

# JESSICA DICKINSON

**Selected Press**

# BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

JUNE 3RD, 2015

ART

INCONVERSATION

## JESSICA DICKINSON with Danielle Mysliwicz

One week prior to the opening of her solo show *Close/Close* at James Fuentes (May 3 – June 7, 2015), Jessica Dickinson hosted Danielle Mysliwicz at her Gowanus studio for a conversation about her paintings, her practice, and the publication of her new book *Under / Press. / With-This / Hold- / Of-Also / Of/How / Of-More / Of:Know*, published in conjunction with the show by Inventory Press.



Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

**Danielle Mysliwicz (Rail):** When I visited the studio last week to sit with your work alone, I was immediately drawn to this painting, “Knows:” (2013 – 2015). I’ve never seen a painting of yours like this before! The word aggregate appears in your writings and, to me, “Knows:” feels like an aggregate of all of your different approaches to painting that I’ve seen to date. I see the echo of the slanted rectangle from the composition of “Here”, (2008 – 2009) and this ephemeral light that is in many of your works, which feels like it is being cast from a window outside the painting’s edge. The surface simultaneously calls to mind crumbling ruins, polished marble, a weathered slab of stone. Then there are these beautifully wedged marks reading like cuneiform or some illegible lost language carved into a cave wall from the beginnings of time. How do you see it?

**Jessica Dickinson:** I was thinking about a moment of sharp clarity being materialized, like that black line marking the open rectangle, but then also making visible everything that led up to that moment—as if seeing multiple ways of attempting to understand something at once. To me it’s like a strange sensation of understanding time in a very material sense. Sensations can be physical, like the carved out sections, or ethereal, like the light—and then almost linguistic, like the opaque black line. In a way, I thought of all these paintings as having this sort of archaeology, if that’s the right word. So, it’s interesting that you say that it’s all of the paintings I’ve ever made combined because I feel like it’s also the other five paintings for the show combined in it. For this show, I wanted to create an environment where there were multiple and differing spaces and times at once, and this is the centerpiece where it is all collapsed.

**Rail:** Archaeology conjures the act of excavating and I feel that process in looking at this painting. Can you describe how you made it?

**Dickinson:** With all the paintings, I work with oil on a plaster-like surface, like fresco, and layer a series of events, both additive and subtractive, over long periods of time. Certain things are planned, like a loose script, but I don’t know what it will look like—however, I start with the title and have a very specific thing I am after. It’s actually hard to describe how it was made, since they are so layered, and each painting is different. With “Knows:” I started with a thin white line on a grey surface that was an echo from the painting “Of:Know” (2013). That was like a thin perimeter of a thought. I carved that out and then applied layers of white paint, like curtains continually closing. Once that initial delineation was lost, I carved out these deep decisive gouges with a chisel to create a larger perimeter. Chunks of plaster flaked off, and that was a dramatic, unexpected moment. And then it was red, and then bright blue, and then I painted the slanted rectangular form, which for this painting comes from that motion of opening a curtain, that transition, the appearance of illumination. This takes different forms in different paintings for this show, this idea of being open or closed, different degrees of being closed, or closeness. Then after painting a black layer—like a light being turned off—I slowly scraped out the slanted shape with a small chisel that would dull and be replaced repeatedly. All along, though, I knew I wanted there to be this firm rectangular line. It’s based on this window frame here. I woke up from a studio floor nap and it was very strong and staring at me. It evoked this certainty and I wrote down “The feeling of seeing a hard thought.” In a sense the excavation is like this migration of a thought, like a foundation being moved and the traces of its former perimeters being visible.



Photographs on Dickinson's studio wall. Courtesy of the artist.

**Rail:** The new book of your work features the eight paintings made between 2012 and 2013, each followed by its complete set of “remainders” (full-scale graphite rubbings documenting significant shifts in the paintings as they’re made). And in your interview with Patricia Treib, included in the book, you said you were imagining the paintings from your show *Before/Beside* (2011), emitting light, then casting shadows, and the next body of work being conceived of as those shadows. I loved the idea of the shadows becoming physical objects. I thought that was a poetic way to connect the two bodies of work and it speaks to your interest in light and time as subject matter. Is the work in your current show a continuation of this kind of conceptual chronology?

**Dickinson:** Yes, to me it’s a way to structure things. I do think in terms of sequences, reoccurrences, and shifts. It’s not some meta-narrative that anyone needs to comprehend to enter the work, and each piece can work on its own. The book covers paintings that went from darkness in an intimate space (“Under,” “Press.,” “With-This”) to countering whitish paintings not exhibited (“Hold-,” “Of-Also”) to expansive color and scorching light in the Altman Siegel show (“Of/How,” “Of-More,” “Of:Know”). For this body of work I made more paintings in order to deal with a larger expanse of time. I thought of three of the paintings as more stone-like (“How-Close,” “More:Yet,” “Knows:”) where light and color is embedded, and the other three (“Close-Now,” “Yet:For,” “:More”) as more luminous and coming forward in space, with their weight slowly emerging.

**Rail:** Over the years it seems you’ve moved away from a more pictorial painting space and foregrounded your presence at the surface as the content of the work. When I was reading the stamped definitions of the titles on your exhibition flyer, this one stuck with me: “in what way – to what extent – like what – in whatever way – to mention a fact or event – to introduce a suggestion – in what way or manner – in, or to what degree, amount, number – in what condition – for what reason, why”

**Dickinson:** That’s a composite of definitions of the word “how.” One of the paintings is titled “How-Close.”

**Rail:** I like that it ends on “why.” It brings to mind existential questions and ideas of being. To act is to be, and in painting, in a way, to make a mark is to be. As an abstract painter today one has to contend with the iconic gesture of expressionism, so this question of “how?” is essential if you’re trying to make a mark that is felt. You’ve referred to your paintings as “radically cared for surfaces” and that care is evident. All of this is to say that when I look over the last several years of your work and think about the title of your first show with Fuentes—*Here* (2009)—I feel a profound sense of gravity, like I’m looking at a geological record of the self, of your here-ness if you will. And it resonates

with my individual being as a viewer, causing me to reflect on my here-ness. Do you see the work as a record of you?

**Dickinson:** No. They are not autobiographical. Nor are they about my presence or the value of my labor or my subjectivity. Ultimately, the paintings are for others, so the fact that it causes you to reflect on your own here-ness makes me feel like something is working. That said, when I saw the book printed, it was really intense to look back at those paintings, because the details are almost to scale, and the reproductions of the “remainders” so clear, that I felt like I was making them again, in this tactile way. I could feel it in my body. And since painting is part of daily life for me, it can’t help but conjure everything those mean to me, my associations with them, because there is a deeply personal motivation behind each piece. But I think it’s so important for me to make the paintings assert their ability to make space for others, and I’ve found that the best way to do this is to be as specific to my own experience as possible, it somehow opens things up for people better. In a sense there is no “mark” in my work to “be,” there is so much obfuscation, repetition, obliteration, and layers. There isn’t, for me, an assertion of self; rather, perhaps, an acceptance of intention compounded by chance, a sense of being partial and incomplete. I think so far away from the singular, and perhaps that is the existential question. One of my favorite quotes by Clarice Lispector is, “At the moment of painting and writing I am anonymous. My deep anonymity, that no one has ever touched.” I think I work the surfaces so much to leave myself, to have something internal evolve into something outside of me. Griselda Pollock also struck a chord with me when she wrote about Agnes Martin’s work producing a “generic subjectivity.” I think these ideas are different than ideas of “universality,” but I think perhaps the geological record you’re talking of is something we relate to with our bodies as matter, something more haptic than optic, that perhaps can connect us—and something about the ability of surfaces to register time, obliquely.

Going back to your comment about the earlier work, that transition from the more pictorial to more surface oriented, one thing I realized in the mid-2000s is that the work was getting too representational, which is an issue that ebbs and flows for me, that I have to keep in check. I want something more physical. When I was at MICA in 1996, I did the University of Georgia studies abroad program in Tuscany. My teacher from MICA, Ken Tisa, said, “you have to look at frescoes. Your art is about decay and fragility and you need to look at frescoes.”

**Rail:** So, even early on, it was evident that there was an interest in something physically being worn away over a long period of time.

**Dickinson:** I think a good teacher can sense the larger thing that’s in your work but not entirely visible, and direct you. I was making quasi-abstract process oriented paintings at that time. I saw the

Assisi frescoes by Cimabue that have changed through both erosion, accident, and mistakes—everything painted white turned black through slow oxidation. After seeing those I felt like I didn't know how to make a painting. How do you make this thing whose forms and marks are only partially decided? It took a lot of trial and error to figure it out, perhaps a decade of trying things. I learned true fresco, and didn't like it. In grad school I made a big installation, with multiple panels, like a frieze, but then I thought, Maybe it's about the decorative border? I started working on the plaster-like ground with oil paint, but I still thought, Maybe I should make more illustrative, figurative paintings that are more Baroque? [*Laughter.*]

**Rail:** How do I get to this thing that is resonating with me? Where is it located?

**Dickinson:** But also, what exactly *is* it? It isn't purely how it looks, it's how it feels, and also what took me longer to figure out was a concept to drive a method, and the right materials. I returned to see the Cimabue frescoes again in September of 2001, and realized how incredibly physical they were, and abstract. After that I started to treat the painting more like a surface going through various events, and I considered the viewer more as encountering the painting as a perceptual field. But it took a while to figure out a method. Then during a residency in France in 2008, I spent more time with crumbling frescoes nobody cared about, and started doing the large mixed-media works on paper, which got me thinking much more about pressure and absorption of time, which affected the pressure exerted on the paintings. I was realizing the need to slow everything down—turn the reductiveness up and turn the contrast and chromatic drama down so that I can create this really physical space that operates more gradually. A friend who visited my studio recently, just after travelling to Pompeii, was describing how the wall paintings he saw had this feeling of being “lived in” and this sense of “frozen time” that he sensed in my work as well, which may be ultimately what I've been trying to figure out.

**Rail:** I mentioned the surface of “Knows:” having what appears to me as a cuneiform-like marking over a large part of the surface. Were you thinking of cuneiform or text when you made that?

**Dickinson:** I have a strong attraction to ancient notching in stone. I wasn't thinking as much about it being writing as I was thinking about a surface being pressured through time, and marking time in different speeds. The pressure of trying to remove that surface created the motion of the mark. I'm physically doing it over a long period of time so I have to come up with different strategies. I like to do things in the work that are really slow and I like to use a small tool for a big thing. I don't always feel like a painter—I say I'm painting and then I've got a hammer and a chisel. I'm picking at a painting with a razor for two months. The mark, for me, is not an authoritative mark or a gestural mark about my presence, it's often these marks that build up in slow increments to become a big thing—or sudden

and dramatic removal—that maybe look like they weren’t made by hand, perhaps by other processes, forces. This goes back to what I was talking about before—an accretion of parts rather than a singular mark. Someone else mentioned to me that they were reminded of the first markings of counting, or the stone in a monk’s cell that’s worn down from repeated prayer in one place.

**Rail:** I liked how you said earlier “turn the reductiveness up.” It reminds me that I came across the idea of “baroque minimalism” in your notes. That seems to be one way this idea of accumulation operates in the paintings. It’s true that on first glance many of the paintings share a reductive monochromatic language of minimalism, but the immense history of each painting seems to be both hidden behind and pushing through its surface in a mysterious way that beckons incredibly long and slow periods of looking. In this painting, “More:Yet,” it reads like a wind blown stone with these two luminous blue lines that have been gouged out and it’s hard for me to even comprehend if the final layer was actually applied last or sanded down to and recovered.

**Dickinson:** I think in terms of the Baroque and Deleuze’s discussion of Leibniz and *The Fold*, of multiple times and material states existing at once and the potential to unceasingly unfold. In a sense the surfaces are compressed and hopefully expand in the process of viewing, with no fixed viewpoint. This painting has 23 “remainders”, which is the most so far. I wanted a series of opposing actions to happen to it but then somehow become assimilated into one field with this bracketing of the blue lines that are almost pushing the surface open. I was thinking of this painting as opaque and transparent at the same time, and I thought of it as a heaviness that’s been opened and closed several times, which is literally what happened. A few years ago, I looked at my wall of photographs and realized they’re all of passages of light or something really hard, like stone or concrete. To me the light, in a sense, represents something that’s fleeting and constantly changing, but slightly predictable. The hard surfaces are slowly eroding, being worn down by different forms of exposure, or resealing. They both mark time and change in these different ways.

**Rail:** It makes me think of “the gradual instant,” which is a phrase I came across a long time ago that has stuck with me. It’s a recurring theme in Anne Michaels’s novel *Fugitive Pieces* and I looked it up after seeing your work last week. “Just as the earth invisibly



Jessica Dickinson, “Knows:” (2013 – 15). Oil on limestone polymer on panel, 56 1/4 x 53 1/8 “. Photo: Jason Mandella. Courtesy of James Fuentes, New York.



Jessica Dickinson, detail of “Knows:” (2013 – 15). Oil on limestone polymer on panel, 56 1/4 x 53 1/8 “. Photo: Jason Mandella. Courtesy of James Fuentes, New York.

prepares its cataclysms, so history is the gradual instant.” And then later in the novel, “at what point does wood become stone, peat become coal, limestone become marble? The gradual instant.” It describes one way I’ve been thinking about meaning in your work and the metaphors conjured by your process. There is that notion of the minor forming the monumental. These feel monumental to me, not in the expressionistic way of, say, Pollock, but in their visual weight. I think about the sound they would make if they were tipped over and what it would feel like to lift them off the wall.

**Dickinson:** The need for them to have a sense of gravity is important to me. I do think of all these repeated actions of accumulation and removal as a way to make the minor into something major. I think also about the potential of the monumental while viewing the work, how it shifts from different viewpoints—this could also connect to the “gradual instant,” with multiple parts and transitions—from the optical to the material—revealing itself at different speeds and in different ways for different people. Like with “More:Yet” how the blue lines seem to be floating from a distance, but up close they are dug in. That could go unnoticed by some, or be apparent right away. At first they seem atmospheric, and then become heavy. Others can be heavy at first and then become atmospheric. Painting always deals with an “instant,” but I really consider the viewing operation, and work to stretch it out, to create something that maybe appears to be nothing, yet holds so much, or holds contradictions. I guess in some ways that goes back to the source of the work. In “More:Yet,” I knew I wanted to use these vertical lines—there’s this light that comes through the shades in my room, there’s photos of them on the wall there, they’re almost like incisions. They kind of haunt me at all times; they’re there when I wake up in the middle of the night, they’re there when I wake up in the morning, they’re there as I’m on the other side of the apartment, and they’re sort of like a bracket, in my peripheral vision, yet so strong in space, and they’re sort of asking a question—they are peripheral but major, somehow.

**Rail:** Do you make these notebook drawings when you’re actually looking at the light coming through?

**Dickinson:** No, it’s not so literally an observational drawing. It’s not so much about what it looks like—it’s more like marking different sensations produced in my thought process or psychological state. I think of seeing, thinking, and feeling as one thing. The notebook drawings are more like an automatic drawing practice that later turns into stages for the paintings.

**Rail:** In your statement, you describe your practice as devotional. I know you grew up Catholic, and earlier you mentioned the stone in a monk’s cell being marked by prayer. Do you mean devotional in a religious way?



**Dickinson:** No, I think it's important for me to not refer to some other power or higher power, so I don't mean that in a religious way. I used the word "devotional" because I think of the surface of the painting as a place where something is worked out philosophically through material, different from producing an icon, but with a fidelity to a process. Perhaps it's a word I use in the wrong way to stake out the more conceptual side of my project, which is weird of me! But I think "painting production" now is so linked to a marketing system of the signature style or intellectual value of the artist, that I needed to frame my project in terms of loyalty to whatever drives it, to serve the painting's question rather than the demands of the outside world or standard ideas of "painting." Another text that has influenced me is "The Blank Page" by Isak Dinesen. It's maybe too much to get into here, but it's a parable about how the secret of every good story is to be "loyal to the story," and to do this we must always "include the blank page." This to me is a structural setup to allow for the unknown, and perhaps in my need to really work the painting through, I have to think of it as devotional and linked to an intention, to make it really work.

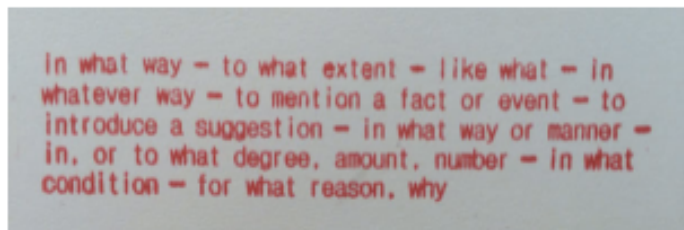
**Rail:** It makes sense to me because of the commitment you have to the daily practice. There are a lot of people who say, "Oh, this painting took me two years to make," but that means the painting sat on the sidelines for 6 months and then they went back to it periodically. You are returning to the surface, over and over and over and over again and, to me, that's what seems devotional about it. You've ventured into this pact with the painting to return to it and that's unique to your practice, that there's no abandonment in this work. You return, until it's done. At least that's how I understand it.

**Dickinson:** I do want to see something through, no matter what it takes.

**Rail:** Returning to the role of the minor. You write about the minor, the peripheral and what you term the "antiheroic" gesture. And then in another text of yours I came across this idea of feminism opening up a space in abstraction. I don't know if those two ideas were linked for you. Can you say more?

**Dickinson:** Yes, they are linked. It's a way to rethink how to paint for me. When I read Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* so long ago, I was struck by this simple notion of her call to try to make your experience most accurately into art, and how this can make art richer and better. It's not

necessarily about a gendered life, or gendered view, and not about asserting an identity, but thinking about what constitutes a valid subject—that the fleeting intervals of daily life not constituted as



Stamp of composite definitions of the word "how" from the exhibition poster. Courtesy of the artist.

“major” can hold profound possibilities. This affects the concepts that drive each piece, and also the approach to making in which a kind of invisibility is layered so much it becomes something with weight—so the result of small moves rather than a heroic gesture. And in the parameters of modernist abstract painting, we have the authoritative gesture and declarative statements, and also this idea of a linear canonical march of abstract painting with a beginning and an end. Growing up as a feminist I just always felt outside of that, I couldn’t relate. Rothko is often brought up with my work, and I understand the association, but I’ve never felt so moved by his work. It feels too adhered to a notion of the transcendental for me. He talks about how once the viewer is in a fixed position in front of his work the painting performs. I always think about a moving viewer, an unending possibility, not about filling a lack, and abstraction being a possibility for this. The process of working, letting go of a space of authority, or an assertion of the ego, through painting—and then the process of viewing it being a space of sharing and belonging through multiple encounters and exchanges—I think this is a feminist notion.

**Rail:** I took some pictures of your bookcase last week and in one there’s this stack of books: George Kubler’s *The Shape of Time* on top of Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves*, on top of Helen Cixous’s *The Third Body*, on top of Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*, on top of Rosalind Krauss’s *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and other Modernist Myths*, on top of Robert Etienne’s *Pompeii: The Day a City Died*. And I just laughed and thought, “Well, she’s pretty much summed that up!”

**Dickinson:** I’m so attached to that copy of *Moby Dick*, which I’ve been thinking of again lately. When I finally got to page through the new publication with the “remainders” I had this odd revelation where I was like, “Wait a second, I had this idea a long time ago. How could a painting be like a book? How could it unfold through time, be this compact thing that somehow holds so much?” Around 1999, I wanted to create a painting that somehow produced epic time. I was reading epic literature, like *War and Peace*, *Moby Dick*, *The Iliad*. And then I had this sense when I got the new publication that the actual “remainders” are like a book form of the paintings. Also all the paintings’ titles are thought of in sequence, however poetic and oblique, so the paintings are strangely structured as a book. Not so literary or narrative, but in a kind of sequential experience. Maybe I’m not a devotional painter—maybe I’m a novelist! [Laughter.]

**Rail:** Yes! That’s what I was thinking when I paged through the “remainders” in the book. In fact I wrote in my notes “This reads as a really understated suspense thriller.” I was kind of taken aback by how invested I became in seeing what came next, because honestly when I originally sat down with the book, I was expecting to flip through them and stop at a few that caught my attention. Then I ended up going very slowly, page by page. When did you start making the “remainders”?

**Dickinson:** I did the first “remainders” in 2009, which were rubbings of the final state of each painting. I thought, what if I just made a really direct drawing where I didn’t touch it at all after, just transcribed the surface? Because the paintings always have a specific material state that is not always visible. I liked that this could account for some other less visible reality of the painting. One thing that opened up my practice at large was Jay DeFeo’s idea of *The Rose* going through a “lifespan,” and the performative element of the documentation she made of that piece. With the next group of paintings, I started an experiment, making a rubbing every time I completed something significant on the surface. Sometimes that shift in the surface isn’t so clear in the “remainder,” but that’s part of it, it has to be in the sequence, because I think sometimes things occur that aren’t always so dramatic and that’s part of it, that time can be uneventful, or there is a discrepancy between the physical reality of the painting and the visual. And then I liked the way the “remainders” embody time in this more lateral way than the paintings.

**Rail:** Do you ever look back to them as a map of what to uncover or reveal later?

**Dickinson:** Honestly, I don’t look at them that much while I’m painting. I kind of know what’s there. What they do help me with is making a recording of an event and then letting it go. I think the “remainders” have been good for the paintings, because I can be more disciplined and obliterate or cover something if that’s what needs to happen.

**Rail:** Right. They seem to allow you to maintain that loyalty to the painting you spoke of earlier, in this case, to acknowledge the inevitable loss that comes with time passing.

**Dickinson:** Yes, and also give credit to the not entirely visible, because all the actions and obliterations aren’t lost, and time is not lost—these events are always necessary to get to what comes next.

**CONTRIBUTOR**

Danielle Mysliwicz

## Jessica Dickinson

JAMES FUENTES LLC

The ride of Jessica Dickinson's recent show, "Here," signaled an unwillingness to look elsewhere, say, the history of abstract art-demanding instead the attention be paid to the situation at hand. The eponymous paintings, which faced the viewer upon entering James Fuentes' small storefront gallery, lent forced to this insistence on presence. In the 2008-2009 work, a shining slab of pale yellow leans precariously rightward in front of a blue-gray, green, and chalky off-white background. Up close, one could see that the near-solid appearance of this sunshiny block was illusive; it in fact subsists on the ridges left after thin grooves were etched into the limestone polymer base.

The materiality of the show's six paintings and works on paper required the viewer to take them in repeatedly from different vantage points to negotiate the interplay of light, color, form, and surface, as well as to map the relationships among them. The space was divided in two, with the three pieces in the front thematically linked through light as subject and content. *Distance-Come Closer*, 2007-2008, bursts with summery shards of swimming-pool turquoise, and it was only when one examined the work more closely that one saw that the paint is applied like spackle, filling deep gouges in the surface, which is elsewhere heavily sanded down.

A more mimetic and simultaneously more philosophical bent emerged in the third, closely related piece in the front space, a work on paper that complemented the sense of affirmation-in-spite-of-the-odds that dominated the paintings. Titled *Screen*, 2008, it depicts its subject with a grid of slightly irregular crosshatched lines; a blue shimmers here, too, though obvious only from a distance, when it emerges seemingly behind the surface. Like the conundrum of its real-world counterpart, the screen is at once a dense geometric grid and something almost imperceptible, designed to be seen through.

The complexity of Dickinson's works is built up through a six to twelve-month-long process of layering and erasure: Each is repeatedly scrubbed down, sanded, repainted, and modified in various ways. This procedure reflects the phenomenological basis of her practice: "Each piece," she has written, "is rooted in an exchange between a passing everyday perceptual experience and a psychological/cognitive experience over time—a silent, unfolding 'event.' ...[T]he paintings are a materialization of this event, and become an event in themselves." The



Jessica Dickinson. *Here*, 2008-2009, oil on limestone POLYmer on panel. 56 x 53".

angles. Dickinson's process has here become involuted, with the centripetal texturing of the surface adding to an introspective pull that is partially (but only partially) countered, when given time to play out by the irregularly occurring brighter-colored areas.

The other piece in this space, *Before-Almost*, 2008, appeared at first glance to be the outlier of the exhibition. A sheet of paper that look like it had been trop upon while lying on a gravelly surface it is painted, we learn, on the reverse. The work seems a commentary on the rest of the show, most explicitly out to make a statement. Rejecting the autonomy or purity of abstract art, nor to mention its occasional duty as standard-bearer for a latter-day Romantic sublime, it clarifies the assertion of the show's title through the immediacy of its own link with the nuts-and-bolts world.

An artist's book accompanying the exhibition, featuring photographs of graphite rubbings of her paintings, likewise explores the underpinnings of Dickinson's art. The images, titled "Remainders" look like depictions of dried-out mud. In addition to drawing attention to the sculptural aspects of her painted surfaces, they offer further evidence of the programmatic integrity of Dickinson's visually nuanced explorations of the interdependence of temporal processes and physical matter.

-Alexander Scrimgeour

act of abstraction is here a rendering of density. That includes a temporal density, as the drawn-out process to which each work has been subjected is answered with a decompression that takes place through the act of viewing.

In the rear section of the gallery, a notably darker, almost nocturnal register prevailed, with a painting and a work on paper that from a distance looks like almost purple-black, the Former. *Flash-Shift*, 2008-2009, overlaid with concentric circles and the latter, *Shift*, 2008-2009, with lines that likewise converge on an off-center point. Each is modulated with patches of lighter purple and the outlines of Rothko-esque interior rect-

# THE NEW YORKER

GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN

ART

**GALLERIES—DOWNTOWN**

**JESSICA DICKINSON**

At first glance, Dickinson's off-square near-monochromes (oil on limestone polymer on panel) have a familiar, Marden/Ryman look of principled restraint, but comparisons soon fall away. Practically geological accumulations of distressed paint layers—in green-struck gray, blushing turquoise, or what-the-hell orange—feel bedeviled by second, third, and umpteenth thoughts of an always almost attainable resolution. Dickinson memorializes interim states of the paintings' textures with graphite rubbings on paper. She makes her problems our problem, with desperate generosity. Through Dec. 11. (Fuentes, 55 Delancey St. 212-577-1201.)

# *l'étoile*

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THURSDAY, JUNE 20TH

## *Art & Vision: Intermittent Archives*

*by Nathaniel Smith*

*Brooklyn-based artist Jessica Dickinson returns to the Twin Cities with the first-ever collection of her conceptually-driven and subtly striking recordings reminiscent of her painting process. l'étoile arts columnist Nathaniel Smith talks with the artist before the closing of her exhibition, "final remainders," June 22 at David Petersen Gallery.*



remainder: Hold- (final) by Jessica Dickinson

Contemporary art is full of examples of artists with expansive practices. Artists are often encouraged to experiment with as many different media as they are able, an expectation which can unfortunately pull their creative endeavors into too many directions, creating a disjointed and unfocused body of work. Other artists utilize the intrinsic strengths of many different media to their respective best advantages in exploring the concepts central to the artist's work. Jessica Dickinson is an artist who falls in the latter category. Painting is the foundation of her practice, but her work is informed and expanded through the creation of drawings, art-books and mixed media works on paper. These separate yet related works simultaneously investigate themes of visual sensations, the passage of time, and inner sight gained through outer sight. Perhaps this dynamic is most evident in her graphite rubbings on paper called *remainders*, which are collected in her exhibition *final remainders* currently on view at David Petersen Gallery.

### ***slowing down/ paying attention***

Working out of a studio in a building shared with several other artists in Brooklyn, Jessica Dickinson works slowly, building layers upon layers of oils and a limestone-like additive onto the surfaces of each of her panels. As each layer takes extremely long to dry before another layer can be built up, reduced or altered, she generally finishes only four or so paintings a year. This does not seem to be an intention to limit production, but the fact that the artist uses this particular, time-intensive method indicates her willingness to explore the nature of materials in her work, as well as the patience necessary to complete each piece. The process itself aids an investigation into the nature of time, as well as how small changes (and taking the necessary time to notice them) can affect perspective. Dickinson says, "I think there is a life painting leads outside of what we can grasp of it that is very mysterious, and I want to honor that."

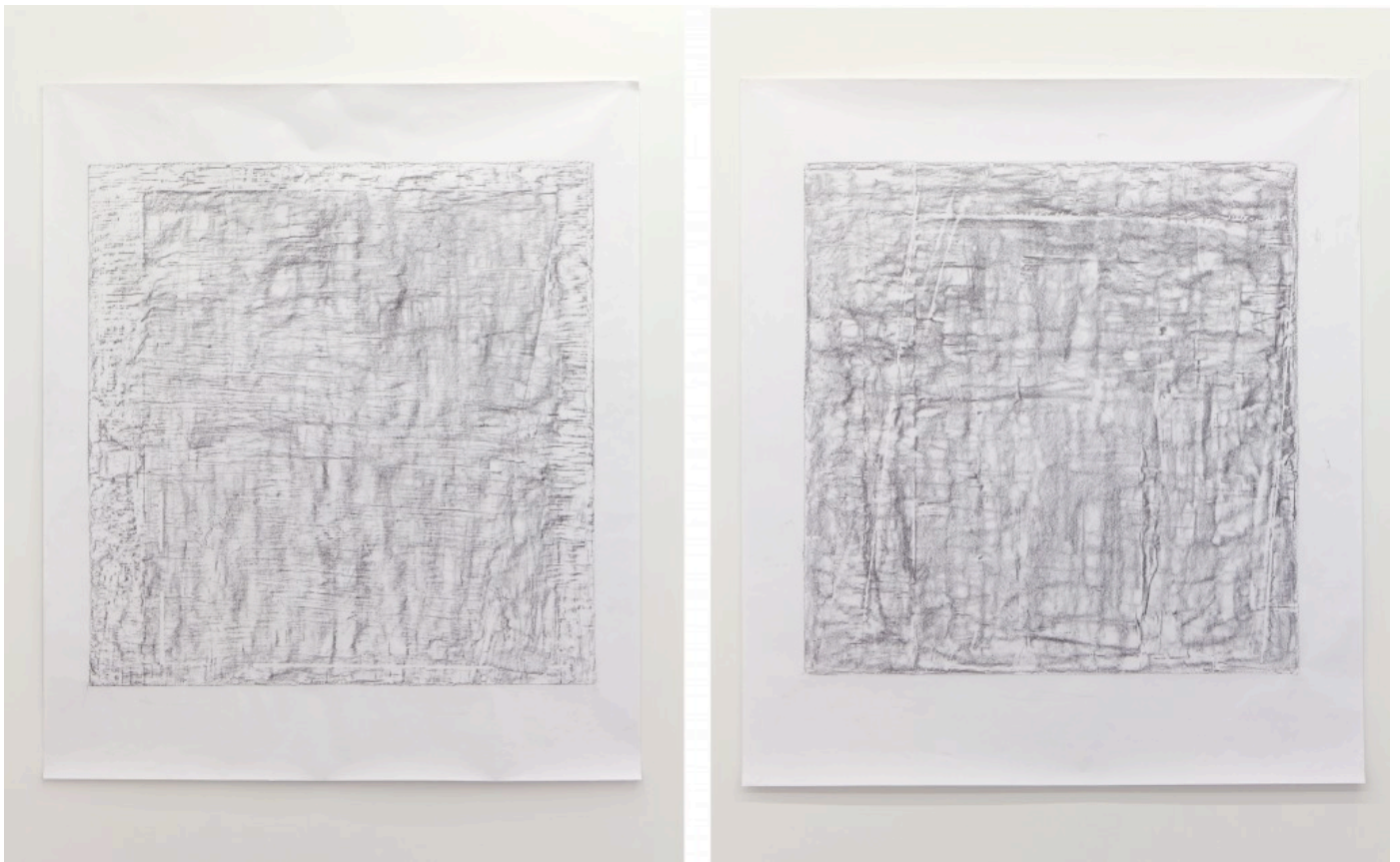
This glacial, focused pace is countered by her mixed-media works on paper, as well as two related practices she calls *traces* and *remainders*. The *remainders* are essentially large sheets of white paper which are laid over paintings in varying states of completeness, and documented by rubbing the paper with charcoal. These rubbings are kept as intermittent archives of the painting, eventually becoming singular works, and later collected into art-books, which Dickinson makes. While all of these processes are connected, they all bring their own possibilities as "markers of a space outside of the verbal and within the visual," an idea essential to her work.



remainder in progress, 2009. Courtesy of the artist.

While Dickinson's paintings are an exercise in a long-view perspective of time, her *remainders* serve as drawings or sketches, in that they are a quicker, though inexact, documentation. The work is not related to horometry or any other form of specific time measuring; rather they materialize as frozen moments of a surface, before the landscape that they captured is permanently altered. These rubbings are not related to stop-motion documentation, which has a mechanical and automatic detachment. Instead, Dickinson records the works in progress by hand, using a graphite tool on paper rubbed directly over the painting, documenting their most pivotal changes, and eventually, their end result. This documentation is incomplete of course, as all color, sheen, and many characteristics of a painting are lost. But what is gained is equally important; a rough and uneven surface that records the 3-dimensional aspects of the painting's present state.

Perhaps most intriguing about Dickinson's remainders is the fact that although there is strong theory behind their creation, they exist as beautiful, monochromatic works on their own. The paintings are intentionally absent from *final remainders*, allowing the work to be seen on its own visual terms. In viewing the works on paper, the eye follows their irregular, rocky patterns and markings slowly, as if touch has become more essential in understanding than vision. Their appearance, paired with Dickinson's intense interest in the passage of time, and how we what we see is effected by time, recalls the study of tectonic plates. While some artists are more results-driven (creating as many pieces as quickly as possible), Dickinson's work seems more similar to the slow-moving plates that permanently alter the geology of our planet, invisibly and almost indiscernibly, unless seen through vast expanses of time. *remainders* as recordings brings to mind a quote by Ralph Waldo Emerson, "We learn geology the morning after the earthquake". What is particularly intriguing about the *remainders* is not just their aesthetic, but the fact their delicate existence is a recording of a surface forever lost.



remainder: Under (final), & remainder: With-This (final)



### ***“The concept drives the aesthetic”***

While considering the works on view at David Petersen Gallery, and then recalling the origins of the pieces in a conversation with the artist via email, it became apparent that many of her thoughtful answers were far more revealing without any verbal framing or writer’s intervention. The following is excerpts of our interview:

**l’étoile: I assume most people are as aesthetically interested in the pieces as I am, but for you, what is the balance between the aesthetic and the concept in the pieces creation? Which takes precedence most often?**

Dickinson: For me, the concept drives the aesthetic. In general with all my work I am interested in setting up a situation that unfolds slowly through time, perceptually and materially, and where delineations start to form within what first appears possibly to be an overall field, atmosphere, or impenetrable surface. This drives an aesthetic where there is minimal contrast, an element of initial restraint, and a lack of quick visual reference. The aesthetic of the *remainders* comes from the procedure of making them; I do not manipulate the surface the way I do other works. I like that they are stark and atmospheric at the same time. With them hung directly on the wall, I like them existing like documents that don’t really explain everything, but in their size confront the viewer’s body a bit. They sometimes feel like seeing out of focus, but somehow foreground and come from something very hard and factual.

**l’étoile: How many *remainders* exist for each painting? I know they are for different phases of the paintings, when subtle differentiations can be recorded and compared, but was hoping to hear more about this important aspect of the process.**

Dickinson: Every painting gets a *final remainder*, which happens once the painting is complete. Every painting also gets a *remainder* set that happens during the development of the painting. Every time the surface of the painting changes significantly, when I finish a certain procedure, I make a remainder of the painting before moving on to the next stage. This set stays together as one piece and is shown left to right on the wall. I’ve only exhibited a set of remainders once and actually don’t get to see them up in my studio, they need a lot of wall. How many remainders per painting depends on the painting and the events and processes it goes through, right now they range between seven and eighteen, depending on the painting. Since I started this whole thing doing *final remainders*, I always do a second *final remainder* that is not in the set, and that is what is exhibited here. It is not a copy since they end up different.

**l’étoile: I am sure I know the answer to this, but have you at any time ever felt that either the *remainders* or the paintings themselves or more important? Has it ever been a case by case basis, as in, have you ever preferred the look of the graphite rubbings much more than the painting, or vice versa, even though both are equally important?**

Dickinson: I’ve never thought of it as one as more important, but that painting is central to what I do, and the *remainders* and other works on paper I do extend from this and support it. I think there is something the paintings can do in terms of aggregating time, illumination, color, and material that the remainders can’t do. But I think there is something in terms of directness, muteness, and austerity that the remainders can do that I find necessary. It completes the work, on the periphery, while being independent of it.

Likewise I think my other works on paper deal with chance and the pressure of peripheral time in a way my paintings and the *remainders* can’t. All of these things interest me as an artist and speak to the larger project of my work, and everything I do in other media help my paintings be what they are. I have never really preferred one over the other. A friend says the *remainders* are like the paintings “baggage”, which I like, like here is this subtle, slowly developed painting, and here is what remains to remind you of something you may not see. It was also said the *remainders* look like “depictions of dried up mud,” which is what a painting is, really – dried up mud.

**l’étoile: Can you briefly speak about how time affects your work? On your website you say you generally only work on four paintings a year, which makes documenting them through drawings an interesting way to reverse the drawing/painting hierarchy in regards to completion of the work (drawings typically precede a painting). It also seems important because you can create many of them, while focusing more time on the comparatively more labor-intensive paintings.**

Dickinson: I typically work on three to four paintings together over a year’s span. I put the paintings through many stages and events, and this process makes the final painting. The *remainders* and other works on paper me make the paintings because they are a different place for me to go so disciplined

about the decisions in the paintings. They also reflect stages that get lost or absorbed into the painting.

And finally, I think I can do things with paper and drawing materials that I can't do with my painting materials, all of which reflect different manifestations of how things shift and change through time. I guess there isn't a hierarchy just a contingency.



final remainders, installation view

**l'étoile: Paul [Dickinson, poet and founder of the much-beloved Speedboat Gallery, also the artist's brother] mentioned that although you have exhibited quite extensively worldwide, this was your first show in Minneapolis. The Twin Cities gallery scene is not incredibly healthy at the moment, which makes what David Petersen Gallery is doing so important right now. How does it feel to show here, and also how did you and David get together to work on the show?**

Dickinson: Yes, this is my first solo show in Minneapolis, if we can all please forget coffee shop shows I had in my college years. I met David through the artist Aaron Spangler, David came to visit several artist friends here in Brooklyn that Aaron introduced him to. I liked that he had been to Speedboat in his youth, which is often a bonding thing for artists of our generation outside of the Twin Cities. The alternative attitude towards art and music at Speedboat was just normal life to me, and making art happen outside of pre-programmed confines has always kept me alive as an artist, and pushed me to find my own direction.

I liked the idea of showing in Minneapolis because although I've lived in New York for almost 15 years, and went away for art school at age 18, I have always felt very lucky and proud to be from the Twin Cities, which is a rich and specific cultural center...So this is a long answer, but when thinking about community I think of the large community of art outside of just the people on the ground, so it felt good to show in this place that really had an impact on how I work as an artist, and how I understand art in general. I think it is great David is creating another forum for art in the city, and bringing in artists outside of the city as well.

***final reminders*** at David Petersen Gallery closes Saturday, June 22. David Petersen Gallery is located at 2018 Lyndale Avenue South in Minneapolis, and is open Wednesday through Saturday from 11 am to 6 pm and by appointment.

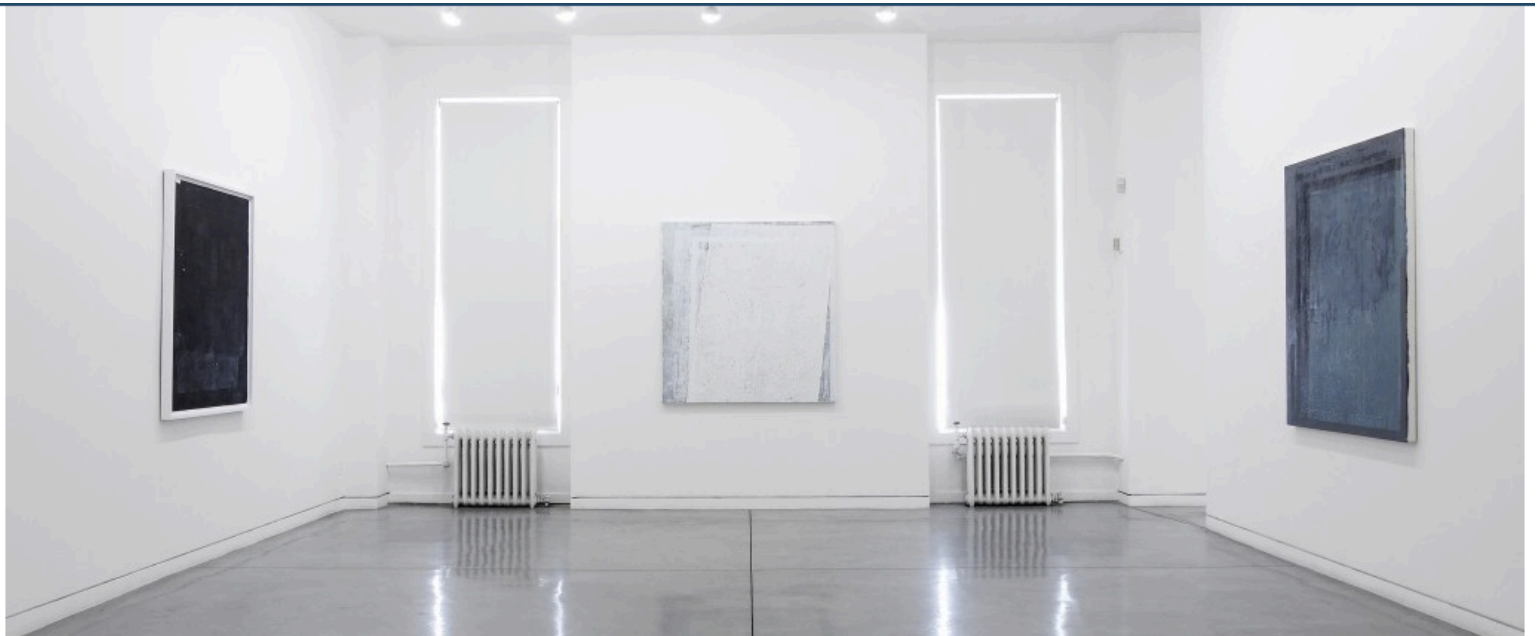
# Art Practical:

## Review

# Are:

By Zachary Royer Scholz

June 7, 2016



*Jessica Dickinson: Are::* installation view, Altman Siegel Gallery, San Francisco.

Jessica Dickinson's exhibition at Altman Siegel offers a contemplative space in which to reflect on the deep resonances and accumulated impacts of seemingly incidental actions. The show, entitled *Are:*, includes three different types of work: evanescent notebook drawings, densely worked paper pieces, and slowly developed, deeply textured paintings on panel. The exhibition is also accompanied by a small catalog of Dickinson's *Remainders* works, graphite rubbings of the surfaces of her paintings made at various points during their slow evolution. Despite distinct material differences, these varied bodies of work form a cohesive whole that reciprocally feeds into, and off of, itself.

The most physically substantial works are the paintings, which are made with oil paint and limestone polymer on panel. Dickinson typically produces three to four of these paintings at a time and works on them slowly over a period of a year or more, periodically making her graphite-rubbed *Remainders* works from their surfaces. This gradual process invests each piece with intense, layered consideration, and gives the works an immensely satisfying, though diffuse, heft. The three paintings in the exhibition are all in cool, deftly modulated shades of gray, white, and blue. The two pieces hung

on adjacent walls in the main gallery are almost a diptych, sharing nearly identical formal structures in which the edges of the panels are echoed by offset and tilted planes as well as frames of different densities, pigments, and marks. The techniques and materials used in the paintings are aggressive and sculptural. Gouges and chips, scratches and scrapings have left the surfaces pitted and abraded like rough-hewn stone. However, the cumulative effect is diaphanous, the hacked fields of marks overlaying each other like muslin veils and drifting planes of shadow. The third painting, tucked furthest into the gallery, takes this unexpected textile quality in a heavier direction, its grid-like chipped expanse reading almost like heavy burlap or a woven rug.



Jessica Dickinson. *Are.*, 2015-2016; oil on limestone polymer on panel; 53 x 51 in.  
Courtesy of the Artist and Altman Siegel Gallery, San Francisco.

Nearly as large as the works on panel are three commanding framed works on paper, one black, one red, and one blue. These pieces are less physically massive and temporally dense than the panel paintings, but exhibit similar logics. Each has been so heavily worked with pastels and other material such as wax crayon, graphite, and gouache that in places the heavy paper has given way. Even where the paper has held, the pigment application has left physical marks: stuttering stripes, glancing dents, and chisel-like gouges. Though all three pieces are worked similarly, the results diverge dramatically. The red piece is unexpectedly light. Its matte blood-red expanse is broken by dents and rents scattered across it like dropped straw. The white flecks glimpsed through the tears in its surface float delicately in the red expanse like constellations. The blue work that hangs opposite is by contrast inaccessibly menacing. The white flecks glimpsed through its torn holes set up a harsh, staccato rhythm that bounces the eye over its hard, flinty surface and icy depths. The black work, hung away from the other two on the long wall of the main gallery, is enigmatically indistinct. The hazy shapes and dim structures that lurk within it are sensed as much as seen. The ridges, rips, abrasions, and

bumps that softly mottle its surface are as much found as made. Their artless inevitability make the piece seem as much an artifact as an artwork.

The slightest and most problematic works in the show are Dickinson's notebook drawings in lightly scribbled colored pencil. Each individual drawing has been torn from facing pages of a bound sketchbook and framed along with seven others in a vertical column of eight. Three of these columns have been included in the show and are hung so close to each other that they read as a single, larger work. The exhibition's press release reveals that each vertical set of drawings relate to a specific painting, and their organization is how Dickinson ordered them in her studio to inform the successive actions and layers in those paintings. It is fascinating to see this aspect of Dickinson's output, but the sequenced presentation is overly didactic and diminishes the drawings by binding them to a specific painting and aligning them with the traditional role that drawings have played as preparatory materials. The press release notes that this is the first time these works have been exhibited, and I hope that in the future these drawings will be shown individually, so viewers can give these delicately bittersweet pieces the same measured, focused attention that Dickinson's other works invite and reward.

Taken on their own, Dickinson's works look vaguely like many other artists'. Her compositional tendencies, particularly her interest in edges and frames, are reminiscent of Richard Diebenkorn. Her scraped and torn surfaces obviously bring to mind Gerhard Richter's squeegee works and Lucio Fontana's slashed paintings, but also look remarkably like the chipped non-finito expanses in Michelangelo's stone *Slaves*. Her pieces' deep emotional palate resonates with the paintings of John Zurier. And the stillness of her work brings to mind Agnes Martin. Dickinson can variously be connected to all sorts of other artists too, such as Helen Frankenthaler, Richard Tuttle, and even Jules Olitski, but there is something critical to understanding Dickinson's practice that eludes the reach of these direct aesthetic comparisons.

What sets Dickinson apart from many of the artists to whom she can be formally compared is the interwoven relationship between the different aspects of her practice. Her drawings structure her paintings, which are rubbed to produce her *Reminders* works, which echo in her large paper pieces. This set of outputs cycles ceaselessly, cross-influencing and pollinating at all points as works seamlessly become sources and sources become finished works. This entangled contingency allows incidental slippages to amplify and accidents to become codified. It is a system whose reflexive generation of meaning over time leads to interesting, unforeseen ends, mirroring the way each of us authors and makes sense of our own lives, progressively, bit by bit, as we live them.

# ARTNEWS

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EVENT HORIZON: ART HAPPENINGS AROUND NEW YORK

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## 9 Art Events to Attend in New York City This Week

BY *The Editors of ARTnews* POSTED 07/31/17 12:29 PM

### TUESDAY, AUGUST 1

#### **Opening: Jessica Dickinson at James Fuentes**

Typically accompanied by what the artist calls “remainders,” or rubbings made from her work, Jessica Dickinson’s paintings are objects that also include their environments. For this first time in New York, Dickinson will exhibit a painting alongside an entire series of remainders made from it. Looking at the remainders, one becomes aware of how much Dickinson’s uneven canvases, often made using oil paint that she then chips and chisels, collect various elements from the outside world. In some cases, viewers might even be able to glimpse small piles of dust—evidence that these objects are being changed by the world around them. Instead of an opening reception, this show will have a closing in September.

*James Fuentes, 55 Delancey Street, 10 a.m.–6 p.m.*

[Link](#) to full article.

## EXHIBITION REVIEWS



Jessica Dickinson:  
*Give*, 2010-11,  
oil on limestone  
polymer on panel,  
56 1/4 by 53 inches;  
at James Fuentes.

### JESSICA DICKINSON JAMES FUENTES

Jessica Dickinson works on small groups of paintings over a very long time—as much as a year. Each is inspired by some chance observation or physical phenomenon, which, while it constitutes her starting point, will disappear as an image over the course of the painting's fabrication. The delicacy, even the loss, of the inspiring phenomenon is at odds with the almost overwhelming materiality of the finished work, which recalls Jay DeFeo's *The Rose* in its accreted weight.

For her paintings Dickinson uses custom-built rectangular wood panels verging on the square, which are scaled to her body. She begins by covering them with 10 layers of smoothed limestone polymer. She then proceeds to build layer upon layer of oil paint, sometimes mixed with wax, distressing, marking and smoothing as she goes. Each layer must dry before she proceeds. At various points along the way to completing a painting, Dickinson lays a large sheet of paper on its surface and makes a graphite rubbing, eventually producing groups of large drawings that she calls *Remainders*. These are both a record of the process each painting has undergone and

finished works in their own right, something like progressive states of a print.

In this exhibition, Dickinson showed four paintings from 2010-11, and eight *Remainders* based on a painting not in the group. It was an elegant, meditative display. There was a light and a dark gray painting, a blue one and an orange one. Each has an ineffable presence. You find yourself peering closely at the built-up surfaces, searching for buried images or trying to identify the position of marks in the depths. In *A/ways-A/so*, the orange painting, parallel rows of small gouges seem to mark the passage of time. A kind of glow around the top and side edges seems to emanate from behind a door or window. Similarly, in the blue painting, *Give*, a doorlike shape at the center makes you wonder if a door was, indeed, the inspiration for the painting—or perhaps a shadow falling over a door. The frame of that door shape is ragged, something like the edges of water-damaged frescoes in an old church.

Within the depths of the pale gray *Before/Beside*, there appears to be a kind of herringbone design—some lost composition, perhaps. In *Close/Close*, the central portion is opaque while the edges are marked with crinkly lines not unlike those

to be found in the *Remainder* drawings. In the paintings, history is collapsed, whereas time unfolds in sequence in the *Remainders*. The presence of the two

types of work inspires a kind of melancholia, as the drawings bespeak something that no longer exists, something irretrievable within the paintings. (That the *Remainders* in this show had nothing to do with the paintings only exacerbated a sense of loss.) The association with grave rubbings is almost unavoidable, adding an emotional punch to the knowledge that each drawing logged a transitory state. Once again, the artist achieves an intriguing paradox, as the architectural scope of the drawings is undermined by the ghostly delicacy of their markings.

—Faye Hirsch



# THE NEW YORKER

## GALLERIES-DOWNTOWN

### JESSICA DICKINSON

The best of Dickinson's three painted panels and four works on paper, all abstract and more or less four feet wide, will slow you down and knock you out. Each surface was months in the making: trowelled with layers of plaster, sanded and painted, sanded and painted, and gouged and scored with knives. The results are as metamorphic as they are painterly, though history looms large. The verdigris-and-bone-colored "Distance-Come Closer," in its crumbling surface and pellucid blues, recalls a Florentine fresco; the nested rectangles in the pearlgray and yolk-yellow "Here" serve Rothko and Albers sunny-side up. Through Sept. 20. (Fuentes, 35 St. James Pl. 212-577-1201.)

### *Short List*

**TAUBA AUERBACH:** Deitch Projects, 18 Wooster St. 212-343-7300. Through Oct. 3. **CARTER:** Salon 94 Freemans, 1 Freeman Alley. 212-529-7400. Opens Sept. 9. **RACHEL FOULLON:** Beauchene, 163 Eldridge St. 212-375-8043. Opens Sept. 9. **ALEX KATZ:** Peter Blum, 99 Wooster St. 212-343-0441. Through Oct. 24. **ADAM PUTNAM:** Taxter & Spengemann, 123 E. 12th St. 212-924-0212. Through Oct. 17. **SARA GREENBERGER RAFFERTY:** Uffner, 47 Orchard St. 212-274-0064. Opens Sept. 9. **DAVIS RHODES:** Team, 83 Grand St. 212-279-9219. Opens Sept. 9. **JACOB ROBICHAUX:** Museum 52, at 4 E. 2nd St. 347-789-7072. Opens Sept. 10. **KEHINDE WILEY:** Deitch Projects, 76 Grand St. 212-343-7300. Through Sept. 26. **"IF YOU LIVED HERE STILL: A PROJECT BY MARTHA ROSLER":** £-Flux, 41 Essex St. 212-619-3356. Through Oct. 31.

# VULTURE

The logo for Vulture features the word "VULTURE" in a large, bold, black, sans-serif font. A blue, ribbon-like tag is positioned over the letters "L" and "T", containing the words "DEVOURING" and "CULTURE" in white, uppercase, sans-serif font. The tag is slightly curved and has a white border. Below the main text, there are faint, light gray lines that suggest a stylized horizon or a road.

## Three-Sentence Reviews: Peter Saul's Fake News, Trevor Paglen's Zombie Conceptualism, and 7 More September Shows

By **Jerry Saltz**

September 19, 2017 1:44 pm

### **Jessica Dickinson; *Are: For + remainders***

James Fuentes

55 Delancey Street

It's no secret that I have had my critical problems with the many redoes of 1960s and '70s monochrome painting and painting that confuses process for content — artists making pretentious empty canvases by leaving them in the Red Sea or rubbing them on the sidewalks of Ferguson, Missouri. I have been following Jessica Dickinson's work for a long time and while I still think she may be just another one of these later-day process painters, there *is* some sort of resonance to the way, for example, she makes a rubbing of every stage of a painting, and then shows, as she does here, all the rubbings and the painting. That at least lets me know that even things that can look like nothing — like these rubbings and the paintings — may really be something, so I'm still on board — for now.

[Link](#) to full article.



# THE NEW YORKER

ART GALLERIES—DOWNTOWN

## Jessica Dickinson

The abstract painter's new show begins (or ends?) with a single painting—a vermillion monochrome, opaquely titled "Are: For," from 2016-17. Its weathered, spackled surface appears old beyond its years, and bears traces of stencilled rectangles. The gallery is otherwise filled with eighteen works on paper, graphite rubbings that Dickinson calls "remainders," which chart the red painting's slow evolution—she made an imprint each time her composition underwent a major change in texture or structure. Strangely, the effect of these colorless documents is more bureaucratic than sensual, and none of the works on view, regarded on their own, have the appeal of the show's over-all appearance at first sight. The initial puzzle of her elegant, sequential installation, with its implicit invitation to determine the mysterious relationship of its contrasting components, is the best part. Perhaps that's the process-oriented artist's intent.

Through Sept. 17.