

Dana Lok: *Conditional Mood*

Scott Roben

Can painting be thought of in loops? Dana Lok's exhibition *The Set of all Sets* is bookended by two of them. *Conjurors I* and *II* are a pair of mirror-image paintings that face one another from opposite walls, each displaying a ring of free-floating text against a deep blue backdrop. The text consists of two parts: "I KNOW" and "YOU KNOW". You might read the words in one sequence ("I KNOW YOU KNOW") or the opposite ("YOU KNOW I KNOW"). Or you might understand the text as a continuous chain of dependent clauses ("...YOU KNOW I KNOW YOU KNOW I KNOW..." etc.), one whose origin and end exist only speculatively, descending into a *mise en abyme* of "knowing" where the object of knowledge is always out of reach. In *The Set of all Sets*, part of what seems to be at stake in the motif of the loop is its potential as a model for paradox, especially paradox in relation to the discipline of painting. All of the works from this series intervene in certain distinctive qualities of painting -- its particular ability to depict space and time, to convey narrative, to address a viewer and refer outside of itself -- in order to expose the inherent, unshakeable contradictions at the basis of painterly representation.

In Lok's work, text and space are codependent, operating as part of a single apparatus. In *Conjurors I* and *II*, they're bound efficiently in a multivalent paradox. Who speaks the text in these two paintings, and whom does it address? It's unclear because all we're given is a set of placeholders: a pair of abstract signifiers (I and YOU) that are able to accommodate whatever combination of subjects comes near. So maybe the painting speaks to the viewer, for example, or to the artist in the studio, or to its partner on the opposite wall — but equally possible is the reverse, that any of these subjects addresses the painting. The real trick of the *Conjurors*, however, is the way that they intertwine this kind of semantic ambiguity with a spatial ambiguity. Just as the subject of the sentence exists as a plurality of possibilities, so too does one's sense of near and far: which side of the ring comes forward, and which recedes? The question of linguistic address, of a *to* and a *from*, is fused with an oscillating awareness of form circling in *to* or out *from* the depths of the painting.

Even when text itself is absent from Lok's images, their spatial composition remains somehow distinctly textual. Perspective, for example, takes on a syntactic function as an organizational device that is deployed to bind discrete forms into particular kinds of relationships. In her painting *Tilted Bather*, Lok employs a perspective shift to inflect a quotation. The painting refers to an iconic work by Edouard Manet, *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (1862-1863), focusing in particular on the figure of a female bather in its background. Lok's painting imagines a scenario in which the figure has been cut away from the painting and tilted in space without any attempt to preserve the illusion of three-dimensionality. Instead she is exposed as what we know her to actually be — a flat illusion — tilted and laid to rest on her "back" in what appears to be a blue puddle on the forest floor. As in Manet's original, she remains unaware of our gaze, but rendered not only *from* a new perspective but within an alternative perspectival *scheme*, we're denied the fantasy of sharing her space. She arrives in this painting as an interrupted illusion, not fully available to our stare or our projections, still belonging to a scene taking place somewhere else.

The word "perspective" derives from the Latin roots *per* (through) and *specere* (to look). The works that make up *The Set of all Sets* perform "looking through" on multiple, often intentionally contradictory levels. On the one hand, you look through the paintings into their illusionistic depths, while on the other, you seem to be looking through the device of illusionism itself. The image that's quoted at the basis of *The Enchanted Cel* represents a moment of literal looking

through — a hand reaching out to pull aside some greenery, presumably in order to more clearly see the wider forest landscape in the distance. The image has been subjected to the same type of manipulations as the figure in the previous painting; this time it's been rotated just shy of ninety degrees in a counterclockwise direction. In both paintings, the perspectival logic of the source imagery falters as it is fragmented and subjected to Lok's intervention. Part of what makes Lok's approach so particular is that in her move to negate perspective, she never resorts to non-perspectival space (such as the space of the diagram). Instead, she allows the tool to perform its own deconstruction, revealing both its fallibility and its robustness: the broken perspective is always finally housed within the frame of a larger, perspectivally coherent image. You could imagine the process repeating itself infinitely, with each partial rotation of the image revealing a larger surrounding space that can then itself be rotated... and we're back to the paradigm of the loop.

Part of what's so mysterious about Lok's work is the way that it manages again and again to locate and visualize spaces *between* the signifier and the signified, or *between* the act of reference and the object of reference. In addition to being rotated, the source image from *The Enchanted Cel* has been split in two so that the foreground — the hand pulling aside the shrubbery — is entirely separated from the background — a blue forest pond with a grassy bank. In keeping with the understanding that space in Lok's work operates syntactically, this can be understood simultaneously as a splitting of subject (the one who sees) from object (what is seen). In the chasm that opens between them, a sort of delicate, barely intelligible text emerges floating, as if shaved off of the scene's contours: "I AM A WINDOW YOU ARE A DRAFT." This might sound like a fairly straightforward analogy of the relationship between a painting and its viewer (the idea of a painting being treated as a window goes back at least as far as the fifteenth century), except that in fact, it's not quite straight at all. The text, which is aligned on an axis perpendicular not to the frame of the canvas, but to the partially rotated image of the quoted forest, seems directed not quite at the viewer, but at a space just to her left. Here again, a pictorial intervention starts to interact with and disrupt language, dragging its signification slightly off-kilter.

The "oblique" in Lok's work (oblique perspectives, oblique references, oblique modes of address) seems inextricably linked to the act of rotation, and ultimately, the model of the loop. There's no denying that a peculiar atmosphere starts to set in as Lok's paintings carry us again and again into this type of indeterminate territory, into these various, void-like spaces *between*, where time feels somehow suspended. *Opening Statement* is a diptych which figures the words IFF (the academic shorthand for "if and only if") and THEN against nearly identical a moonlit skies. Once again we're left with the ghost of a relationship: a conjunction and a conjunctive adverb without any trace of the material they ought to qualify. Instead the two words drift freely in the twilight like shadows of conditional thought. That might be emblematic of the logic of this body of work as a whole, of the matter-of-fact manner in which it speaks, repeatedly and cogently, through contradiction.

Published on the occasion of Dana Lok, *The Set of all Sets*, CHEWDAY'S, London, 2016