Inner Workings: On Garry Noland's *Piece Work*

The show is called *Piece Work*. You will be compensated accordingly—richly, for once—as you have tremendous productive capabilities. The processes themselves are no mysteries. Everything has a logic, a way that it works. Assemble these tiles. Peel up the tape. Shift this ink. There is no difference between inner workings and outer appearance. You are a productive viewer, working out what you see, exercising the piece's machinery, its responsiveness. Your eyes break the artwork down to pieces, then reassemble it. Your work is monumental—geographic, even—but also humble. This is Garry's artistry. You are shadowing him for a day on the job.

Garry Noland's work is mapping the transformations in color, space, and material that both natural processes and human work negotiate. It has something for the historical materialist and the new materialist—for champions of human labor and for believers in the vibrant agency of matter itself. Through the salvaged materials he "elevates," Garry shows how objects can be put to human use while—and *through*—remaining resolutely themselves.

Each artwork conveys its own organic individuality through palette, texture, geometry, and formal principle. In each, Garry has attended to some inner aesthetic working. Not his "inner," but the piece's. Tickets, ladders, limestone deposits, pump jacks, axles, condensers, collapsed slopes, and walking elephants have all made their appearances, though Garry is more interested in capturing their logic on a formal level than simply showing what they look like. That is to say, each piece works differently. Like organisms, machines, or products, each contains the movements of its own production within it, an energetic self-understanding, a formal core. Then you come along, and the artwork works on you, replicating its logic within you.

These formal logics are some of Garry's great subjects. Grids, color fields, seriality, the geometry of perspective, oscillations between foreground and background, surface versus depth, plan and improvisation, illusion and representation within material immediacy—all productive mechanisms this or that piece will run on. Locating these formal riddles across media and art historical influences, Garry continually hits "refresh" on art history, investigating and updating what the work of the artwork is.

And how do things "work"? Machines work mechanically. Organisms work organically. Thought works conceptually. Art works—aesthetically? I suppose, but to me this really means it *works on you*, recapitulating the other modes: a bit of the machine, a bit of the living thing, a bit of the conceptual model.

Failed Axle, the only sculpture in the show, is also the most obviously machinic—even if the machine doesn't work, since this wheel made of bubble wrap and broken PVC pipe can't take you anywhere. Heidegger famously suggests that we don't recognize the independent existence of an object until it stops working. Only when a hammer breaks (in his example) does it cease to be a mere tool for human activity and become, instead, a mysterious, non-human *thus-ness*. Garry's *Failed Axle*, which was *made broken*, thus has ample opportunity to glitter forth its material richness. The simple machine of axle and wheel has actually failed twice: the axle is snapped in two, and the wheel—a roll of bubble wrap that sags under the weight of PVC pipe encrusted in marbles—is more of a flat tire.

The only thing this wheel moves is light itself, though it performs its task exceedingly well: it gathers the light, stores, processes, and distributes it. The bubble wrap, layering crinkly gloss upon gloss, bubbles the room's ambient light through its clear plastic into a complex white. The dollar-store marbles, like all marbles—no matter how cheap or worn—immediately capture the eye. They mass into a knob rich in texture and color, verdant with tiny moments of competing depths, surfaces, and strata. This charm is probably one reason Garry has incorporated marbles throughout much of his sculptural oeuvre. They're humble yet divinely spirited, and they suggest moss or microbes as much as human play or factory production. It turns out there are a lot of directions this wheel can take.

The formal core of this piece? The action of *plugging in*, perhaps: line plugged into circle, marbles plugging pipe (the wheel's literal core). And the opposite: wheel unplugged from movement. The bubble wrap is a joke of a tire, filled with air yet completely useless. Really, *Failed Axle* is about venting as many ramifications as possible from the simple machine of wheel and axle. It's about watching what happens when non-standard materials are used to *act like* that machine—de-inventing the wheel, harnessing the resonances that result. *Failed Axle* holds these resonances silently within itself until you, the viewer, enter the process as the final hubcap that un-fails this axle, reinvents it, making the whole art–machine work after all.

Garry focuses on "process," on its simplicity, accidents, and sudden complexities—though I have to put that word in quotes. What artist isn't interested in process? Each defines it to their liking and then lives in it. But Garry's process does not originate with him. He knows that activities beyond himself create the things that end up in his hands and on his mind. Industry, trades, crafts, sciences, ecosystems, geology, and weather all shuttle material through their internal logics until—plunk—they suddenly confront the artist. At this point Garry steps into the process, negotiates

with it, sees how he'll react from this position, from that position, pauses to see what the material will do in turn.

That stepping-into-process creates things that are full of life, are just as much verbs as they are nouns. They charm us with their compelling color and tactility, engaging not just our eyes but our awareness of our embodiment, our associations and memories—even our own capabilities. Garry wants the piece to make you wonder how it was made, if you could make it too. You stand alongside him in your imagination, working on the piece, figuring it out, negotiating with the material, stumbling on new ideas, accumulating a history of such work.

Art, then, is a workaday commitment to helping form accrete meaningfully, even if not all practitioners are called "artists." In this vein, Garry has dedicated a wall to works by his great-grandmother Estella Renick. These circular rag rugs fit the show precisely. Their central concern is the spiral: how this ancient form, both mathematical and organic, gains individual character through color. Garry imagines his grandmother selecting hues randomly from a box of rags—essentially his method, too, in artworks like the pixelated *Untitled*. Renick's artistry is in transforming what's at hand, using old cloth to create an almost celestial variegation, a mandala-like composure.

These qualities, along with the complete fusion of color with material texture (here, that of knotted cloth), the room left for untidiness as a kind of realism, and the enjoyment of sticking with a process, all suggest a family resemblance. The rugs' place in a solo show (and who among us is truly "solo"?) conveys how deeply Garry feels these works are part of him and his practice. He celebrates his great-grandmother's work, acknowledging her influence and that of folk crafts in general, and shows that "art" is of a piece with work that goes on throughout human life.

Even more than it is visual, Garry's minimalism is methodological: he has continually emphasized his use of "simple verbs." He employs these verbs in repeated and modulated succession, and the activities that create one piece often inadvertently create other pieces as well: scraps, fortuitous residues, and analogue glitches can lead him down an unexpected path. The pieces have histories of interacting with Garry that they carry forward to interact with you.

It's as if Garry's activity has spring-loaded the artwork with potential energy that then rebounds in the viewer. Your eyes sense what your hands would feel were you to touch it: texture, edge, the reactivity of matter. The paper or cardboard subtly ripples and warps; exposed to temperature changes, humidity fluctuations, perhaps even battered by the elements before Garry salvaged it, it breathes like a living thing whose history impels

it forward. You could dig your fingernail under the tiles in *Overcoat*, feel the springiness their combined tension lends the piece. If you push on the art, it might quietly push back. You can imagine yourself interacting with it physically, gently, as if it were alive. Perhaps you could have even made it yourself?

The term "piece work" refers to compensation based on production rather than time. Each unit produced or task performed ticks up the worker's pay at an agreed-upon rate. It's an employment model that works best for repetitive, standardized tasks in fields such as agriculture, manufacturing, and crowd-sourced micro-work. While such a model could reward the labor that goes into making something, it can also be used as an excuse to pay people less, to force quantity over quality. The title of this show nods to these conditions and acknowledges solidarity with them. Artists also work piece by piece, don't they?

Being around an artist or a writer will teach you that a lot of work goes into hiding work, into making a final product look effortless. That's part of the artist's skill, but it's also how our world maintains its illusion of smoothness, instantaneity, and comfort. Time and labor get obfuscated: artists don't timestamp their brushstrokes, nor do I know how long it took to make my coat. *Showing your work*, then, in art as in math class, is an outer sign of inner workings, a gesture towards the labor beneath a smooth surface, unfolding the time hidden within instantaneous appearance. It might be as simple as setting up a work bench in the gallery. See these tiles sorted by color? I bet you can figure out how Garry used them to make *Overcoat*, *perhaps* even estimate the amount of time it took.

Piece work then, by definition, is a unit-based activity. And while the painter's art is often continuous—brush strokes, even when visible, can blend into one another—Garry's paintings are just as often assemblages composed of *discrete* units, pieces made of pieces. The units of the *Overcoat* series are paper tiles, or shingles, or scales depending on how you want to think of them. Garry mentions working a roofing job when he was 17. We might think: shingled roof as overcoat. Or we might see scales, so that the artwork becomes a kind of living skin, the word *Overcoat* suggesting that we might try it on, swim in its logic for a moment.

The series' original inspiration is an old magazine picture: a Denmark salesman constructed a massive, multi-story outdoor coat rack, a kind of abstract tiling of public space. In Garry's series, overcoats have been shrunken down to paper tiles, though Garry is still working on a large-enough scale that the question of part versus whole remains. The entire artwork becomes one large overcoat, even if the scalloped tiles, streaky with paint, hold their own—each perfectly poised against its surrounding colors.

Bordered by stripes that evoke longitude and latitude lines, each *Overcoat* is its own topography. In this way, the piece conveys the geographic methodology that pervades Garry's work. Remember geography*?* We learn about geography in grade school and then never hear about it again. We instead talk of more specific phenomena like geology, geopolitics, even geothermal energy. Are there still geographers? (Yes.) The word roots (*geo* + *graphy*) translate literally as "earth-drawing," a practice that sounds archaic in our era of GPS and mapping software; it would seem to have as much in common with art as with the sciences. For Garry, this translation is quite literal: the earth itself draws, is itself a drawing. The planet is a system of edges. At the most simple global view, it sketches lines where land and water meet: coasts, river banks, lake rims.

Unlike earlier cartographers who set out to map a static God-given mass, we know that these edges are in constant transformation through forces such as erosion and plate tectonics. The earth is, to a great extent, self-moving. Nor is it an impassive medium for human extraction, but a reactive complex of systems that warm, cool, flood, batter, collapse, erupt. Only relatively recently have we gained a global picture of our dynamic planet—we can see it from above *and* see it changing. We observe the earth drawing itself. If our relationship to the earth has split into all the sub-disciplines mentioned above, perhaps geography, and the artist's ability to embody "earth drawing," might be a way of bringing it all back together.

Relatedly, the *Plan-O-Gram* series is about the organization of human life, about spatialized economic activity *as* life; that is, human dwelling. The series is named after a diagram used in retail to map out a store's product displays. The bottom layer of each piece is a map, mostly obscured by roughly painted rectangles in a loose grid pattern. Atop these, Garry depicts illusionistic boxes that might suggest floating display shelves, as if they're reaching out from the painting to offer you something. What are they trying to sell? Nothing, really; the boxes are empty save for themselves. Yet this is not so much a comment on consumerism as a treatment of the formalism of commerce. It's about the shape of life under modern economic conditions, vibrant even so.

Garry constructs his foreground out of non-skid road tape, painting it to suggest three-dimensional boxes but much of the time refraining from fully rendering them as such. Purposeful misalignments, missing corners, and perspectively incorrect folds create moments that conspire against what is still a general impression of depth. This plane of contrapuntal visual cues eddies and warps around corners and edges, pulses with changing colors, a complex yet accessible music. The *Plan-O-Gram* series is one of the show's best examples of Garry's obsession with interplay between surface and illusionistic representation.

We might think of each *Plan-O-Gram* as a highly abstracted cityscape, the aesthetic equivalent of logistics for commercial activity. The word "plan" can refer to steps to be taken in the future, or to a two-dimensional diagram of an existing space. Garry's *Plan-O-Grams* juggle these definitions, hovering between a rational vision of an order-to-come and the unruly shape of the present. Economics and city-planning are a bit like that, too, messy mixtures of rationality, rules-of-thumb, anticipation, reaction, competing interests, and the irrepressible improvisations of human social life.

In each *Plan-O-Gram*, the background of map and the foreground of boxes is mediated by the scratchy, colorful squares in the middle ground, as if to suggest that this is the formal principle linking them. This middle ground conjures chain-link fence, tiles, or city blocks, depending on your mood. It negotiates between the bird's-eye view of the map and the human-eye (or road-side?) view of the boxes. These squares were actually created unintentionally at first: they are the outlines formed by painting the paper tiles for Garry's *Overcoat* series. The residue of that activity thus reveals the overcoat's "plan," whether any such plan was conscious for Garry or not.

Grids, city blocks, shelves; city planning or retail logistics; it's all *life*, the human activity of working the planet into something habitable and meaningful, negotiating edges, defining positive and negative space, asserting who owns what, who gets to be where. The artwork isn't saying it's all perfect or right. But there is here, as everywhere in Garry's work, an optimism of color, a relentlessly charming palette which balances itself against the problems of existence. The non-skid tape gives your gaze traction; like road lines, it guides and directs you, constructing space; like retail shelving, it also catches the eye, enticing it. It compels you to stick with life.

Garry, for all his experimentation with found material, is ever the fastidious painter at heart. His investigation of materiality is always set against the medium's illusionist capabilities, its potential representational depths, the painter's art. Op art is one of his early influences. *Untitled*, from 1979, a pixelated painting from a time before pixels had entered popular consciousness, is an example of how the illusionistic geometry of Op art and the algorithmic patterns of minimal art foreshadow digital space. While the handmade *Untitled* is resolutely analogue, its creation of warped depths purely through blocks of color and changing proportions on a grid suggest that these artistic modes create a kind of precursor digital space; the virtual within the material.

With an exquisite eye for texture and mass, combined with an equal aptitude for perspectival geometry, Garry thus harnesses a paradox:

surfaces that present as things-in-themselves while also leading us into represented depth. Materials travel away from themselves (paper squares become pixels, flat tape depicts a box) and, what amounts to the same thing, representation heads back to its material building blocks (see Garry's altered photographs). It's a physics where matter and representation are one. Whatever is present also represents. Garry is a painter at heart, after all.

Garry thus practices a deceptively easy elision between physical and cultural material. *Close Up USA* is a perfect example of this meeting point. Garry glues the pages of an issue of National Geographic together into a single brick, chops the bricks into slabs, assembles a substrate out of several such slabs, slathers them in oil paint, and carves a crude map of the lower 48 states into the paint. At what point does the magazine transition into a tectonic slab, or the indented oil paint into a national boundary? Like this piece, our lives constantly shift between the thick and the immaterial, printed page and slab of matter, immanent touch and satellite-eye view.

This is why Garry's abstract work and his collage practice are really part of the same activity. Whether it's photographs or paper tiles or any other found object, it's all just material to be worked with. These collages are actually, as Garry calls them, *altered photographs.* They involve eclipse-like anomalies, hoax-like fakes, and giant words embedded in the landscape like the Hollywood sign. They reveal the constructedness of images and the precariousness of how we view landscape.

Garry works almost exclusively with early *National Geographic* pages. At first the fakery escapes—for a split second—your notice. You think Garry is simply recontextualizing a found photo as a readymade—but, wait, this tropical plant doesn't live on alpine slopes, these mountains don't belong at the edge of this farmland, etc. Things escalate. A jagged slice of sky darkens as if becoming a mountain range. Black-and-white lunar photos disrupt pristine landscapes, like fake moon landings in reverse. Or, with a drop of acrylic matte medium, Garry excises a small circle of ink from the image and shifts it over slightly, exposing a crescent of raw white paper beneath, like an eclipse. Emulsified in the matte medium, the ink forms a raised glob that distorts the image within it as would a lens or drop of water. These globs track gazes and trace orbital paths.

At the core of this work, as always with Western landscape art, is the relationship between humans and the Earth, or more specifically with whatever segment of the planet we can fit in our minds at a given time. We construct that relationship through images, smoothing and naturalizing it. In Garry's altered photographs, astronomical phenomena, remote biomes, and political ideologies all come uncomfortably close to a patch of Earth

you thought you knew. The *Attention Fascists* series is the most overt iteration of this activity. Overall, it's a kind of de-geography that collapses previously established distances, territories, and separation, putting once-hidden edges into extreme contact with each other—leaving it up to you, the viewer, to do the negotiating, to be the geographer.

If geography is how humans make sense of the Earth, then what about animals? In *Parade* strips of colored duct tape cross each other and mass as jagged polygons to form an abstracted elephant. It walks from right to left, motion multiplying its legs across the piece's wide aspect ratio. The elephant's "torso" extends indefinitely from end to end, in effect becoming an endless trunk. Really, *Parade* does not so much depict the elephant as act like one, mapping its movement from the inside. In greens, yellows, pinks, and grays, its quadrilaterals and stripes also suggest a map, a territory called, perhaps, *elephant walking* that the viewer could inhabit and, eventually, become. Life in this elephantine territory would be all trunk, an extension of your face snaking over the earth with thousands of flexible muscles, amplifying smell, feeding, drinking, calling out: the elephant's union with the world.

To make *Parade*, Garry laid strips of tape on the floor of his studio, then lifted them up all at once, their adhesive faces now caked in wood and other studio debris, lending the appearance of earthy skin. As Garry points out, one patch of debris even hovers over a trunk-like appendage like an eye. In effect, the inside of the artwork—the plane once hidden between tape and ground—has been exposed. The viewer becomes privy to its inner workings. *Parade* conveys the earthiness of the elephant, its geography; in fact it treats earth, elephant, and studio as one. The tape becomes the artist's trunk. Strong yet flexible, it senses, grasps, and lifts everything it comes in contact with.

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