

In Every Return a New History Asks to Be Written

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Oil painting is an old technology. A nearly primitive one, one could argue, yet a technology nonetheless—the word technology comes from *techne*, Greek for art, skill, craft, or a cunning use of the hand.¹ In order to produce an oil painting, powdered mineral pigments must be suspended in linseed, safflower, or another vegetable oil to make paint, which is then thinned with pine resin-derived turpentine or mineral spirits. This tincture is applied, usually with animal bristle brushes, onto woven cotton or linen canvas stretched over a wood frame, or some other flat surface, that has been first smoothed with a rabbit-skin glue or a chalk and gypsum-based gesso. At times, I can scarcely believe this ancient craft, with its veritably archaic materials and techniques, continues to exist in our age of silicon circuit boards.

Of course, many people's nimble fingers are assembling those iPads, somewhere halfway around the world, so we can use our "paint" software without getting our hands dirty. And we all know old things aren't instantly supplanted by the new. There will still be pencils and paper in the future, in part because they do things touch screens can't. Similarly, painting may be one of the oldest methods still being used today to make an image, but it has stuck around because it works like no other medium does, and it represents things in ways no other medium can. Part of its longevity as a form of representation is that a history of painting is also always a history in painting. That is to say, paintings mark the passing of time in their very process. Each brush stroke in a painting chronicles a past gesture, and those daubs of colored pigment suspended in oil only gradually accumulate on their support (oil paint dries slowly, over weeks). The accretive procedures of painting distinguish it from other media, for example, drawing, in which a limited condition of representation is reached when graphite or ink, or whatever mark-making material is being used, can eventually cover an entire surface. Painting, on the other hand, can be applied in layers endlessly; every painting is an encrusted surface regardless of whether its facture is evident. Try to wipe or scrape oil paint away, and visual traces will remain on the canvas—the oils having soaked into the support—although these marks can be skillfully concealed with more paint.

1. *Techne* should, however, be distinguished from the related Greek word for art, *poiesis*, which is often translated as "making" and is the root of the English word "poetry."

Kamrooz Aram's recent series of oil paintings is exhibited under the title *Palimpsest: Unstable Paintings for Anxious Interiors*. Every one of the works in the *Palimpsest* series uses the layering of pigments to thematize the accumulative, time-based nature of painting, and the visual tension that arises when what is covered over struggles to retain visibility. His palette is predominately white and black and its admixtures of taupe and ash-gray, grays treated the way that Cy Twombly did gray—as a messy blend in which the component blacks and whites are still smeamily visible. Also, like Twombly, Aram's departures from black and white act like explosive intrusions on the surface of the works, colors that call to mind contradictory things simultaneously: bodily emanations, bold upholstery, or the garish radiance of a neon sign. In Aram's paintings color, and the forms it takes, cue associations both cultural and historical; as we will see, color is thus a prime signal for the stakes of the visual contests of legibility and effacement going on in each work.

Aram's paintings deploy a recurring floral motif, embedded in a repeated lozenge or rectilinear shape. The floral design is sometimes explicit but just as often veiled; at times parts of the pattern are disguised by covered-over areas of paint that resemble the sections of walls in which graffiti has been hurriedly effaced with solid swipes of monochromatic paint.² In some works, simple geometric shapes such as circles, triangles, or other polygons in red, black, or shades of white have been overlaid, as though the florid foundation layer had been attacked by a competing growth. A three by four grid of twelve floral arrangements forms the stratum of some paintings, in others as few as five groupings of blooms are present, but in all works the flower motif is evident, if only in a vestigial manner.

As Aram discusses in an interview published in this volume, his process in making these works is straightforward, though painstaking:

Each of these paintings begins with the same floral form taken from a carpet that I photographed in a store in New York City. I repeat this form in a grid-like manner across the entire canvas. I then destroy

2. See Aram's photo essay at the end of the book documenting graffiti cleanup on city streets.

it with solvent, wipe it away with rags, and rebuild it again. Sometimes what I am covering up has already been erased. And sometimes the cover-up itself is erased to reveal what was hidden beneath.

The daisy or zinnia-like flowers, stems, and leaves that form the underlying structure to which Aram returns are nearly stylized in their simplicity, their stamens and petals turned frontally toward the viewer in almost diagrammatic fashion. In many instances, the flowers re-emerge from their attempted erasure traced in bright, almost lurid reds and pinks, and the vegetal portions of the plants are often rendered in electric shades of green that approach kelly or chartreuse, which are then outlined in black. At times Aram drops the green and only black remains, lending those works a funereal cast, which seems an almost inappropriate association given the cheery vibrancy of the punctuating red petals that embellish those works' surfaces.

Several kinds of repetition are at play in these paintings, each signaling a temporality that Aram is attempting to excavate. First, the base floral motif, itself composed of several similar flowers grouped together, repeats within each work as a pattern. In taking a snapshot (a technology of infinite repeatability, as opposed to the singularity of painting), Aram isolated a single floral motif from the more complex composition of the carpet, and then expanded this section into a lattice-like pattern he traced onto the primed canvas in wax pencil or oil pastel using a projector. Through this process, one form of repetition (the pattern of the carpet) is translated through a technology that enables the repetition of imagery (the photograph) into a grid of repeatedly hand-traced elements. Second, the pattern—after being effaced—returns layer by layer as an attempted replication of the original tracing, a repainting of its partial, shadowy traces. Finally, the entire procedure is repeated within the serial logic of the group. In this chain of repetitions, crucial concepts are being introduced as quickly as they are being covered over in paint or erased with solvents. It is important to consider that the initial layer of each work is derived from an image of a carpet. The floral pattern, mediated as it is by the instrument of photography, originates in what is traditionally conceived of as a "decorative," not a "fine" arts object—a commercially-available weaving in which the repetition of the warp and weft of the fibers forms its very structure. The paintings thus implicitly emulate the scale and rectangular form of the original rug (Aram works in large 84 × 72 or 66 inch formats, as well as a squatter 60 × 54 inch dimension), just as they exceed the constraints of the craft form by using the freedom of the medium of paint to continually build up new surfaces and efface the old.

It is painting's ability to adapt to new layers that elucidates the importance of Aram's title for his series. The word *palimpsest* comes from a Latinized Greek term that means "scratched or scraped again." Romans used wax-coated tablets, referred to as palimpsests in passing by Cicero, to write upon, tablets that could be scraped and smoothed for reuse. In modern times the term palimpsest came to be associated with the Medieval practice of reusing parchment (paper made from animal hides), which was sometimes scraped but more often washed with milk and oat bran to be used again. In this process faint residual underwritings, presumed erased, would often return to visibility over time, giving the document spectral traces beneath the new text.

The multilayered, interwoven composition of a palimpsest cannot disguise the self-contradictory nature of its contents. In such a work, one thing was literally wiped away to clear space for another, yet that which was presumed eliminated refused to disappear. A palimpsest is thus a record of a botched recycling effort; an uneasy truce between a text that attempted to supplant a previous formulation, and the original ink that obstinately remains.

One could say that every painting shares some metaphorical characteristics with a palimpsest—any mark covered over in a painting perseveres in some stubborn, yet nearly concealed manner. And as in a palimpsest, the autonomy of any individual mark in a painting is subsumed by the creation of a whole that is composed only later, in time. Every mark is partial and no mark denotes alone, all are enlisted in the production of a future gestalt image.

Yet in a palimpsest, a special kind of duality is set up between primary and secondary material and process. Likewise, in the case of Aram's paintings, a fight between the semiotic content of the layers is taking place, one that links his works to the specific tradition of palimpsest production. For if a palimpsest is a troubled treaty between two temporalities, those temporalities have historically represented competing cultures and ideologies. For example, many palimpsests were created by Christian scribes, who expunged pagan or heretical tracts to reuse existing folios. To give perhaps the most famous example of the violent nature of this reprocessing, consider the Archimedes Palimpsest, a parchment of a previously unknown work—the only extant copy, it turns out—by the 3rd century BC mathematician that was wiped, refolded, and rebound as quartos in the 13th century AD for a Christian liturgical text.

In Aram's work, the underlying floral pattern that he repeatedly effaces has a distinct genealogy: it is adapted from a Persian carpet that was displayed for sale in Manhattan. Persian carpets, traditionally woven in Iran, have historically employed designs featuring flowers, palmettes, vine networks, clouds, or other non-figurative geometric patterns in obedience to the Islamic tradition of aniconism, which proscribes the representation of sentient beings in images (though not all Persian carpets shun representational iconography). These repeating flowers are therefore quite fraught objects, derived from a centuries-old craft tradition of Persian carpet weaving, which Aram re-presents only to cover it over using the slightly more recent craft tradition of oil painting, a tradition that is strongly associated with European art. The "anxious interiors" of the series' subtitle can be interpreted as involving, at some core level, the contamination of painting (designating itself an art form) by weaving as craft, with all the cultural associations the taint of craft or decorative arts as opposed to fine art carries in this case.

The *Palimpsest* series brings to mind other experiments in variation undertaken by abstractionists throughout the 20th century. The replacement of one geometry—that of the carpet design—with another—the red, white, and black geometric forms seen floating in many of Aram's paintings—is important to note. It appears that the floral substructure, which Aram reinforces just as frequently as he obliterates it, is vying with other non-figurative representational schemes such as those employed in early 20th century Constructivist and Suprematist paintings. The nearly pedagogical logic of serial variation that was the endgame of those traditions, in which a discrete set of variables was continually reworked in order to educate viewers in subtle techniques of visual comparison and assessment, is thus another return in Aram's work. This return refigures painting as an education in the fundamentals of form, while simultaneously flagging the culturally determined nature of the base units (flowers and vines, squares and grids, and so on) in which forms of representation are traditionally constituted. Aram's erasures push the theme of repetition and return beyond the recursive logic of pattern (which frequently characterizes craft) and the overdetermining nature of the underlying grid (the limit condition for many early 20th century abstract art practices). In so doing, his work overlays traditions of geometric abstraction to create a radically polymorphic hybridity between visual forms previously interpreted as dissimilar or even antithetical.