

Tom Streit

Oil is boring

For some an art object expresses the passing of time in idleness. They perhaps consider the act of looking at art an inactive activity that has no direct function other than to please the eye. To others, art might be boring, but they nonetheless find it pretty. For the cultural critic, Sianne Ngai, boredom is interesting to think more about because it operates, she suggests, in between shock and serenity, and speaks to “the oddly discrepant status of affective lack”.¹ Ngai’s “lack of affect” refers back to Immanuel Kant’s description of *apatheia* (Affektlosigkeit) but is also different from it. While Kant understands *apatheia* to be ennobling, expressing calmness, he conceives of the mood of boredom as being dissatisfying.² So what does it mean to lack affect, an affective engagement with or affective response to something? Why do we, for example, engage with art, if we consider it to be, putting it bluntly, boring?

The texture of Tom Streit’s large oil paintings speaks to various conceptions of boredom. On most of his canvases there is nothing but oil. No figures are depicted. Instead, Streit’s abstract cotton canvases are soaked in natural materials, such as oil and resin. Linseed, poppy seed, safflower, dog hair, baryte and rügen chalk leave their material traces on their surfaces. They create the colour tone and form of his painting. Without knowing more about the material makeup of his work, perhaps it is only the smell in Streit’s studio that makes the artist’s intensive material engagement sensible. His voided canvases underscore the relationship between material and surface. They are not *not* painted, but create something else by abstracting the materiality of painting.

As an art historian, I read Streit’s paintings as blank spaces that reassess the value of painting in the twenty-first century. His work emerges from within the current moment, at a time when ecological concerns reach from the use and representation of rural and urban landscapes to its human and animal inhabitants, and demand us to question forms of human agency to sustain ways of living and working together. I could also drop the comment

¹ Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, Cambridge/Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2005, p. 269.

² Ibid. Ngai refers here to Kant’s work, *Observations on the Sentiment of the Beautiful and Sublime* (1764), predating his *Critique of Judgement* (1790).

that some of his artworks are similar in tone to, for example, Ralph Humphrey's *Olympia* (1959) and to how the colour field painters approach painting.

From my aesthetic perception, I prefer to read them as monochrome-like paintings that successfully drain painting from its historical and political meaning to address its material significance. To me the canvases do not lack affect, but draw attention to the question of what makes an encounter with organic materials a sensuous engagement. Why use natural products that are commercially, even if on a small scale, produced, rather than making things for oneself? Why do artists continue to use oil to fill white canvases today? Perhaps my identification of an affective lack in Streit's works draws attention to the implicit aesthetic value of oil painting today. Streit's preoccupation with oil and painting materialises from and needs *Langeweile* to remain sensually stimulating. He rethinks the use value of oil and painting; and this, in turn, seems to sustain a distance between the artist and his work. Does it matter if Tom Streit's conceptual oil paintings generate an affective response in the viewers, as long as they emerge from his ecological relationship to artistic production and the monotony of everyday's boredom?

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