



Sebastian Black

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by Julie Kreimer

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SEBASTIAN BLACK'S "Pink blink" and the Logic of the Screen

by Alex Bacon

We live in an era when the virtual space of the digital screen has become the dominant lens by which we perceive, and thus make sense of, the world around us. Within the screen various perceptual registers—from the textual, to the photographic, to the painterly—are brought together and made fictively coherent. There is no heterogeneity too vast or disparate to be encompassed by the relational meta-logic of the screen. Ours is the first time a form of distanced mediation, embodied in the ubiquity of the screen, has been felt by many to be an essential tool in such culturally, socially, and politically charged issues as community building, subjective expression, and phenomenal experience.

The complex, unfolding, and ultimately contradictory encounter with one of Sebastian Black's "Puppy Paintings" is one of the most rigorous engagements with the screen paradigm that presently governs our visual vernacular. In the latest, most advanced iteration of these paintings, Black plays with the kinds of perceptual cues and expectations that the digital screen capitalizes on, conditions, and extends. Not by finding their painterly analogue, but rather by using that medium as a critical tool to dismantle, challenge, and ultimately redirect those unconscious perceptual logics by which we interface with the world via digital prostheses like laptops, smartp



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Sebastian Black, "Pink blink," 2013. Oil on linen, 36 × 27. Courtesy of the artist.

"Pink blink" (2013), on view in UNIQUE NEWARK, Black's recent show at C-L-E-A-R-I-N-G (which closes February 16), is one of the latest in the artist's ongoing series of "Puppy Paintings." So-called because of the disembodied cartoon puppy face motif that—blown up, centered, and geometricized—serves as a sort of perverse armature for what is, in recent iterations like "Pink blink," a stunning investigation of some of the most rigorous formal possibilities available to the medium today. In this painting, Black alternates between flat graphic planes and bulbous shaded volumes, all rendered in a bright palette of pinks and purples that run the full gamut from light to dark, warm to icy. The underlying puppy face, immediately visible in Black's earlier paintings, has become submerged under the layers of complex aesthetic activity that it gives rise to and structures.



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What initially appears as a carefully arranged jumble of shapes and patterns begins to reveal itself to the viewer in piecemeal fashion, unfolding in three stages. First there is the sense that everything we are looking at will function in a predictable fashion. What is painted a dark hue will sit close to the picture plane, while what is painted a light hue will stand back from it. This form is set on top of that one, and next to this other one, while slightly overlapping yet another one, a particular coming together of painted passages that is ultimately legible, perhaps with some concentration, as the puppy's eye, its ear, or its nose. As one looks at them, some of these forms will stay obdurately immobile, while others will oscillate forward and backwards in the shallow space of the painting (I can detect little to no lateral movement in "Pink blink").

There are three ways form can function in the compositional system Black has established in "Pink blink," and which is consistent across the latest of his "Puppy Paintings." They can float somewhere between picture plane and background, as with the right eye—which, with its lidded semi-circular form, is perhaps doing the "blinking" indicated in the title—which lies in a much more discrete relation to the rest of the picture than most of the other forms. Or they can seem to body forth out towards the viewer, as with the central circular form, which, when focused on, takes on a life of its own, detaching from the composition and seeming to emanate forth from the canvas. Or they can lie flat against that background, as with the puppy's "ears," which are felt, in the case of the left one, to have been set directly on top of the background, while the right one can be read two ways—as either blending into the background to form part of its planar patterning, or as set just on top of it, it depends whether one reads it as an "ear" or an "arm" (given that it ends in a hand).



Installation shot, *UNIQUE NEWARK, C-L-E-A-R-I-N-G*, 2013. From left to right, "Pink blink", "Period Piece (partition) 2", "Motif Lite".



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One could walk away then and there and think she had “gotten” it, the painting amounting to not much more than an elegant tone poem. Chances are, however, that in just that instant of smug satisfaction, as her eyes begin to move away, something in the painting would catch her attention from out of the corner of her eye, causing her to pause. In that pause it would become evident that a shift had occurred in the composition, that in some subtle way a piece of the puzzle thought just a moment before to have been solved had slipped out of place, and in so doing had begun to shift the experience of the picture as a whole. Like dropping a stone into a lake, and with all the compositional clarity and elegance of an immaculately composed piece of music, the setting off of one element of the picture ripples across the canvas until we begin to perceive it as an undulating surface of gentle pulsations, oscillations, and modifications.

After this comes the third stage, which, it must be said, is not the final one, given the potentially endless proliferation of aesthetic experiences to which this series of events can give rise. At this point the viewer realizes that the painting has laid a trap of sorts for us, directly soliciting our conventional expectations for how painted form should work, a situation it then thwarts via various formal shifts, subversions, and rearticulations. “Pink blink” does not simply negate or reverse these expectations, but rather renders them ceaselessly in flux by constantly adding to them, shifting them, only to redouble back on itself, never stopping anywhere for long, and by extending this syncopated flow indefinitely. This is a highly significant state of affairs in our present digital age, but before we examine that connection in depth let’s discuss some specific examples of the kind of formal activity I am talking about.

The enigmatic hand that rests, slumped, its fingers curled against the lower right edge of “Pink blink” is likely to be the first of these points of subversion that the viewer encounters in the picture. At least it’s where my eyes landed first. Its graphic clarity and instant iconic recognizability set it apart from the abstract non-referentiality of the majority of the rest of the canvas and make it a compelling place through which to enter the composition. However, the situation is quickly complicated because the hand is mottled with various planar passages of purple and pink that range through hot and medium values. Convention declares that these should imbue the hand with a sense of dimensionality, but rather they insist on lying flat atop it as an adamantly abstract pattern that refuses to fulfill its duty as an agent of corporeality.

Then there is the matter of the fingers. Have they been stopped by the bottom edge of the painting? Is that edge thus literalized as a kind of physical “support” for the hand, or do the fingers perhaps continue below and behind it, the edge cutting them off as a cropping device of sorts? This suggests another reading, one that would reconcile the literalized edge with the fictive continuation of the hand beyond the canvas, for is it possible that the hand is resting against the edge, but the fingers are spilling



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downwards, out of frame? Any of these scenarios are possible, if not necessarily at the same time, and the issue is thus never resolved. But “resolution” is the wrong word to use here, for we quickly lose sight of a resolution as we allow ourselves the pleasure of embarking on the aesthetic journey that Black has set us on.

After dwelling on the hand, next my eyes went left, to the central circular form, the painting’s most complex. It is segmented, truncated on the left and on top, and has a triangular protrusion thrusting out from its right side. Within this form I can identify several different ways of indicating, enacting, or suggesting volumetric modeling. The lower-left passage is rendered as a hazy scumble, as is the central-right passage, underneath which a purple triangular form is seen to continue. The use of chiaroscuro here lends the lower-left passage a certain sense of downward curvature—or at least makes it seem set back in space—while the presence of visible underpainting lifts the right side of the form and seems to tilt the segmented one away from the viewer, as if it is moving steadily backwards at an angle.

But this is complicated by the rectilinear agglomeration of triangles that frame the top and right sides of the circular form. In these, Black has used flat planes of lighter and darker colors to suggest spatial difference, whereby the darker parts are read as closer to the picture plane, and as more solid than the lighter ones. This effect is emphasized by the use of a passage of medium purple along the meeting point of the rightmost triangle and the central circular form, which reads as a shadow of sorts, setting the triangle back in space. However, Black’s use of flat, alternating dark and light, triangular planes that get progressively smaller as one’s eye moves towards the upper-right of the rectilinear form, complicates this visual effect. When viewed a certain way, it seems as if the outer edges of the form have been turned up, confusing our sense of that form’s location relative to the central circular one. For, given the shadow at lower right, this makes the form as a whole seem to tilt backwards in space before curving upward and forward toward the viewer at its edges, which contradicts the visual cues provided by the sectioned medium purple passage that seems angled the other way, a spatial situation which cannot conceivably be possible because, in order to do so, it would have to intersect with the form to its right, and it demonstrably does not.

Close inspection reveals other such formal “contradictions” elsewhere in “Pink blink,” which stands in here as paradigmatic of the strongest of Black’s “Puppy Paintings.” What is significant and remarkable about this crossing of perceptual wires—which, in itself, is not new, art historically speaking—is that this kind of formal confusion and multiplicity is given new meaning and significance in our digital age. While Black’s “Puppy Paintings,” such as “Pink blink,” bear a morphological resemblance to Cubism, this is a red herring that distracts from the fact that in the face of the shifting spatial paradigms we are currently bearing witness to in culture and society more



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broadly—whose ubiquitous manifestation is the digital screen—a structurally engaged model of meaning making has new relevance and, of these, Cubism is the major art historical precedent. As Anne Friedberg has argued, “The vernacular ‘space’ of the computer screen has more in common with [the] surfaces of Cubism—frontality, suppression of depth, overlapping layers—than with the extended depth of Renaissance perspective.”¹ Friedberg aligns Cubism with several technologies, especially film and television, that, over the course of the 20th century, set the stage for our contemporary visual vernacular by introducing notions of spatial and temporal discontinuity and multiplicity—via techniques like flashbacks, ellipses, and achronologies.

What is displayed on a computer screen, nested within one of its many windows, is given meaning only in relation to the other things alongside which it is displayed, things that may occupy their own very different spatial, temporal, and graphic registers. As Friedberg also tells us, “Above, below, ahead, and behind are simultaneous on the computer display, where each element in [a] composition is seen separately with no systematic spatial relationship between them ... not all digital space is designed to suggest three dimensions.” This is the major difference between Cubist space and screen space. The Cubist painters discovered in the flat rectangle of a painting—which is neither simply a mute object, nor simply a passive vehicle for pictorial illusion—a space where multiple perceptual registers could coexist; such a space did not exist elsewhere in early 20th-century Europe. Over the course of the 20th Century the screen has taken over this function, and made it the dominant visual paradigm, rather than an avant-garde challenge to it and, insofar as its presence is ubiquitous, for the masses of the first world at least—in our homes, offices, on our persons—what was an isolated, critical gesture in the early 20th century has become an unconscious part of everyday experience in the early 21st.

Black and the Cubists can, then, be seen as perched at either end of the development of what Friedberg terms our contemporary “visual vernacular.” For an artist like Picasso, working at its beginning in the early 20th century, the paradigm to be challenged was the humanist, Cartesian logic of perspectival space, whereby what the viewer surveyed was understood as subject to his or her masterful experience of it, and was thus projected as an extension of his or her interiority. Now, however, as Friedberg suggests, the perspectival model “may have met its end on the computer desktop.” This is not to say that today perspective has ceased to serve as a meaningful analogue for spatial experience, but rather that the contemporary non-hierarchical rule of coexistence, contingency, and relationality of multiple spatial paradigms in singular and stacked frames, as in the various windows on a computer screen, means that it exists today as only one possibility among a multitude of others, within which it is neither autonomous nor privileged.



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Since perceptual disjuncture has become the standard mode by which we experience the world, Black's "Puppy Paintings," such as "Pink blink," make us aware of how we have come to give vision a kind of dictatorial power to reach out and effect what we see, given that—especially now with the touch screen, although this was already suggested by the computer screen—we expect to be able to reach out and manipulate what crosses our vision into an infinite number of potentially desirable configurations, and toward a number of goals, spanning the full range of the mundane and the profound.

"Pink blink" strategically resists the unconscious naturalization of this state of affairs, with its subtle but whole scale program of recentering subjectivity. Even as "Pink blink" seems to be giving in to us—the composition seeming to move in concert with our expectations—this is only, as we have seen, to ultimately thwart them. The disjunctures that Black conjures in works like "Pink blink" must both derive from a meaningful system and add up to one, but along the way go off on alternate routes that cannot fully be controlled by the attempted perceptual interventions of the viewer. The most profound experience one has with a work like "Pink blink" is that moment of recognition where one becomes aware that not only has a perceptual expectation been subverted, but that one then made a move unconsciously to "correct" the discrepancy, which was then also foiled by the painting and, in being foiled, made visible. This checking of our unwitting hubris can be as exhilarating as it is humbling. Perhaps in the digital age the latest version of the (technological) sublime has become the realization that we have already jumped off the cliff and are lost, adrift in the sea of data, and this act of checking our expectations of mastery over that information, thereby now made visible, throws us up out of the water back onto the shore, even if only for a second before a wave sweeps in to drag us back out. That instant where we experience the vertigo of our situation—and just how mired, often happily and unconsciously, we are in it—can be exhilarating.

In a certain way Black's "Puppy Paintings," in all their formal complexity, are about the inability for any act of formal analysis to pretend to be objective, since, as I inventory my reading of the painting, I realize that everything I felt to definitively "happen" in the act of looking was largely an imposition underwritten by my unconscious expectations of perceptual mastery. We can now understand the course of the 20th century, into the early 21st, as perhaps being a long systematic undoing of an old model of mastery—the singular subject who is master of all he surveys by being the sole actor in a neutral field—that only ushers in a new one, whereby the great multitude of visual data may be endlessly varied, but can also all be controlled, just so long as it can be placed in the proper context.

Thus a formalist methodology is all the more necessary as a heuristic that in analyzing



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the best contemporary work, such as Black's, finds itself capable of articulating a double action. On the one hand it exposes ingrained and supposedly unconscious perceptual cues and reveals them as, at their base, the result of our (largely unconscious) desire to order and control what is laid before us—the process by which subjectivity is secured—the most ubiquitous model for which today is the digital screen (which is not so much its determinant, as a hypostatization of the cultural desire for this kind of mastery, which has been decades, even centuries, in the making). Thus, no formal claim should be made without the understanding that it is never natural, nor inevitable, bringing us to the converse of what formal analysis can tell us today, which is how those systems might be resisted, even subverted, or at least partly redirected in the service of more active considerations. This is what the formal “detours” in Black's paintings such as “Pink blink” do: they make visible our ingrained, unconscious expectations, and suggest the means of their redirection. In the process a utopian plateau of future possibilities is opened up, toward which this recalibrated sensorium might be directed.

Endnotes

1. All citations are to Anne Friedberg, *The Virtual Window: From Alberti to Microsoft* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009).