

CITY DRIVING

Lia Gangitano

Bumper to bumper. Rubber burning. Slow plus fast equals city driving. Making shiftless contradictions becomes preferable to seeking designated meanings. Hence a decision to stop literally searching and start waiting to get one- a philosophy.

A cultivation of boredom, repetition, simplicity, made credible by Warhol, leads to infinite production, the delegation of responsibilities. Gregory Coates does not like ironies, but he tends to list them, to look at them later. His paintings do not just display themselves; they tend to be in transition. Like driving fast, the solid road blurs, the fence picks up speed.

The idea that painting should broaden and repeat itself is motivational. Some reversals are implied by titles like Mimic, Echo, Family names. Unlike the groping for emotion implied by the vernacular of Abstract Expressionism, Coates has found something quieter, a project whose longevity alludes to indefinite retreat - embracing a scarcity of material, an explicitness of color. But they would not be his own if these terms were not made to contradict themselves.

Some contradiction lies in Coates' composition of the paintings' structure, surface. The structure is found material, wooden packing palettes scavenged from his neighborhood, around which more found materials are wrapped, bicycle inner tubes mostly, sometimes rope, duct tape. Clear allusions are made to makeshift swellings, patch-job refinements, the style of the street. To these structures, a coating of pigment is added. Most importantly they do not shine. A covering of powder (slow) over (fast) material causes an inward stare, offering no reflective way out.

Oddly, Coates cites a reference found in nature, a stream, fast water moving over slow dirt. The mundane natural discrepancy is applied to an urban rhetoric of debris.

There is no medium of concealment, just a dry accentuation of the elements drawn beneath. That the inner tubes, etc, comprise a drawing style on their own, whose formal duration, interruption of width relate to architectural spaces the pleating of grids, and the metaphorical implication of lines, highlights the versatility that Coates demands of painting.

By abandoning the hidden stretch of canvas, other tensions are divulged. Binding materials (tape, rubber) augment control, and are thrown off by strokes of color. Process not without audacity. His pursuit of a certain junk fetish (an accumulation and repetition of material) is dolled up with some rope tricks and the melodrama of accurate restriction. This conflation of cultured art history (Modernist color quotations) and streetwise performance (dressing up, acting) constitutes a subculture unto itself, much like the eighties art world from which Coates emerged and toward which many artists still aspire.

It's time to discuss Sado-Masochism, a literal and metaphorical situation, once described by artist/cinematographer Arthur Jafa in relation to the cinematographic representation of black-on-black violence in films such as *Boyz in the Hood* and *Menace II Society*. When deprived of power, one must create a context for dominance by any means necessary – an uneasy displacement of master/servant roles. So, Coates' literal references to bondage (restrictive, binding material and at times unadorned black rubber, a specificity of knots and hardware) speak of this transference of power, both in its social and overlapping aesthetic circumstance. Discarded objects on the street become elegant dominatrices in a Minimal power play for painting field. The material information lies in its accentuation of restriction, the drama of its accumulation and fabrication.

By overlapping aesthetic circumstance, I mean to allude to wry promise of Abstraction for earlier generation of African American practitioners in the genre in the mid forties, fifties. As a field of artistic expression, unencumbered by explicit cultural signifiers, Abstraction offered a level field for artists despite racial differences. However, social factors, namely segregation and racial prejudice, prevented the realization of the promise, and amassed a repository of forgotten heroes called African American Abstract Painters, to which Coates refers in equal part with their famous white counterparts. But with Coates there is

no “African American nobility clause, “ no preaching, just he pacing together of art historical references made disparate only by the circumstances of history. And this history continues in its relegation of art to racial categories, written in the scarcely understood recitals of a black vernacular hardly updated since the Harlem Renaissance.

And so the exhibition of Coates’ work in an alternative space, geographically located in downtown Manhattan (where he lives and works) presents an opportunity for the expansion of his installation practice as well as the formal dialogue he engages. A mature experiment in restraint, *to be Distributed* not only refers to the careful placement of adaptable units in space, but also to the positioning of his work in an environment fraught with heterogeneous associations of race, class and discipline – an encounter between a past utopianism posited by Abstraction and the complexities of present day exhibition practice.

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Ms. Gangitano curated the exhibition: Gregory Coates, to be distributed at Thread Waxing Space, NYC 2002