

## THE UPSTAIRS ROOM

*Recent paintings by Robbin Heyker*

This exhibition brings together paintings produced over the past year while Robbin Heyker was a resident artist at C-Space. Given the important role that the space has served in hosting him over four visits since 2010, it is appropriate that the show has been titled *The Upstairs Room*, as it refers to the studio and living spaces located above the main galleries where he has lived and worked. They have served as well as the base from which he has explored the immediate environment of Caochangdi village.

It is primarily from within this community that Heyker has found and documented a series of improvisations or provisional solutions realized using what is immediately available; wooden boxes have been pressed into service as table bases, bits of wire hold outside lamps in place, and all manner of things have been grafted, bent, glued and taped together as temporary fixes, only to be broken down and altered days or weeks later. It is this inventiveness, the process of finding simple answers that have helped to shape Heyker's compositional structures. Observing individuals navigating and managing the complexities of daily life, often in the absence of proper resources, tools and equipment, has revealed an intrinsic characteristic of village life and provided a conceptual strategy for creating his new work.

References in his work to this haphazard process in the village can be seen in the juxtaposition of compositional elements, the use of found materials like tape, and the tentative feel of some of the canvases. His paintings as well have a workman-like quality. Metaphorically they reflect our instinctual need to bring together the disparate perceptions of our existence to forge provisional answers and create manageable systems.

The paintings function as conceptual proposals, produced with a precise set of rules intended to limit the field of enquiry. Multi-layered, and in some cases including found three-dimensional components, his paintings act as structures that mediate the difference between the literal and the abstract, using a working method that involves subtle interventions and modifications within the act of painting. A work that seems to be comprised of purely abstract forms at first glance will on closer inspection reveal representational forms, as in the untitled work (that the artist refers to as *hout*, or Dutch for wood) where energetic abstract gestures simultaneously reference the fake

wood-grained folding tables found in the village shops.

In general, his practice stands out for its committed focus to the philosophical potential of painting attainable by close attention to its mechanics; with the restrictive parameters he self-imposes ultimately liberating his practice from a re-enactment of modernist abstraction. But importantly these limitations as well allow for an investigation of reality in painting without resorting to mimetic representation. Here the adaptation of modernist conventions serves as means to set a pictorial stage. The deceptively simple compositions reveal little attempt for a complete resolution, or a polished finished work. Each work is taken only as far as its internal relationships require, and then left to actively resonate at this tenuous stage.

The works act as visual puzzles, modest in form but containing internal contradictions that are not easily reconciled. They are created with techniques that allow us to read and follow Heyker's decisions and the sequence of production, with the thin translucency of his base colours acting as a record of his actions. This lightness of touch keeps the surface of the works open and alive, with an intentional naïve quality that makes them self-evident and without pretension. They act as propositions, objects in the process of becoming. Heyker has described them as "attempts" and "proposals." It is the act of making and trusting the process that guides the work to a point of delicate stability.

He does not work on multiple canvases simultaneously. They are created one at a time, partly explaining why they are so surprisingly different from each other. There is none of the tendency, often found in series of pure abstract paintings, for the canvases to gradually evolve along a recognizable course. Each work is a separate project, a new start with its own demands. Resisting an attempt at representing China, Heyker seeks instead to emulate the daily patterns in the village around him, a form of gentle integration with the place. As the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century, English writer Gilbert Chesterton noted 'The traveler sees what he sees. The tourist sees what he has come to see.' Now on his forth stay in China, Heyker has honed his direct observation of what is before him in order to echo these methods of adaptation, with the exhibition gathering these diverse experiences to create an intriguing dialogue between art and life.

In earlier discussions I had with Heyker described his childhood interest in magic, and his efforts to learn the sleight of hand techniques required to create an illusion. He was referring to close-up magic, not the stage show extravaganzas requiring elaborate props, gears, and gizmos, but rather the quick and subtle movements of hands that seem to alter reality in the eyes of the spectator. He explained that the deception that is at the heart of this magic is only possible when the observed movements appear simple and transparent. It is the act of hiding the complexity of the technique and masking the skill involved that is central to the success of the trick. There is a form pictorial sleight-of-hand at play in his current series, with the taciturn compositions only slowly revealing the intricate relationships. In this way they are the polar opposite of efforts to demonstrate painterly virtuosity.

In the final point he made about magic, he talked about the continuing allure and mystery the skill holds for him even as its practitioner. I believe he wanted to suggest there is still an on-going mystery to painting as well - long after its pronounced death at several junctures during the unfolding of modernism. But even while Rodchenko's monochromed, primary-coloured canvases brought, in his words, "painting to its logical conclusion" within the modernist imperative of a strict reductive logic, they still functioned at the time of their making in 1921 as a political gesture; a call for a rupture with the past. As the dizzying restaging and reconfiguration of modernism's salient painting movements in China over the 25 years has made evident, there are renewed possibilities for painting shaped by local context, and individual investigation. Heyker accepts this premise, permitting him to explore the theoretical and aesthetic potential of painting. Allowing, in fact requiring, a degree of ambiguity in his work prevents them from falling into historical quoting. He notes that "it's about making something vulnerable, showing off fragility." These works then reflect Heyker's humility and his acceptance of the unfixed nature of art-making.

*Gordon Laurin (Beijing, 2013)*