TALIA LEVITT WITH AMANDA BROWN
The Dual Life Of Painting: On And Off Screen

TL: Amanda, did you see any art during quarantine? Did you go to any online shows or in-person shows, somehow?

AB: I saw your show in person! But before seeing your show, I hadn't seen any artwork outside of my own in my own studio since…

TL: Since Kyle Staver's opening?

AB: Yes! Since Kyle Staver's opening in March. I've seen a lot of online exhibitions and viewing rooms. I work for Hunter College and part of my realm of responsibilities is to put together an exhibition newsletter for students, and so I was definitely perusing the viewing rooms quite a bit. Many of which offered a more intimate look at the artist and their practice. I'm sure the content is curated hand-in-hand with the gallery. But the artist now has the opportunity to suggest things like sketchbooks or source material.

TL: Like this conversation.

AB: Totally. Going meta, huh?

TL: Yeah.

That very much reminds me of what we were talking about yesterday in preparation for this conversation, in terms of a certain kind of intimacy of virtual studio visits.

AB: Totally, yeah.

TL: Because, in both instances, the artist has the power- the power as the curator in terms of what kind of information they're going to offer up. I had a studio visit during quarantine on my phone, which I held to each of the different paintings and spoke about them. I was able to put my lense over the surface of the canvas or the sides of the canvas, or wherever I felt like I wanted him to see, or where I had something interesting or specific to say. All the little details that I hide for the viewer to find, depending on how long they spend with an image, I was able to give him that right off the bat.

AB: Do you feel like, in an in-person studio visit, you don't normally have the opportunity to guide your guest through the work? Do you feel like it depends more on that visitor and what they're interested in looking at?

TL: Every studio visit is so different. I'm sure that you've experienced the same thing. Each visitor has a different take, and is interested in varied aspects of the project, so typically, though we (the artists) can help steer the conversation, the dynamic is different.

AB: Or some people are more interested in looking close-up at the material, and other people have more intellectual or pragmatic questions.

TL: Totally, yes.

AB: So during this digital studio visit, you were able to show them how to look at the work a little bit like an artist regardless of whether or not that's now they would normally approach the work on their own?

TL: Yeah! And it was really fun. It was one of the longest studio visits I've ever had. It was over two hours long on the phone. And it was really fruitful for me to be able to curate somebody's viewing experience that way.

AB: During quarantine I was fortunate to have had a studio visit with Hunter East Harlem Gallery as part of their Virtual Studio Visits with Uptown Artists. We had the visit on Zoom, which I also did from my phone. I have an iPhone 5, so the technology is super outdated and I felt like the work couldn't translate. I wasn't able to really offer those moments of guided looking that you're describing. I think in part because of the outdated quality of my phone, and perhaps it's an issue of scale as well.

Your work is very large, but you also have like itty bitty tiny little details, which allows a range in modes of looking.

TL: The way that I like to experience your work isn't big to small or close-to-far. It's an angled way. You know? It's side to side rather than front to back.

AB: Or up and down.

TL: Yeah, or up and down, because of the transparencies and pearlescent pigment. You want to see how light reflects over the surface. The large geometries do not necessitate the same kind of scanning.

AB: Yeah. And during this visit, I kind of felt like the clearest images I was able to offer were images of work that had been photographed and were on my website. These professional images on my website were far better than the streaming image of the new work during the studio visit.

But tying this back in, I guess comes back down to the life of the painting on screen and off screen, and how you're not getting the same experience. Instead you're getting two different, but equally interesting experiences of the same work.

TL: Yes.

AB: Or sometimes not. For example, I've been texting you images of my most recent painting which has an iridescent glaze over one part of it. First I sent an image, and then I sent a video of me tilting my camera so you see the light move side to side, but none of it was really translating.

(Above) Amanda Brown, *Demilune*, 2020, Oil on canvas, 58 x 58 inches.

TL: I mean, any kind of translucent or shimmer is challenging to capture in a still, at least as someone who isn't trained in photography.

AB: Are you using sparkle in your paintings right now?

TL: I am. Yeah, there's sparkles in the paintings for sure. And I use a little bit of puff paint to recreate stickers that shimmer. The frames have pearlescent powder in them. The frames are generally the most difficult part to reproduce because they have a subtle inlaid texture.

(Left) *Detail*, A Piece Of A Painting
(Right) *Detail*, Painting A Wall

AB: Maybe you could talk about the process of actually making, how you're using paint to make those frames, for people who haven't actually seen them in person?

TL: So I'm using a stencil to trace a pattern with pencil. And then I trace over the pattern with a thickened acrylic mixture piped out of a bag. Like icing a cake, I cut the corner off the bag, and use it as a drawing tool. Because the paint is thickened, when it dries, it creates little receptacles, like little sections to drop paint into. Then I use an eyedropper tool—a physical eyedropper tool, not a Photoshop eyedropper tool (laughs)—to place paint mixtures into the different sections. And depending on the material I'm trying to mimic, there's different kinds of additives in the paint. So if I'm trying to create glass tiles, for example, (I used glass tiles in a red and green painting of Rubylith on a cutting mat), I add a thickened gloss medium. But some other frames are made with a pearlescent powder, paint and a matte medium mixture, etc. So that's how it's made.
It has the same physical texture as the material that I'm mimicking in real life. So glass tiles look and feel exactly like glass tiles, or stained glass looks exactly like

stained glass. Or shell inlay looks like shell inlay. But when you take photos of these things, it mostly looks like a flat pattern.

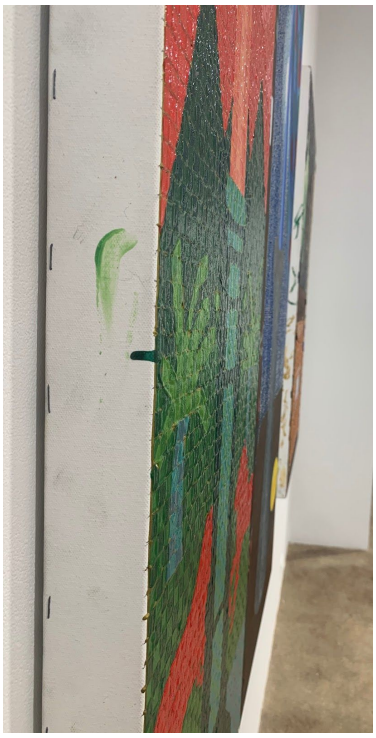
(Left) Inlay frame detail from Dear Painting, I Love You
(Right) The process of creating the inlay work

AB: It's interesting because what the camera isn't getting is the three-dimensional component of it. It flattens the components of the painting that aren't actually flat, right? However, the patterning of the tiles itself is not trying to create anything that mimics three-dimensionality—patterns tend to flatten anyway. For example, in your painting *Dear Painting I Love You*, you have the still life of fruit towards the bottom, which you've worked to render so that it creates the illusion of three-dimensionality, meanwhile it's a flat image. And that, on a screen or in a photograph, reads as creating that illusion of having depth. But then the actual 3D, textured components, the raised parts of the tiling, become the flattest in reproduction. So it's kind of this inverse.

TL: Totally.

AB: Another one of your paintings has little pieces of painters tape that you've cast out of paint, right? And then put them on the surface of your painting. So it's still paint, but it's trying to become another object. And that also kind of flattens in photograph but it's like these little secrets that you can only see in real life.

TL: Totally. Yeah, the staples for example, around the paintings aren't typically represented in the photographs. To be clear, I had painted faux staples around the edges of the canvas so as to trick viewers into thinking that I stretched these works incorrectly.



(Left) Casted tape detail from Painting A Wall
(Right) Painted staples on the side of Separate, Together

TL: I was just thinking of Anna Valdez's work, when you were talking about that. I just feel like her paintings reproduce so well. You see them on a screen and they're exactly what you would expect them to be in real life. Of course you can't precisely see what her brushstrokes look like on a screen. But it's just so satisfying, in a way, to go to see them and to have the experience in front of them, knowing that they totally live up to what you thought they would be.

AB: Have you seen them in person?

TL: Yeah, I have seen them in person.

AB: And they're just as good in real life.

TL: Yeah. I think we've both had experiences where the work is so different, not necessarily for better or worse, it's just a different experience. And I think that sort of speaks to what Instagram or the digital image is good at capturing, which is pattern and…

AB: A certain kind of flatness.

TL: A certain kind of flatness, yeah.

AB: With her use of pattern, I think Anna Valdez is already playing with a kind flatness. Her paintings read both spatially, but then also totally flatten out. And that is kind of the quintessential painting question.

TL: Yeah. I feel like it would have been useful to invite an illustrator into this conversation, because illustrators have been working with the screen as a primary venue for viewing their work for so much longer than us. Because their work has to be reproduced- on screen and in print. That's the whole point.

AB: Well, you have a little bit of an illustration background, right?

TL: I studied it, and worked in editorial. But I don't have the professional experience of a working illustrator.

AB: I don't know anything about the world of illustration, but what translates has a certain graphic quality, right? At least when you're looking at things online or on a screen.

TL: Right. But sometimes not. Sometimes seeing something really tactile on a screen can also be refreshing. It's just that, you don't really know how much you're missing viewing something hand-made that way. The work takes on a different life, becomes a new entity.

AB: Yeah. Often the materiality is difficult to decipher on screen. I've made the mistake of assuming an artwork was a painting when it wasn't.

For example, I'm thinking of the artist Erin O'Keefe. Her work plays this kind of trick on you. They look like paintings of formal abstractions that have to do with flat and deep space, but really they're photographs of painted blocks that she stages in her studio. So they are really three-dimensional objects that she's able

to intentionally flatten out by way of photography. The first time I saw her work was on Instagram, and it wasn't until I saw the work in person at a group show that realized they were photographs.

TL: This is very cool, wow.

AB: Yeah. They're tricky, right?

TL: Yeah. Ah!

AB: In her Instagram bio, it says "Photographer based in NYC." So first and foremost, she's thinking of these as photographs, but I think there's also something so painterly about them.

TL: Yes, definitely. That's her game.

AB: Have you found yourself questioning the surface of your work based on how it will reproduce on a screen?

It's an interesting question that I personally haven't considered really at all. So much of my work has to do with trying to recreate a perceptual experience for the viewer to have while standing in front of the painting. Part of that seems inherently impossible to translate to a screen. But there's definitely a different experience of the work online, it becomes more graphic. The color relationships, or the layering of glazes, or the iridescent paint doesn't translate. Also, I think my paintings are a slow read. They ask a lot from the viewer—to stand and look at for a while.

How do you feel? Your work is so different—you have a lot of different elements going on, not just in how you're using material but in how you're building your compositions and putting images together.

TL: I mean, I've obviously been considering how the work reporoduces recently, hence this conversation. And well, whether or not it's worth cutting corners in the techniques that I'm using to describe- ultimately that's never the decision that I make…

AB: When you say "cutting corners," what do you mean by that?

TL: Perhaps “cutting corners” is too vulgar a term... what I actually mean is economize, and consider if there is a way of creating images, textures, patterns that are not as labor intensive but result similarly. For example, I have considered the fact that, when these frames, for example, are photographed they look like flat pattern. So, I ask myself, should I paint them as flat pattern, or should I go through the inlay process? Ultimately, I have always chosen the path that bears the most interesting results in real life, rather than optimizing the image on screen.

AB: But it’s not like cutting corners would provide a better solution, it’s just that by going through the full labor steps, you’re not guaranteeing that any of that’s going to make it to the screen.

TL: Right, again, that’s why I always decide the subtle relief processes are worth the time. Because the trickery of image, and the mimicry of paint is such a huge part of my content.

AB: It’s supposed to fool people. I remember about a year ago you had posted an image of your living room to Instagram, and everyone thought it was a painting.

TL: There was a painting in the photograph, but it wasn’t—

AB: That is something you would do though, putting a painting in a painting. You have repeated images in a lot of your paintings. So it wouldn’t be outside of your realm.

I think this is really interesting because… You’re painting these images, oftentimes very lifelike, and you’re working with trompe l'oeil, which is both flattened and also very realistic. Trompe l’oeil really tries to mimic the real thing with image. That translates very well on the screen, but you’re taking that trompe l'oeil a step further when you’re adding three-dimensional elements. Instead of painting the piece of tape, you’re remaking the piece of tape as a physical thing, but with paint. In some respects, the screen is a perfect platform for your paintings because it allows the viewer to really be fooled. Then there are these other elements that don’t even make it to the online image.

TL: Right. I totally agree with all. And I love that you picked up on that digital level of trickery- which I will have to think on more. Translation from life to paint and

mediation are what motivates my work, so its interesting that a different kind of translation- from painting to screen, is a challenge that I'm facing in my practice. But of course I'd rather viewers see the work online than not, especially during a pandemic! I'm so grateful for anyone willing to consider my images in any format. In general, more folks look at images on screen than in real life. And that's really important to consider, and I'm trying to.

AB: I guess it's interesting, and I guess this is what we ask with painting all the time, is to be fooled, but not fooled all the way. You want the viewer to catch themselves and say ",oh, wait, this isn't actually that." Like, it's a painting being caught in that gap between the image and believing it's real -- that is the sweet spot.

TL: Yeah.

AB: In asking what photographs, the screen, and digital platforms do to paintings, as well as whether this informs choices during the creative process, maybe we could talk about artists who specifically do allow this influence. How do you think this is impacting painting?

TL: Sure!

AB: How is it impacting what they choose to paint and how they choose to paint it? In talking about your work, the elements that interest you the most are these labored parts of the painting. Perhaps this relates to trompe l'oeil, but I also feel like what I'm seeing in a lot of painting could be as simple as growing up on the internet or how we encounter images now. This idea of collaged or synthesized space, floating elements in screen-like spaces, or a kind of pulling together of images from disparate sources. In a way it feels like a continuation of post-modern '80s painting like David Salle.

For example, you mentioned the painter Yael Ben-Simon. Looking at her work she's painting images of images. In one of her paintings she's painted what looks to be a black and white illustration of an athlete. And that illustration of the athlete is on what appears to be a flat surface, or a piece of cloth that has been draped over a hand--a hand that looks like it is a cutout of a piece of paper, an illustration of a hand. So she's depicting each element with different artistic languages. She's also revealing the flatness of the image. It's like, here's a screen, but I'm taking that screen and making it drape over a cone.

TL: She creates these experiences in a software, like SketchUp software or something, and then paints from them.

AB: Yeah, I feel like this really highlights this idea of collage. What does it do to the image when you paint from compositions that are manipulated or pulled together using that kind of software or Photoshop—

TL: It's so interesting to think about a still-life painter like Catherine Murphy, who actually sets up her entire situation and paints from it, versus somebody like Yael who also sets up an entire environment on a screen.

AB: Right. We were just talking about Kenny Scharf and there's a collage aspect to his work as well. But when he was painting in the '80s, he certainly wasn't using Photoshop. And so there's even a different collage aesthetic in a lot of '80s paintings that's very different than what's happening now.

TL: Totally. Do you feel like you can identify some tangible differences in sort of a blanket way, or do you think that's not really possible?

AB: I keep thinking about the '80s painting show at the Whitney a couple of years ago in 2017. Maybe I'll pull up images of that. The title of the show was *Fast Forward: Painting from the '80s*. Okay, so in looking at these we have—Eric Fischl, David Salle, Kenny Scharf, and Julia Wachtel.

TL: Oh my god. Wow.

AB: If you look at David Salle's painting, he's specifically pulling together these different images that are completely unrelated. The idea is that they are seemingly unrelated, and by putting them side by side, he's removing their traditional symbolic content.

TL: I keep catching myself trying to make a narrative.

AB: Yeah, totally.

TL: So many of these are a publication structure. It's like they're a…

AB: Storyboard?

TL: Yeah, a storyboard. With all of these rectangles.

AB: Right. With the exception of perhaps Kenny Scharf's work, there's still this kind of linear, rectangular, partitioning of the picture, of the painted image. I think the impulse is you want to make a connection or build a narrative, but then you're kind of forced to be like, I give up. I have no idea what these have to do with one another.

TL: Yeah, totally. I wish I had seen this.

AB: With Kenny Scharf, the mode of collage is completely different. Perhaps his is more related to what we're seeing in Yael's painting. But his paintings don't really create the illusion of a space the way Yael's do. There's definitely no trompe l'oeil in his paintings.

TL: Right.

AB: Whereas with some of the painters now who have elements of collage, there is also this element of trompe l'oeil, or an attempt to put the collage in a space that floats between very flat and digital, but also the space of a box that looks like a box. I'm also thinking of Lindsay Burke's work.

TL: Oh, yeah.

AB: In some of her paintings she's layering an image over another, over another over another, but they all have a frame. Like dealing with windows on a screen or layers on Photoshop. I don't know that she's actually doing that with any form of software, but I think it speaks to this experience of how we encounter images now.

TL: Totally. I know which painting you're talking about. I don't know if she has multiple paintings that are like layered windows, layered digital windows...

AB: Or spliced windows? Back to these paintings at the Whitney show, the different collaged elements or images have pretty similar paint handling--the painting vocabulary is pretty similar from one image to the next. If you look at David Salle's paintings, he's painting all of disparate images, but how he's using the paint to describe the image is fairly similar. Even with Kenny Scharf, the hand

is fairly similar, it's fairly consistent. With Lindsay's paintings, and even with yours, part of the collaging is the use of different painting languages.

Or if we look at someone like Dan Fig. In one of his paintings he's painted an image of the mark that screenprinting makes. He's trying to replicate a different mark that is not indicative of painting. It's like the use of trompe l'oeil is focused on the mark, not the image, and as a result the mark becomes the image. This also happens in Lindsay's and Yael's work. So the mark is collaged too.

Last fall I co-curated a group show that you were in called *Faux Real*, and the majority of the artists that were included are dealing with images and image making in a similar way. Like Leeanne Maxey—

TL: She came up in my conversation with Clarity yesterday.

AB: I don't think all of her paintings follow this format, but she's painting felt storyboards that you might have encountered in a classroom as a kid. Again it an image of a flat image. The mark, or in this case the felt story board, becomes an image in and of itself.

There's also Stephanie Temma Hier. Her work is another, different example of collage. She makes these playful, decorative ceramic frames for her paintings, and what's going on with the ceramic frame doesn't necessarily have anything to do with the image in the painting.

TL: Right. Well, nothing conceptually. They're always related visually, I feel like. The palette.

AB: Yeah, but she works on the frames and paintings separately. It's not like from the outset she's planned this frame for this image or vice versa.

I was looking back at your question about making painting choices based on how the work will reproduce. And I think I was a little bit dismissive at first. My work is so much about the phenomenological, perceptual experience of standing in front of painting, because all of my paintings are rooted in an actual experience of looking and being in a particular place. But I work from studies. And I work from photographs. And I'm not painting in plein air. And I think…

TL: I mean, I don't think anyone can totally escape…

AB: Well, you know, there is a certain kind of graphic quality to my work when they are on the screen, and part of arriving at that aspect of the paintings has to do with them being passed through my camera, and then also looking at them on my computer and then making studies from that source image. And I was thinking—

TL: You mean you don't paint on an easel outside a building...

AB: No. But I was thinking that in the space between photograph and study, study and painting--or photograph to computer, and then computer to study--there's room for something to happen. An opportunity to interfere, mediate, translate, to mess around. Like you said, it's true for everybody, or inescapable for most people making paintings right now. And that's what makes it relevant.

TL: Definitely. I agree. Your colors, for example, have a glow to them that references the paintings photographic histories. I think it's- I mean foolish is not the right word, but it would be really strange for someone not to consider that their work will be looked at online, and most likely, in a little square. Because like we said before, most people see our work on screen so not to consider it, I think would be a really strange move, because…

AB: It's so entrenched in the lived experience right now.

TL: Exactly. We have to rely on the digital translation. That's definitely not to say that we need to alter our work accordingly, but just to be aware that the images will be interpreted in varying formats. What can our work lose and gain with each? This is a question I am contending with in real time, especially during the run of my show which is installed in person, and available to view online.

AB: Yeah. It's not to say that the work only needs to meet the purpose of being seen online.

TL: Yeah. Right. Definitely.

AB: Which is why there are two lives to painting, right? One on and one off screen...

TL: Wow, that was smooth. Good one.