



Chelsea Music Festival

Jonathan VanDyke | 2022 Visual Artist-in-Residence

How to Operate in a Blue Room

Dear Viewer:

I'm preparing this exhibit in my studio in Brooklyn, a bright, airy unit on the top floor of an industrial building. In this space one hundred years ago, workers produced ammunition. A decade ago, a mouse trap factory occupied the lower floors, and when I first moved in, the factory's sprawling equipment churned on and off, day and night, sending vibrations through the floor where I lay out my paintings. The mouse traps were infused with an artificial peanut butter scent that rose as an invisible cloud into my space, and I would head home smelling like a candy bar.

Now the building is mostly rented by designers, fabricators, artists, makers. Surely the ammunitions and mouse trap factories are still churning, in other buildings, out of my site. But here, at least, a space that once produced devices of elimination is home to acts of creation.

My studio windows face a hospital complex. During the first wave of the pandemic, in the months when NYC was at its center, the incessant crescendo of ambulance sirens would jarringly cut out upon reaching the emergency room's entrance. I slipped into my studio to care for the many plants I grow there. I couldn't bear to see anything else die.

In that first pandemic summer, I found myself unable to do much in the studio besides stare into space. I absent mindedly sorted through bags of shirts and trousers I had gathered, for years, from friends and family and companions. These garments are the base for my sewn paintings, and I found comfort in noticing how the weight and heft of a friend's body seemed to linger in a fabric. I opened scores of containers of pigments and paints I'd mixed into a great range of colors and consistencies. A few had dried out, a few had birthed a skin of mold, but most were salvageable. The processes that followed – pouring, dripping, staining, marking paint onto fabric – nudged me back into my artist shape. My paintings became slower, quieter, bluer.

*

One of my first summer jobs, as a college intern, was spent in the storage facility of a Pennsylvania museum, where I re-organized the state's collection of works on paper. While working alone in a windowless vault, the realization that I was gay was just starting to take shape. Certain qualities were indescribable: my queerness was still queer to me. From the outside, I seemed the same, but my interior world was churning. There's a particularly American pressure to state one's identity. I'm interested in those things for which we can't find words. When I lay out pieces of a painting, some colors and marks float visually to the surface, while others sink back. Patterns emerge among disparate parts. I might enjoy the dynamism of certain tensions and accentuate irresolution. This is a way to describe my studio process; it's also a way to describe how one makes a life.

During that summer job at the museum, I began to love storage rooms. The regularity and clean efficiency of metal racks and grids of shelving, in shades of gray and beige, offered a world in which every object was gently held in place. Yet these tidy surfaces concealed thousands of objects bristling with energy. Day after day I opened drawer after drawer of artifacts. I lingered over anonymous charcoal drawings of male nudes, imagining the scenarios of their making. I found stacks of 19th century mourning prints: images of families dressed in black, praying at tombstones beneath weeping willows, with fill-in-the-blank sections where you could write in the name of your loved one. I wondered about a people, a country (this country?), whose inhabitants once hung grief on their walls.

In the vault's stillness and temperate air, I realized that works of art, long past their separation from their makers, continue to change. They decay, their colors shift, their materials buckle. And we change *them*: artworks depend on us giving our attention, on us taking them from vaults and sharing them with others. They depend, necessarily, on the expansion of opportunities and access to those who have been excluded from such resources. The first line of an art work's wall label is usually the name of a maker, but a network of people – those who mined the pigments, those who made the meals for hungry makers, those who offered time and space – comprise a scaffolding for the nearly miraculous possibility that anyone creates art at all.

I make works that are actively and constantly changing – a sculpture leaking color, a painting that is entirely different on its back than on its front. An installation of my work is not about something, but is an expression of a point of view, the ongoing working out of a philosophy. Each part of the exhibition lives in relation to all the other parts. In this installation, these parts include: paintings composed and sewn over the course of a year, paint that oozes onto the floor, shelving that braces everything together, fabric scraps scattered in corners, flowers I've coaxed to bloom during the exhibition's run; this letter, and you.

★

For years I've returned, almost involuntarily, to depictions of suffering bodies in old European painting, lingering in museum galleries where I am often the sole lingerer. These paintings depict a whitened fantasy, an expression of patriarchy and patronage, while obscuring the work of those many who weren't allowed the privilege of making art at all. But could our re-experience of these old paintings be an act of play? Could we pause on their depictions of human frailty, taking them in and out of the context of Christian storytelling? Could other forms of attention enact a reckoning, a change? Here in plain view are excesses of flesh, moments of tender touch, expressions of the erotic, whiffs of queer desire, trials of vulnerability, states of despair, and representations of gender that defy our current conventions.

I snap pictures of these moments on my phone. I scroll through my images and find thousands of painted depictions of wounded bodies. Sometimes among them I find photos of actual wounded bodies. I grew up and lived much of my adult life as a witness to the effects of chronic illness. I was a frequent visitor to hospitals, a carer and comforter of those who were prodded, leaking, involuntarily broken down by illnesses and disabilities they did not choose. And from a young age I was drawn to – and terrified by – the images I saw circulated of gay men a generation above me, marked with signs of suffering and of an illness that – terribly, traumatically – right wing figureheads said was fashioned specifically for us.

Depictions of suffering became my teachers and companions. I kept observing these works, attracted to more details I found along their margins: dazzling geometric floor patterns beneath the feet of robed figures, for example, or depictions of vases of flowers in the extreme foreground, close enough to pluck. I make abstractions, but this imagery lingers as subtext. Abstracting is not forgetting. The photocopies tucked behind my paintings, showing details from my archive of images, are a reminder that next to beautiful surfaces, life goes on.

- JVD
June 3, 2022