MICHAEL BOGIN

GALÁPAGOS PAINTINGS

Opulence and Modesty:
The Paintings of Michael Bogin

Essay by
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Walking into the gallery, you will find the walls are lined with radiance; though each painting has the same dimension, each seems to evoke a new terrain, not quite contiguous with those adjacent, yet possibly details from a much larger map. This is the effect of Michael Bogin’s paintings. Each painting seems to reflect the landscape of island worlds, estuarine flows, mudflats, dark channels, open water, shoals and seepages. They might be a particular landscape or they might allude to vast geologies, floating continents. There are ecologies and linkages— island forms float yet are all part of a sedimted continuity of tone and luminosity. But what is the territory, if not the painting itself? And the painting itself must be the relationships of form, the energy of emergence and subsidence, the process of color illuminating light.

Over the past two decades, Michael Bogin’s work has moved from oil to gouache to acrylics. The shift to working in gouache for his Galapagos series, “helped me understand fluidity,” Bogin commented during a recent studio visit; and then to work with acrylics provides “the freedom to transform things.” The work done with oil sticks in the 1990s, displays the tactility of the medium—color is not thin, but thick and malleable, capable of being handled like clay or wax. In those works, the painter seems to have shaped a topography from the inert, formless mass of color available to him—looking at work from that period, the organic qualities of geographies are already there. The metaphors of mapping seem apparent. But what does it mean that I read the painting as a topography, that the painter has surprised or sprung this speculation from me, that meaning has subsided and we have entered a different condition of relations? Indeed one of the elements that continues to draw me into Bogin’s paintings is the pleasure of the topographical and re-considering the perspectives of a speculative landscapist.
An example of such speculative topographies is #236 (2014-16): the painting conjures the Aegean. Or #248 (2014) might depict tectonic plates floating across the oceanic expanses. Is it the prevalent use of blues, tans, and yellows that suggests mapping? Or is it the organic shapes that echo landmasses? Or does this signal our desire to create a narrative of representation? A desire to belong? Or to know where we are as bodies in an embodying space? I think of Elizabeth Bishop’s wonderful poem, “The Map,” which opens,

Land lies in water; it is shadowed green.
Shadows, or are they shallows, at its edges showing the line of long sea-weeded ledges where weeds hang to the simple blue from green. Or does the land lean down to lift the sea from under, drawing it unperturbed around itself?

Here Bishop initiates her topographies of imagination and astonishment: maps do not provide answers, but pose fundamental questions regarding perception and interpretation—“can the countries pick their colors?” or “is the land tugging at the sea from under?” Maps, for Bishop, do not provide schematic information; or rather, that is their administrative use, but not their meaningfulness: “Topography displays no favorites; North’s as near as West. / More delicate than the historians’ are the map-makers’ colors.” Bishop, like Bogin, understands the desire for the meaningfulness of form, and the pleasure of that reading; yet as the mapmakers’ colors are more delicate, she implies the artist’s work moves past descriptive empiricism. Of course we know this, yet we also derive pleasure in the descriptive. As Bishop concludes her hermeneutical “The Monument,” she instructs us to “Watch it closely”—the it being both the structure (the monument, or painting, or sculpture) but also our own evolving interpretive relationship.

The new paintings in acrylic have a suffused light that is drawn to the surface of each painting—these are works that have been repainted thirty times or more to discover how light might push from color, how form may float on
By using various dispersants, for example in #251 (2015), Bogin controls the viscosity of the paint; this is not a schematic process but intuitive; in part a giving oneself over to the process of discovery, and thus an egoless engagement. Each of Bogin’s paintings instructs us to “watch it closely,” to examine the very localness of the painting, the detail as much as the whole. Anywhere along the edge of a form another form is implied. And anywhere along the edge of a form, there is the potential for transformation: one tone may be covering another, or one may be in the process of slipping beneath a different tone. If we watch closely, we witness this event.

The tactile surface never disappears: the dispersant speckles the surface, or the surface may thicken with translucent layers creating a thickness of information. Bits of pumice may create a sheen of grittiness across the surface of a form. Shapes may be scored. Edges may become a littoral zone of accumulation and erosion where colors seep into one another, or edges maybe adjacencies where two bodies lie pressed close, seamless. Yet the materiality of these acrylic works has shifted from a physical density to fluidity where countless substrata of color flow. Although the process that produces these effects is intuitive it is not accidental; the process necessitates for both the painter and the viewer an attentiveness to what unfolds.

What is the need for painting? The necessity of beauty? Dave Hickey has argued that in the West, the approach to viewing painting as well as the purposefulness of painting, has shifted from reading through the painting to a prescribed meaning, to a comparative assessment, and in our culture, the experience of beauty has a peculiar American cast, as “we speak the word beautiful and respond to its being spoken because we are good democrats.... [because] these spontaneous exclamations may presage a new consensus.... because we live in a society in which freedom of speech and the pursuit of happiness are officially sanctioned.” The painter’s surprise and delight in the process of painting corresponds to our own delight in the painting, or to come into a room of paintings, such as those of Bogin’s, and exclaim they are radiant, they are beautiful. Hickey writes, “I think of encounters with beauty... as pleasant surprises, positive moments in the history of our free responses to the world. For most human beings, these are far from daily occurrences, but they can be, and they do happen.” The necessity of painting, as with perhaps all art, is in this possibility of encountering, and reaching some consensus about, “the embodiment of what we like, what we are like, and what we want in the external world.”
It should strike no one to say that we live in a world of precarity. To have open the recourse to look at, or even more so to experience the making of art, is on one hand an extravagance few have and on the other hand a necessary pressure against the reality of the precarious. The danger of writing about any one’s art is to overdo the role of the individual or the individual’s work—Bogin’s work combats that in its modest scale: these are intimate works, even as they may seem to evoke the monumental. Here, looking at #220 (2014), the large rectangular blocks forms organize the painting. We could imagine this, or even some detail of this painting, as a much larger construction. The painting also evokes a landscape—the blue horizon and its edge-line near the top of the painting, the inverted arch, and indeed the very blocks of color suggestive of fields. Though filled with particulars—and these only increase upon closer inspection—the fields are not uniform fields—the landscape is vast, encompassing, thick in its opulence of color and form. Certainly this is a legacy of abstract expressionism, that essential American visual idiom. The painting as a painting reminds us by its presence how much we have to lose if we slip away from the human and toward the austere and precarious. Western painting has always been about relationships. Certainly there are the relationships to the physical world outside the frame of the painting—Bogin’s travels, for example to Ghana, the Galapagos, and the Andes provide connections between the lived world and the world created by art—but aren’t these really overlapping worlds, the latter, in fact, filling an unknown void of the former? The need for painting, most elementally, is to create, as Amenoff has said, and thus to fill a void. The exploration of color, for example of blue—traditionally a rare pigment, usually derived from the minerals lapis lazuli or azurite, and a metaphor of the celestial and expansive—in works such as #51 (2004-11), #228 (2014), or #241 (2014-16), provide speculative maps of the unknown, worlds we would otherwise never know could exist! Bogin’s paintings remind us of the world as art—if we enter into a conversant relationship with the world is ultimately to take pleasure in seeing those relationships. Bogin’s paintings provide a space in which we experience not only...
the delight of seeing within the painting likenesses—or as in Bishop’s poem, translating an abstract topography into “Norway’s hare runs south in agitation”—but also a consensual process, or as Hickey notes, “the utility of beauty as a legitimate recourse resides in its ability to locate us as physical creatures in a live, ethical relationship with other human beings in the physical world.”

Bogin’s paintings are informed by his nearly five decades of painting, as well as his acute knowledge of the histories of painting and the visual arts, some of which serve as points of dialogue whether with Matisse, Pissarro or Cezanne or with Nazca or Dahomey textiles. Painting addresses our attentiveness to relationships; they speak through color, light, and form. Bogin’s Étretat (2010-2016) refers directly to Courbet, Monet, and Matisse, with its glowing orange-red arch that seems to step into a perspectival space suggested by the curving green expanse and the dark blue mass that seems to thrust diagonally from the lower right corner back into the pictorial space. Although the elements of landscape—and indeed the very history of a specific landscape iconized by Courbet, Delacroix, and most significantly in the light-charged serial work of Monet—are present, Bogin also deconstructs the visual privilege of perspective: the light lime-yellow mass, delicately scored by pencil lines covered by the final thin wash of paint pulls all the painting’s shapes forward. In Matisse’s Boats on the Beach, Étretat (1920), the diagonal line of boats drawn up on the shore across the canvas flattens the pictorial space. Similarly, Matisse has envisioned the sea as an organic but planar shape, providing us with a pleasure that is not that of perspectival illusion but something that seems to approach the tactile. In Bogin’s painting, the light lime-yellow shape that provides a counter-weight to the complexity of the arch parallels Matisse’s rendering of the sea into shape rather than representation.

In conversations, Bogin has noted the significance of the abstract expressionists, and in particular the work of Joan Mitchell. The paintings of Mitchell play with instabilities of form; in her landscapes the paint moves, wet with light and illuminated through the gestural energy. The expansive choreography of Mitchell, and indeed many abstract expressionists, can be found in the dynamic sweep and gestural traces of brush-work in Bogin’s paintings. John Yau comments that Mitchell “is neither an observational artist nor one who abstracts from experience. Rather, she feels her way across a canvas, activating it with a wide range of marks.” This is a process of expressive and formal precision, a process that, for Bogin and Mitchell, embodies deliberation and thinking within the visible. “Every day,” comments Bogin, “I make discoveries, even after fifty years of painting, I’m still finding my way.” This process is not a matter of procedural application, but a way of being. Looking again at Bogin’s Étretat we should note his vocabulary: scored graphite lines, drips of pigment, thick brush strokes, thin washes that coalesce or disperse, areas scrapped clear of wet paint, applications of color where the brush has worked into the pigment rather than laying it directly on the painting’s surface. The attentiveness to how things happen to paint, to intervene or to allow the paint to interact is all part of allowing the work show the decisions made in the process of making.

We should also recognize the seriality of Bogin’s work of the past decade. Most apparent is the uniform dimensions of his work and that they are all on paper—22 by 30 inches on 300lb watercolor paper and that they are
consecutively numbered. The uniformity of size allows Bogin to concentrate on the process of painting and how that process moves over the course of time. This seriality also suggests the daily-ness of the painting practice. To be open to the unexpected, the improvisatory, is a state that is gained only through ongoing practice. Seriality implies sustainability and a productive joy, not in the repetitive process, but in a process that opens itself to change. We see, for example, an increasing subtlety of color, a complexity of shapes, and increasing dynamic interactions along the edges of forms. Nonetheless, the intimation of landscape, or perhaps more accurately, the intimation of environments where physical bodies interact, remains the focus. Giorgio Morandi, a painter Bogin particularly admires, works in a similarly small scale and also engages in a serial exploration utilizing a limited number of quotidian objects to create abstract landscapes. Morandi’s 1953 Still Life is instructive: the horizontally stacked colors are repeated as verticals; more subtly, the background tonally warming as one traverses it right to left. And while the painting seems to be perspectival, the background’s embracing shape pushes forward the assemblage and flattens it. Throughout Bogin’s work, what might be initially read as a background, emerges as a dynamic force that lifts forms toward us as it also becomes as defined a shape as any other within the painting. Bogin’s #252 (2015) the pale ground plane is not uniform but shifts in the qualities of brush stroke, from heavy application to thinner washes that reveal blooms of color below as well as older structures of color. In fact form seems illusory for as we look more closely a shape that seems defined by clear edges, such as the blue-black form at the bottom center, is composed of a series of over-paintings, the earlier of which seem to support the more recent. The background becomes a balance for the brown-red serpentine form that opens into the large red and green-brown rectangular form dominating the top center of the painting.

In #252 glimmers of cobalt blue seem to open up the painting to what lies below the surface—these elongated forms repeat themselves across the painting; like portals, they reveal the past. What Bogin has created could not be a preconceived idea, rather these gaps expose the very phenomena of painting—that is the action and the final, perceived object. As the earlier dark blue background disappeared below the pale colors, the elongated blue forms come to gesture to both that erasure and to a new sense of presence as they balance and echo other elongated forms in the painting. In his #254 (2015-16), a similar curved line works across the middle of the painting before veering toward the upper right corner and disappearing as another set of lines bend and bow in the upper right corner. Various elongated forms stretch across the upper third of the painting counterbalancing the large, malachite triangular form that dominates (and yet is enclosed by bending lines) the center of the painting. Yet this form is not uniform—it is a site of various reactions between paint and dispersant, between periods of painting and over-painting. No color can exist on its own; color is always (and already) in reaction, in relation with other elements (pigment, dispersant, particulates) of composition. The shapes within a painting are not intended to be coherent, in the sense that they are fixed or definitive; rather the painting reveals its own modifications, amendments, developments, and accumulative re-visioning.
Examining the left side of the painting, the contrasts between the watery green where the paint seems to collect in droplets and the sure, dense olive green brushwork opens an interstitial space between them where earlier painting has occurred.

Bogin’s paintings balance between movement and the composed form: the paintings are as much about movement as they are about the relationship of particularized forms. For Bogin, “drawing becomes a scaffolding for color”: he might draw a painting, to re-form shapes, but then those shapes assume their definition (and histories) through the accumulations of colors. In #210 (2014) the maize yellow forms flow across the field of the painting creating a doubled “L” shape; a thicker—both in width and in paint saturation—inverted “L” form responds by its apparent stasis. This form, however, has its own double—a blue form that perhaps by its metaphoric color, seems to invoke fluidity and movement. While line and form create movement across the field of the painting, within forms paint is always metamorphic and glimmering between tones: the soft rectangular shape between the yellow “L” shaped curves in #210 and the large triangular shape dominating the center of #254 exemplify how color and form interact. In fact, Bogin has commented that “shapes by themselves do not tell me enough”; instead the interaction with color, indeed color itself becomes primary.

As we look at Bogin’s paintings, different viewing experiences occur: from a distance colors merge into distinct and largely uniform forms, but as one moves closer, the complexity of color becomes apparent. In #251 (2015), the dense saturated flat yellow, created by mixing in pumice, becomes a far more varied, with histories emergent in the color—histories of other colors, other applications, other movements in the pictorial field. What at a distance is a warm buttery yellow becomes en-shadowed by grays and pink-purples. In conversation about this painting, Bogin noted that on one level he hopes, in his work, to create a “broad simplicity,” evoking “the bold authority of children’s painting,” so that the whole could easily be taken in; yet on another level, closer inspection reveals what was hidden, that complexity.

Painting, as Bogin’s work implies, allows us to practice the art of looking, to see that things are part of each other, as we may see in #251 the bluish form repeat a version of itself in the central green form which then seeps over (or under) the pink-purple form whose color-ecology (how else to describe this complex and inter-sustainable use of pigment?) appears on the left and right boundaries of the painting as do variants of the central green form. To look closely is to actively look—thus the painting starts to ask us to think about perception, how to speak or write or engage our perception. #251 reveals that things are never as they seem—what I have described as the central green form is in fact mottled with ocher ponds and glimmers of
red and lighter greens.
In our conversations, Bogin emphasized the need to simplify—but the process of simplification is one of accumulation and reduction toward a delicate balance. It is what the poet Lorine Niedecker has termed condensing—

I learned
to sit at desk
and condense

No layoff
from this
condensery

Niedecker, in “The Poet's Work,” describes her “trade” as work in the “condensery”—which describes the daily, meditative, process of Bogin's own painting process. No “layoff”—perhaps that is the joy of the painter, the poet, that creative processes has its own economy and value system that ultimately resides outside the marketplace; and there is also the implication that the work never ceases, it is one's ethos. Bogin works to generate new work, but he also works back into old work (so many of the paintings have multiple dates where the painting has been picked up again and reworked). To consider Bogin's seriality as a continuum is important not only for procedural interests, but also to consider the purposefulness of the creative process and its resistance to commodification. Yes, one can “own” a painting by Bogin, but not the continuity of a process that allows no “layoff” from work that jeopardizes usual forms of valuation. They—Bogin's paintings or Niedecker's poetry, for example—are finally far less property, than they are landscapes.

Bogin's paintings confirm our relationship with the landscape—in this way they are both ethical and environmental. His paintings as they are paintings of bodies, forms, masses, remind us of our own physical presence in relation to the physical presence of the world. #267 (2016) exemplifies embodiment and the generative energy of art. In “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” Wallace Stevens writes,

The poem refreshes life so that we share,
For a moment, the first idea . . . It satisfies
Belief in an immaculate beginning

And send us, winged by an unconscious will,
To an immaculate end. We move between these points

Gazing into the surface of #267 we see glimpses of the beginning: the reds of the beginning are painted over so that very little of the original remains as an overt presence. Nonetheless, the original color suffuses the entire painting with hints of warmth, of a pinkish underglow. There are openings to other areas, for example the area in the upper left corner reveals the thin washes of greens and browns: we are peering through the time of the painting, the remains of the past that still inform the present. Our gaze moves across and through the painting, and in that movement our gaze is refreshed; as Stevens writes later in “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” “The freshness of transformation is // The freshness of a world. It is our own, / It is ourselves, the freshness of ourselves.” As Michael Bogin practices it, painting—perhaps a supreme fiction—renews, sustains, and transforms. This is its modest necessity and opulent joy.
REFERENCES

Quotations from Michael Bogin are from conversations in his Houghton House studio in Geneva, NY on June 1, 21, July 6, and 15, 2016.


THE DAVIS GALLERY
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