

Painting Paintings : A Leap of Fate Astrid Dick / Erika Ranee

October 28 – December 11, 2022

Astrid Dick and Erika Ranee embrace risk-taking as an essential element of painting. They assume and carve out space, as women, as fighters against assumed expectations and societal limitations. They utilize processes in which chance moves lead to discovery. There is no singular look to any painting by Ranee; the same is true for the work of Dick. They trust in the ways that abstraction can embody real, lived experience. They recognize the particularities of these moments, inside and outside the studio.

For several years, Ranee made figurative work contending with imagery of Black stereotypes. She painted giant Mammy and Uncle Ben faces, using books that archived these images, and postcards and Black collectibles found in flea markets. These works were powerful investigations of horrific, racist imagery, which had been absorbed into the culture and casually traded as memorabilia by white tourists. Ranee re-interpreted it, in the context of Willem de Kooning's *Woman* paintings – which she loved, even while recognizing they, too, were politically problematic.

After the death of her brother, a shift into more personal and intimate painting, and a nine-year hiatus from exhibiting, her imagery began to morph. Natural elements, like trees and forests, started to appear. Eventually, Ranee let go of direct depictions of the figure. In part through the guidance of Jack Whitten, her teacher at the School of Visual Arts, she came to recognize that abstraction could contain narrative, even if it was not illustrated.

Astrid Dick calls hers an “atypical path into art.” Born and raised in Buenos Aires, Argentina, she had painted since her teenage years, but studied math and economics in school. Despite forging a successful career as an economist and university professor, she left this field in her mid-30s to devote herself to painting. For her, painting acts as an antidote to the world of scientific research. As she says, “In this arena, one must put brilliant ideas aside, and mostly surrender to the adventure – no preconception, no planning.” She has noted that the art world can be as populated with academic jargon and explanation as the world of economics in academia. However, Dick urges both artist and viewer to resist words, in favor of a sensorial, feeling experience in front of painting, citing Susan Sontag, “To interpret is to impoverish, to deplete the world.”

Dick's work makes this proposition through its directness and the use of alternate materials and supports. Her re-purposing of found foam as the support, takes painting to a more immediate level. Several canvases are completely covered in glitter. Like the “family” of painters that include Chris Martin and Peter Acheson, Dick mixes high and low in terms of gesture and materiality to point to the possibilities awakened by impermanence, craft, and children's art.

Although Raneé's painting communicates a relationship to a wide-ranging host of art historical figures, she too looks to a pre-vocabulary state of being. As she states:

Paintings sometimes start as documentations of little moments, but the end result might be illegible. I will have a quote in my head, but when it moves from my head to the canvas, it's the painting gesture that drives it and articulates it.

I like to imagine that it is the way a baby would write out words before they've learned how to spell and form letters – the unadulterated, early stage of gesture. That accounts for my reverence of the CoBRA artists, like Karel Appel and Pierre Alechinsky.

Raneé's work also incorporates collage elements, which become embedded and partially obfuscated within a surface populated by pours, spray paint, gesture, and layers of shellac. The Black body is still present in a large painting "I Wonder if I Know What You Mean," in the form of newspaper clippings, but it takes time to discover. The painting has been through many iterations; still, it is full of air and breath. The ground is white, and vertical forms undulate and float from top to bottom. The vertical area at far right comprises drawings of her niece's hair braiding patterns, collaged onto the canvas. Raneé says of her process:

I build each painting through a form of layering, drawing from the detritus of my daily experiences. I'm interested in the preservation of stories and in harnessing moments of stasis as a counterpoint to the transient impermanence of this digital communication age. I take cues from the cacophony of city streets, its sounds and smells, as well as from minutiae of the natural world, and pull it all together in an intuitive visual freestyle.

Raneé's sources and influences are wide-ranging. I have written before about hers being an "alternative canon," mostly because it has always consisted of significant African American artists, many of whom have only become known to wider audiences in the last decade. She grew up knowing the work of Romare Bearden, Alma Thomas, Beauford Delaney, Henry Ossawa Tanner. Elements of their work resonate in that of Raneé's: in terms of touch, light, use of collage, expressionist portraiture, and a connection to music (the "intuitive visual freestyle") Raneé mentions above.

In addition to art historical references, Raneé is a cinophile and a nature lover who considered botany or entomology as a young person. When asked, in a 2017 Q & A to share ideas or influences that inform her work, she cited street markings, *The Cabinet of Natural Curiosities* by Albertus Seba, Aboriginal art, Hiroshi Teshigahara's 1964 film *Woman in the Dunes*, bird murmurations, and Gee's Bend Quilts. Raneé has connected her use of shellac to her love of examining insects preserved in amber as a young child.

Many of Astrid Dick's paintings utilize horizontal stripes, and she, too, connects her work to a host of references, both high and low. In a self-published whimsical zine, she reminds her audience that the blue-chip male painter Sean Scully does not own "stripe painting." First noting that women artists like Mary Heilmann, Bridget Riley, and Agnes Martin also employ stripes, she proceeds to go further back in art history, to Sonia Delaunay, Hilma af Klint, and 17th Century Tantric paintings. Then she turns to craft, popular culture, and nature: Argentine textiles, the French sailor shirt, zebras, patterns on window grates, the planks of a boardwalk, a piano keyboard.

Although stripes can be a way of emphasizing a painting's essential flatness, Dick sometimes uses stripes to layer planes and create deep space. Her painting *Caelum, Caelus, Caeli* (2022) heaves with emotion, despite its

minimal compositional structure with a blue center, a red frame, and yellow bands at top and bottom. The red spills over the blue area, and the deep blue - as the title implies - feels like the night sky and the universe. Yellow horizontal bands, along with a purple vertical stripe at left are a reminder of the painter's presence; they signify this is painted space. The painting has a rawness that contradicts the history of minimalism and geometric abstraction: embedded in it are memory, rage, and a claiming of space. It stands in opposition to Frank Stella's comment, "what you see is what you see." I read "Caelum" as a feminist statement.

If Dick's "Caelum" is about the night, Raneé's paintings ["I'm Right Where I Thought I Was" and "Prize Inside"] are about the earth and the body: fiery excavations of space that gather force towards the center. Like Dick, Raneé constructs gestural frames within the rectangles of the canvas to bring attention to superficial constructs and to enliven the surface. In "Prize Inside", she extends off one edge with a piece of sushi "grass" - it is a "sign" of nature as it exists in urban daily life. Raneé's paintings are about attentiveness to both the micro and the macro, in nature but also societally. The paintings record ghost lines and fissures; these are preserved in the amber surfaces. The accretion of information, the looking back and preserving of one's history, and the multiplicity of disparate forms of painting marks, is a political move.

Most recently, Dick has joined pairs of two very different paintings into diptychs. In "My Kitty Loves Carnival Cake," she brings together a vertical glitter stripe painting with a more gestural one. "Night Swimming" links a monochrome blue canvas with a painting composed of blue, green, and purple downward brushstrokes. The panels of each diptych are not exactly the same size; nor are they positioned quite side by side. Raneé and Dick are artists who recognize that paintings do not conform; they always push back.

Jennifer Samet

Paintings mentioned in text:

Erika Raneé *I Wonder if I Know What You Mean*, 2018-2022, Acrylic, shellac, spray paint and paper collage on canvas, 84 x 72 in

Erika Raneé *I'm Right Where I Thought I Was*, 2022, Acrylic, shellac, spray, gouache, oil stick and collage on canvas, 24 x 22 in

Erika Raneé *Prize Inside*, 2022, Acrylic, shellac, spray paint, gouache, oil stick and collage on canvas, 24 x 22 in

Astrid Dick *Caelum Caelus Caeli*, 2022, Oil on canvas, 84x70 in

Astrid Dick *My Kitty Loves Carnival Cake*, 2022, Glitter and mixed media on canvas / Oil on canvas, 70 x 62 in + 84 x 70 in

Astrid Dick *Night Swimming*, 2022, Oil on found foam / Oil on canvas, 14 x 14 in + 14 x 11in

Astrid Dick, born (1972) and raised in Buenos Aires, Argentina, is a painter based in Paris. She began to paint intensively on her own at 13, and later, excited by mathematics and social frictions, begins her studies in economics in Buenos Aires, while continuing to draw in her free time. In 2002, she is awarded a Ph.D. in economics from MIT. Having led a double-life between art and economic research for many years, at age 36 she abandons her post as university professor to devote herself entirely to art. She was artist-in-residence at the Atlantic Center for the Arts, the Vermont Studio Center and the Leipzig Spinnerei and has shown her work through solo and group shows in Europe, the US and Argentina, such as the Grand Palais in Paris and the Manoir de la Ville de Martigny, Switzerland.

Erika Rane (1965) received her MFA in painting from the University of California, Berkeley. She is a recipient of a New York Foundation for the Arts (NYFA) Fellowship in Painting and has attended the Artist in the Marketplace (AIM) seminar program at the Bronx Museum, as well as the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture. She was an AIRspace resident at Abrons Arts Center, 2009/10, and was awarded a studio grant from The Marie Walsh Sharpe Art Foundation, 2011/12. Her work has been exhibited widely in New York: at the Bronx Museum, The Last Brucennial, The Parlour Bushwick, BravinLee Programs, Storefront Ten Eyck, FiveMyles, TSA Gallery, David & Schweitzer Contemporary, and MAW Gallery. In early 2018 her work was featured in a group exhibition at the Southampton Arts Center, Long Island, NY. In the summer of 2018 her work was featured in concurrent group shows at Geoffrey Young Gallery in Great Barrington, MA; at Lesley Heller Gallery, at Klaus von Nichtsagend Gallery and at Freight+Volume--as well as 2 concurrent solo exhibitions at Ground Floor Gallery and BRIC/Project Room. In early 2019 her work was featured in a solo show at Lesley Heller Gallery/Project Space and recently in a group shows at Freight+Volume, NYC and at Wild Palms in Dusseldorf, Germany. Her work has been mentioned in several publications including The New York Times, San Francisco Chronicle and Artforum. She lives and works in New York.

Jennifer Samet is a New York City-based art historian, curator, and writer. She is the director of research at Eric Firestone Gallery. She also lectures at the New York Studio School. She is the author of the column "Beer with a Painter," in Hyperallergic Weekend Edition. She completed her B.A. at Barnard College and her Ph.D. at The Graduate Center, CUNY. Her major areas of interest include Post-World War II and contemporary painting.