like paintings insist on their aura because of their one-of-a-kind status, their
complexity.

Your concentration is rewarded as you enter this environment realizing,
their status as objects, for example. But, of course, what is most unsettling
is the darkness all around. No clear imagery is apparent but rather they ap
pear like contemporary iterations of Modernist abstraction, stripes, blocks
and squares of color floating in space. They insist on their formal devices be-
cause it is initially quite difficult to make out any subject matter or content
beyond some awareness of the repudiation of merely vertical lines of paint.
This formal opaqueness seems to suggest that, from a distance, we may be
able to compartmentalize the work as so much decorative, dark background
noise. And yet, conversely, they demand that we engage the work at a closer,
more intense level. The darkness forces us to look for the light, for that
which is hidden. As though we are in a room with no light, the paintings ask
us to grope around slowly to determine their meanings in both aesthetic and
iconographic terms. In this regard, they are deeply absorptive.

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Behind this lingers the specter of the philosopher Walter Benjamin's well-
known analysis of the auratic function of art. 1  For Benjamin, works of art
are related to the aura—the aura as objects, for example. But, of course, what is most unsettling
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musical articulations of air across edges. In addition to performing in Chicago and the
US, Coppice has exhibited in Iceland, Sweden, Greece, and the Netherlands. Its
recordings are available through Quakebasket Records (US), caduc. (CA), Con
erum Waste (UK), and Sniffintotodes (IT).

The Painter’s Other Library

Matthew Girson and the References in “The Painter’s Other Library”

Few symbols represent the spread of knowledge in the modern world like
the public library. While private libraries have long stood for the intellectual
and social status of individuals—whether in ancient Rome or China, in the
monastery or the palace—the public library, accessible to all, has been wide-
spread as a phenomenon only in the modern world. Such an expansion of the
library’s function has also received a corresponding aesthetic expression.
For example, Henri Labrouste, the prominent 19th-century French architect,
gave his Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève (Paris, 1850) an impressive row of
iron columns in the interior to emphasize its break conceptually and aestheti-
cally with the masonry past, and he had sculpted representations of gas lights
on the façade to remind the public that it was accessible at night, i.e. as a
respite even for the worker after a long day, knowledge for all. By the 1893
World’s Columbian Exhibition in Chicago, no modern city was considered
complete without a grand edifice that proclaimed a city’s commitment to the
rational education of its citizenry. The result here was the dramatic and opu-
leous public library that is now the Chicago Cultural Center.

Matthew Girson’s newest work, entitled “The Painter’s Other Library,” en-
gages the idealism embodied in this world of books with paintings that are
formally rich and deeply absorptive. Simultaneously, though, his approach to
the potential for knowledge’s critical function in the contemporary world is
just as thoroughly ambiguous. The tension between the possibilities of what
reason can achieve but also what devastation can be wrought by the most
advanced thought (Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s “dialektik des
Enlightenment”) trouble Girson’s subjects and his aesthetic choices. He paints
a library that attracts, that insists on concentration and close looking. On the
same time, it is a library that resists knowledge, that obscures all in its
totaline darkness. Girson thus thematizes the very limits of knowing in the
pursuit of the possibility of knowing. After all, that is all that is left in the darkness as something that is, perhaps, aesthetically pleasurable, conceptually dysphoric yet compellingly challenging.

Matthew Girson

May 24–August 10, 2014
Chicago Cultural Center | Chicago Rooms | 2nd Floor North
Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events
City of Chicago • Mayor Rahm Emanuel

Recent work by Matthew Girson

May 24–August 10, 2014
Chicago Cultural Center

The Painter’s Other Library

The Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events is dedicated to stimulating Chicago's artistic vitality and cultural vibrancy.
Benjamin did not have a random philosophical reference, but rather points to that which conceptually troubles in Gisron’s work. Benjamin wrote his essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of its Mechanical Reproduction,” in 1934, at a moment when Hitler’s interest in anthropological spectacles had begun to become all too apparent. In his architectural projects from Munich to Berlin, Hitler staked himself as the architect of a new Germany and in a new world order; he used aesthetic debates as a tool to both express his racialized world view and to influence artistic practices. Further, the emphasis on his cult-like status as a leader was also aestheticized and rendered endlessly fascinating to a mass German audience, most famously in the 1935 film Triumph of the Will (1935; dir. Leni Riefenstahl). It was this “aestheticization of politics” as Benjamin called it that rendered Fascism so dangerous. Used film and art to emphasize the aura, the cultic status of works and, simultaneously, the seductive aspect of an authoritarian state. Benjamin criticized this position by counter-posing the materialist and seemingly rationalist function of art in government, its basic form from a short segment from Reifenstahl’s past and its cultural expression both directly and indirectly. The fire series, by counter-posing the materialist and seemingly rationalist function of art and indeed the library unusable, filled with a darkness that barely allows us to influence artistic practices. Further, the emphasis on his cult-like status as the architect of a new Germany and a new world order; he refused to take a clear critical stance towards the past. Girson has little faith in close to think about the possibilities of the visual. In the end, these are compromised works that do not result, or rather that result resolution. The closer we look, the horror we see, but the further we are from the truths embodied in these books of knowledge. We are in a dark library. What such a knowledge that art provides, while, on the other, he has made the books per se. For this reason, his books are inaccessible, his sources obscure and varied, his points of reference ambiguous. Simultaneously, the deep look­ing required of the viewer and the play between rich matte surfaces draws us in to the autocratic and fascinatory qualities of the paintings. It is on this level that Girson can push us to close in on the difference at once pleasure at the expense of knowledge. (Could there be a more transparent politics here?) At the same time, however, he sees himself from that seemingly uncrucial lends through the incessant repetition of forms and motifs, clearly reflect­ting a traumatic inability to escape the very past or concept of modernity with which we are fascinated. And after all, however pleasant the experience may be, it is also one that is constantly frustrated and obscured in the dark and dreary inks of those variably black surfaces. We are encour­aged and rejected simultaneously. These paintings intrigue but challenge our fascination with the sup­posed progress of modernity. Yet, Girson also does not allow for any easy postmodern posture that assumes ironic detachment. It is to work through and dematerilize this contradiction that he has, on the one hand, surrounded us with books of all shapes, sizes and colors, showing us the wealth of knowledge that art provides, while, on the other, he has made the books...