

CUE
ART FOUNDATION

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(An essay on Ron Linden's solo exhibition curated by Peter Plagens on view December 6, 2007 – January 26, 2008)

*So why, pray, sign anything as long as every word, letter,
penstroke, paperspace is a perfect signature of its own?*

–James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*

Ron Linden's *Shem the Penman* (2007) is a modest painting with an innate but peculiar logic of its own. On a worked wooden panel, geometric forms in graphite and acrylic drift like half-shucked oysters, broken glass, or unstrung black pearls stuck in some muddy nook. Rendered in sooty earth tones, this layered abstraction shifts between slack brushstrokes and hard edges in a movement at once organic and mechanical. As its title suggests, this painting seems to exist only to spite its creator; a playful aphorism in disguise, "Shem the Penman" – a central figure in James Joyce's protean novel *Finnegans Wake* – should also be read as shame on the author," or "the maker is a sham." But why would Linden (as maker, author, *penman*) indict himself through such Joycean punning? Perhaps because there is great pleasure in allowing a work of art to cultivate that "perfect signature of its own." With humility and ease, Linden willfully plays second fiddle to the abandon of his compositions and the plasticity of his images. As a result (and after some 40 years), Linden's approach has generated a subtle, elusive and farcical body of work.

Linden draws on time as an essential asset. Just as Joyce's novels are perhaps best read sequentially, allowing a reader to follow recurring characters and trace evolving narratives, Linden's oeuvre describes a temporal arc of repeating forms, opportune ideas and techniques developed through protracted consideration. Fabricated from industrial materials like resin, graphite, vinyl, gauze and acrylic, the artist's works portray a confident continuity punctuated by the impulses (formal tastes, political leanings, personal sagas) that come with passage of time.

Linden moved from Chicago to Los Angeles in 1972, a move he claims siphoned the color out of his work. Since then, most of his paintings have relied on a limited palette of bronze, rust, gray, charcoal and brown, elemental colors likely tied to the shipping yards and oil refineries of the landscape surrounding him in San Pedro, where he has lived for the last 13 years. Living in this unassuming southern California harbor town affords Linden time to reflect on the familiar (dare I say timeless) qualities of uncertainty, revelation, wit and disquiet.

Before settling near the Port of Los Angeles, Linden worked in the San Fernando Valley, at the other end of the Los Angeles Basin, as a scenery painter for film and television productions. Generating images meant to be ignored (the receding perspective of a dance hall or the faux details of an exterior landscape, for example), he refined his technical skill at creating material textures such as marble and wood ("subjects" inherently lacking in content). Linden now prefers to paint on real wooden panels, negotiating the nuances between material authenticity and artifice. Although he often works on unstretched canvas, he finds wood easier to "mistreat" with his shabbier squeegees and brushes. Nevertheless, even the most awkward formal liberties he takes yield careful balances of line and weight. A work like *OCKT* (2006)—a small square panel with three primary shapes arranged against a painterly golden field—determines a delicate balance between linear brushstrokes and natural wood grain pattern. Together, such complementary components add a depth and softness to the otherwise flat, bare panel.

Works like these are not intended solely as formal exercises. In most cases, they function rather like quippy diagrams, alluding to art history and literary theory and indulging in inside jokes and wordplay. As the kind of artist who gets the "punch line" of Sherrie Levine's *Knot* paintings, with their linguistic and pictorial conflation of the natural and the artificial, Linden has a sense of humor that is both rhetorical and radical. His painting *Phook!* (2007), for example, cleverly reconciles these aspects. On a wooden panel weighted towards the bottom with black shady brushstrokes, an arrangement of ochre symbols floats in a thick atmosphere. Near the lower corner, five blocky rectangles pictorially imitate the surface of wood while delicate papery shapes resembling commas, apostrophes, an exclamation point and a period hover above. As decorous figures, these familiar grammatical signs are ultimately robbed of meaning and function.

Yet the artist doesn't reject meaning altogether; through the immediacy of the coined word "phook" (which is meant to be read out loud), the work's title becomes pregnant with significance as it phonetically mimics its vulgar counterpart. (Oddly enough, the catalogue for this exhibition accidentally enacts a similarly casual use and misuse of language. During the early stages of the catalogue design, the exclamation point was missing after the "k." But Linden didn't mind, perhaps because that missing symbol was perched weightlessly inside the composition, as if goading the page that failed to describe it).

As *Phook!* demonstrates, Linden's titles are undeniably provocative. Functioning as happy interruptions, sight gags or pure nonsense, they are as important as the images they refer to and prompt unexpected considerations. In true Duchampian fashion, Linden's seemingly simple linguistic concepts and allusions enable meaning to multiply while always referring back to the work itself. Within defined parameters, Linden

constructs a complex aesthetic, so it follows that the artist is now exploring new challenges to his discrete aesthetic, those of multiple authorship and of sound. Linden has recently begun a collaboration, his first, with the experimental jazz musician Igor Grigoriev, also known as Ogogo. Grigoriev, a Russian guitar virtuoso and avant-garde composer, has already written scores based on Linden's paintings *Ohfey* (2003), *Fly Gel* (2004) and *Eye Spring (version 2)* (2006). (These compositions can be heard on Grigoriev's website, www.myspace.com/ogogoigor.) Such a pairing of music with image seems a natural gambit for Linden, who often listens to the music of Brian Eno, Steve Reich and John Cage while working. Grigoriev himself would seem to be responding to the "noise" already within Linden's work.

As he proceeds, Linden humbly yields to the autonomous will of his artworks. He recognizes that "a more thoughtful person" might know exactly when to start or stop a painting, but he allows his surfaces to dictate the course of their own development. And as a mature artist, he also understands the liability in talking about his work in such terms. In his simple yet poetic artist's statement, he offers only seven candid conceits about his process, speaking of "centric shapes" and "stingy palette." But among these forthright characteristics, one statement gives pause: "shared doubt." Linden will tell you, that his doubt is indeed "shared with anyone who pays attention," to art, its systems, its histories and its pretensions. It's an expression of doubt about the maker, the author and the penman, a doubt that gladly lets creative authority slip out of the spotlight. After all, as Joyce reminds us (in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*), "the artist, like the God of creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails."

Quotes are from interviews with the author, except where otherwise noted.

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Pasadena, CA, November 2007