

THE MINUTES, HOURS, AND DAYS OF KELLYANN BURNS

In 1867, the American expatriate James McNeill Whistler exhibited his paintings, *Symphony in White*, No. 3, at the annual exhibition of the Royal Academy of Arts in London. It was a significant moment in the history of art, not simply because the picture was and remains a small masterpiece, but also because of its musical title. The musical terms that Whistler transposed to his paintings – Symphonies, Arrangements, Harmonies, Nocturnes, and Notes – reflected the highly orchestrated nature of each canvas he produced, as well as his assessment of its relative ambition. But more importantly, Whistler used musical language to diminish his works' dependency upon anecdote and narrative, and to infuse his painting with the abstract suggestiveness of music. It was a critical moment in the movement toward 'art for art's sake,' as opposed to art in the service of pictorial storytelling.

The abstract paintings of Kellyann Burns are not vehicles of suggestive musicality, but in their insistent formalism they do trace a path back to Whistler. More like the European and American non-representational painter who, throughout the 20th century, sailed in Whistler's wake, Burns erases all but the process of painting from her art, all but the visual and material action of manipulating oil-soaked pigment on the surface of a canvas or a board. As if to emphasize the physicality and the craft of painting over any overt or encoded meaning, Burns titles her works austerely, providing only the exact time and date that they were completed. Titles such as *11:31 am 7/28/03* are meant to discourage narrative allusion – not to mention musical suggestiveness- while serving as a form of unemotional recordkeeping not so different from Piet Mondrian's *Composition V*, Jackson Pollock's *Number 23*, or Clifford Still's 1946-E.

Given how intently and intensely Burns strives to capture the deceptively effortless chromatic and compositional balance her paintings consistently achieve, it is not surprising that she emphasizes form and process over subject matter and content. That paintings such as *7:31 pm 8/27/02* and *12:04 pm 9/16/03* are elegantly organized and appear to glow from within is the expected result of her attenuated involvement with the materials and with the painting's surface. Burns's canvases are constructed of layer after layer of thinned and doctored oil paint, interleaved with extended periods of drying time. Those otherwise passive intervals can be difficult for Burns to endure, but the drying process is essential to the richly saturated and luminous quality that begins to emerge after five, ten, thirty repetitions. Moreover, it is in those crucial hours, as the canvas dries and Burns circles its vulnerable surface, that she discovers when to stop painting. But even in that recognition, the product of intimacy as well as experience, the process is not yet over. Indeed, far from it.

For Kellyann Burns, the painted surface is always a vulnerable target. Once the canvas has gone through its extended curing period, she returns to the hardened surface armed with fine-grit sandpaper. With this abrasive, this burnishing tool, she not only alters and manipulates luster and sheen, but reveals layers beneath layers, and colors that seem almost to have smoldered to the surface. The intensity of Burns's saturated color is only held in check by the visual and textural delicacy of her alternating gloss, satin and matte surfaces, and by the pristine unity of a canvas wholly reconciled. When she is finally convinced that color, texture, luster and composition have been brought into harmony, Burns slowly, even reluctantly, steps away from the canvas.

Then she looks at her wristwatch. Burns's chronological titles may be a convenient ordering system and successful dodge of pictorial narration, but they are also a timely accounting of a young life's work. Although she is a painter thoroughly grounded in formalism, and utterly engaged in the process of painting, perhaps there is more meaning lurking behind those timed titles than she would openly confess. Process and time, music and meter, life and its passing. Is it Whistlerian art for art's sake or is it something more?

In Kurt Vonnegut's novel, *Bluebeard*, his narrator, and aging New York School painter named Rabo Karabekian, chides his former teacher, a successful illustrator of the 1930s. "Rabo insists, "but they lied about time." He goes on to describe the most compelling works of the Abstract Expressionist era as those that "indicate somehow that time was liquid, that one moment was no more important than any other ...that all moments quickly run away" and that "birth and death are always there."

For Burns, the meaning of painting lives in the process and thrives in its manipulated forms, and certainly that is armature enough upon which to hang important work. But even as her canvases speak for their own existence (apart from external representation) and insist on upon their own time in the world, individually and collectively they may track the passing of life itself, and bear the pleasures and the burdens of Rabo's liquid time. It is too soon to know if her chronographic meditations will resonate across the arc of a long career, but we will have a better understanding of the minutes, hours, and days of Kellyann Burns after *6:31 pm 2/28/04*.

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