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Jason Stopa Interviewed by Jarrett Earnest

Paintings as a social idea about abstraction.

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Interview

Art



Jason Stopa, *The Poetics of Ecology*, 2023, Photo by Adam Reich. Courtesy of the artist and Diane Rosenstein Gallery.

Over the past decade Jason Stopa emerged as one of our most insightful critics of contemporary art in the New York tradition of painters who write. In his new exhibition, *Garden of Music*, at Diane Rosenstein in Los Angeles, Stopa wrestles with the history of abstraction, mining the forms of utopian architecture for his colorful abstractions that fuse geometric structure with brushy, almost casual, execution.

—Jarrett Earnest

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The surfaces of your paintings are insistent on the ways that they've been touched. In the precise way that you've painted them, I feel as if your paintings are performing their presence as an object. I wonder how that relates to the function you see for abstraction right now.

Jason Stopa

I think touch is so important. I tell my students that the meaning of a painting is not only found in content alone but in how you use the paint. I want my touch to feel considered but casual, confident and a bit offhanded. I want the surface to read as wet, like Ancient Greek pottery. I'm not interested in labor being performed as a sign of "hard work." That has always struck me as puritanical. If the field of the canvas is an arena of activity, then painting is a performative space.

I'm interested in how an abstract painting can reconstitute something from the past—acknowledging its context and history—so that it can argue for its relevancy today. There are a few ways I try to deal with this condition. For instance, I think a lot about color "families." My color isn't arbitrary; it's color that's rooted in early Henri Matisse, Bob Thompson, Stanley Whitney, Mary Heilmann. It's graphic, optimistic color loaded with content about mythologies, Arcadia, and joy. To use that palette is to reference that content. When I think about an artist's form and color I think: Where's the context for it? What history is it trying to reference? How's it going to perform its relationship to this in the present?

JE

How do you see your composition's relation to image and its allusion through shape and composition to some of these ideas you mention?

JS

I think paintings advocate for a certain mode of language—large-scale and small-scale, big gesture and small gesture, mirroring, repetition—that are all ways in which they speak their content. I also think: What is it to use this kind of form? For instance, in the center of *The Poetics of Ecology*(2023) and *San Marco Sunrise II* (2023), I'm using a spire shape often found in a Catholic church. The spire is loaded with religious and historical significance. Some audiences might just read it as a form. But I like when shape can become iconic. I find it interesting when forms or marks start to do multiple things in the same painting. It's not a, Look what I can do, relationship. Instead it's more

like, Look at what this thing is. What is it doing there? I'm using basic, iconic forms, but I'm hoping that an audience recognizes that these paintings are loaded with objects and history, be it a piece of architecture, a coat of arms, or something ornamental.

I'm making a painting right now based off a fragment of Iranian bricks from the fourth century. I'm trying to understand it formally and then trying to understand that as a way of talking about identity from a thousand years ago. These bricks held out some sort of relationship to ornament, to the decorative. What is it to take something from another part of history and rethink it? That's also what Afrofuturism points to in certain ways—a kind of cultural zeitgeist that happens through cross-cultural mixing.



Jason Stopa, *Last Garden City*, 2023, oil on canvas, 28 × 23 inches. Photo by Adam Reich. Courtesy of the artist and Diane Rosenstein Gallery.

I think that's something that gets left out of the kinds of conversations about postcolonialism these days. So many cultures were interacting with the Nile River two thousand years ago, and they're not all African cultures. They each have different relationships to religion, to identity, to politics, to the land, to spirituality; and they're all using resources together. The Greeks knew what the Egyptians were up to and vice versa. So there's cross-cultural awareness. What does that mean for aesthetics? It means it doesn't happen in a vacuum. These days we're at a fever pitch of polarization while trying to figure out how to have shared and private discourse about culture and identity.

JE

Do you feel that the way of reading aesthetics that you're advocating for is a critique of the terms in which identity has been constructed within contemporary art discourse lately?

JS

To a degree, yes. There is a lot of work about identity lately. And many artists want to make virtuous objects. Virtue is only real when performed in a material object. And how does an object do that? In my case, taking a form that's rooted in a certain idealism or utopia and then altering it. I think a

lot about sites like Arcosanti in Arizona and Luis Barragan's structures in Mexico City. Once I've done my research and addressed the form as a painter, I feel I've formed a relationship to it on a material level as opposed to a linguistic relationship. There are several blind spots in contemporary painting about identity. For instance, virtuous intentions don't necessarily make virtuous acts or aesthetically interesting acts. And objects, like people, can both be incredibly ethical and moral while also betraying those ethics and morals all the time—that's the human condition.

Some artists want to rail against these contradictions or pursue some form of moral perfectionism. I think that's a form of denial. I'm interested in the fact that we're never going to create an ideal world where all people are granted the same degree of rights, freedom, social and economic mobility, and live in sustainable harmony with animals, technology, and the earth. We haven't figured it out in the last seven million years, so I don't think seven million more will seal the deal. Intentional communities and monasteries might be the closest thing to it. And maybe the Netherlands. *(laughter)* When modernist politicians, architects, and artists sought after utopia, art risked becoming propaganda or became fodder for reactionary forces. The comingling of politics and art during the October Revolution in 1917 is a great example. Utopias are impossible. The definition of the word is: not a place. As an artist, this means leaning into contradiction in order to grapple with that middle ground.

JE

The whole conversation about the "great divorce" and extremists talking about secession creates a position from which to ask what's holding this shit together? You've made a textile piece sewing together strips from all fifty US state flags, and of course the thing about a flag is that it's obviously ideological, but it's also about an abstraction around which a set of beliefs is being coalesced. And that is enacted by the way that people respond to it, not by the thing itself.

JS

Yeah. That work is a concept piece. It's titled *That's All Folks (Sorry David, Sorry Jasper)* (2022) and is made up of all fifty state flags cut into two-inch strips and sewn back together. Each state flag bears cultural, social, and political significance. Parts of the American flag feature heavily, as does imagery from the Confederacy, the British flag, dates of revolutionary battles, archetypes of Indigenous figures. The title is a reference to all of America and all of the folks that make it up, yet

it is hand-made, fragile, and stitched together or nearly falling apart. It's also an homage to other flags by Jasper Johns and David Hammons.

I think there's a crisis of faith about what America's shared values are, about what we believe in, or who we believe we are. It's a crisis of the commons. It's why I'm trying to approach abstraction as a historical project that is now up for a lot of reexaminations.



Jason Stopa, *Garden of Music (After Bob Thompson)*, 2023, oil on canvas, 28 × 23 inches. Photo by Adam Reich. Courtesy of the artist and Diane Rosenstein Gallery

JE

How do you see these ideas being embodied in the particular visual structures of your paintings? How do they intervene in, bend, open, and reframe those histories?

JS

My recent paintings all have framing devices that wrap around and structure them in a way that create relationships to perceiving what the thing is, to understanding how it situates itself in a space, and maybe also flattens and collapses itself in that space. They do some things that are optical in that you can see an abstraction as an image and as an abstraction

I want to create a propositional opening for the audience to think of the work as a mode of being or acting in a space, which feels to me like a social idea about abstraction. The marks and forms in my paintings are actors acting the space. I'm looking at certain architectural moments to draw forms from. These actors come together and have relationships that bend, conform, and act out the drama of the work. They play out tensions, sometimes complementary, vying for position, vying for space, but maybe through togetherness.

Jason Stopa: Garden of Music is on view at Diane Rosenstein Gallery in Los Angeles until July 1. Jarrett Earnest is an artist, writer, and curator based in New York City