Light, Illusion, Speed

Matthew Carver's warped paintings satirize the traditions of anamorphosis with digital photography. They exist at a crossroad of time and memory, fusing with the frenetic pace of our modern cities, full of neon lights, traffic jams, and urban horror vacui. Carver's paintings have the urban energy of a DJ's music sampling finding his own contemporary voice; they are spirited and possess clarity and a mature vision. His art is about the energy of now.

By Gina Fairley

German businessman Klaus Rathke made the scene count at the turn of the millennium. Relying on the future does not prevent us from also looking to the past. In anything, the two complement each other.24 The works of Canadian-born painter Matthew Carver evince this very axis of thinking. His untitled outdoor paintings point to a constellation of art history references and yet remain a personal hommage encompassing the force of contemporary times. Carver poses the question, "How has technology added to the visual language of painting?" Is a blocked digital slip so different to Barnett Newman's zips or a dash of white light by Vermeer? From today's generation of peripatetic artists on offer is defined by a new identity. Carver's paintings capture with equal intensity the spirit of Hong Kong's elevated, illuminated skyline, the virtual mega-billboards of Tokyo's Ginza neighborhood, and the surreal, cascading boulevards of Las Vegas. Carver's images don't carry the preconceived propagandist or cultural signifiers of those locations, rather they are defined purely by their urban setting. It is in this urban space framed by notions of time, memory, and digital blue. Standing in front of Carver's huge paintings, averaging two by three meters, the viewer is absorbed into their frame; not through the conventional reading, but by stepping back. Carver has been fascinated by anamorphic paintings for about eight years and, at the same time, has been exploring in parallel with the aesthetics of digital photography, mimicking its bleeds, blurs, and flipped echos through the layered works of his paintings.

It is a belief that examples of anamorphosis can be trodden back as early as 15th century Dutch painting, those beams of light upon air, it is right to use a medium connection from the revolutionary marks of Vermeer to Carver's blurred acrylic. "Wano-scapes." Both are about the mark-making of light. Carver first started to play with reflection during the late 1990s. Garnering a reputation for painting objects from a kitchen—ovens, toasters and jokers that mirrored the immediate surroundings and anonymous bystanders. This fascination with the refractions image set Carver on the path of anamorphosis. It also led to his successful exhibitions "Bamboo Kings" (Toronto, 1999) and "Capturismo" (Toronto, 1999) and being awarded the Canadian Emerging Artist Prize in 2000 for a painting of a water-sprung joker: this accolade came at a point when Carver was starting to look elsewhere in the work. As he says, "the kitchen appliances exploded into these big paintings of downtown." Carver had moved to Tokyo's Shibuya area in 2002. It is a dramatic move the paintings relocated from his kitchen to Asia's energized streets, from a static still life to the vibrating energy of contemporary Asia. In adding movement to his painting's recipe of perspective and light Carver's canvases start to sit quite comfortably beside Giacomo Balla and the Futurists' kinetic imagery, the slashed energy of Abstract Expressionism, and the luminous trails of the Bragaglia brothers' photographic experiments capturing movement during the 1930s. The aim of these pioneering works was to induce visual vertigo causing the image represented to move as far as possible from the photographic reproduction of things. Sounds rather like the earlier anamorphic reaction to perspective.

Antonio Giorgio Bragaglia published his "Fotogrammi Fumettistici" in 1919 stating, "We are not interested in the precise reconstruction of movement, which has already been broken up and analyzed. We are interested only in the area of movement which produces sensation, the memory of which still palpitated in our awareness." Manifesting as streaks of light across the frame of a shot, gesture was encoded on film as a trail, a kind of drawn light. Echoing Bragaglia's words, Carver's luminous trails of paint sat on the surface 'palpitating with sensations.' The parallel is clear in his painting "Capturismo" (2000), where the whole painting slips sideways, each motif grazing a passerby tail. This idea that speed can affect the way we see is further validated in Bragaglia's writings. "Photodynamism does not have to resort to disintegration for observation, but possesses the power to record the continuity of an action in space... in the immediate shifting of volumes that results in the transformation of expression." What Bragaglia or the cognoscenti introduced as scientific contributions to the visual medium of painting has merely been updated by 21st century technology and Carver's digital saturating of an image. For Carver, the past validated his current manifestation as a digital blip oscillating between abstraction and representation.

Similarly, Carver's recent painting "Kotoshi Lu #2 (2000) pays direct homage to Barnett Newman's legacy of the zips—his version of a streak of light with a
I came to the realization that the painting that inspired me wasn’t the work that was centered with ideas of application but more concerned with the idea that painting was a means of communication,” says Carver. “I was spending months working out the geometry and using computer programs like Photoshop to cut up, twist, morph, and then reassess images to make my own anamorphic paintings. Constructions and referencing new visual ideas in digital photography, yet I was held in the sway of what I saw as the hermetic creativity of other painters. Perhaps this is all a part of the dialectical nature of painting, a practice that can use and make reference to the technologies of its time and still belong to a freer and more literal way of thinking in regards to the creative viscous nature that the medium allows.”

Carver proposes a collision of layered histories and forces the viewer to move outside their perceptions when reading image and space, not dissimilar to the approach the Carbons used. Essentially, Carver’s images sit more accurately in the world of illusion than the representation of a particular place. He will draw on several source photographs to construct a single painting. For example, Tadeo Gótz’s famous image is familiar to Carver as an inner landscape, but he is more interested in the spaces between those anonymous streets half a block back from the blinding strip where reality and illusion can coexist.

While his painting, Inamurah Dori No. 2 (2000) reconstructs Sumida’s stocked lights, it typically illustrates Carver’s tendency to engineer diversion rather than reproducing the specific location of its site. Here he positions the viewer nestled in a valley of skyscrapers, a kind of U-shaped canyon carved out by a 1200-foot deep canal. The image is exploded and constructed directly in the studio with a new reality, increasingly becoming fewer, faster and more mind. It is intuitive painting and moves beyond the realms of the trick of pure anamorphosis. Carver found their definition of the paintings, and compose the paintings with emotions there is transition, mutation, and disorientation. They induce energy, and noise in patterns and color. Occasionally, he will throw the viewer on an anchor, such as a monochromatic scene. Carver’s signature, a lone figure, a lone ladder with a sign spray. This painting is caught in a clear blip of memory, a kind of sensory digital contamination.

Clearly, Carver’s paintings work on a micro/macro level. One first picks up their painterly quality and calligraphic parallel with traditional Asian brushwork. This East-West connection with abstract mark making is an inspiration for the energy of the urban city environment, especially the chaos of a big, gritty Asian city and its vapid tracts of monotonous expanse.

Preparing for his January 2007 exhibition, Bright Lights, Big City, with PAAS in Kuala Lumpur and Singapore, Carver had the low-stress environment of a four-month residency to push the parameters of his painting and to mine a more personal expression. The larger paintings are visually stacked and constructed directly in the studio with a new reality, increasingly becoming fewer, faster and more mind. It is intuitive painting and moves beyond the realms of the trick of pure anamorphosis. Carver found their definition of the paintings, and compose the paintings with emotions there is transition, mutation, and disorientation. They induce energy, and noise in patterns and color. Occasionally, he will throw the viewer on an anchor, such as a monochromatic scene. Carver’s signature, a lone figure, a lone ladder with a sign spray. This painting is caught in a clear blip of memory, a kind of sensory digital contamination.

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