

Four White Walls  
and a Sermon  
06 / 2013



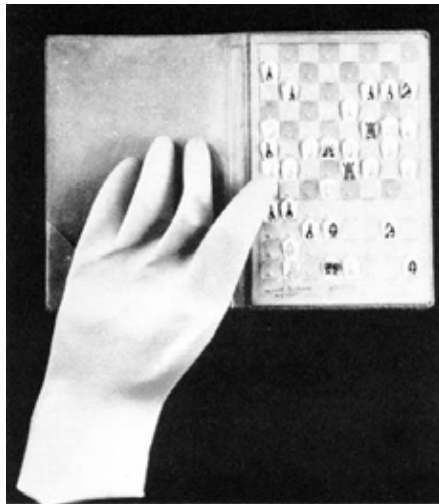


**Rubens Ghenov:** The idea of 'Four White Walls and a Sermon'—as being pertinent to a gallery: the white cube, the four walls, and something inside that has a message. A sermon involves anecdotes, references, experiences, examples, that are intended to apply universally.

The 'Four Walls' refer to an architectural space thus shelter, protection, intimacy, decoration, and self-preservation. When encapsulating a story, or in this case, a sermon, it guides you to a portal of sorts. I think due to this conflation of space and narrative, the latter can be meditated upon.

I've been thinking about Duchamp, and his impetus towards playing chess. A few months ago, I saw the *Dancing Around the Bride* show at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. One of my favorite things on display was a little pocket chess book that Duchamp used to play with; it was beautiful, small, intimate, and magnanimously interesting for being a duplicate of something you play at a designated place, and is designed to be carried in an ambulant way.

The chessboard is in many senses like a painting. It has four angles, which display a pictorial space where players have to interact via moves that come intuit, intellectually, meditatively. It is a 'Four White Walls and a Sermon' of complexities.



In painting, there's a game with a different system of checkmates that, by nature, have a completely different kind of resolve—or perplexity. What's also interesting, is that in chess you have articles (knights, queens, kings, bishops, etc) crafted as still life items that symbolize human, societal roles; it's a bit De Chirico-esque.

Of course, in painting, I think, the chess-like "game" is more of a Kierkegaardian checkmate-less navigation, but nonetheless bounces

within the 'Four Walls'. In my own work, I've also been thinking about Albers' *Homage to the Square* which, interestingly, goes back to the Japanese game, Go, where you can play a smaller board of less grid lines!

In being someone who's interested in folklore, storytelling and narrative, the 'sermon' takes shape wherever you are—churches, synagogues, mosques, temples or other places where you take a scripture that precede one by hundreds of years. You are being given a story, and anecdotes that are applicable to the message. By, 'story,' I don't necessarily mean fiction, but instead,

the construct wherein the message is flowing through. Although a story is not only a vehicle, a vessel, it's ultimately the entire entity; it goes back to the notion of:

"Do you have a body or are you your body?"

Contextually speaking of this idea of the sermon, we have narrative being told within these four walls where, again, that conflation provides meditation. Sitting down, or even kneeling, bowing, you might pay attention to the sermon, or you might wander off into a daydream.



PREVIOUS PAGE: Rubens Ghenov, *Sugi Nioni anto*, 16 x 20 in., acrylic on linen, 2013 LEFT TO RIGHT: Marcel Duchamp, *Pocket Chess Set*, leather, celluloid, and pins, 6 5/16 x 4 1/8 in. (16 x 10.5 cm) © Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris / Estate of Marcel Duchamp, The Louise and Walter Arensberg Collection, 1950. [src: Philadelphia Museum of Art]. Marcel Duchamp, *Pocket Chess Set with Glove*, photocopy, 1944, *Imagery of Chess* exhibition, submission. [src: edochess.com]. Marcel Duchamp, *Chess set*, designed and carved by the artist, circa 1919 [src: edochess.com]

Nonetheless, there is this verbal nucleus going on within this space. This goes back to the notion of domesticity that I'm so much in favor of. By entering into a place, the experience becomes domesticated. It is no longer simply a shelter. It's a place of meditation. You extract yourself from the world, and you deal with yourself. The 'Four Walls' allow you to get into your inner space where things aren't necessarily in a checkmate, or linear logic.

19th Century Korean Chaekkori paintings have been revelatory for me in that sense.

**R.K. Projects:** Those paintings are astonishing. Reversed perspective is so strange, yet so effective given the context.

**RG:** Exactly. Those paintings had

the illusion of a three-dimensional place, and yet they are very cognizant of there not being a three-dimensional place. They're super Modern, even with the idea of displaying scholarly accoutrements, as well. In grad school, I became aware of my own interest in that. Having grown up in a household of educators, the shelf was an interesting place where it was a bit like a painting—square, or rectangle—again, four angles throughout. It's decorative and utilitarian. We organize memorabilia (photographs, trinkets, objects) with catalogues of knowledge (books, records). Visually, these begin to switch roles. The catalogues become decorative where the spines of books and records display colorations and patterns, while photographs and knick-knacks speak as if they were books. So, for me, those paintings

became really important

**RK:** Duane Slick was recently talking about the idea of a shelf.

In his new paintings, *Measured Utterances in Red*, and *Multiplicities of Sunrises*, for example, there are rectangular quadrants that he considers to be a type of 'shelf'.

The obvious reason being that, visually, it is a rectangular space that doesn't extend to the edges of the canvas. It floats.

The interesting part is that, for him, that 'shelf' is a signifier for liminal space—an entry space; the threshold to a metaphysical world. It becomes an access point in which you can absorb and be absorbed—like Emerson's idea of the transparent eyeball:

*...I become a transparent eye-ball;  
I am nothing; I see all; the currents  
of the Universal Being circulate  
through me; I am part or particle of  
God.*

— D Ralph Waldo Emerson

If you think back on Duane's series of primarily black, monochromatic, acrylic on glass paintings in the context of them being representative of a period of grief, you can think of these newer stripe paintings as



stemming from the same ideology of black, layered, liminal space. Here, in the new works, it becomes structured into compartments, as if in a way to delineate an experience and allow it go somewhere else.

It is also a textured, tactile threshold. The paint is built up scrupulously. He manages to make a very shallow painting have foreground and background, and yet, despite their rigidity, they aren't representing an outdated riff on Geometric Abstraction in painting and its history. Instead, they invoke design of Native American textiles, like blankets and rugs.

**RG:** I love the fusion that can operate in different languages, Geometric



LEFT TO RIGHT: Chaekkori, six-panel folding screen, color on silk, each panel 119 x 39 cm, circa 1800. [src: hanulsoblog.com]. Rubens Ghenov, An evening raga, episodic lecture vol. -1, acrylic on wood, inkwell, piece of wood, plastic woven ball, chinese rice box housing *Songs of Exile* loop, DV, 2013



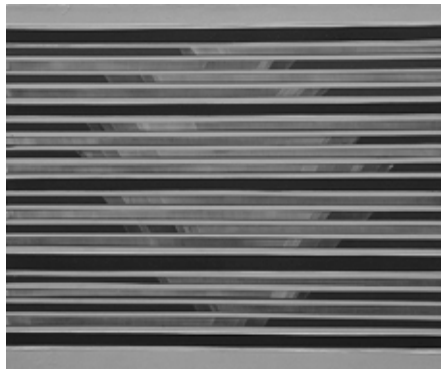
Abstraction and Native American textile. I think that read provides fiction. Grief is a reality, but when you translate that reality into a piece of work, or when you “channel” that sentiment or experience, we are somehow translating it; i.e.: ideology of black/liminal space as grief. I’ve been reading Paul Celan a lot lately. When translators speak on his work, there’s a huge exegesis about his usage of the German language. What he uses for “word formations”, are conceptual notes that silently play throughout his poems. When translated, it’s quite impossible to catch that. The Russian poet Ilya Kamin-sky in an article on Celan says:

“Translation, however faithful, is fiction.”

Personally, that quote meant worlds to me. Not only due to my interest in fiction, but also perhaps because fiction is important to me on so many levels, especially that of translation.

How do I, as a foreigner, translate my experience in a system that is foreign to me? That translation creates a fictive space. Going back to the subject of shelves and painting, for these past five years I have been thinking about Mondrian as a person who redefined space. I’ve been thinking about my paintings as still lives, in the vein of those Chaekkori works, and as a form that allows for meditation, but more of a modernist meditation of sorts. I have been fascinated with someone like Bodhidharma, and the story of meditating for nine years in front of a wall. Whether it’s utterly or somewhat fictive, it’s grand in both ways. Whatever that meaning is for me—standing in front of something that is within me is a narrative that exists in the studio. That’s why those elements for me, within Chaekkori paintings, and Bodhidharma, are of a certain importance.

I want the paintings to be slow. I’m a slow painter. Sometimes, I get in the studio and I look for three



hours, and only put two moves in 15 minutes. It ends up going back to Duchamp, like that chess game where every move is meditated on rather than manufactured or hastily impulsive. There’s a book by Yasunari Kawabata called *The Master of Go* that tells a story of two Go players. The game at times takes months, days pass in between certain moves.

The idea of the shelf came from me thinking about jewelry boxes and architecture. Jewelry boxes are little mementos you keep things in. It is such a beautiful, ornate thing about nothing. It is a keeper of vanities. It can represent a keeper of vanities that resembles how people think about paintings: it doesn’t mean anything, or it means everything.

Architecture is a space that you have to think about the safety of people. It’s a structure of shelter, as well as, a place where one can’t help but think about the way human beings have lived on the planet for so many years. Human life precedes architecture if we keep the term under what we call it to be, the ‘sermon’. Humanity as a story is housed within walls we ourselves invented.

How do you house a soul inside of a body inside of this place? How do you let sunlight in? Is this place only good at night? How do the windows



your work, or other human beings?

Having grown up in houses where shelves held history, artifacts and books from other areas of the world, I experienced a spectacle of somewhere else, a scent of another place. Their presence for me, in their organized, decorated, milieu, clasped my attention early on. My interest in expressing that image came out of the confluence of those things.

In my last show, *The Silent H*, the paintings came from a specific narrative about a poet whom I invented based on a culmination of things. The idea of that story happened domestically. It resonated the shelf notion for me. There was the maid’s quarter, and there was the kitchen. There was the woman’s house, and there was the dress. Where do you put things? For me, it’s cinematic. How do you compose a mise-en-scene? I think that’s why Mondrian sometimes ends up being really

important for me. How much of that square becomes a rectangle? How much red? How is the red painted? The shelf is also a nonsensical object, as well. We have this idea of organization where you can put a picture of your grandfather that has nothing to do with the records that are next to it on the shelf. It's a creative thing for a very quotidian activity. They end up being like paintings. If you pay attention, it talks to you when you don't want to be talked to. It's quiet, though, and I like that quietude. That's why I think about these objects quite often. The shelf is the space where extraction gets a place for viewing.

**RK:** Talk about the tape loops?

**RG:** I've been making a lot of mixes. In the studio, I will play one song for a whole entire week. It becomes mantric. The Buddha Machine is now a product made by Zhang Jian and Christiaan Virant (FM3). The machine however was inspired by these Buddhist prayer machines distributed at temples to aid practitioners, believers, and worshippers in meditation. Like I said, sometimes my listening experience while at the studio, or when by myself, is akin to that. So, I have been thinking about my own machine of 'meditative' loops that come from different sources within my personal milieu. Miles Davis used to talk about pulling a myriad of melodies out of one note. Coltrane did that

amazingly. Sometimes it takes me like a half hour to choose what album I'll listen to. The loops are a shelf of their own.

**RK:** And the title—*Songs of Exile*?

**RG:** Again, it's like looking at a tree trunk and not realizing where all of the roots extend to in the soil. It comes from a plethora of places. There's a passage in the Book of Psalms, Psalm 137. The title the passage has been given is, By the rivers of Babylon. I made a drawing years ago that I gave that title. Basically, it's an image of the Israelites hanging their instruments on the trees, because there was no real sense in playing their songs since they were in exile, and in captivity in Babylon.

1  
*By the rivers of Babylon,  
there we sat down, yea, we wept,  
when we remembered Zion.*

2  
*We hanged our harps upon the  
willows in the midst thereof.*

3  
*For there they that carried us away  
captive required of us a song; and  
they that wasted us required of us  
mirth, saying, Sing us one of the  
songs of Zion.*

The idea of exile for me as an immigrant has been interesting. I didn't



Rubens Ghenov, *196090's*, acrylic and iron-on transfer on canvas, 2011.

necessarily have a say in moving to the United States. I moved with my folks. I was a young teenager. The longer I get to be who I am, I understand that my relationship to this land has been that of a middle ground that feels exilic. I live in a place that I really don't have a connection to. I've been excerpted from the water that's in my system, and I don't necessarily feel or smell the scent of the water in this new system. The music I listen to in the studio hits that nerve.

When I was growing up in Brazil, the music I was listening to was a *mélange* of things from America and the UK, as well as listening to punk or post-punk bands in Brazil (Titãs, Ratos de Porão). Within a time frame of four years in America, all I was listening to was bossa nova, MPB, Tropicália (João Gilberto, Jobim, Nara Leão, Caetano Veloso, Gal Costa, Djavan, Tom Ze, Os Mutantes, Lula Cortes, Novos Baianos, Chico Buarque, etc.). That music solidified the nebulous memory state in a sense for me. It somehow navigated me back to the experiences I had, or the sentiment of "being" where I'm from, not in a nostalgic sense but as an exile of sorts. I almost could sense a ground a few inches below my feet as if I were walking there. Transport, and Meditation...

That displacement has always been a part of my work, something

that my own being told me about my own being that I didn't really know. There's a part of memory in your brain called episodic memory. The way I found out about this was because I'm diabetic, Type 1 diabetes. I had this extreme low blood sugar one morning. I woke up super groggy, and I fell and hit my head on the table. I called my wife, and as she's coming up, she sees me get up and hit my head on the table again. I felt like my brain was split, and the right side of my brain where I hit the table was empty. It physically felt numb. I got really worried and said we should go to the hospital. I go to the doctor, and they do an MRI and said everything is fine, but they found some sort of interesting read on the brain. They mentioned some medical terminology that I of course was unaware of but that I tried to procure information on. The research led to this thing called episodic memory where apparently a lot of people who are immigrants end up having. It seems that the brain is trying to connote the place where they now live with the place where they used to live. So the brain tries to cope. I think Martin too is an interesting guy in terms of the way that he's moved around the United States. He goes to Paris, to LA, comes back to NY...

**RK:** His conflict in that context is more internal. I think his sense of displacement is about being outside of the church almost. His Episcopa-

lian upbringing was so rigid in some ways, and yet he's such a hippie at heart. It's been pleasant to watch him grow—to visit his studio and see his work mature through different stages. It was amazing when he was doing the Provincetown commission mural. He was so euphoric at the time, especially with the baby on the way. It was like fertility was on his mind. He was blossoming and blooming.

**RG:** It's cool to see men that are so in tune. We have come to know a bit of motherliness.

**RK:** Yes, he embraces femininity. I think you do too, but through an outlet revolving around fiction. A lot of historical figures that you reference and portray are very strong female characters.



**RG:** Brazil is a woman, I think. I have a father who was very feminine in a way, but wasn't effeminate. It comes through with how humanly we are in Brazil. It's much more female. I wouldn't say that Brazil is a matriarch of sorts because of how sexist the country is. Brazil is carnival. It's a woman displaying herself, but not in a sexist way even. I remember when Janet Jackson lost one of her brassieres with Justin Timberlake. It was a huge to-do here, but in Brazil, every February, a naked woman dances beautiful in her glory, covered in gold replete with glitter, painted in the specific colors of a certain school of samba on top of a float. In a sense it was almost presidential, papal, even. Though, not solemn and stoic, but rather festive and celebratory. Surely it can be sexist, but I think it is expressing something else about Brazil that is much more feminine.

**RK:** It's beautiful how you identify with it.

**RG:** I definitely do, yeah. I did this video at RISD where I'm naked and playing a broken guitar. I'm lip-syncing this song called *Tatuagem* (tattoo), sung by Caetano Veloso. It is him singing a song that another artist named Chico Buarque made. The song is about a woman speaking about her lover. Both Caetano and Chico are men embodying the voice and sentiment of this fictive woman as if they were in her flesh.

There are different embodiments taking place—Chico embodying a woman, Caetano embodying Chico, and then I embody them lip-synching it naked on this broken stringless guitar. Both aren't gay, nor transvestites, and neither is their desire to be a woman, per se. They were simply embodying that sentiment of a specific woman. Fiction sometimes can be much truer than life. Clarice Spector is really good at this, this embodiment which is strangely Brazilian when you think of syncretic religions like Candomblé or Umbanda where spirits “embody” mediums, or Fernando Pessoa, who says I'm going to create these heteronyms from this milieu that's already existent inside of me. What is strange here too, is the fact that both Lispector and Pessoa were immigrants as well. That kind of fiction allows the entrance, a certain ‘immigration’, that provided me a type of lineage. A fiction that is actually not that fictive. It's a more thorough way to tell.

RK: And that was the impetus for developing the character “Angelico Morandá”?

RG: Again, it's the idea of the shelf. On this shelf, I put Fra Angelico, Morandi and Edu Lobo via Maria Bethania with the song Borandá. The last character I worked on were two women, Antonieta Munchen and Algia Adamus. The latter was a poet whose practice influenced the

work that came out in 2012. One of the things I really enjoy about hip hop is that seamless wall-less place where a plethora of disparate things congregate unapologetically, channeled through a mask. MF DOOM, Dr. Octagon, Rammellzee, for instance. In Pessoa's case it's Ricardo Reis, Alberto Caeiro, Bernardo Soares, etc.

I think pseudonyms, aliases, heteronyms, masks can conjure a truer sense of oneself by, again, embodying all that one is, at least from the perspective of what one can see there is in oneself. Rather than hiding, you expose fears, vulnerabilities, guilty pleasures, hidden desires and interests through this construct. That which is deep and vulnerable subconsciously puppeteers the hand to create the mask. They say more than what we don't want to say. I think Pessoa, Lispector, and Borges are really interesting for me in that kind of way.

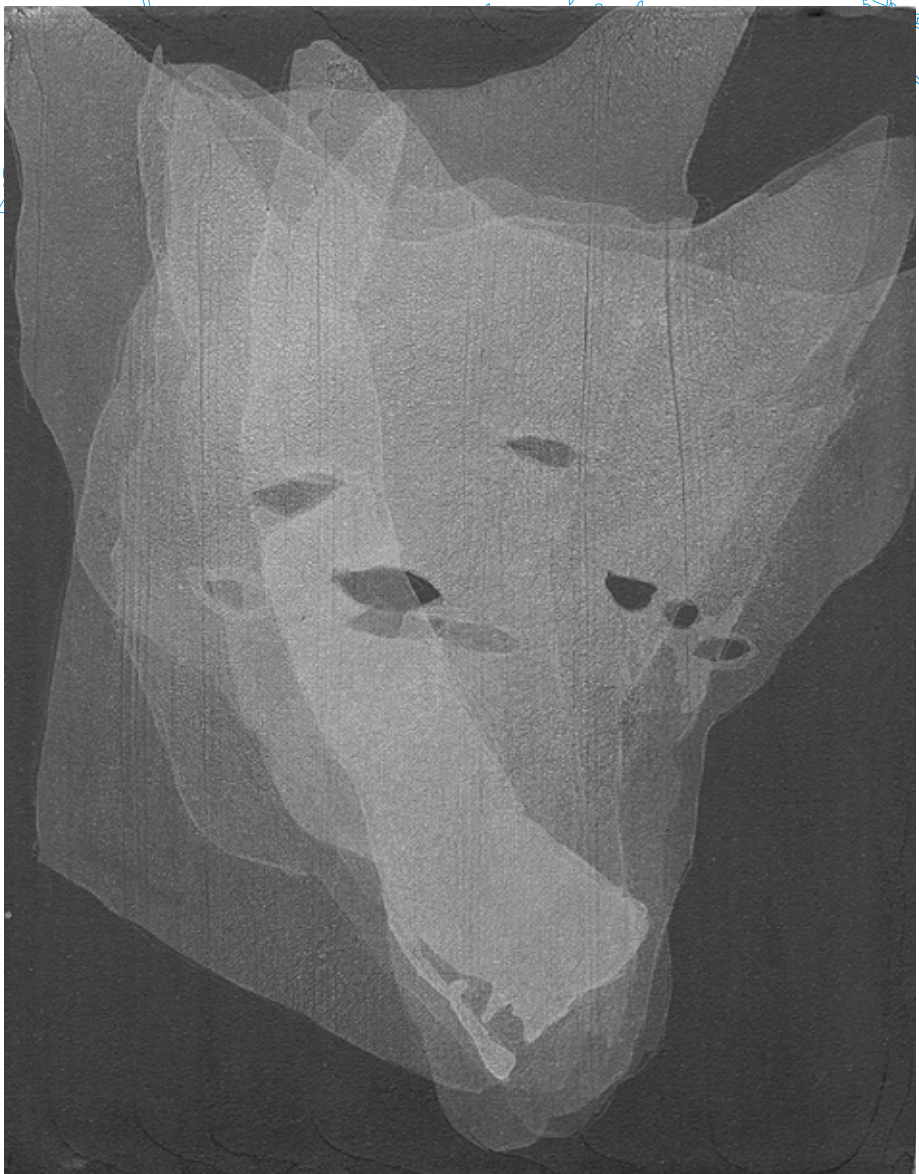
Throughout art history, of course, Picasso can be pegged as the guy who used African masks, but the African mask allowed him to move aesthetically, personally, and even philosophically. Emma Kunz believed in her drawings as a force of energy. The work is not the representation thereof, necessarily. It is the actual amulet.

I did a lecture on Angelico Morandá at Moore College of Art here in

Philadelphia where I spoke of his “life”, para-fictionally, within another narrative I'd been creating called the *Mystagogues*. The latter was spawned from Borges' *The Sect of the Phoenix*. Based on that, I fleshed out Morandá, whose name is the title of one of my recent paintings.

*Rubens Ghenov was born in São Paulo, Brazil, 1975. He immigrated to the US with family in 1989. Rubens received a BFA in painting from the Tyler School of Art, in 1999; and an MFA in painting from RISD, in 2010. He has shown in New York, Chicago, Philadelphia and Detroit. He currently teaches Foundation Studies at Tyler School of Art, and resides with his wife Lynne Ghenov, son Galliano and daughter Mia currently in South Jersey.*





Duane Slick is a painter whose use of materials and formats has ranged since 1990. He was born in Waterloo, IA and is a member of the Meskwaki Nation of Iowa. His mother is a member of the Ho-Chunk Nation of Nebraska. He received his BFA from the University of Northern Iowa, Cedar Falls, IA. He received his MFA from the University of California-Davis, Davis, CA. In addition he attended the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in 1986.

Slick has exhibited internationally and nationally, venues include The National Museum of the American Indian in NYC, the Eiteljorg Museum in Indianapolis, IN and the Museum of Art and Design in NYC. Slick has taught at the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, NM and is currently Professor of Painting and Printmaking at the Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, RI.

**R.K. Projects:** What was your upbringing like? What kind of traditions did you practice?

**Duane Slick:** Traditions in the context of a native identity mean several things. I come from two tribes, and both tribes were very different. My mother's tribe was more Christianized. My father's tribe was more traditional. They were not Christian, but my parents always thought we needed church since we were raised "urban"—first generation, urban Indian. We were sent to

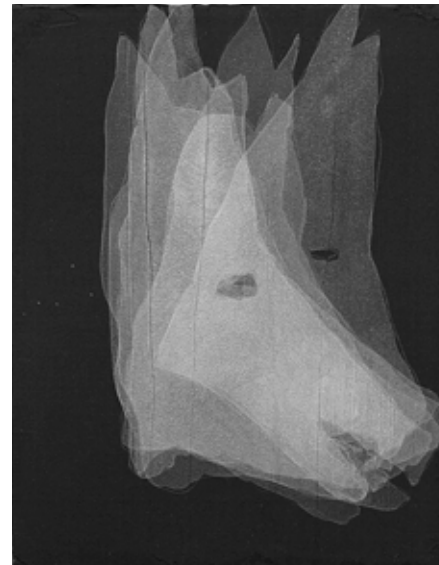
the Salvation Army Church, then a Lutheran church, and then a Protestant church. My parents weren't differentiating between them. We also attended different ceremonies, and I witnessed a lot of oratory traditions—particularly amongst the Ho-Chunk Nation. A lot of the kinds of ceremonies were based on events—funerals, baptisms, sometimes a birthday.

In terms of the impact, I cite the presence of death in my family. From the age of 14 to 24 I lost seven of my aunts and uncles, then my little brother in 1986. It was kind of strange. There was a national statistic that said the life expectancy of Native American males in the 1970's was between 45 and 52, and



that's what happened to all of my uncles. By the time they hit their mid 50's, they were gone.

Amongst both of my tribes, the cycle of mourning is four years per person. So, every year at the date of the death for four years we had to have a gathering with our relatives, and then you had to listen to the mourn-



ers. I had a lot of empathy for them, but it wasn't until my little brother passed away that I really understood how those people felt.

**RK:** It sounds like a kind of relentless grief. How did you cope with those binaries? You were being forced to go to church, and yet also expected to participate in ceremonies

that were happening within your Native family. Is that something that leads you to express yourself via painting?

**DS:** This is the story of show-and-tell. As urban Indians, we would be coming back from different ceremonies on the reservation and my mother would always say, "Remember, on Monday when you're in school, and they ask you to do show-and-tell, don't speak about anything you've seen or done." And the reason was always: "because the white man does not understand the Indian, and if you tell them anything, the first thing they will do is take it all away." So, that was it. My parents established our separateness at an early age. We didn't say anything, but we saw a lot beautiful things. I always tell the story about show-and-tell, because at some point when I was a teenager I realized the loophole in my parent's law: they may have said you cannot speak, but they never said you cannot paint or draw either.

**RK:** Were there any repercussions?

**DS:** No. Not really. But I later realized that my parent's law was intended for self and cultural preservation. By emphasizing our separateness we began to learn the legacies of U.S./Indian relations

and I sensed the goal was to instill some sense of stewardship for the traditions we were taking part in. My elders would always tell me to keep going and finish what I started. They liked the fact that I was in college and had planned on teaching. But the hard part was not speaking about it through undergrad — people were frustrated because one of the ideas of critique is: “What is common ground?” The anthropologist, Beatrice Medicine once said there are three issues facing contemporary Native Artist:

“Holding a tribal identity in the face of a culture driven by individualism. The conflict between market ethics and values and tribal ethics and values. The dilemma of function or the role of the sacred and the secular in the content of tribal arts..”

I had taught at the Institute of American Indian Arts for from 1992–95. I worked with Native students from all different tribes, at critiques, the students often never said “I” think this or “I” do this — everything was prefaced with “We.”

**RK:** Because it is ingrained that they think as a collective?

**DS:** Yes, and when you ask, “who’s we?” They’re talking about their tribe, and the tribes are broken into clans, and each clan has a particular duty within the tribe. I think in the pre-contact days, part of the

clan structure was set-up so that people had assigned and understood duties to specific things. For example, the bear clan were the police. It was a division of labor in a kind of spiritual economy, or metaphysical economy.

**RK:** What does that mean for you?

**DS:** Within that division of labor, there are certain types of responsibilities that each clan member and leader of that clan are imbued with. For instance, according to the clan descriptions by the Ho-Chunk Nation, the wolf clan was entrusted to calm the winds.

**RK:** Ah! I see. That’s part of the spiritual economy.

**DS:** I had a visiting artist gig at Haskell Indian Nations University in 1994. Haskell was an infamous Government boarding school. Have you heard of the boarding schools? In the 1930–40’s, the government decided that the policy had to be: “Save the Man, but Kill the Indian.” They decided to do that through education. They invented these boarding schools, and placed them in disparate places around the country, then they went onto reservations and abducted the children. They were sent hundreds of miles away from their tribe. They cut off all their hair, made them wear uniforms, and they were forbidden to speak in their native tongue. The



kids often tried to escape, and a lot of them died in these boarding schools. Haskell has a graveyard for the children. They took me to that cemetery, and the gravestones are etched with the name of the child, their tribal affiliation, their age, they were all six to eight years old. The bodies weren’t returned to the tribe. They kept them. According to two separate sources, in one of the dorms at Haskell Indian Nations University, you can hear the children playing in the stairwells.

**RK:** We just got chills.

**DS:** My last body of work was titled: *The Untraceable Present*

It was a reference to how all of these kinds of stories and experi-

ences come into the work. My statement reads:

*In narrative traditions to tell the story of tragedy one must always begin by telling the ending first. I once believed that the weight of such expectations functioned as a cultural-given for the artist of Native American descent. Its rules stated we cry for a vision and place ourselves in a single grand narrative of history and representation...*

*But the laughter of Coyote saturated and filled our daily lives.*

It echoed through the lecture halls of histories and it was so powerful and so distracting that I forgot my place in linear time and now I work from an untraceable present.

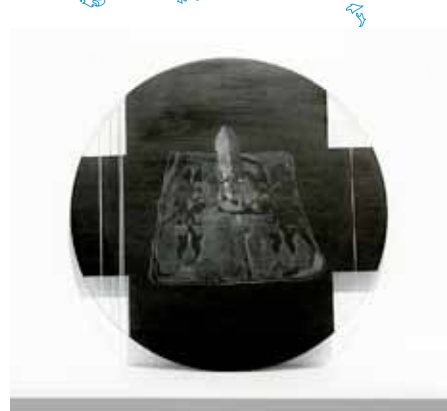
My work for the RK show is phase two of that earlier work, phase one were black and white paintings on glass, using the American flag as an object and painted in careful realism. The context of that work comes from the recent death of both my parents and my little sister. It was really from the experience of home hospice care for my father that triggered much of this work, he died from lymphoma in 2008 and I was his last caregiver. I would sleep on the couch next to his bed, because he would get up at night



**RK:** The coyote paintings, as well?

**DS:** The stripes began first as an outgrowth of the flag paintings. Those carefully made paintings are comprised of layers of washes done with a .001 brush. It was meditative and time consuming. I wanted to return to a type of painting that was more spontaneous, additive and subtractive. So I began to follow the stripes I had been painting from the American flag. I was also thinking of this gradient strip that began to appear in all my work. I remembered a story of how a Native man was describing the eagle feather fan he had made as a devotional instrument, he said, "Look at this fan and those feathers, it is so beautiful, it is like looking at all the sunsets in the world at the same time."

But the flag itself was something I had fixated on in the funeral process. Both my father and sister were veterans. My father is a veteran of the Korean War and they were both given a Meskwaki Veterans funeral.



and need help. One night he woke up, distressed and confused. He said he had a dream. In his dream he was trying to read the newspaper. He would pick up the paper and when he held it up to his face it vanished from his hands. In another part of the dream, he was putting some money in his pocket. He stuck the money in his pocket, then he reached in his pocket again, and the money was gone. I thought of it as his mind trying to prepare him. The newspaper is a document about the present, the money in his pocket is currency he needs in daily life. They were vanishing because where his spirit is going, those things no longer have value.

That whole experience of sitting with him at night, and that dream... We had the funeral wake on the Meskwaki settlement. This is a very rural area with little lighting, so when it's dark, it's very dark. That's where the black came from.

I was thinking about that darkness. The other part was that dream as an embodiment or evidence of a threshold.



**RK:** Was that something he chose? I can't imagine the impact that would have on the psyche, as a Native American—of having to endure the trauma of this country, in addition to dealing with that of another.

**DS:** There is ambivalence about the flag, but at the same time, within Indian country, veterans are honored. There are different kinds of legacies of warrior culture, it's definitely something that exists, they served, they protected.

**RK:** The flag paintings that coincided with the grieving process of your father's death utilized the symbol of the flag with such darkness and depth. That darkness is something that isn't there anymore.

**DS:** Yes, there's the darkness, and I just decided that it was over. Time to move on. I wanted the painting to have more give and take. I am following the story of all the sunsets-in-the-world and the threshold it leads to.

**RK:** You've previously used the coyote in a symbolic way. It has come back, as a different manifestation?

**DS:** Yes, the coyote came back.

I originally called it a retrieval process, a recovery process, the idea was that the tourist market was taking things. Is it taking cultural authority? Or is it assuming cultural authority to the point it waters things down and then the people



LEFT TO RIGHT: Duane Slick, *Multiplicities of Sunrises*, acrylic on linen, 50 x 38 in., 2013. Duane Slick, *Red Cinder Coyote*, acrylic on linen, 14 x 11 in., 2013

themselves accept this watered down idea of their cultural authority? The coyote mask is a folk art object purchased in Mexico. The idea was to put his shadow onto white-on-white painted space and animate him, give him his own agency. It gave the object a sort of mythic space.

For the show, *Four White Walls and a Sermon*, the coyote returns. The image is still generated by shadows, but he is painted in iridescent washes and reds on pitch-black grounds. In some way I don't see them as threatening, as the expression I work to arrive at looks remorseful. Of course that's not true for all of them.

**RK:** What is your perspective on the relationship between the coyote paintings and the stripe paintings?

**DS:** That threshold we talked about earlier—looking into that blackness, and then seeing the coyote emerge. A reviewer for the Boston Phoenix wrote, "the coyote was never a menace, that there was no fear associated with it, and that he seems more of some kind of voice, or some kind of guide. That's pretty spot-on.

**RK:** The coyote has its agency back?

**DS:** Yes. That's partially where the coyote comes from, when I'm painting these, what's important to me is what I can do with the eyes. It's layer and layer and layer, shadow

over shadow over shadow, to arrive at some believable glimpse.

**RK:** Earlier, you were saying how you hoped the stripe paintings and the coyote paintings would be a conversation relating to each other—in what way do you see them relating?

**DS:** Maybe its like chapter one stripes, chapter two is coyotes. As an environment/installation idea, the coyotes are seen as packs. The pack is really the formal idea of serial formatting. They activate a space as animate images. The colors red and black, then the iridescent embedded in every color bind the stripes and coyotes. The black is not ever really black since the iridescence sparkles democratically across/inside the image and surface.

In this largest stripe painting, with the black band on top, I inserted one of my grey gradients into the black space but it doesn't extend horizontally across the painting as you might expect. I cut it short so that it sits on the edge and becomes tromp l'oeil. I call this painting my red shelf since the three black bands all hold the shortened gradient. The eye wants to bliss out with the vertical roll but the shortened gradient has a somber effect. It rains on the paintings parade.

Maybe that is what the Coyotes are here to remind us of.

A story that was written into an artist-altered book titled: *The Truth Will Set You Free*. A Jehovah's Witness publication published in the 1950's. The book was altered by Slick in 1991. The discussion with RK Projects is centered on the book and two new paintings included in the Four White Walls exhibition: *Turtle I* and *Turtle II*.

DS: One of the things that came about in my work in the early 90's was the term grace. I started to think about that in relation to my family and cultural history.

TP: In what capacity?

DS: It was precipitated by the Jehovah's Witness publication, *The Truth Will Set You Free*, an odd title and I began my book alterations by intertwining it with an event that occurred with my brother Brian. In 1989, he had been attacked by a gang of white boys who beat him to the point of semi-consciousness and then they poured kerosene on his legs and attempted to light him on fire. They were throwing lit matches

on him but he wouldn't burn. Some people saw what was happening and ran to his rescue.

It occurred just before I was in a fellowship program in Provincetown at the Fine Arts Work Center with 10 writers and 9 other visual artists. I wanted to address the example of grace that existed from this incident. Where does grace exist? How does it manifest itself? What are its origins? Causality?

So one day my poet friend Andrew Towle says, "Provincetown, a cold gay town." So I included that as a precursor to an idea about desire and change. It reads:

"It was desire that caused the single celled organism to leave the water."

"This led me to believe that there are times when anything is possible."

"Desire makes people do strange things."

The story segways into the Turtle Dream, a dream I had in 1987.

It was such a vivid dream, it involves a site I return to everytime I go back to Iowa. It goes like this:



### THE TURTLE DREAM

In this dream I am river fishing for catfish with my brother Brian. We are fishing on an old lock and dam, where the water is high and fast moving. I throw my line into the current and realize as I reel it back in that my line is snagged. I try pulling the line in and suddenly I am pulled into the fast moving waters.

I am trying to stay afloat but the current is pulling me under. Suddenly, a huge turtle with a shell the same size as me rises to the surface below me. He tells me to hang one

to his shell.

Atop his shell he takes me to a small tributary off the main current.

Here, the water is so crystal clear I see every rock, pebble and contour that lies below the surface.

We arrive at another river bank.

Here, my New York friends are gathered and talking excitedly amongst themselves.

The Turtle and I walk ashore and the turtle is walking on his back



legs like me. We sit on a log and he leans forward slightly resting his hands on his knees and stares out across the river. We are silent for a long time.

As I am looking at him, I am thinking how amazing it is that I have arrived there and how he saved me. I go to my New York friends who are all busy talking to each other. I try to get their attention and to tell them the amazing story of my survival. But they are not listening to me.

No one is listening to me.

Finally, I look at the turtle and he points at my New York friends and he says, "They know how to get you home from here."

The turtle stands up. He wades into the water and I watch him sink into the current.

He disappears.



Duane Slick, *Measured Utterance in Grey (Turtle #1)*, acrylic on canvas, 23.25 x 19.5 in., 2013





Martin Smick received his BFA from Washington University in St. Louis in 2000 and his MFA from RISD in 2009. He has been a resident at the Cité Internationale des Arts in Paris, the SVA Summer Studio Residency in NYC and was a 2009–2010 Fellow at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, MA. His work has been exhibited in San Francisco, Los Angeles, New York, Provincetown and Providence. Smick has also worked as a muralist, and decorative painter since 2001. He lives and works in Providence, RI with his wife Elisabeth and daughter Luna.



Ugaritic and Semitic texts, and of course Greek and Latin to some extent as well.

**R.K. Projects:** You grew up in a very religious family?

**Martin Smick:** I grew up in a family steeped in religion. My parents were raised as Presbyterians but converted as adults to the Episcopal Church, which is the church I was raised in. The Episcopal Church had more ritual and liturgy than most Protestant churches. Both of my grandfathers were biblical scholars, experts in ancient languages and exegetical scholarship. They were very engaged in an academic practice but also in a theological practice with the idea of bringing greater scholarship to biblical translation. They felt many evangelicals were not rigorous enough in biblical scholarship and translation. So, they set about doing some of that work themselves, specializing in transcribing and translating cuneiform texts, ancient

All that's to say that I was heavily steeped in this idea of, not just the importance of religion, but also the importance of the biblical text itself, and the importance of biblical history. The other side to this is that my parents were heavily involved in a liberal high school in New England that promoted a broad liberal education. It integrated subjects teaching the history of Western civilization, theater, art, and music all in relation to one another. This in many ways would contradict what I would go and hear in church every Sunday. It was kind of two lives for a long time. But from a young age, I was very encouraged to explore art, particularly European and Western traditions.



subvert the importance of the text, and reclaim it in a way, as a pattern or something visual. I think being steeped in religion made me more reserved about addressing spiritual issues, or any issues that an artist wants to deal with for that matter. What you confront a lot in religion are taboos. Painting became a place where I could explore such issues. Eventually, I made the shift to a more abstract language, finding it to be fertile ground for delving into ideas that are for the most part sublimated aspects of consciousness

deemed sinful or off limits in a way by most religion.

**RK:** In regard to there being a shift in this new series of paintings—from that of symbolic imagery to abstraction—do you feel as though it is a practice that represents a type of iconoclastic act?

**MS:** I feel like abstraction looks forward in a way—like prefiguring something, as opposed to representing something.



**RK:** Prior to you saying that, I had this perspective of them being reformations. You're purging the symbols; they're not there. They've become iconoclastic in terms of the vocabulary that you've built up to this point.

**MS:** Yes, that use of symbols that you're talking about are still there, but I'm tilling the soil right now. Those symbols are things that are going to start to populate these paintings eventually, but I don't

want there to be such a separation of image and symbol. It's been this process of, yeah, reformation—if you want to call it that.

I was once constrained by rigid structures in my thinking, and also in my approach to painting. It's like having one lens on a camera, and only using that one lens all the time. For a long time I was stuck with that one lens, and I put it on everything. With those patterns, I think they were more about architecture.

I used to do restoration work in a number of churches. I often think about abstract painting as the subversion of the Victorian aesthetic. We used to basically decorate every inch. All of that goes into modernist forms in a way, because decorative language is essentially abstract language and a lot of that language relates to occurrences in the natural world, then it is implemented specifically for architecture; all of that logic goes into the canvas. They're developing into spaces that I inject my own narrative into. Before, it was a wall.

The pattern that consumes the whole surface was like a wall that I meditated on. It was a force field; it was a defensive posture. I'm looking to tear down the wall. It's hard to know when you've succeeded at something, because each painting has its own set of variables. I want you to be able to see through the space a little bit. It's like looking through a forest, a little disorienting, but spatial at the same time. My one fear is that I've arrived at a conventional idea of painting that lots of people use.

**RK:** That is what is so lovely about them, though. It is why the large painting we showed in 2012 received such positive responses. It was very ornamental and decora-



tive, but...

**MS:** I'm not rejecting that decorative language. It's floral, related to nature, with veiled sexual references, and notions of fertility, but it's also an abbreviated language like pictograms. I go through cycles. I don't know how I'm going to look back on this in 20 years, but I feel like it's been a long road trying to find a mature voice. I'm not sorry about that; I feel like it's part of the journey. At every stage of my development, there are pieces that I hold on to. Some people dump their older work really quickly, but I keep recycling it through.

**RK:** That's apparent in your work. It seems like there have been major ideological shifts, though. Do you



content was until later. A lot of content back then was about trying to deconstruct my experience in New York being a worker—a pyramid builder—working in the Trump Building in NY, or the Atlantis hotel in Dubai, for example. By the time I went to Provincetown, I wanted to be as far away from all of that as I could get. That's really where I'm at now, getting back to the landscape, somehow connecting to my true self.

**RK:** You are a romantic...

**MS:** I got that big landscape mural commission, and that was totally a romantic painting, you know, yeah... I think I am. I'm a little embarrassed about it, but I think I am.

**RK:** That was a real feat—the landscape mural.

**MS:** That project was cool, but I was

think you can identify the catalysts for those changes?

**MS:** I started working for Richard Davis out in LA, who was a master decorative painter. I was totally blown away by all the stuff he was able to do. I liked how performative, and decorative it was. It had pop, and it was seductive to look at. For example, he would do a faux-bois painting of a crotch-cut mahogany panel for a library or something—speaking of sublimated meaning, it's a very erotic wood grain—and so after that I was always looking for ways to deploy that type of language in my own work.

The problem is when the idea becomes played out and stale. It has effect, it's over, and then what's next? I felt like people wanted me to do my tricks, but then it was hard for me. I never figured out what the



Martin Smick, *Forgetting the Formula*, 40 x 30 in., acrylic on linen, 2012.



Commissioned Landscape Mural, Private Residence, Millerton, NY, 2012

glad when it was over. That's where a lot of this current work came from. I wanted to make landscape paintings, or make work that was about the landscape. I want to tread the line between a depicted space, and an abstract painted surface. Part of it is just creating a sense of space through surface layers, and being able to look through one layer to the next.

I've been tossing around the idea that creation is loss; any gesture you make also means negating something. I think that's the idea of time in a way. It's a relentless thing you always have to push through in order to create something. This goes back to what I was saying before. Symmetry is more like death, it's unchanging. Asymmetry is like the creative force; it coincides with the idea of sublimation for me. It helps instigate that next layer of growth. There's something important about getting comfortable with letting that happen in the work—letting go in that way.

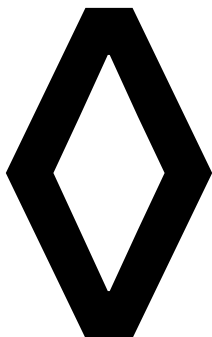


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