



Overleaf:

Detail: *In the neighborhood: at what point does a line become a hedge?*

30 in. x 184 in.

acrylic and ink on canvas

1994-5.

**Two Essays on the Painting
of Janet Echelman**

John C. Welchman

A. W. B. Randolph

April 1995

Harvard University

Abstraction and Overlay

John C. Welchman

Making contemporary abstraction is a risky business. To do it you must fly in the face of many forms of dominance and control. You must risk a position at the fatigued end of a non-iconic tradition that has staged the paradigm of visual modernism. You must risk inscription in one — or several — of the many horizons of abstraction unfolded since the 1910s: the counter-material, spiritual diagramming of the ‘pioneer’ abstractionists, Kandinsky, Mondrian and Malevich; the missionary internationalizing of abstract discourse in the inter-war years; the newly expressive abstraction of Pollock, Rothko and Newman; and the counter-expressive reaction of post-painterly abstraction in the late 1950s and early 60s— at which time the apologias of autonomy and self-definition handed down by modernist criticism reached their zenith. You must also walk down a gang-plank of risks invented by the theory and practice of ‘postmodernism,’ within which the notion of ‘abstraction’ was differently reinvested with social metaphoricality, and whose preferred materials were photography, documents, commodities, installations sites, and performed actions — rather than gestures of paint on canvas. Clearly, the risks are many.

One negotiation of this peril might attend to the social formation and cultural destiny of *abstraction*, that is, to how abstract visualization might most effectively speak to the (real) conditions of abstract flow and exchange that characterize contemporary technologies, media, financial systems, global politics, even social desires. Such work might replace the theory of self-reference set out in modernist criticism with a notion of meta-abstraction. For the theory-form of this mode of representation is predicated on the making of an abstraction out of the social experience and everyday circulation of abstractions.

Much 'post-modern' abstract-representation actively disputes with the inherited parameters of the abstract tradition. The artist no longer 'intends' the work to function as a site of privileged access to the psychological condition of the artist-subject—though it may still involve a critical form of *expression*. The making of abstractions no longer gives rise to undisputed objects of sublime transcendence — though it may interrogate the (historical and contemporary) conditions of the *sublime*. It no longer issues in art-as-object tautologies — though the status of the (commodified) object is often opened up to inquiry.

Instead, in the most persuasive gestures of contemporary abstraction, the territory of the non-iconic has been set in motion between the social formation of non-figural systems

and the condition of the subject-body. Abstract-representation, then, mediates between the site-of-the-body and the social envelope. It initiates a dialogue which lays claim to the abstract visual narratives of scientific discourse (the micro and macro-scopic image), the imaging of communications technology (networks, chips, conduits, pixels), and the interface between corporate capital and social abstraction (the logo, the formula, the slogan, the laser-scanned bar code...). These are the abstractions of a space fed back from its locative remappings in telematic discourse, an abstraction whose social signification is encoded through its reflexive positionality on the circuit-board of an informational culture. Such abstractions are appropriated, reconvened, parodied and hybridized.

Janet Echelman's paintings make a move that is related to the new abstract spaces mapped by the recent generation; but which is also worked out in restrained opposition to the social neo-utopianism of what might be termed 'ironic deconstruction'. The relational space between these practices has several sides. First, pursuing the question of the abstract mark through a sustained encounter with Balinese and other southeast Asian forms of pictorial gesture (including calligraphies, the longitudinality of scroll-work, and batik), she takes an informed and ambitious step beyond the monocultural location of 'social abstraction' in western visual-cultural discourse.

Secondly — in this respect like Lari Pitman, David French, and others — she sets up a complex interactive relation between the signifying condition of the painting and its title.

This opening-up of reference is set alongside a further expansion that embraces virtually the whole repertoire of mark-making established in the abstract traditions of western modernism. Dots, splashes, spills, quasi-recessional rectilinear forms, collaged elements, smooth, soaked passages, hair's breadth lines and blocky solids — all participate in a merging of abstract languages that together constitute a counter-assemblage of virtual abstractions. Reading the more achieved of these images necessitates a passage through the overlay of abstract systems. The experiences, epiphanies and ghostly objects they suggest are revealed as a confection of abstract symbol systems. In this respect Echelman replaces the social articulation of meta-abstraction with an abstract articulation: her work maps the abstract referential system of abstract marks. And in so doing it interrogates the space between each of the kinds of abstraction introduced here: between mood-seeking, intentioned configurations and the blueprints of social development; between expressive articulations of the self, and the production of autonomous form; and between these inherited traditions and the postmodern search for newly socialized abstract symbolization.

**The Visual Rhetoric of Anti-Narrative:
Some Thoughts on the
Paintings of Janet Echehelman**

A.W.B. Randolph

The radically amimetic sign retains its power to alienate. Literary and visual conventions produced within educational structures, within the markets of text and image, as well as within the oral traditions of family and community condition our reflex to seek meaning in representational signs. Especially irresistible to the human animal has been the flaming lure of narrative: the immaterial master text illuminating contiguous signs as the pattern of a story. The reading of visual and literal texts has been so intimately connected to the concept of narrative that imagining a non-narrative *reading* is difficult, if not impossible, for most of us. Nonetheless, it is just such a process that Janet Echelman's paintings urge upon the spectator.

Abstraction toys with reference. Eschewing — in its “pure” forms — the representation of an external, observable reality, the abstract image appears to present itself as itself alone. This conceit is, however, misleading. For in reality abstraction, though positing its autonomy, in fact focuses referentiality on the author. Within the

conventions of abstraction, her marks and traces are the distillation of reality, the potent extract of perception. Within this intimate and reciprocal relation between artist and abstract sign, little room is left for other reference. Faced with the provocative legacy of abstract expressionism (its doctrinaire formalism and cult of the artist as hero), the most creative of contemporary artists must invent means for negotiating between the deictic, self-referential constraints of their practice and the Charybdis of the non-referential, linked, albeit arbitrarily, to narrative lack.

It seems to me that Janet's works navigate, successfully, such treacherous cultural waters, pulling the beholder into an abstracted universe rich not in narrative per se, but in "anti-narrative" cues. In their very denial of narrative, her paintings implicate themselves in a universe of stories, while not telling tales themselves.

Standing before her works, traditional spectatorial attitudes may be struck: the lively surfaces of Janet's canvases appeal to the eye attuned to the dominant aesthetic trends of our century. But with their visually trenchant materiality, the paintings suggest more than a pure visuality. One cannot but note the panoramic breadth of *In the neighborhood: at what point does a line become a hedge?* The ungraspable details of this secular triptych

flirt with referentiality. Mechanical lines and billowing color are suggestive of fenestration: sill, pane, and curtain. Staring through this prismatic caricature of an Albertian window, the viewer establishes ephemeral temporal and spatial relations. The distance between shadowy objects soon dissolves in the gauzy mist of the surface. Moreover, the world onto which we are given access is a kinetic one: the imaginary landscape flies by. Vivid ruled lines race like message-bearing telephonic wires. Fixed before the window, the viewer is, nonetheless set in motion, propelled through a world of which she sees but a slice.

Confronted with the lack of a story, Janet's paintings exhort us, nevertheless, to talk, and to supply our own response as the fitting complement to the visual image before us. Our active participation is expected and encouraged. The application of paint provides a temporal scaffold for such interventions. Drips and animating repetitive strokes suggest the passage of time, while leaving us to imagine the events that might inhabit this temporal frame. Bold, gestural lines implicate the producer's body, and work, adding to the sense of past time, the awareness of corporeal action and of presence. Such a reading often returns one to the author/artist, but it can also be seen as drawing the spectator into a physical relation with the art object. Our hands too could make

such marks; we too could fly across the horizontally arranged visual field with the sureness necessary to leave such a trace. Elated, the viewer is, I think, brought close to the work of the artist and views as a collaborator.

The anti-narrative elements of Janet's work, I would argue, do not alienate the spectator. Rather, they encourage the spectator to enter a fantastic and elusive world of imagination. The stories one spins out before these canvases function as an aesthetic completion. The images, these magical, abstract signs, ask us to act and to reflect upon our own action. The rejection of narrative, then, opens up a narrative space and then calls upon the viewer to fill the void, to enter and transform the galaxy of forms. Called into an active subject position before these canvases, the viewer looks and is offered the opportunity to consider the structures of looking within which we all operate.

John C. Welchman, visiting professor in Visual and Environmental Studies at Harvard University, has written for *Artforum* (where he had a column 1988-89), the *New York Times*, *The Village Voice*, *Artfiles*, *Art International*, among other publications. His most recent book is *Modernism Relocated: towards a cultural studies of visual modernity*. (Allen & Unwin, 1995)

A.W.B Randolph is a doctoral candidate in Fine Arts at Harvard University.

Janet Echelman, MFA teaches at Harvard University Graduate School of Design, the DeCordova Museum School of Art, and is Resident Visual Arts Tutor at Harvard College's Adams House. Her work has been presented in more than a dozen solo-exhibitions, including the Fung Ping Shan Museum of Hong Kong, the Bentara Budaya Museum of Jakarta, and the Tampa Museum of Art. She studied at Harvard College, the University of Hong Kong, the New York School for Visual Arts, and the Milton Avery Graduate School of the Arts.