



HIDDEN DARTS READER

On embarrassment

Josh's statement that he is completely embarrassed by expressionism stopped me in my tracks. I realized that I too make a link between expressionism and embarrassment, but a different one.

It is clear why anyone may regard expressionism with suspicion – its problems are almost too cliché to bring up: the bad politics, the vulgar taste, the empty sign of personal authenticity, and all the rest. But if a modern painter already comes equipped with some cold, hard critical thinking and certain punk feelings like hatred, she or he could maybe find something useful or even required about embarrassment. In fact, embarrassment could be used as a procedure, a tactic or a diagnosis. Josh's mechanisms are quite different from mine, but I'm sure we have something in common.

Call me sentimental but my tendency is to steer myself directly into the very heart of expressionist embarrassment and see what's there. Let me give you a practical example. Let's say you go to someone's studio, someone very sophisticated and up-to-date, and after showing you many trophy paintings that look really cool and sophisticated, they sheepishly reveal this one last weird painting that they have turned to the wall... and it's an ugly brown one with an embarrassing image on it, and it turns out to be the one you like the most. And when you tell the painter this, she or he brightens up because you have given an embarrassing and off-limits painting the permission it needed to live. But really, it IS the best painting in the room because it's the one where you feel the strangest edge, the most out-there and unafraid quality, the painting that goes to a really weird bad place without the baggage of shame or guilt. This is not a painting for everyone, mind you. This painting is perverse, and in being so, it expresses aggression. Well, that's how I've come to like and think of a

certain kind of expressionism.

Of course this could merely put embarrassment in a kitsch category of so-bad-it's-good—which is something that Josh is constantly playing with. But this is more than a strategy of kitsch: it is an awareness of history, in its way, because it is a double negative position, a position from which a certain kind of critical theory has already been absorbed and the artist is trying to go further, to make an object or have an attitude or find a place to stand that has not been sanctioned by art bureaucrats. This is the cliff edge one feels around for.

Embarrassment is therefore a sign that one is at risk of exposing one's feelings, which is a good thing especially if these feelings are ugly and contradictory. I look for these complications in Josh's paintings. He has built an infrastructure that is shored up with analysis and calculation, but nevertheless it leaks out the back with painterly desire and instinct. And it is for this reason that I care about his work so much. I don't like any work that isn't equally one thing as another: as revealing as it is concealing; as cold as it is heartfelt, as hating as it is loving.

Three memories: the first time I saw a Josh Smith show it was a whole room of handmade Xeroxed books, with a kind of Twombly-meets-Wool vibe, but with a particular Josh Smith sloppiness and excessiveness. The books were all stapled together by hand, and each one was made of scribbles and signatures that were basically unreadable. I loved them and I bought one, totally not knowing who this person was. I think it was twenty bucks for a book.

The next time I saw a Josh Smith show that I really loved was at Reena Spaulings. He filled the room with painted stools and mirror paintings (dark centers with, I think, dots around them). I felt it

was the best use of that space I had ever seen. I deeply regret not buying one of those paintings on the stools.

One of the more recent times I saw Josh was at his last Luhring Augustine show, where I gushed to him that seeing his show made me need to run home and paint, and he remarked to me cryptically, "You worry too much." I took it a bit too much to heart and tried for a week not to "worry." Then I went right back to worrying. I wish I could make paintings with the speed, the brashness, the audacity, the not-caring that Josh puts forth. But I'm a struggler, and I spend all my time struggling and wrestling with layer after layer of destruction in my work. However, I take incredible heart in the fact of his paintings being out there, challenging me to be more flippant, maybe more stylish, certainly more open to embarrassment. I'm not sure if I've come closer to him in my attitude or if he's letting more expression out than he really wants to or knows.

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