

of Rembrandt to the abstractions of Reinhardt. But these references are also denied to or at least indistinct for their audience. In the end, they leave us not with knowledge, but with the self-understanding of our own boundaries for the possibility of knowing. After that, all that is left is the darkness as something that is, perhaps, aesthetically pleasurable, conceptually dystopic yet compellingly challenging.

What becomes immediately clear upon viewing Girson's paintings is their insistence on the formal qualities of the work. Indeed, at first approach, one is left with little but form. The paintings stand out from the wall insisting on their status as objects, for example. But, of course, what is most unrelenting is the darkness all around. No clear imagery is apparent but rather they appear like contemporary iterations of Modernist abstraction, stripes, blocks and squares of color floating in space. They insist on their formal devices because it is initially quite difficult to make out any subject matter or content beyond some awareness of the repetition of murky 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.

This is particularly true of the largest paintings that seem to surround the viewer in their scale. Fiction (2012), for example, draws you in and encompasses your body, much as traditional history painting used to do. Once up close, the viewer is aware of the subtle and variable modulation of the dark paint, which turns out not to be black but a veritable rainbow of blacks. Your concentration is rewarded as you enter this environment realizing, first, the variations in color but then the different patterns of spaces and books, of curtain and binding. Close looking favors an experience of visual complexity.

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 like paintings insist on their aura because of their one-of-a-kind status, their physicality, their inability to be replicated mechanically. Girson in this sense is certainly a painter's painter, working his surfaces to such a degree to give



The Painter's Other Library (Panel 14.7), 2014, oil on Aluminum, 16 x 32



Non-Fiction, 2013 Oil on Canvas, 60 x 80"

Gallery Talk

with Matthew Girson and Curator Greg Lunceford
Wednesday, June 4, 12:15pm

Panel Discussion

with Paul Jaskot, Lise McKean and Matthew Girson
Saturday, June 28, 1pm

Musical Performance

Saturday, August 2, 7pm
 Coppice will perform compositions for live electronics and bellows in the galleries exhibiting The Painter's Other Library. Chicago-based musicians, Noé Cuéllar and Joseph Kramer of Coppice investigate "breathturns" as they explore 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), Consumer Waste (UK), and Senufo Editions (IT).

Artwork photographed by Tom Van Eynde. Brochure concept by Andrea F. Bucsi.

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FREE ADMISSION

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The Painter's other Library

Recent work by Matthew Girson

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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 widespread 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 aesthetically 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 optimistic public library that is now the Chicago Cultural Center.

Matthew Girson's newest work, entitled “The Painter's Other Library,” engages 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 “dialectic of the Enlightenment”) trouble Girson's subjects and his aesthetic choices. He paints a library that attracts, that insists on concentration and close looking. At the same time, it is a library that resists knowledge, that obscures above all in its resolute darkness. Girson thus thematizes the very limits of knowing in the guise of pushing the status of representation to its extreme, focusing on the outer edges of what can be seen. His works hinge on an engagement with multiple aesthetic and iconographic sources, from the darkest shadows

them the status of an icon and using the smallest variation of color that makes them all but useless as reproductions. They exist only as objects of absorption. There is in addition a ritualistic quality both to their installation as well as to the emphasis on the repetition of a series. One processes through these paintings, stopping to move in to view a small work that rewards close attention, or halting before the large-scale canvases to admire the effects on the eye.

Benjamin is not a random philosophical reference, but rather points to that which conceptually troubles in Girson's work. Benjamin wrote his essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of its Mechanical Reproducibility," in 1934, at a moment when Hitler's interest in aestheticized spectacles had become all-too apparent. In his architectural projects from Munich to Berlin, Hitler styled himself as the architect of a new Germany and a new world order; he used aesthetic debates as a tool both to express his racialized world view and to influence artistic practices. Further, the emphasis on his cult-like status as 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. It used film and art to emphasize the aura, the cultic status of works and, simultaneously, the seductive aspects of an authoritarian state. Benjamin critiqued this position by counter-posing the materialist and seemingly rationalist function of art under Communism (naturally, a position more difficult to maintain after the exposure of the Stalinist purges of the late 1930s). For Benjamin, the absorptive quality of an artwork contributed to its aura and thus to its ability to seduce.

Girson is more than aware of this history, as indeed he references the Nazi past and its cultural expression both directly and indirectly. The fire series, for example, derives its basic form from a short segment from Riefenstahl's film. More indirectly and broadly, in previous work (such as his *Scotoma* series) Girson has dealt with the troubling intersection of intellectual knowledge and blindness often assigned to the core dynamic of the Nazi state; after all, the same scientific breakthroughs that produced Albert Einstein and the same culture that fostered Thomas Mann would also result in the barbarity of the Nazi genocide.² In addition, early on as he was thinking about this



The Painter's Other Library (Panel 14.1), 2014, oil on Aluminum, 16 x 32



Allegory, Allegory, Part 1 (3 of 24 panels), 2014, Oil on Aluminum, each panel 8 x 16"

series, Girson visited the site not only of the Party Rally Grounds in Nuremberg where Riefenstahl filmed but also the Party library in Munich (now the Central Institute of Art History). The latter site was a location where, in the Nazi period, knowledge was used for its most destructive possibilities, while today it has been turned here to the seemingly humanist study of art. In these dark paintings, he thus toys with the tension between a form that conjures up the gloss, fascination and ambition of the grand tradition of painting and, at the same time, an obscured content that signals the most grotesque function that human cultural goals have justified. The genocide depended on the racist idealism at the heart of Hitler's cultural and political ambitions. This is the endgame of modernity.

The general question of the status of art and knowledge that Girson's work poses is at least on the surface at times too uncomfortably engaged with the Nazi past and the seductive interest it continues to raise in the general public and mass culture. Susan Sontag discussed this allure in her foundational essay "Fascinating Fascism" which dealt with the fetishistic, aesthetic power of Nazi culture in postwar society and how our aesthetic return to Riefenstahl and other sources masked or even makes beautiful the political brutality of the regime.³ For Sontag writing in 1974, the uncritical appropriation of Fascist aesthetics blunted the possibility of a productive and necessary ideological critique of past and present reactionary politics. Such a critical position, however, became more confused with the explosion of artists like Anselm Kiefer who in the 1970s and 1980s directly thematized perpetrators and violence in his paintings or with the more deeply ironic responses to Nazi crimes of a younger generation of artists more recently as in the 2003 exhibition "Mirroring Evil".⁴

In the stream of this tradition, there is no denying that Girson's paintings refuse to take a clear critical stance towards the past. Girson has little faith in a mantra of ideology critique, and indeed no faith in rationality alone,



Allegory, Allegory, Part 1 (3 of 24 panels), 2014, Oil on Aluminum, each panel 8 x 16"

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 auratic and fascinating qualities of the paintings. It is on this level that Girson can push us too close to an insistence on pleasure at the expense of knowledge. (Could there be a more transparent politics here?) At the same time, though, he saves himself from that seemingly uncritical ledge through the incessant repetition of forms and motifs, clearly reflecting 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 inkiness of those variably black surfaces. We are encouraged and rejected simultaneously.

These paintings thus 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 thematize 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 and indeed the library unusable, filled with a darkness that barely allows us to distinguish the object of the volume let alone read it. This is knowledge that is right there for us, drawing us in, and at the same time stubbornly obscure. The great challenge that the Nazi regime posed to the conception of modernity as the rational trust in knowledge lingers like a scrim over these already difficult images.

Girson's work toggles back and forth between that potential for manipulation and dominance but also the possibility for knowledge and even progress. Thus, fascinating and absorptive as these images may be, there is also his insistence on a critical experience of frustration. That frustration

reminds us of the limits of knowledge but also of our interest in pushing against such limits. Representation offers a moment for clarity at the same time that it is a site of enigma. In many ways, the enigmatic qualities of the work teach us more about ourselves. Matthew Girson wants to draw you in close to think about the possibilities of the visual. In the end, these are complicated works that do not resolve, or rather that resist resolution. The closer we look, the better 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 site implies for both our enlightenment as well as our downfall becomes the real core of his paintings and his conceptual concerns.

Paul B. Jaskot
DePaul University



The Painter's Other Library (Panel 14.17), 2014, oil on Aluminum, 16 x 32

¹Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," reprinted in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 217-51. More recently, the generally accepted translation of the German title is "The Work of Art in the Age of its Mechanical Reproducibility."

²George Grosz also grappled with this problem while in exile in the United States. See Barbara McCloskey, "Cartographies of Exile," in Alexander Stephen, ed., *Exile and Otherness. New Approaches to the Experience of the Nazi Refugees* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2005), 135-52.

³Susan Sontag, "Fascinating Fascism," reprinted in *A Susan Sontag Reader* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), 305-25. Since Sontag, others have taken up this theme of the problem with appropriating the aesthetic themes and tropes of the Nazi past. See, for example, Saul Friedländer, *Reflections on Nazism: An Essay on Kitsch and Death* (New York: Harper and Row, 1984).

⁴For an overview of postwar responses, see Andreas Huyssen, "Figures of Memory in the Course of Time," in Stephanie Barron and Sabine Eckmann, eds., *Art of Two Germanys. Cold War Cultures* (New York: Abrams, 2009), 224-39. See also Norman L. Kleeblatt, ed., *Mirroring Evil: Nazi Imagery/Recent Art* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002).