

Nicholas Szymanski
Notes to Diane

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Essay by Alex Bacon

Asphodel

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Something I observe in my work is that it is all between shores; it exists in an endless state of becoming and has a kind of self-evident authority. I like to describe it as purposelessness; there is an absence of necessity in the work.

The most understated work can resonate in an incredibly commanding manner. It is challenging, being there with this thing and asking myself...what is enough?

The paintings are meditations on the passage of time and process, a celebration of suchness.

Nicholas Szymanski
2017

Nicholas Szymanski paints monochrome paintings. In and of itself this is no longer necessarily shocking or "avant-garde." For a while now, monochrome painting has been an established artistic genre.¹ Of course, compared to certain others—representational painting based on the models of perspective and illusionism, for example—it is youthful, and because of that still relatively challenging for mainstream aesthetic taste.

Historians tend to agree that its many variants have existed since about 1915, the date of Malevich's epochal black square, with an antecedent history dating back several decades prior. The idea was first broached in the nascent moments of early modernism, often in a humorous context.² From the vantage point of the present, the most influential era of monochrome painting was that of the 1950s and 1960s, and the work of artists like Yves Klein, Robert Rauschenberg, and Ad Reinhardt. At this time much of the diversity of the genre's formal and interpretive possibilities were established. These range from an emphasis on the optical sensations that arise from "pure" color, to a declaration of the fact of painting, a physical object wherein everything but the basic material elements are expunged. Of course, most monochrome painters, then and now, operate somewhere amidst this spectrum.³

It is not necessary to go into great depth about the many different ways to paint a monochrome, which are after all, as numerous as there are monochrome painters. In this sense Nicholas Szymanski's path is well trod, and yet one which always has the potential to lead to new discoveries. Within an artist's career the monochrome often emerges as a way to move through an impasse or, to paraphrase Marcia Hafif, to "begin again."⁴ Whether we are discussing Kasimir Malevich or Brice Marden, rarely is a monochrome painting an artist's first work, but often they emerge at a crucial early stage.⁵ It is a means of paring things away and laying out the terms of painting such that it is possible to isolate and consider them, both independently and against one another. This is where Nicholas Szymanski finds himself.

In a pluralist era where anything is possible it can be difficult to find a direction as a young artist. Far from a popular choice among artists of his generation, Szymanski was drawn to the monochrome, unironically, as a way to consider his options, to see what might be yet possible in our glutted art world. If the initial impulse was in some sense reductivist, what Szymanski has arrived at is anything but.

Szymanski quickly moved away from the idea of the monochrome as an object with as few traditional painterly qualities as possible. Instead, he is attempting to cultivate a kind of painting that is expansive and concrete, drawing on the whole history of the medium in the process. He has discovered that something as deceptively simple as a single color covering a canvas introduces a range of complicating effects.

For example, if one moves outside of declarative color, as in Rodchenko's triptych of the primary colors, or else color descriptive of a particular paint and/or process, as in Marcia Hafif's many series involving this or that pigment, or mode of application, then the realm of color and its associations—from the natural, to the industrial, to the biological, and beyond—opens up infinitely. This is what Marden recognized in his first series of monochromes wherein he isolated grey as the sole color, realizing that within a single hue there were innumerable possibilities, each evoking something distinct. This led him to understand each of these grey paintings as having a unique color and feeling associated with something else—for example a place (*Nebraska*), a celebrity (*Dylan*), or a friend (*4:1 [For David Novros]*).

Something similar has captivated Szymanski. In the process of painting he has found that a monochrome gives him just enough structure to plumb these diverse possibilities. Simply put: Szymanski is using the monochrome as a vehicle to explore color, and more specifically its abstract, associative qual-

ities. What this means changes from work to work and is dictated by what happens while Szymanski is painting, rather than what is decided on beforehand. For example, in one work Szymanski might push a color in a certain direction based on how a given shade of it feels to him. While in another he might end up changing the color entirely part way through in order to follow a different hunch. The kinds of sensations colors give rise to—and in Szymanski’s work we encounter a full sweep from the uplifting to the dour, and everything in-between—are, because of their necessarily abstract nature, hard to describe with words and can thus be aligned with the kinds of feelings music gives rise to.

In a way that suggests musical analogies, we recognize that when Szymanski varies the execution and surface effects of his paintings—for example, either allowing or effacing visible brush strokes, layering color, or presenting color unadulterated, choosing a matte or glossy finish, and so on—he is subtly altering the effects of his otherwise unrelenting focus on monochromy. It seems that Szymanski, with his diverse palette, is interested in the full span of sensation, rather than in one side or the other of human experience, either the positive or the negative.

Though Szymanski’s paintings and the sensations they convey are arrived at through this process, they are, to some degree, a way of working out experiences and feelings. This is true as much for the viewer as the artist: process-based artworks put the viewer in the position of the artist. To behold a painting is to walk through the artist’s process. Given that they are isolated, and delivered abstractly—rather than tethered to a particular experience, person, place or event in the world (figurative, allegorical, or otherwise)—Szymanski’s paintings serve as a framework that allow us to consider emotions intellectually. The primary historical shift that has occurred between Marcia Hafif’s "beginning again" in the 1970s and Szymanski today is the advent, and subsequent

hyper-acceleration, of digital technology and its effects on perception and communication, both in the art world and the public sphere. Szymanski does not update the monochrome by merely introducing a digital version. Rather he embraces monochromy precisely because it resists the incursions of this new regime: by encouraging slow, careful looking, which, in turn, opens up the painting, inviting its beholder into its coloristic world, replete with sensation, though muted compared to what we expect from more conventional painting, let alone the spectacles of the culture industry.

Ironically, the monochrome is not unlike many of our own digital devices. It is emphatically an object, present in our space, and contains a screen, a two-dimensional plane, that invites us into an abstract other space with indeterminate limits. Szymanski shows that, as it has in the past, the monochrome is the perfect, eminently complex medium for stripping away unnecessary elements so that we can phenomenologically and sociologically consider the terms of vision of a certain time and place. This is to say, Szymanski’s painting lays bare the ways in which we see and makes us conscious of how we interpret what we see.

Alex Bacon

New York

October 2018

¹ Benjamin Buchloh questioned whether the possibility of the monochrome being an avant-garde gesture was not already eclipsed by the 1950s in his seminal article, "The Primary Colors for the Second Time: A Paradigm Repetition of the Neo-Avant-Garde," *October* 37 (Summer 1986): 41-52. The further question, by extension, is whether by the mid-20th-Century any gesture could be considered avant-garde, hence the neologism "neo-avant-garde" for the art of that era. This term derives from Peter Burger’s influential *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

² I am referring here to Alphonse Allais’s cartoons of the 1880s which suggested white, black, red, and blue, etc. monochrome paintings purportedly representing subjects like *First Communion of Anemic Young Girls in the Snow* and *Apoplectic Cardinals Harvesting Tomatoes by the Red Sea*. For more on the pre-history of the monochrome, see Denys Riout’s thorough, *La peinture monochrome: histoire et archéologie d’un genre* (Paris: Gallimard, 2006) and also Barbara Rose, ed. *Monochromes: From Malevich to the Present* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006).

³ I say this in part because early, pre-World-War-II monochromes—by artists like Malevich, Rodchenko, Miro, etc.—tended to be exceptional rather than defining aspects of the artist’s overall production. A notable exception to this was the Unist painting of Polish artist Władysław Strzemiński, though his work was not readily available to a broader audience at the time of its making, the 1920s and ’30s.

⁴ See Hafif’s seminal, "Beginning Again" *Artforum* (September 1978).

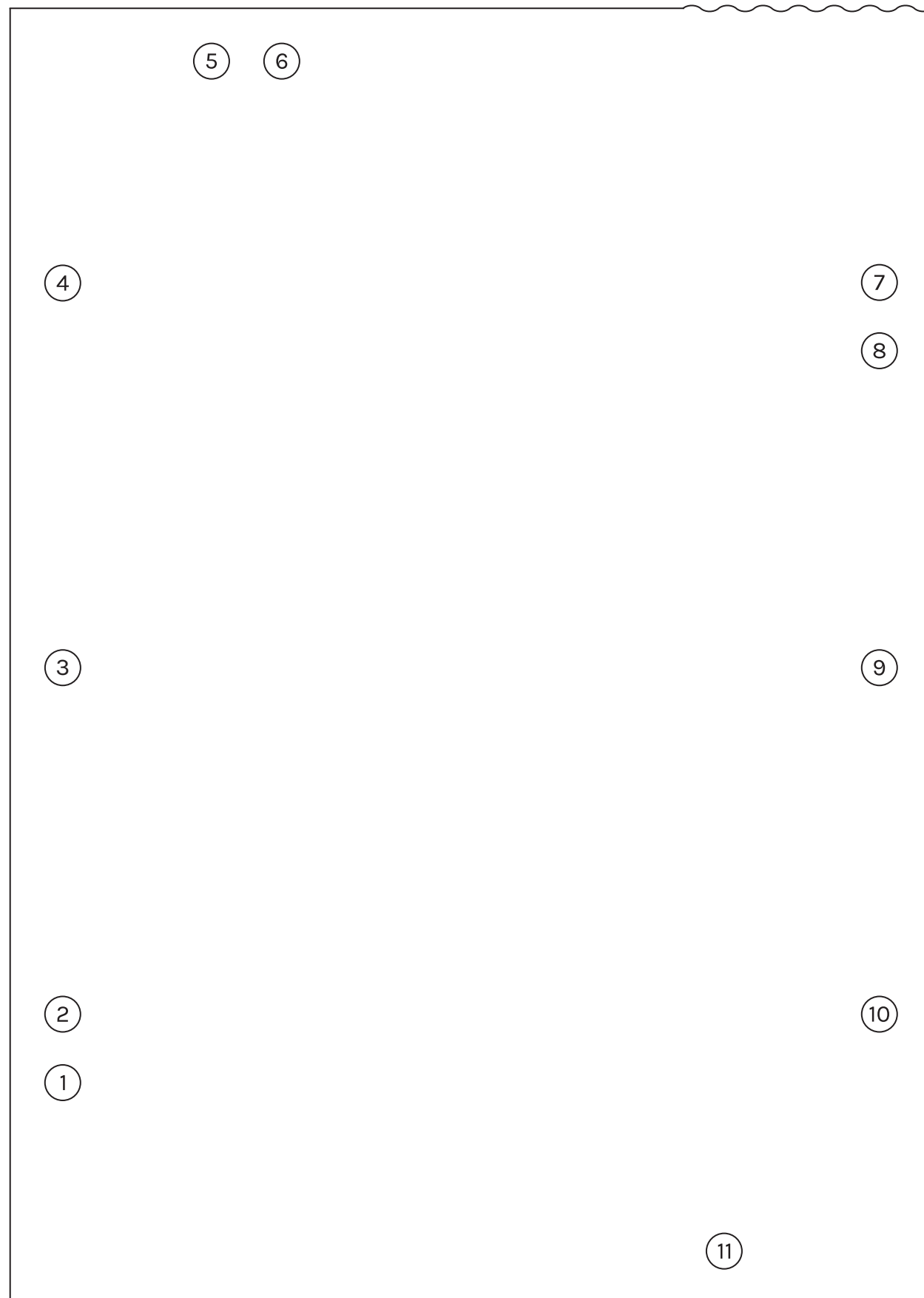
⁵ This is especially true of conceptually-inclined artists of the 1960s, such as Michael Asher, Sol LeWitt, Joseph Kosuth, and Mel Ramsden of Art & Language, all of whom began their careers in the mid-1960s painting variations of monochrome paintings before giving that up to make so-called "dematerialized" works in non-traditional media, like text. For more on this, see Thierry de Duve, "The Monochrome and the Blank Canvas," *Kant after Duchamp* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996). On the other hand, an important exception to this "rule" would be Ad Reinhardt, who approached the monochrome only in the final phase of his career, as the culmination of everything he had explored before.

Nicholas Szymanski (b. 1989) lives and works in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Recent one-person exhibitions include *Nicholas Szymanski at Alcove* (Amsterdam) and *Impressions* at 337 Project Space (Grand Rapids). This is his first exhibition with the gallery and his first one-person exhibition in New York City. Szymanski earned his BA from the Kendall College of Art and Design.

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Alex Bacon is an art historian based in New York City who writes criticism and organizes exhibitions of both contemporary and historical art. Among his publications, Bacon is co-editor, with Hal Foster, of a collection of essays on Richard Hamilton (MIT Press, 2010), as well as the author of texts in various exhibition catalogs and edited volumes on artists such as Francis Alys, Simon Hantaï, Josiah McElheny, Ad Reinhardt, Niele Toroni, and Stanley Whitney.

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|--|--|
| <p>1 <i>Practice like anything else</i>
2017–8
acrylic on muslin over panel
16 x 12 in (40.5 x 30 cm)</p> <p>2 <i>The date of Seneca's birth is unknown</i>
2018
oil, acrylic on canvas over panel
16 x 12 in (40.5 x 30 cm)</p> <p>3 <i>Serious (not too serious)</i>
2018
oil, acrylic on canvas over panel
11 x 14 in (40.5 x 30.5 cm)</p> <p>4 <i>Gray square</i>
2018
acrylic on muslin over panel
12 x 12 in (30.5 x 30.5 cm)</p> <p>5 <i>Raum</i>
2018
oil, acrylic over panel
16 x 12 in (40.5 x 30 cm)</p> <p>6 <i>Care itself is permeated with nullity
through and through</i>
2018
acrylic, mica on canvas over panel
20 x 16 in (51 x 40.5 cm)</p> <p>7 <i>Light sleeper</i>
2018
oil, acrylic over panel
16 x 12 in (40.5 x 30 cm)</p> | <p>8 <i>Colour picture</i>
2018
acrylic, mica on canvas over panel
16 x 12 in (40.5 x 30 cm)</p> <p>9 <i>Dead in a boat</i>
2013–2018
acrylic, mica on canvas over panel
10 x 8 in (25.5 X 20.5 cm)</p> <p>10 <i>Quixotic fantasy</i>
2018
oil on linen over panel
18 x 18 in (45.5 x 45.5 cm)</p> <p>11 <i>Buttered beauty</i>
2018
acrylic on found fabric over panel
8 x 10 in (20.5 x 25.5 cm)</p> |
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