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In Studio with Clayton Colvin

By Brian Edmonds
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I recently visited the studio of **Clayton Colvin** in Birmingham, Alabama. The conversation below took place during the visit and through an exchange of emails over a period of time.

Brian Edmonds: *Clayton, could you explain your studio routine? I know you recently moved into a new studio space. Has this affected your work, if so then how?*

Clayton Colvin: I work in a studio at my home, which makes it possible for me to work when time presents itself. I try to work 4-5 hours, 5 days a week, but it is not so predictable.

BE: *Are there any methods or materials you favor?*

CC: Linen, acrylic, and ink and dry drawing materials. I also use GOLDEN mediums.

BE: *Yeah I have noticed how the linen is stretched over a panel. This seems as if it would provide a solid surface on which to draw. I notice a lot of charcoal. This gives the work a nice feel, almost crude and stark contrast within the painting. I don't recall seeing a sketchbook or preparatory drawings lying about. Are things worked out on the canvas?*

CC: I make small drawings, or write down sentences or phrases, or clip an image online or from a printed material, but that often is a starting point, and the paintings grow and revolt in unpredictable ways most of the time.

BE: *There are elements of drawing imbedded deep within many paintings. Canine Sensibilities (2013) is a good example of this. Does the drawing dictate the direction of the work? Is there a point when the drawing is erased or pulled under and resurfaces?*

CC: Drawing is huge in my work. The qualities of drawing, the intimacy allows for the feelings I want to work with to be present: drawing is a great conveyor of personal amazement and feelings of fragility.

BE: *I can definitely see that. From my observation the drawing is almost always being devoured by the paint but in the gentlest sense. The drawing doesn't detract from the work. It enhances the viewer's experience, draws you closer to the surface, a considered intimacy.*

I have followed your work closely since the Space Mountain exhibition @ beta pictoris gallery in Birmingham 3 years ago. It seems as if the recent work has tightened up a bit while not become formulaic. Pattern or the hint of a pattern is always present but does not overpower the work. Could you take me through your process? Giving insight into how a painting such as Brain Wash (2013) comes about.



CC: Patterns are really interesting to me. A lot of my visual language comes from my experience with field vision and the game of soccer or futbol. Players are naturally good or trained to read things in their periphery and anticipate events in space. So, creating space through unlocking patterns and exploiting breaks or lapses is a way I like to think of the technical act of painting.

In a more philosophical way of addressing your question I have to reference a phrase that is in my head while I paint, "how do you want to live your life, and what does that look like?"

I am interested in how structure and pattern is in place in my day to day experience. And I question these patterns. Usually they break down on their own and new ones arise. For example, one of my kid's soccer practices will be rained out or daylight savings changes the routine, or someone close to me is born or dies.

For a while I was interested in painting the act of willing a change in routine, but more recently I am less aggressive, more interested in how fragile the pattern or structure is - and the paintings hopefully reflect that.

Brain Wash is a painting that is a classic case of destroying the precious part of a painting so that a better whole can arise. I built it up and broke it down many times slowly, and then gave it a very gestural series of line-like marks that gave it a lively and fresh influx mixing boldness or abandon with fragility. The palette in that one benefited from a slow process.

BE: *The viewpoints are very interesting. I have often thought of the act of painting in relation to chess. The way a move can dictate how the painting unfolds, how one approaches the next move or how to work your way out of a jam.*

I think we forget how external factors play a role in our painting. Be it an emotional response to something/someone or a break in our daily routine. How time plays a role in how we work in the studio. It takes great focus and a sense of determination to make/create/build a cohesive painting much less a body of work.

That is one thing I picked up on during our studio visit. How the pattern begins to break down or becomes imperfect as it continues on its path. As if a structure is beginning to collapse and unravel due to its massive weight.

You also have this great painting within a painting going on in your work. Both Brain Wash and All Magic is Dangerous are great examples of this. In All Magic is Dangerous the pattern is there, slowly breaking down, appearing to spiral out of control while the pink and white forms create this wonderful tension. It is as if the ground beneath your feet is quickly dissipating. The white, semi-transparent form really ties it all together.

Many painters have referenced works of literature as a direct influence on their painting. There are books scattered about the studio and references you have made to the written word. Do you actively read? If so, does this influence your work?

CC: Yes, totally. I just closed a show at the University of Montevallo where I included a lot of the books I had read over the last year to make that clear. Art students feel pressure to read theory and art history, and that's great, but it is a big world. I like fiction. I like writers who open up my thinking more. I read a lot during the summer especially. It is hot here. Being still is advisable.

BE: *I remember asking you about artists that influenced the work included in the Space Mountain (2012) show. You mentioned trying to not look at other artists or works that might influence the paintings. Do you still try to insulate your work from outside influences? Do you make mental notes when you see a work either online or in person?*

CC: Isolation is helpful to my practice. I taught at UAB and Alabama for years, and when I stopped and focused on my studio practice it helped a lot. That said, I love teaching and talking shop, but for now I am keeping limits on it. I do try to design my experience.

BE: *To me it is so difficult to remove oneself from it all. We are so bombarded with imagery. Magazines such as Artforum are filled with glossy advertisements for upcoming shows. Blogs and Facebook create a feeding frenzy of sorts.*



CC: The question kind of leads me back to the fiction and literature influence. I don't make work directly in response to books, but I am aware that they are in play in my thinking and experience. For example, My 2013 solo show at beta pictoris gallery was titled "Sewing up the Sea". A lot of those paintings were influenced by the writing of Kelly Link. Her writing has a way of expanding and contracting that I really responded to, and I saw that plasticity as analogous to the way I think of Painting.

Reading is slow and quiet, but can simultaneously be enormous and unruly. Imagery consumption is tricky.

I try to avoid social media, Facebook especially, which is a conscious attempt to insulate myself. I prefer to do email and phone calls and face to face stuff more. It seems less disposable and doesn't wear me out!

However, I am interested in digitization of imagery, and use my phone/cam and a projector in phases of paintings. I am interested in how we consume images, and how my relationship to imagery has changed, and how Painting fits into that whole deal. For example, the Space Mountain show at beta pictoris had a lot of references to the way soccer looks on TV when not a HD broadcast; it was cutting edge at one point and I loved it, and now it is hard to watch... Or soccer games broadcasted from different parts of the world such as Argentina leagues with one camera that just pans back and forth.

I look at the major art mags and W, but not in the studio. If I see a color relationship or a pattern or a structure or a shape I really respond to I'll clip it and take it to the studio to reference. But just stacks of old magazines and art history books are not helpful in my studio. I did Art History undergrad and love it, but right now I have two books in my studio. One is thin (Zizek's the fragile absolute) and one is thick (on Japanese Zen culture) they are both useful in propping up my projector as needed.

BE: *This has been a very busy year to date. The High Museum of Art in Atlanta recently added "Gaps In Memory" to their permanent collection. The show at the University of Montevallo just closed. Slow Your Instruments is currently up at Launch F18 in and Put Down Your Stars opens next week at Margaret Thatcher Projects. It's great to see things moving forward so rapidly.*

CC: Yes, it seems busy. Actually the Launch F18 show is up still and both of the solo shows will close the same day as the one at Thatcher Projects.

The paintings are going well, and so it is the other logistics and shipping that is extra activity... I have a great group of people that I trust with a lot of the bits and pieces of it, here in Birmingham.

It has been great to be in New York physically a lot this spring. I did my undergrad at NYU, so I feel at home, and I have some great people that I love seeing when I am there.

The High Museum of Art acquisition is pretty exciting. I had a great studio visit with one of their curators last year. They got a really fresh piece that is a large collage/painting on paper. I am looking forward to seeing it in the context of their collection.

BE: *How do you see your work progressing? Simplifying things a bit, exploring the pattern, etc.*

CC: The work is flowing. I have brought in a new scale, which helps to keep it fresh. I try to keep it not formulaic, so I can't tell you exactly where it will go, that's the fun part?