

Scott Reeder



Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose ...

Julie Rodrigues Widholm

Pears smoking pipes. Communists being cute. Pandas in protest. Pissed-off popcorn. Hungover flowers. A pencil wishing it were a pen. Introspective ice-cream cones staring in a mirror. These are just some of the characters that populate Scott Reeder's imagination and come to life in his paintings. His faux-naive style and brightly colored compositions complicate the gravitas of his subject—namely, the history of painting and the academic or macho nature of much of that history—with saccharine colors, subjects that could easily be regarded as silly, and an impish sense of humor. His recurring protagonists—a pear, an orange, a banana, a cubist coke-head, a rectangle, an ice cream cone, a drunk flower—are anthropomorphic versions of inanimate objects, used to absurd and poignant effect. In Reeder's more representational paintings, the seemingly innocuous "figures" emit a kind of existential angst at times related to mythic struggles, as in *Sisyphus Ice Cream* or *Narcissus Cop*, yet his drunken flowers and smoking fruits could reflect the more mundane life of a struggling artist as much as it could the lives of three guys who just clocked out of a hard day at a factory. Their tired, dejected selves turn to selected vices for fleeting moments of pleasure.

Reeder is a multifaceted artist who uses humor to challenge the hierarchies, values, and tastes of the contemporary art world. The artist says, "I've found that humor is a great lure in attracting that initial engagement, maybe even sometimes drawing in someone who might not otherwise be interested in art. The recurring subtext or punch line of my work is always about asking a viewer to question preconceptions."¹

In this, his first solo museum exhibition, Reeder tackles painting—historically the most universally revered art form—yet his cheeky approach is pitch perfect in its ability to simultaneously embody the high and low, the dumb and the brilliant, the abstract and the figurative, the naive and the sophisticated, the heroic and the humble, the visual and the conceptual. Part of a younger generation of artists that carries the torch of "bad painting" pioneered in the 1970s and 1980s by Germans Sigmar Polke and Martin Kippenberger, who flaunted their defiance of "good taste" and traditional notions of beauty through parody and irreverence and who eschewed a signature style by changing mediums, Reeder's work comfortably situates itself within this milieu. Like other artists such as Ann Craven, Josh Smith, Karen Kilimnik, and Kai Althoff, he chooses not to work in an accurately representational style that is

¹ Scott Reeder, e-mail message to author, July 12, 2011.



Scott Reeder, *Sisyphus Ice Cream*, 2010.
Oil on linen, 38 × 28 in. (96.5 × 71.1 cm).
Courtesy Luce Gallery, Turin, Italy.



still often considered the height of painterly skill by general audiences, even though since Edouard Manet, and especially after the advent of photography in the 1820s, most modern and contemporary painting has challenged realism as the pinnacle of painting. Reeder, like most of the great modern and contemporary painters such as Pablo Picasso, Jackson Pollock, and Willem DeKooning, could paint in a more realistic manner if he wanted to, but instead he fuses his academic training with conceptual underpinnings in a purposeful style of so-called “bad painting” that challenges what defines a “good” painting as a means to engage with broader cultural values. Reeder ironically critiques the authority over painting that many twentieth-century “masters” now hold, even if many of them began as rebels against tradition.

One way he accomplishes this is by combining the lowbrow and the highbrow. Reeder’s cooked spaghetti paintings riff on abstract expressionist Pollock’s all-over compositions. A trio of oversized smoking fruits—the aforementioned pear, orange, and banana—are themselves replete with iconic references such as Magritte’s pipe, Philip Guston’s infamous cigar, and Pollock’s *Life* magazine article in which he stands with his arms crossed and a cigarette hanging from his mouth. Reeder’s paintings are further engaged with an absurdly anthropomorphic, cartoonish style reminiscent of Guston and Carroll Dunham, but he also imagines his figures relating to the realm of

1940s and 1950s vintage commercial logos or WWII aircraft markings. There is something for everyone when viewing his paintings, even without recognition of the sly references to artists who defined painting in the twentieth century.

Reeder explores not only the history of painting styles and movements but the materiality, color, and scale of painting as well in the group of new image paintings made for this exhibition. With transparent acrylic washes as background to the centrally positioned oversized fruits painted in oil, the interaction of colors on the canvas becomes primary, effectively veering the work toward pure abstraction. (Reeder jests that these are his Rothkos.) The contradictory properties of paint—its opacity and transparency, fluidity and solidity, gravitas and levity—further Reeder’s stake in the concept of simultaneity, while exploring what an artist can accomplish visually and conceptually with this very traditional medium. Clearly, Reeder is interested in the history of painting in his references to the styles of great “masters” such as Pollock, Guston, Mark Rothko, Picasso (in his Cubist Coke-head series not included in this exhibition), Sol LeWitt, and Cy Twombly (in his most recent foray into abstraction using raw spaghetti), but he also prods the dialogue around contemporary painting in new and unexpected directions that are completely his own.

Reeder has made all new work for this exhibition, including two abstract paintings. The first is a large-scale, fourteen-by-twenty-five-foot, site-specific canvas for the MCA’s second-floor lobby, the second, a smaller, cooked spaghetti painting on view within the galleries. Both portend a kind of serious abstraction that is undermined when we learn that they were made by the chance arrangement of spaghetti on a canvas, akin to a game of pick-up sticks or I Ching sticks. Reeder creates the appearance of a subtractive mark, and from a distance, some versions of this work look deceptively like a surface that has been marked and erased, belying the viewer’s initial understanding of how the painting was made, which is more akin to surrealist Man Ray’s aerographs, in which paint is sprayed over an object on a canvas or paper surface, or photograms, in which light is exposed around a solid object on photosensitive paper to create negative shapes.

Chance elements are a significant part of Reeder’s process, which manifests itself in a particular way with the spaghetti in his abstract paintings but in a completely different way in his almost stream-of-consciousness process of making lists of potential titles that provoke a call and response dynamic between language and image. As he explains, “With the image paintings I’ve always been interested in how combining seemingly unrelated images, fragments, or words could generate unexpected narratives or content—or even a sort of a new hybrid meaning. I think of it almost like mixing colors—you can have a primary meaning or intended meaning, but the best images also have secondary or tertiary associations.”² As in the line “rose is a rose is a rose ...” from Gertrude Stein’s famous poem “Sacred Emily,” Reeder points to the subjectivity of meaning, even within a shared syntax of words and objects, that is entirely dependent upon context and the individual

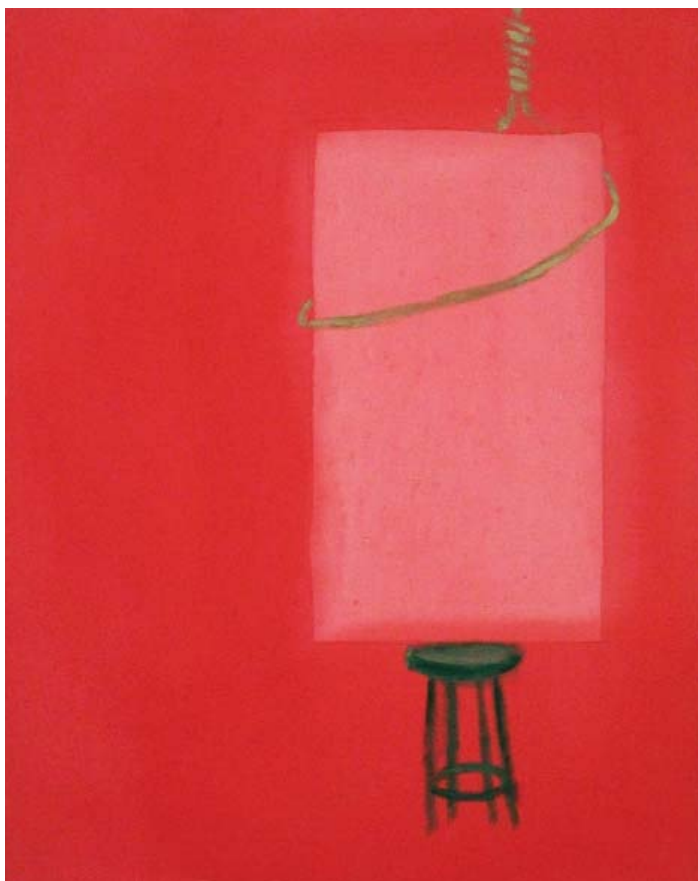
² Scott Reeder, e-mail message to author, July 12, 2011.

viewer. How do our personal associations and memories invoked by language influence our experience of art, and, by extension, life?

This play between language and image is at the heart of Reeder's work. The titles of his paintings add nuance to the act of viewing and provoke questions such as "What are the pandas protesting? What would make a shape suicidal? Why is the popcorn pissed off?" Yet his titles are often so descriptive and deadpan—in the spirit of John Baldessari's text paintings such as *Tips for Artists Who Want to Sell* (1966–68), a painting containing three bullet point sentences, such as "Generally speaking, paintings with light colors sell more quickly than paintings with dark colors"—that we may feel slightly sheepish about not getting the joke right away, and, since there are no answers to Reeder's queries, we instead focus on the formal qualities of the paintings and our reactions to them.

Reeder's process, however, is a reversal of the act of looking followed by that of reading the title. He most often thinks of the titles first and then figures out how exactly to depict his humorous, alliterative phrases. The titles hang on his studio wall, and the ones that compel him the most over time become the subjects of his paintings. The exhibition includes a new body of work composed of a suite of prints of Reeder's handwritten lists of "so bad they're good" ideas for various titles and names: for this exhibition (*Preconceived Surface*), paintings (*Experimental Poems Unleash Dark Matter*), TV show episodes (*Elderly Jazz Musicians Try to Stop Time*), bands (Rad Fax, one of a group of three-letter-word titles), books (*Think Thrice*), new foods (*Rusty Rice*), and new music genres (*Celtic Crunk*). The fact that these works are prints of his handwritten lists is an intentional comment on the presence of the artist's hand and the artistic gesture that thwarts their historical association with artistic value, while still maintaining the sense of individuality that accompanies handwriting. Similarly, Reeder's use of an object, such as spaghetti, and a paint sprayer to create the marks, or lines, in his abstract paintings sidesteps the more traditional use of a paintbrush. Pairing the two types of works within the same gallery calls attention to the different approaches to gesture and the presence or absence of an artist's hand to create an image. The lists also create a conceptual space for the viewer to imagine what exactly the evocative phrases would look, sound, or taste like.

Although Reeder seems to take the piss out of painting, he is truly enamored of painting as a material, a history, and a commodity that can be used to confront our tastes and value judgments. Throughout the last fifteen years, Reeder's ongoing conversation with painting and its history has been augmented by a more expansive curiosity that manifests itself in curatorial projects, performances, collaborations, and a forthcoming feature film, *Moon Dust*, which is set one hundred years in the future and tells the story of a failing resort on the Moon. An artist of a generation reluctant to limit its creative energy to one particular medium, Reeder, along with his brother Tyson Reeder and wife, Elysia Borowy-Reeder, ran General Store, a storefront gallery in Milwaukee, from 2002 to 2007. Their curatorial projects included



Drunk vs. Stoned, at Gavin Brown's enterprise; *The Early Show*, at White Columns, which featured artworks that established artists made as children or before they had any formal training, investigating their relationship to the artists' mature work; and, more recently, Club Nutz, the world's smallest open-mike comedy club, which debuted at the Frieze Art Fair in 2009 and has since been presented at fairs, museums (including the MCA), and galleries, nationally and internationally. Reeder is also part of the five-person curatorial think-tank known as Milwaukee International, which was responsible for Dark Fair, an exhibition at the Swiss Institute, New York (2008), and Kölnischer Kunstverein, Cologne (2009), that presented works lit only by candlelight, flashlights, black light, or lights within the works.

Reeder's paintings and do-it-yourself curatorial projects explore what happens to the creative process when it is confined to limited yet unexpected parameters that equalize the playing field and set into relief the shifting and subjective standards by which we consider art.

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Untitled, 2010
Enamel and acrylic on linen
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Scott Reeder was born in 1970 in Battle Creek, Michigan. He attended University of Iowa (BFA 1994), Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture (1995), and University of Illinois at Chicago (MFA, 1998). He is currently Associate Professor of Painting and Sculpture at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

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