CONTINGENT ENGAGEMENT:
A RECENT PAINTING

John Tallman

2009 january 23 through february 21
clough-hanson gallery, rhodes college, memphis, tn
Polyurethane, pigment and foam, 13" x 12", 2008
Several years before the exhibition at Rhodes College, John Tallman made a rubber mold of a painting he’d completed in 2005. This untitled, fluorescent red, acrylic on wood painting wasn’t one of Tallman’s favorites, nor did he consider it a throwaway piece. In the artist’s words, it was “right in the middle, average.” But there was something about this slightly off-square surface with its rounded edges that just felt right. The casual decision to use this painting for a mold started Tallman on a years-long investigation that makes up the body of work for this exhibition. Here we find him beginning at a not-so-simple point of departure and traveling at nearly an infinite number of directions at once. Using the mold of this particular painting, he creates a series of resin, plastic, or plaster casts. These are then used as singular objects, surfaces for painting as well as sites for investigations of a visual language. Over time the original painting becomes a prototype or sorts. The artist is taking the original form of this painting (as well as the notion of what a painting is or isn’t) and “twisting it, subverting it, playing with it, duplicating it, respecting it, disrespecting it, losing it, getting it back, possessing it, repossessing it” all at the same time. More than simply variations on a theme, Tallman uses his unconventional studio practice to explore the almost endless possibilities inherent to the practice of painting (and sculpture). Along the way we begin to gain insight to the minutia of his particular, peculiar decision making process.

Not at all unlike the androids in the film Blade Runner, these copies sometimes become more real than the originals. The accuracy and personality of Tallman’s replicants vary depending on the process and materials chosen. Urethane plastic resin mixed with toilet paper is, by its nature, unruly and lumpy whereas pigmented resin tends to seamlessly capture every nook and cranny of the original mold. Often the pieces are casts from casts (that may or may not be casts from casts themselves). These second or third generation copies take on subtle nuances that naturally arise from the artist’s unpredictable duplication process. Like ongoing Xerox copies, little specks or bumps become amplified the more you move away from the original copy. Leaving these imperfections, Tallman embraces the element of chance inherent to such a process. The very act of producing these multiples gives them a built-in history the moment they are made.

The exhibition’s nontraditional installation is an extension of Tallman’s exceptionally fluid studio practice. His configurations usually feature paintings on the floor, stacked, leaning against walls as well as a painting’s traditional location: hung flat on the wall. These installation methods provide yet another avenue for the artist to explore the relationships among the paintings themselves, as well as the connections between paintings and the spaces they inhabit. This intentional shift away from comfortable notions of what a painting exhibition looks like provides a space where the viewers have to renegotiate their physical and emotional relationships to the work.

While the pieces that make up the exhibition share a common point of origin, they are extremely varied in their execution and completion. A number of the paintings in the exhibition exist simply as they were originally cast, while others are altered greatly: painted, broken, reformed and repainted again. Additionally, the materials used vary from piece to piece. Many are made from a seductive, translucent, pigmented resin. Their gentle, luminous shapes are juxtaposed with their heavier looking counterparts that are cast using a bumpier, more opaque resin or the dense, rounded plaster casts. Additionally the crisp, even edges of many paintings contrast with the jagged uneven lines of those that have been broken and reformed. While the paintings share a playful, pop-culture influenced sensibility in terms of color, each piece is informed by its own thoughtfully considered and keenly nuanced palette. When employing a pared down visual vocabulary in the way Tallman does, every step must be carefully weighed. Subtlety is always more complicated than it appears. A close inspection brings one to admire the artist’s uncanny ability to deftly combine the simplicity of form with these complex, occasionally unruly, often caustic colors.

The title of the exhibition, Contingent Engagement: A Recent Painting, offers additional clues to understanding the artist’s intention. As evident by the works in the exhibition and as the title implies, the artist is deeply engaged in the rigors of creating and exploring this territory where chance and repetition play such an important and influential role. The title also refers to the exhibition as A Recent Painting. As he works at this model again and again, he is not trying to find a right answer. Rather, he is striving to establish a better understanding of the forms and materials as well as their place in the world. These are the workings of an artist who revels in the notion that his studio practice is a vast continuum. Tallman has established a process that not only allows one thing to lead to the next, but operates with the idea that all previous and subsequent activities are connected.

Hamlett Dobbins
Director, Clough-Hanson Gallery

1 From an email exchange between the artist and the author from January 1, 2009.
2 From an email exchange between the artist and the author from January 5, 2009.
John Tallman  
Artist’s Statement

I'm interested in that point where the illusion of two dimensional images breaks down.  
I'm interested in the freedom found in working under certain conventions.  
I'm interested in the effects of gravity on a painted surface.  
I'm interested in paintings that don't hang straight or that aren't quite square.  
I'm interested in gravity.  
I'm interested in plastic-like surfaces.  
I'm interested in making paintings out of something else besides paint, cotton and wood.  
I'm interested in stacked pizza boxes.  
I'm interested in old holes in walls that have no purpose.  
I'm interested in the theoretical possibility of creating endless compositions.  
I'm interested in wood painted white.  
I'm interested in chunks of red wax.  
I'm interested in things people can describe as jello-like.  
I'm interested in capturing fragments.  
I'm interested in the dirty, dusty image a hung picture leaves on the wall after it's taken away.  
I'm interested in the big, empty space that inhabits the center of my work.
Polyurethane and pigment, 13"x12", 2008

Photo credit: David Nester. ALL images courtesy the artist.