

Andy Giannakakis

Country Paintings

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STYLE IS THE SUBSTANCE: ON ANDY GIANNAKAKIS' *COUNTRY PAINTINGS*

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As I was preparing to write this text on Andy Giannakakis' new paintings, I kept returning to thinking of his work as a set of refusals. It was with some surprise that I found this term used early in Dick Hebdige's *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979), a book I randomly grabbed off the shelf to read on a recent flight. Hebdige uses this term in the first few pages as an idea central to his study, which, however, after that, he does not explicitly explore. Instead the bulk of the remaining pages are spent describing, positively, the various subsets of 1970s punk culture. There is the main refusal implicit in participating in a subculture, of not participating in mainstream culture, obvious enough, but I realized that in Hebdige's formulations, in the embrace of one specific subset (i.e. punk, mod, Rasta, etc.) one also refused the others. Or, one made an evaluation, and chose definitively, one style over another. A refusal, therefore, is the shadow, or negative, of a choice.

And I found that this was how I had been thinking about Giannakakis' work. These paintings are simple, in a material sense: small, abstract oil paintings, painted by hand with a brush or knife, on handmade wooden panels. And when I look at them, I enjoy them. But when I think about them, I find myself thinking so much about what they are not. Painting is like that, a snake pit of rules, of limitations, of decisions. I found it helpful to think of style as Hebdige defines it: a construction outside of oneself, made in participation with the language of a group. It seems that now more than ever before, as any language, any group, any history is equally available or viable or relevant, style is the substance, the culmination of the decisions and refusals that make a work, and maybe nowhere as nakedly as in abstract painting.

I zeroed in on the set of refusals that Giannakakis has used to lay the foundation for his project, to define what will be kept out of the paintings:

1. No technological advancement, only traditional materials;
No withdrawal of the hand in mechanized process.
2. No clearly delineated graphic mark making or photographic imagery.
3. A resolute commitment to a non-monumental scale.

These refusals quickly converge at an apex that points to the history of painting before the 20th century. Giannakakis rejects a Pop sensibility and borrows something from Minimalism's deconstruction, but shares none of its reduction or its authoritarian prescription of universality. What is left in the paintings is not cold, nor are they purely about material. What Giannakakis has developed through the systematic refusals is a rich and fertile position where he may shut out the world and paint. And this show, his first with Park View, demonstrates that he is becoming more comfortable and daring within the limitations he has set for himself. The refusals inside the paintings are not as hard-set as those outside, and are attuned to profusion rather than to restriction. These are mutable, prone to change, intuition, development, and flux, which is good. Giannakakis has worked these paintings as a group that together creates something of an abundant gestalt, pushing variations of the Style, testing the limits of the refusals. And importantly, these rich and sensual, dense and multilayered pictures are each a singular exploration.

We recognize some of his influences, but when the paintings lead us there, they are more akin to studies of the manner a specific musician plays their instrument than the borrowing of a phrase from any particular source.

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I would not call them quotidian but I see Giannakakis' love for Bonnard, Ensor, and many others. These are smoky caldrons, full of spirits, with notes and touchstones of Style mixing, swirling: a fogged screen, with a depth that only paint can produce, in layered workings, and a deliberate unfocus; paintings which float in a space of near articulation. Blocks of color play across the paintings. His marks and shapes suggest but refuse to describe.

The shapes, colors, and forms bend around each other, are tucked, recede into the background space, or come forward. In some paintings, like *Feudal Times* or *Backtracker*, the color band is tight: lush, murky pictures that push us to recognize the green of maybe trees or maybe parks or maybe towns or country seen from above; in the green and blue *Language of the Birds*, the scale shifts to that of a still life. Some are painted with a full color spectrum, and to different effects: the explosive and complex *The Gravity of the Situation* reads as a turbulent, riotous affair; the simple seeming *Byron's Hair*, in which vibrant red and blue shapes vie to possess the surface, presents shapes as flat as anything, as nothing but the paint they are made with.

The paintings are small, with no dimension longer than 36 inches—most are much smaller—and the density of the paint and color pulls the eye deep into them. There is spatial depth, and pictorial space, but it is often difficult to tell how much or of what. There is movement in these scenes, and stillness in the compositions that make them. There are figurative suggestions, but these are submerged in color and are blocked out or are breaking apart: dematerializing. The poetic titles recall short stories, songs, or even novels, suggesting different registers of duration. Painted as they are, by hand, without a formula, we see the distinct brush-marks that make up these works. The refusal of a mechanized process is evident: these paintings are not made all at once, but are accumulations of individual decisions. Each mark, each addition of color, is an event, and a choice.

To call these paintings abstract is not quite correct, for while they are not representational they are not quite non-representational either and this complicates how I look at them. I can't quite say if I see these paintings as scenes or as abstractions. I believe these paintings are far more analytical than expressionistic, that each mark is an attempt to articulate *itself*, on their own, in a collected field made of other marks, and as such each picture becomes its own dense experiential nondescription. I'll reach, as Hebdige does, for Barthes, to help me articulate Giannakakis' fulfillment of the method of his project's Style: "...we constantly drift between the object and its demystification, powerless to render its wholeness. For if we penetrate the object, we liberate but destroy it; and if we acknowledge its full weight, we respect it, but restore it to a state which is still mystified." We want these paintings to tell us what they depict, but they resist. We have to do the work, while all the information is there, in the paint. These are intimate paintings (and nothing, after all, but painting) that allow us the pleasure of looking and not knowing.

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