

Blanknesses, or, Sharma's Shades of Grey

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"*What you see is what you see.*" Frank Stella

Well, perhaps ... or perhaps not.

Blankness, after all, is Janus-faced.

As has been remarked of the monochrome: "All blank space is potentially baffling." (Morrison 2006: 135) Yet the other side of that bafflement is the fact of overdetermination: abstract painting "could be pure Idea or material object, exalted or grounded in matter"; it oscillates between "matter and ideal, presence and absence, the visible and the invisible." (Fer 1997: 10 and 154) What we have, then, is simultaneously too little and too much. On the one hand is a blank slate, the inscrutable, a-referential emptiness of the *tabula rasa*, the scraped tablet. On the other is the canny void of the monochromatic surface, an art *historical* object, a hollowed-out presence that insists on the opacity of its truant illusionism, and, almost by default, embraces an open-ended multivalence.

Jeremy Sharma's latest series of works – let's call them the grey paintings, for the sake of convenience – operates within that liminal space. They are, in the artist's own words, "in-between": both physical objects, and paintings that gesture at their broader implications. Their blankness is immediate, and polysemic. At once evacuated of pictorial content, and suitably devoid of expression as to bear the freight of a complex discursive structure, their ontology hovers at the threshold between categories, an equivocal semantic flickering.

As material entities, as paint on concrete supports, the paintings almost inevitably foreground their processual disposition, their character as the archetypal Rosenberg-ian "event" or "encounter", an authorial event inscribed on a surface. (Rosenberg 1952: 22) The elements involved in their production are few, and uncomplicated. The works mostly consist of enamel paint on dibond boards, mounted on aluminum channels. The paint is a shade of deep grey, bordering on black; the exact tint varies from painting to painting, in some cases approaching a bluish hue, in others, green. Surfaces are smooth, glossy, reflective. Chromatics and dimensions aside, individual paintings – none are titled – differ primarily in their incidental details. One largish composition features a complex of paint drips in its upper right corner, with a runnel streaking down the length of the board to conclude where the support ends; another sports an exterior impressed with a grainy, lightly indented texture, not unlike the appearance of very fine sand.

Despite these gestural inflections, Sharma's grey paintings are ultimately premised on the phenomenon of providence. They were created through the act of pouring, rather than the application of brush to surface. This fact of quasi-authorship is manifested in the material particularities of each piece: their lower edges are riddled with knobs and nodules of paint, the bumps and lumps that mark the termination of, and the irresistible workings of gravity on, the viscid, mucoid flow of paint down the surface of the board. Sharma likens the process to "the end of a sentence or a painting making and ending itself":

The paint, when it dries, crinkles to create this line of ridges at the end of the frame with the lumps at the bottom; that's the only indication of the orientation of the painting. Pouring was done very slowly over a horizontal surface and moving the volume to cover almost the entire area and then left to stand so all the paint flows out to create this slick and flat finish. It's virtually a slick of paint over the surface.

Painting, then, as almost pure process, a *thing* – a “slick of paint over the surface” – defined by its constitutive elements and generative procedures.

Yet, in the same breath, the artist remarks: “Process is passé.”

He's hardly alone there. Yve-Alain Bois points to the lack of reflexivity, or self-consciousness, in this case: “The innocence of the process account is its failure to think about its own claims to primacy.” (Bois 1993: 218) The *thing*-ness of objects, after all, is precisely what is uncanny about them: “The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation.” (Brown 2001: 4) If the process account is a chronicle of paintings as things, what is left out of the equation is perhaps the viewing subject – or, the sense that the “body is a thing among things.” (Maurice Merleau-Ponty, qtd. in Brown 2001: 4) The reflective sheen of the grey paintings is nothing if not knowing. Ocular experience of them, Sharma insists, implicates the viewer's body as well, which is reduced to a spectral presence, mirrored in the glossy veneer of the works – a hybrid entity of object and subject, or subject *in* object.

The aporia, as such, is an articulate one. If the works are as much *speculum* as *pictura*, it behooves us to ask: does the gesture of mirroring extend beyond the human soma? What else might the blankness of the grey paintings register on its satiny surfaces? Anti-illusionism has, after all, historically proven little barrier. Abstract art has had a myriad of social resonances read into its resolutely un-mimetic visuality: it channels historical trauma (Godfrey 2007); it functions as a tool of Cold War ideology (Guilbaut 1985); it evinces the abstraction of the urban fabric (Shannon 2009); it even signals the ontological lacuna of biracial identity (Morrison 2006). Could Sharma's grey paintings, in that vein, suggest more than the salient verities of their own physicality? If the nub of semantic substance lies in their supple polysemy, what might some of those exegeses look like?

The choice of materials, for one, instantly evokes the realm of exterior design and industrial manufacture. Enamel paint is more commonly seen in and around the home, found on a variety of surfaces from appliances and furniture, to trims, doors, flooring, stairs, and porches; dibond, comprised of extremely thin aluminum sheets packing a polyethylene core, is typically utilized for billboards, exhibition stands and displays, and indoor signage. Sharma's shift away from oil and canvas – he was trained as a painter – into the realm of industrial materiality perhaps echoes a Judd-ian aesthetic idiom. While Donald Judd famously decreed his objects “specific”, asserting that they were “non-associative”, “non-anthropomorphic” and “non-relational” (qtd. in Beveridge and Burn 1975: 129), critics have consistently discerned the forms of prosaic things in them. In appropriating the appearance of industrial articles, his works readily evoked the everyday realm – or, at least, a certain dimension of the quotidian. Of his preferred materials like steel, aluminum and brass, Judd noted: “they are usually aggressive.” (Judd 2005: 187) It was precisely this display of power and aggression that disturbed one art historian, which she characterized as Minimalist art's “obdurate blankness ... its harsh or antiseptic

surfaces and quotidian materials, and by its pretensions, in spite of all this, to being fine art.” (Chave 1990: 54) She bemoaned the look of impassive authority inscribed into Judd’s objects, their synthesis of industrial materials and geometric units into expressionless, “blank” configurations, configurations that announced their own removal from the sphere of the demotic by dint of their placement in spaces and institutions of high art. She also pointedly observed that “what disturbs viewers most about Minimalist art may be what disturbs them most about their own lives and times, as the face it projects is society’s blankest, steeliest face, the impersonal face of technology, industry, and commerce.” (Ibid., 55)

Technology, industry, commerce: these constitute the primary, all-encompassing structures of capitalism, forces that determine the tenor of life as it is lived out in the twentieth century and beyond. Sharma’s grey paintings, not unlike Judd’s decidedly *un-specific* objects, conjure a sense of the lived everyday within these overarching social frameworks. In oblique, affective ways, they allude to modes of socio-political power, channeling the realities of an industrial technocracy. The Gramscian logic of Fordism, for one, is as much cultural as it is economic:

The term Fordism signifies the importance that Gramsci attributed to the assembly-line production, managerial hierarchy, and technical control introduced by automobile magnate Henry Ford. However, Gramsci’s vision of the new capitalism featured distinct political and cultural, as well as “economic,” dimensions. Gramsci argued that Fordist business elites developed novel cultural mechanisms to exert control in the wider society and to create the “standardized individuals” called for by Fordism’s highly regimented forms of work and mass produced products. Gramsci viewed Fordism as more than a system of material production, insisting that it relied on cultural resources and forged new personality types. (Antonio and Bonanno 2000: 34 – 35)

And how are we to imagine these extra-economic dimensions? While we seem to have moved into a post-Fordist zeitgeist, in Singapore, at least, everyday affects of the Fordist system seem alive and well. The impersonality of public housing and apartment living marks the tone of daily existence for most Singaporeans, including Sharma: the homogeneous, modular design of HDB structures, and the often monotonous appearance of public housing estates, are the most salient aspects of the urban fabric. The assembly-line standardization that characterizes mass production is transposed into architectural and aesthetic registers here. The grid-like pattern of individual units comprising HDB apartment blocks, with their ordered quadrangles of doors and windows and walls, and the linear, almost rhythmic landscape of block upon block of nearly indistinguishable façades are the material expressions of, and affective analogues of, the Fordist ethos – what one poet referred to as “this jungle of steel ... this myriad of caves” (qtd. in Chiu 2010). As another commentator notes: “the blank anonymity of standardised housing ... accorded with essentially Fordian methods of mass production appropriate to Singapore’s state of economic development...” (Goh 2001: 1590) In other words, the look of systematized, machine-line manufacture (“society’s blankest, steeliest face”) readily dovetails with the rational abstraction of a HDB-dominated topography (“the blank anonymity of standardised housing”).

And the final term in this nexus of blanknesses? – The blankness of Sharma’s grey series, of course, the monotony and modularity of which so redolently evoke the textures of life

in postwar, urban Singapore. A series of untitled works, they are rendered coolly, placidly anonymous, differentiated only in the most minute details of surface and texture; one grey painting, to the naked eye, slips all too easily into another, and another. The occlusion of any salient point of visual interest is, in fact, doubled: the largely nondescript facelessness of the compositions is extended by the Stygian milieu of the display site, the walls of which are rendered a deep shade of gunmetal grey. The gesture of concealment is twofold: the juxtaposed similitude between one painting and the next is amplified into an immersive environment, where the very distinction between work and wall is negated. Here, then, are affects of the familiar effected. The aesthetic structures of homogeneity, the determined blankness, quadrilateral regularity and visual camouflage of the compositions, channel the mien and the moods of public housing, as well as the mechanical modes of lived lifeworlds that it engenders. Sharma's paintings instantiate a form of spatial ordering – the instrumental, partitional drive of HDB architecture – at the level of the qualitative. The trope of the void, of a fissure, signals both the essential nullity at the heart of monochromatic abstraction, and the discursive configurations of public housing as “the site of a lack (what it does not have, i.e. the freedom and individuality of private housing).” (Goh 2003: 63) This void is, of course, not a mere absence, but rather a systemic, affective lacuna structured by the operations of social pressures and political power. It is the trait of near characterless reiteration, inscribed into the formal contours of the grey paintings, which immediately grabs the viewer, eliciting visceral intimations of quotidian realities.

Perhaps, then, what one sees really *is* what one sees: blankness.

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