



A CONVERSATION WITH: JONAH GROENEBOER

Derek Dunlop

Through an exploration of the mediums of painting and photography, *Blue Shift* considers the optical phenomenon of viewing under moonlight conditions. Each work in this exhibition consists of a two-colour painting created in daylight paired with a black and white photograph taken of the same painting, but exposed in moonlight.

In daylight conditions, the paintings appear as a contrast between two colours, but under moonlight conditions, the paintings have an identical tone. Attuned to the micro moments of shifting light, it is the artist's desire to give form to states of sameness and to states of difference, suggesting an "impossibility of seeing in totality."

The works in *Blue Shift* were created within a carefully constructed system of interrelations that emphasize context, perception and duration.

Addressing the problems of representation and vision, the artist forces the viewer to consider the incompleteness of any single context for viewing. Drawing inspiration from his own experience as a queer and transgender person, Jonah Groeneboer's practice is grounded in the emerging fields of new materialism and non universal phenomenology.

The following interview was conducted in November of 2015.

Derek Dunlop - Jonah, for twenty years now we have discussed queer theory in relationship to our own work, and to our lives. Over the years, we have explored many overlapping concerns but our ideas have always found expression in unique ways. One thing that stands out to me is your formal rigour and your ability to relate concerns of abstraction with queer theory - your ability to navigate these two complex fields has always impressed me.

Jonah Groeneboer - Thank you, Derek. These aspects of your work have always impressed me too. My formal strategies begin with a conceptual, political, or affective concern. When I first started exploring abstraction, it felt very strange because I was educated in a time of identity politics. During that time, artists were using representation to assert complex subjectivities and counter hegemonic structures - it was very exciting. My first turn towards abstraction felt like I was turning away from these capacities of representation. I was coming up against the idea that abstraction is apolitical, or at the very least, less effective than representation. Ultimately for me, abstraction offered a new kind of engagement with the political or conceptual. In an early series called *Stills of 4D Objects*, I felt elated and totally engaged. These string installations ranged in scale and were structurally dependent on the walls of the space. They changed dramatically based on the viewer's position: shifting, collapsing, and re-emerging. Models of 4D objects imagine time embedded within the object's form. The threshold between interior and exterior in an 3D model shifts to a phase transition in 4D models (for example, the point at which an ice cube melts is a change of phase). In a 4D object, the interior becomes the exterior through a spatialized temporal transition. I found a model that better represented my experience as a trans person and I was seeing a way that abstraction could represent social or political experience. This became one of the foundational understandings of my formal approach.

DD - The body of work you have created for *Blue Shift* has spanned many years, I am wondering if there is a particularly piece of writing, or critical theory that has guided the work.

JG - When I first began working on this project, I was reading texts written in fragments about subjective and observational color experience: Goethe's *A Theory of Colors*, Wittgenstein's *Remarks on Colour*, Maggie Nelson's *Bluets* and Johannes Purkinje's writings. Purkinje wrote in 1825 and is known to have the first recorded observational notes on a variety of optical phenomena, including how color is effected by natural shifting light conditions, from full sun, dusk, moonlight and dawn. His interest was in subjective optical phenomena and these early writings served as the beginnings of neuroscience. From his writings I learned that in low light conditions, such as moonlight, we see in shades of gray. Through the instrumentations of our eye, colour turns to tone. "Blue shift" also known as the "Purkinje shift," refers to the monochromatic blue tint that can be observed under moonlight once your eyes have adapted to the dark. When I learned about this phenomena, it was night but I was in New York City. I scanned my memories of seeing under moonlight for colour information. Throughout my life, most of my experiences at night have been flooded by artificial light, so there was very little to search through and of course memory is extraordinarily mutable. I made arrangements to go to a friend's house in upstate New York to experiment with colour away from light pollution. Through my research, I selected a series of colours to begin to work with.

DD - What are some of the things that surprised you about this project? Did you learn anything new about colour, or about your vision?

JG - I am continually surprised by the shift in vision from full sun to moonlight, because it is so radically different. It so clearly implicates the act of seeing as subjective and our eyes as instruments with limitations for observation. When I first went to work away from light pollution, I timed it for the full moon—the most amount of light possible at night. The reason that most people see tone instead of colour under moonlight is because of the structure of the retina which contains cones and rods. Cones, which are responsible for colour, fine detail, and spatial acuity, work at higher light levels but rods take over in low light conditions. The fovea, a part of the retina, is full of cones but absent of rods in most people.

Through my research I discovered that I can see colour under full moonlight, which means I am one of those people that have some cones in the fovea. When the moon is past the first quarter and before the last, it is dim enough that I lost the ability to see colour, but still bright enough so that I could see. So I had to adjust my working cycle to a different point in the moon's cycle than I had originally anticipated.

Another surprise was that colours have varying tone conversion times. Bright red appears to become nearly black before dark blue, which appears a dark grey but not usually completely black. This is just about the way a kind of seeing works and not the colors themselves.

DD - Ever since I can remember, your work has been deeply engaged with critical theory. I'm curious to know what happens when you start working with your materials. Is there a struggle to get your materials to communicate the way you want them to?

JG - My work is deeply engaged with materiality too. The conceptual considerations and material considerations are symbiotic. My approach to materials doesn't feel like struggling, but meeting - I meet materials. This is true of my approach to reading theory too. I read, meet the text, the ideas, and the way the author is thinking. And I meet myself, my relationship to ideas, related thoughts, and something about the way I have thought before my ideas encountered the active text. Working with materials feels this way to me too. I meet them: what they do, how they work, and I also meet my own touch - the past materials that I have worked with and how they have adjusted my hand. There are learning curves when conceptual necessity pushes the practice into an engagement with unfamiliar material. For instance, I'm not really a painter, but for this project it was necessary to make paintings. I worked with the material to learn one very specific technique, which is more about surface treatment than a painterly gesture.

DD - *Blue Shift* forces the viewer to consider the way painting and photography represent the world in different ways. Both mediums have very complicated relationships to the history of representation and to ideas relating to truth-telling. You graciously use the authority of one medium to question the authority of the other. How did you work through these ideas? Did you come to any conclusions?

JG - For a long time my work has questioned the stability and reliability of perception from a fixed position. I wanted to work with this phenomena because of its potential to reveal the act of viewing as material. We see seeing. And in this work, the eye as an instrument is implicated in the intertwined histories of painting and photography. I have thought a lot about how these two mediums have interacted, thrown each other into crisis, and how they both claim reality through representation. It was also my intention to highlight the many steps of mediation between the thing represented and its representation. For instance, in the moonlight, I used black and white 35mm film to photograph the colour paintings in order to simulate the way the human eye sees. I took notes on the tone that I saw the paintings become, and I used this information when printing the photographs in the darkroom. Though I am trying to produce an exacting space of sameness between the different colors of the paint, and the tone of the black and white photos; ultimately, what the viewer encounters is a specific representation of my subjective visual perception. And depending on the conditions in which they are viewed, the works move through states of difference and sameness. *Blue Shift* suggests an impossibility of seeing in totality, and with that, an impossibility of representing in totality. The longer I work in abstraction the more I arrive at the questions and problems of representation. Abstraction as a strategy can reveal the impossibilities of objective representation, why representation fails us.

November 2015

Jonah Groeneboer studied at Simon Fraser University in BC, received a BFA in Intermedia at PNCA and an MFA in Studio Art at NYU. He has had solo shows at Bellwether Gallery and The Galveston Artist Residency. His work has been included in group shows at Bellwether, Andrew Edlin, and Museum 52 in New York, Shoshawna Wayne Gallery in LA, Ideobox Artspace in Miami, Roots and Culture in Chicago, Exile Arts in Berlin, Brown Gallery in London, and Torpedo Kunstbokhandelen in Oslo. This fall his work will be included a group show at the Contemporary Art Museum Houston. His work has been reviewed and written about in publications such as The NY Times, the New Yorker, New York Arts, Art 21, and most recently in Art Journal in a conversation between Jennifer Doyle and David Getsy on Queer Formalism. He has taught studio, art history and theory classes to both undergrad and graduate students. Jonah Groeneboer was born in 1978 in Chiliwack, BC. He is based in New York City.

Derek Dunlop completed his MFA at the University of British Columbia and is currently based in Winnipeg, where he was born and raised. Dunlop is a curator, writer, and an artist with a studio-based practice. His research has primarily explored the political, ethical and philosophical conditions for contemporary abstraction. He has been the recipient of numerous grants and awards including The Helen Pitt Award, the BC Binning Memorial Fellowship, The Andrew MacIntosh Memorial Book Prize MFA, and the Jan and Adam Waterous Scholarship. His work has been featured in exhibitions across Canada and the US, including at the Drawing Center in New York City, and the UCLA New Wight Gallery in Los Angeles.

EXHIBITION

27 November - 16 January 2016

OPENING RECEPTION

Friday 27 November | 8 PM

ARTIST TALK

Saturday 28 November | 2 PM

IMAGE | *Blue Shift Research Kit*, 2013, painted boards, photograph, acid free case

EXHIBITION | Jonah Groeneboer

GUEST WRITER | David Getsy

CURATOR | Derek Dunlop

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