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Liliana Porter:
Red Brush and Other Situations

March 19 to May 16, 2020



Untitled [with white sky], 2019 –detail–
Acrylic and assemblage on canvas
48 x 60 x 5 in.

Liliana Porter as an expressionist painter

To describe Liliana Porter as an expressionist painter is intended as a provocation. As one of the most formidable figures of Conceptual Art to emerge in the 1960s and 70s, her works, while often humorous, are generally regarded as more analytical and critical in character, tied to investigations of the tropes of representation, rather than interested in the use of emotive color or the energized movement of paint traditionally associated with expressionism. Her practice, which developed out of interests in reproduction and multiplicity related to printmaking techniques, is in fact most often understood historically as a counterpoint to the expressionist tendencies of an older generation of artists, such as those involved with Art Informel in Europe and Abstract Expressionism in the United States. Yet intriguingly, during the past decade, an interest in color effects and the loose application of paint has become increasingly evident in her practice.

For decades Porter's palette was dominated by black and white, with an occasional use of blue-scale tones, all of which referenced the photographic and printmaking processes that informed their production. Notes of stronger color were limited to those evident in the figurative objects she began to engage. These were most often displayed at a small scale, thus making their overall chromatic contributions limited.

Porter has been known for her particular use of large expanses of white within her compositions, which create spatial continuity with the white cube gallery environments in which the artworks are usually placed, but which have also been engaged as a way to isolate the objects and images presented, focusing the viewer's looking and evoking a conceptual or mental space within the work.

White in her paintings has traditionally been applied flat onto her canvases. Yet within her recent artworks depicting what she refers to as tsunamis or other chaotic environmental disasters, the Minimalist flatness of her white surfaces has given way to looser applications of white paint, which wash over and envelope miniature objects, as in *Red Brush* from 2019. Oddly as the white paint in this work becomes more active in a painterly manner, it concurrently holds representational references, recalling coverings of snow or white waves. The red brush that is the subject of the painting is displayed as involved in a process of trying to clean or make order out of the chaos represented, by sweeping the fallen objects to one side. This movement creates a large gestural mark that particularly nods to Abstract Expressionist ways of applying paint. The brush has a velvet-covered handle, which catches the light and adds to the strong tactile quality of the entire piece. The ruby-red of this found object contrasts with the cool white around it, in a manner similar to strategies seen in older works by the artist. What is distinct and notable is Porter's inclusion of washes of pale blue paint placed on top of



Red Brush, 2019
Acrylic and assemblage on canvas
60 x 72 x 5 1/2 in.

the central brushwork, as well as next to several clusters of objects. These touches of blue, through chromatic contrast, serve to increase the visual intensity of the red of the brush. The pleasure evident in these painterly effects feels particularly new within Porter's oeuvre.

Untitled (With White Sky) from 2019 also includes the use of pale shades of blue paint, placed on a white ground. Here a lone, white clipper ship made of wood is placed on the canvas. Blue paint has been splashed under and over the ship in a loose manner. The movement of the blue paint directly recalls techniques related the New York School, to Abstract Expressionist gesture, historically articulated as conveying strong emotions and psychic energies and which were often associated with masculine virility. Porter's contemporary take on these traditions sets up an interesting contrast between the potential passionate energy of these marks and the gentle, melancholic character of the tones of blues presented. In this painting Porter again ties her use of stark white to representation and evokes poetic narrative through the painting's title, which references the sky.

Another ship, a recurring symbol of travel, migration, and longing within Porter's oeuvre, is also placed in dialogue with dramatic swaths

of paint in *Untitled (Ship)* from 2011. The painting presents a small antique cruise-liner, recalling the Titanic, imbedded within black paint. Tar-like in its density, the paint falls in an irregular arch down the canvas. Referencing interests in shaped canvases pursued within 1960s Geometric Abstraction, the painting is hung at an angle, a positioning that then places the ship horizontally at the viewer's eye level. In this slightly older work, Porter's engagement with the paint feels less specifically engaged than in her most recent paintings. The movement of the paint feels more rigid or staged, versus rendered in a direct, energized, and singular application.

A similar dramatic use of black paint on a white ground is evidenced in *The Two Buckets* from 2019.

In this more intimately scaled work, a small bronze milkmaid figure has been placed on the top left edge of the canvas. Two buckets hang from a beam held across her tiny shoulders. Instead of holding milk, the buckets are shown overflowing with black paint, which spill downward, across the ledge of the



Untitled (Ship), 2011
Acrylic and assemblage on canvas
73 x 73 x 3 3/4 in.

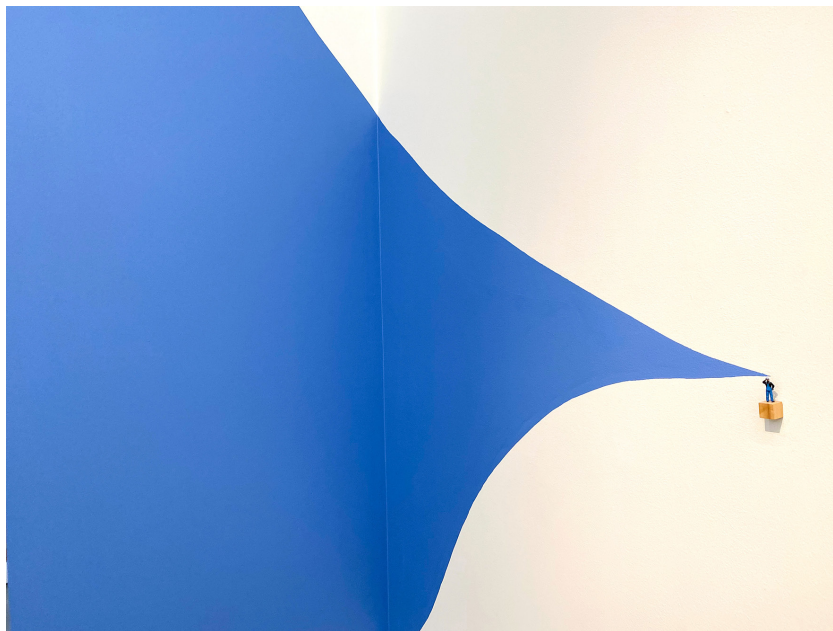
canvas and onto the otherwise pristine white canvas. This particular figure is another reoccurring theme and character within Porter's production, with its sentimentality engaged to address emotions that cannot be contained, feelings or memories that overflow their containers and seep into the environment around them. The particular composition the artist constructs addresses multiple art historical references. The white monochrome is one strong reference, this pure Modernist ideal, which is here contaminated by a representational, kitschy figure. The black spillage also recalls the placement of paint within Jackson Pollock's drip paintings.

For many years Porter has made pieces that form part of what she calls her "Forced Labor" series, involving tiny figures engaged in apparently insurmountable tasks. These works have increasingly taken on larger scales, becoming at times entire-room installations. They have also recently been sites for more dramatic engagements with color by the artist. *Man Painting* from 2020 presents a tiny man in overalls, positioned on a wooden cube attached to the wall. Holding a miniscule brush, he is shown painting the wall a deep, sky blue color. He is in fact depicted as having painted an entire wall of the gallery in which he is presented, a task that presumably would have taken a figure of his scale hundreds of hours to paint. Another tone of blue appears in the sculptural installation *Blue Sand* from 2018.

It is an electric, highly saturated blue, in the form of colored sand. A tiny figure is shown with a rake at the center of this large quantity of sand, which is configured as a circle. He has apparently been raking this blue material for an eternity, creating a circular labyrinth. These works create metaphors regarding the perpetual task of searching for meaning and purpose, life-long philosophical questions and investigations that the artist articulates using ludic and intimate forms.

With all of Porter's works there is always the sensation of a wink or knowing smile being implied. She is consistently the clever savant playing the role of the innocent child looking to understand or construct meaning. Her works perpetually escape irony however, through their projection of the sincerity of their investigations. It is the same with her proposed role as an expressionist painter. One intuitively approaches these historic tendencies as one of critique – perhaps to its macho associations, to its presumed absence of narrative, to its highbrow claims toward psychic transferences or to color's facile attraction. Yet concurrently one senses her present enjoyment with taking on expressionist modes, her true pleasure in the gestural play and the particular experiences that color can engender. As always, she invites us as viewers, to enjoy the show.

Tobias Ostrander
Independent Curator



Man Painting [Hombre pintando], 2018
Wall installation with acrylic, figurine, and wooden base
Variable Dimensions

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