

Defocalizing: Don't just give me figuration, please!

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Jeanette Mundt has an argument with painting, on several fronts. She is against her generation's fixation on simple figuration, she is impatient with the age-old focus on male artists, and she questions the power relations of the art world in general. She insists on a difficult and contrary position.

Mundt is interested not only in her generation of artists, painters, and writers, but in the larger moment, one marked by what we might call the culture of inflammation. We usually think of inflammation as being part of the body's immune function, a way to protect ourselves and stave off infections or any damage to tissue: white blood cells are called to a certain location under attack, increasing the blood flow and temperature in that area. Thus the culture of inflammation is based on an economy of an urgent call for attention and creating heat. Over the last decade the communication technologies have gone deep into a logic of surveillance and creation of emergency responses, spreading information, fears, or rumors, which are continuously annotated and dispersed further, all the while what we may be talking about might be real or invented or both. All this continuously generates an emotionally heightened sphere, which is largely detached from what we used to call 'reality' while being socially and politically extremely influential. Since 9/11, the creative or utopian potential of technology has in many instances been steered toward the needs of profit and control, and this new inflammatory logic thrives on disagreement, outrage, rumor, fear, self-doubt, uncertainty. The art world has

naturally been pulled into this culture of inflammation, which plays a role in contemporary art's simultaneous popularity and alienating effects. How is an artist to bear the paradox of seeing her highly specific, esoteric research marketed both to the wealthiest 1 percent, and to a public so broad that any New York City tourist might feel they must visit the Whitney to see such work? Without ignoring the promise and good luck of this circumstance, it is important to note that nobody has yet figured out what to do with the broad attention given to art these days. In fact, the effect on younger artists and more experimental art spaces has so far been largely negative. A generation of New York artists can get lost in these problems, whether politically, ethically, artistically, or existentially.

Mundt's broad interests include these troubles; she has absorbed them in order to negotiate the question of how they've changed her life and the life of New York City over the past decade, and what is to be done. She is committed to testing what might be the right position. In recent years many artists have responded to the darkness of the political moment with protest or withdrawal, using tools and languages that include identity politics, neo-folk art, local activism, and a back-to-the-land or communistic attitude. These approaches leave Mundt dissatisfied. The art world is her community and she doesn't want to exit it; nor does she want to see it hijacked for political protest. Instead, she wants to let it be difficult and contradictory. Artists have always exposed the symptoms of their times, that is their material. Mundt feels that this is our moment—and doesn't want to negate it. As much as is possible, she wants to be with the trouble. Mundt is sensitive, and trouble goes right into her arsenal of tools and materials. She chooses to embody the contradictions of this world. In this way she is unlike, say, Donald Judd, who after a relatively short period of testing stated a clear, and to him ethically correct, position. That makes for linearity, for clarity, for right and wrong. But his was a different historical moment, and his position was quintessentially male and empowered. We might even say that he demonstrated the clarity of power, which is exactly what Mundt is ambivalent about. It may be that to handle the current climate we instead need to defocalize: let things in, but allow them to flicker with flexibility and vulnerability.

This is not an easy task. It means that Mundt wants figuration and abstraction, removal and connection, acknowledgment and independence, assertion and self-doubt. Such contradictions mean that she must live with ambiguity and ambivalence. Ambiguity can be productive, as it holds the energy of two forces in motion, while ambivalence might generate more nuance, but can also hold us back from fully going with what we do or make. In this light, irony is useful, for it is a tool that produces distance and affords different and even contradictory means of interpretation; it allows an artist to propose something without necessarily believing it in full, for it could always also turn out to be the other way around. For Mundt, irony is a way to own her ambivalence in the face of the current situation.

Wolfgang Tillmans once noted that his disparate series are held together by the way each work "sits in relation to the genre as a whole and how they sit in relation to the genre within my work." Similarly, Mundt is pulled between the formal pleasures of the painting process,

its art-historical background, and a critical commentary on our moment. To anchor these different impulses she focuses on the figure, the body. Here she can refer to both high and low visual culture, as in the *Pink Camo* series, where her own body is both art-historical material and surface for the intimate, lowbrow imagery of her tattoos, woven into dialogue with the overall composition. She looks to digital formats of representation, such as her iPhone selfies, or news images of the Olympic games. The figure alone does not enable discourse or critique, but it embodies the tension between our physical reality and an increasingly digitally inflamed experience or knowledge of the world right now. And that friction produces discomfort, the locus of critique.

Yet Mundt finds the recent attention to figuration of many of her peers to be too limiting. She expresses her dismay in the *Pink Camo* selfies, painted during Trump's first year in office. How ugly can a beautiful painting be? Not only in the hideous hot pink that often serves as a background color, but also in her facial expression and skeptical body language: model and painter posed in a chaotic floating web of broken branches, lifted from Realtree's popular camouflage pattern. She plays with lack of depth, and this collapse of fore- and background produces a sense of disorientation. Her irony is cunning. Selfie culture deserves dismay, eyes focused on the screen in an inflamed circle that disconnects us from everything and everyone around us.

Mundt's *Skull* paintings are one of her historical motifs that don't refer to contemporary visual culture, exploring instead the timeless genre of the *vanitas*, with its symbols of the inevitability of death, the transience of life, and the folly of earthly achievements and pleasures. But for her they are perhaps also an excuse to explore abstraction, a way to tuck it into the background of her works, with the figuration of the skull serving as an anchor, and a gateway to today's charged images. Otherwise, what would we be left with? One somber background is painted in black and white, while another holds a field of red brushstrokes; a third probes abstraction with marks in black, red, and blue. It's as if Mundt tried out various styles of Modernist abstraction and then, as if they would float away by themselves, placed the skull on top. It's not easy for a young female painter to paint abstractions, but removal affords the pleasures of stepping back, handling paint, considering supposedly formal questions.

When Mundt employs montage in the *Born Athlete American* paintings, she knowingly disturbs the authority of single-point vision. Soviet filmmakers introduced the montage technique to emphasize the editing of shots as much as their content; the sense of rupture points to the underlying structure of narrative, which arises "from the collision of independent shots," according to Eisenstein. Mundt uses these disrupting effects to question the status of figuration today. The *Born Athlete American* is based on composite photographs prepared by the *New York Times* that explicate particular routines performed by the American Olympic gymnastics team at the 2016 summer Olympics in Rio. Seen on video, the movements zip by so fast that I can barely see any of the elements. The newspaper composites depict all stages of the routines simultaneously, as one image, extracted from something that takes

less than a second to execute. The individual pieces no longer add up to one image. How strange and foreign it all looks. How to take control of that? When Mundt transfers the digital montage into the further slowness of paint on canvas, what is on display is the everyday disruption of our time-space continuum.

The more she works on this series, the more depthless and abstract the paintings become, the more these strange floating bodies stand out as being isolated from their environments. Secluded in the Graduate Program of Fine Arts at Rutgers, far from the distractions of the New York art world, Mundt delves into the largely male history of modernist painting, wondering how she might empower herself with those techniques. To begin with, the backgrounds are beautiful, in hues of tropical green and yellow. With the second series on Olympic gymnasts, *Best Individual*, she once more plays with the traditions of the modernist monochrome: Rothko, Newman, Motherwell. By placing her montages on flat abstractions, Mundt nods to Color Field painting. Here, the gymnasts' routines are taken apart not through a photo-editor's labors, but by dragging a ruler across the drying paint: Gerhard Richter's trick to simulate gesture through mechanical means. Mundt takes up one of Francis Bacon's signatures: the body in outline, slightly visible after filling it out with flesh. These are subtle yet specific references, which again underline the separation of body from space, and furthermore ask, as a painter, can I own this? Will this somehow serve my struggle?

The view inherited from the Western Enlightenment is structured according to order and linearity, and this suppresses fragmentation and multiplicity as coexistence. Montage argues for disruption, and proposes that everything might exist all at once, and that all is more than it appears. This brings us back to the idea of *defocalizing*. Consider it a way to relax one's eyes, and then one's point of view, to allow other things to enter, as equals. This is potentially a deep shift in awareness. The movement of irony is binary, with its "it could be this, it could be that," while defocalizing entails a *both*: this and that, and even more.

To return to Tillmans' reflection on his work: he referred to the breadth of his output as, merely, "the multiplicity of myself and my contemporaries." Can Mundt simply state this, with similar defocalizing? Can her different strategies coalesce, unify, and go beyond duality despite the ironic edge that's always there?

A thought by Fred Moten might help: "We fall so we can fall again, which is what ascension really means to us. To fall is to lose one's place, to lose the place that makes one, to relinquish the locus of being, which is to say of being single." In this description, Moten's and Mundt's sensibilities meet. Their separate notions of history and struggle, and the ways that they articulate their stances, are quite different, but in the tireless movement of falling to fall again, they come together. The stubborn energy to return again and again to an argument with painting, with art, with the art world, might just push ambiguity and ambivalence until they become multiplicity. For now, Mundt leaves us with a sense of committed unresolve, a stance in favor of difficult painting, not simply pleasing painting, and against the slick sheen of grandeur and success of power.