

LEO XIII

Steven Cox





Whitney Kimball in dialogue with Steven Cox

It’s an imperfect comparison for evidently formalist painting, but photographic references in terms like “contact prints,” “photo transfers,” “negatives,” and “emulsion” are hard to avoid when thinking about Steven Cox’s minimally-arranged texture collages and canvases treated with all-over brushless painting techniques. In the way that a photographer notices and emphasizes parts of the world around them, Cox’s canvases seem to organize and collect found textures, material histories, literary and musical references from their immediate surroundings, rather than espousing a pre-composed message.

Nonetheless, Cox is a painter, and history is always in frame. Calling back to his stricter forebears with minimalist frameworks like hard-edged stripes and monochromes, the canvases capture a melée of motifs like Pollockian drips, and impressions of burlap and polyester. Poems and his studio soundtrack float into his titles, like poet Robert Burns’ “My Heart’s In The Highlands,” Billy Joel’s “Somewhere Along the Line,” and the Beastie Boys’ “Hot Sauce.”

It’s tempting to think of his work as untethered from the history of painting, because if you translate the work to a painting language, you get something more like “postmodernist tendencies in a minimalist tradition in a formalist style.” It’s technically accurate, but attaching the work to a series of “isms” seems antipodal to what Cox is doing. In his titles, you’ll find references to his Scottish heritage - the national poet Robert Burns or the fibre Hessian Jute - but Cox is not a nationalist. Song titles are everywhere, but he’s sampling. Probably the most apropos reference is his 2014 exhibition title, the Smashing Pumpkins’ “An Ode to No One.”

His latest series comes from a four-month stay at the Gast Atelier Leo XIII artist residency in Tilburg, Netherlands. The texture of aging roadside electricity boxes became the inspiration for a new brushless painting process consisting of transferring thick layers of oil paint from large sheets of plastic to the surface of the canvas. The resulting “transfer paintings” - brightly colored, icing-like build-ups of oil paint - recall chipping paint jobs and cragged rock faces. Titles like “*Never Any End To Paris*” and “*Yellow Pages*” create a nebulous sense of place and timelessness.

His unfettered sensibility aligns him with a contingent of peers, and you can locate some of them through Hunted Projects, the moniker Cox uses for a series of curatorial projects and interviews; the artists have a preference for paint that looks permanently wet, raw concrete, and photosynthetic spray paint gradients, as though finding the sublime in the grittiest places.

Whitney Kimball: When I first met you, I think you’d mentioned that you do a lot of your communicating with other writers and artists on the web, and you do indeed collaborate with people from all over the world. If you were to draw spheres of influence, for instance, New York, Facebook, your studio, Edinburgh, would one encircle the rest?

Steven Cox: I wouldn’t say there is one specific sphere of influence that directly informs my work, though the making of conversation and revisiting of past conversations is always happening. By being based in Edinburgh, many of these interviews and conversations with others must happen online. It is convenient, but also highlights that there is no such thing as a correct location where conversations must occur or evolve.

WK: What has come out of your conversations with other artists through Hunted Projects? Have any new theories or common influences shaped the way you think about your own work?

SC: I have always aimed at keeping my practice as far removed from Hunted Projects as possible. From the start of Hunted Projects I have retained the position of curator/interviewer and solely wished to evolve a platform where the focus is on the other artists involved. The artists I have worked with so far are very individual and their practices are in general very contrastable to my own. I find the multiple approaches towards painting very fascinating; each artist has a different way they work. It wouldn’t be fair to say that these artist don’t inspire me, all of them do in different ways. The most powerful part is that they all in one way or another keep me motivated to push my own boundaries.

WK: Why should artists interview artists?

SC: I think artists can relate to other artists practices, as well as connect through a mutual understanding of the difficult or memorable moments within each other’s studio. It is always exciting to hear and share such stories, further more it is not a struggle to find points of discussion and the process itself is rather relaxed and refrains from becoming uncomfortably formal. The process itself can also be really beneficial and rewarding for both involved.

WK: Switching gears to talk about the “transfer paintings”– there’s a Whistler and Clyfford Still-like beauty in the subtlety of these surfaces, but a contrasting almost garbagey degradation to the surfaces

and influences of cheap materials. Were you thinking about that high/low contrast at all?

SC: The work of Clyfford Still has more recently than ever been of interest to me. On a formal level his colour palette is fascinating, and I find that his radically wild compositions that feature jagged edges indirectly hint at the torn poster décollages of the Nouveaux Realists. I found that when I was traveling around Netherlands I became particularly interested in weathered surfaces more than ever, and many of the photographs I took were of electricity boxes that featured remnants of old glue and paint. The boxes were somewhat painterly; it made me think about ideas surrounding the conflict between man and nature, erosion/weathering, transferral of material and the illusion of negative space. In relation to the idea of myself using cheap materials, I began working on disposable materials such as cardboard and paper. Over time, I incorporated such materials into the paintings by applying cut out shapes to the canvas surface. Gradually, the layers of paint deform the shapes, making them merge into the painting itself.

WK: Did physically being in Tilburg affect what went onto your canvasses?

SC: I think one of the main elements was through feeling present within an exciting location in Europe. Belgium is to the south and Amsterdam in the north. I could go somewhere new and exciting within only a few hours on a train, so the idea of travel and research was always at the front of my mind. I would also cycle every day and would take a lot of photographs documenting my days there. I embraced an exciting new lifestyle that resulted in a new perspective on the world around me. The sunshine and higher temperature really made a psychological shift within, and I feel that this is present in the paintings that I began making because vibrant colour was never truly as dominant as it is now.

WK: How did that shift what you were thinking about, consuming, listening to, reading?

SC: I guess it was the excitement of exploring a new city and seeing ‘new’ sights that I had not set eyes upon before. I have been living in Edinburgh for 5 years so far, so it is tricky to find something that has not been ‘seen’ already. Tilburg was like a playground, I was living in a new city where the weather was fantastic and there were no reasons stopping me from exploring and traveling around as much as possible. This new found sense of enlightenment was inspiring and woke up some thoughts, ideas and processes that perhaps laid dormant for a while. The act of living in a new city constantly makes you view things from an alternative perspective.

WK: During this residency, you’ve started to work with a new technique of transferring paint indirectly to the canvas in layers, via a plastic sheet, rather than applying it by hand. You’re very selective with application techniques– you’ll use sprays, drips, or imprints to achieve a variety of textures within one canvas– and it appears that this technique took a bit of time to develop the desired effect. Are there certain painterly languages that are most important to your toolbox?

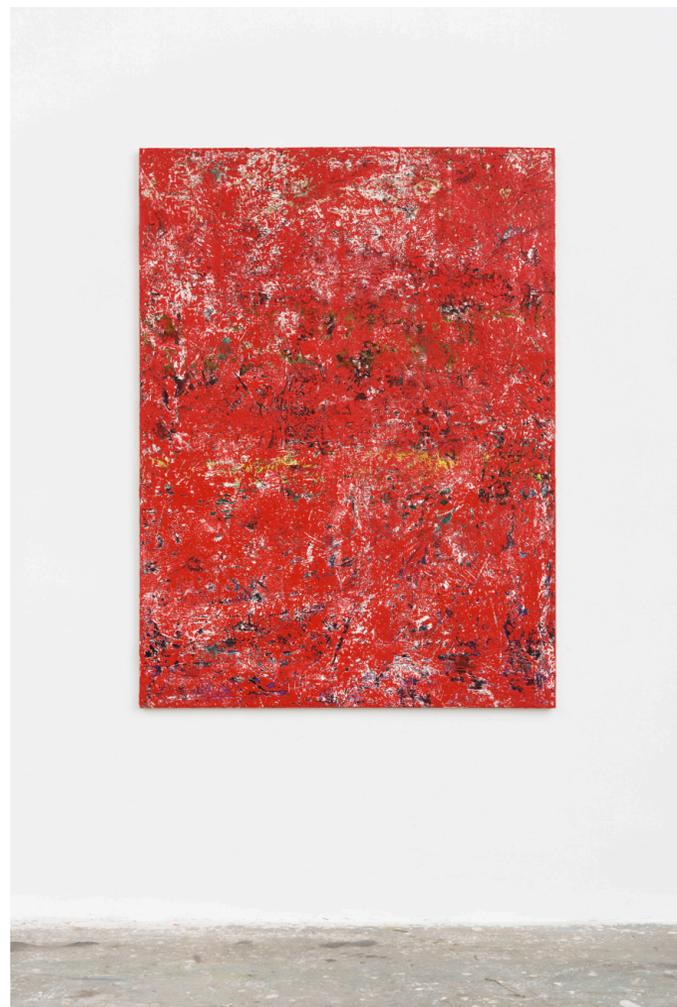
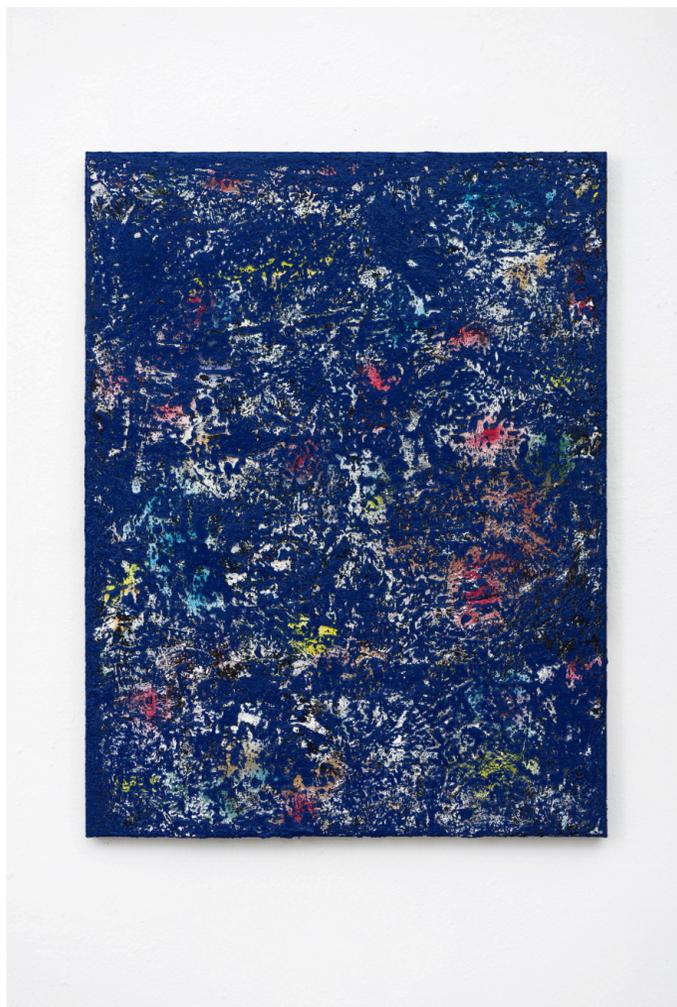
SC: Painterly language is something that I define as being the various methods of paint application; for instance, one language could be defined as a painterly smear, a gestural brush mark or the manipulation of spray paint in one way or another. Each mark is part of painterly language and new processes are always being discovered or developed. Currently this *transferal* process is playing a dominant role in my studio, though it has also been subtly present in much of my past works via a similar process.

WK: Is there a story behind “Black River”?

SC: Black River is a common name for streams and rivers around the world, but this title has more of a personal relationship to me. Whilst being based in Tilburg, I would regularly cycle along the canals in the evenings when the canal itself was black as night. On one particular night I also discovered an area along the canal where there was a lot of graffiti and torn posters, I guess *Black River* is pretty biographical.

WK: Can you tell me what the title “Never Any End to Paris” refers to?

SC: “Never Any End to Paris” is the 20th and final chapter of *A Moveable Feast* by Ernest Hemingway. It is also the title of the book by Enrique Vila-Matas, but I am not referring to Enrique Vila-Matas. The final chapter itself discusses Hemingway’s time skiing in Schruns (Vorarlberg, Austria). The chapter highlights the dangers of skiing, his times drinking wine with friends and the sad deaths that occurred that consequently changed the mood of skiing in Schruns. At the end of his trip, Hemingway returns to Paris to be with his love. The final paragraph features the fantastic line, “Paris was always worth it, and you received return for whatever you brought to it.”







LEO XIII / gastatelier is een atelier gelegen in een voormalig schoolgebouw uit 1908 aan de Leo XIII straat 90 in Tilburg. Het is een monumentale, lichte ruimte ter grootte van twee klaslokalen. In het gebouw bevinden zich woningen, ateliers en bedrijfsruimtes voor kunstenaars/vormgevers. Het atelier bevindt zich op korte afstand van De Pont en het Textielmuseum, beiden centra voor hedendaagse kunst en onderzoek.

Kunstenaars en/of vormgevers kunnen hier als artists- in- residence werken en wonen binnen een periode van drie maanden. Juist die geconcentreerde periode, de fysieke kwaliteit van de werkplek en de culturele omgeving vormen de uitdaging om een onderzoekstraject of project aan te gaan, hetgeen kan leiden tot verdieping of verbreding van de eigen ontwikkeling.

De werkperiode wordt afgesloten met een publieke presentatie van een weekend, waarin de kunstenaar/vormgever laat zien waartoe zijn verblijf geleid heeft. Men krijgt de volledige vrijheid om de inhoud daarvan vorm te geven.

Het gastatelier wordt beheerd door een stichting waarvan de leden wonen en werken in hetzelfde gebouw. De stichting heeft een uitgebreid stedelijk en landelijk netwerk en verwerft de subsidies die het verblijf in het gastatelier mogelijk maken.

Stichting Gastatelier Leo XIII richt zich op professionele kunstenaars met een relatief jonge kunstenaarspraktijk. Zij wordt daarin bijgestaan door een Raad van Advies, die in samenwerking met een werkgroep van de stichting het beleid toetst aan de subsidievoorwaarden en netwerken aanboort om verbindingen met de stad aan te gaan

Steven Cox/werkperiode: mei t/m augustus 2015

tekst: Whitney Kimball

fotografie: Peter Cox

ontwerp: Thomas Swinkels

GASTATELIER LEO XIII / LEO XIII STRAAT 90h / 5046 KK TILBURG

Contact: leo-xiii@hotmail.com

www.gastatelierleo13.nl

Deze publicatie werd mede mogelijk gemaakt door de Provincie Noord-Brabant en de gemeente Tilburg.