ALMINE RECH

Blair Thurman
Mature Blonde

Mar 31 — May 14, 2016 | London, Savile Row

Almine Rech Gallery is pleased to present American artist Blair Thurman's first solo exhibition with the gallery. Entitled *Mature Blonde*, the exhibition comprises entirely new paintings. Nicolas Trembley, art critic and curator, took this opportunity to interview Blair Thurman about his inspirations and practice.

Nicolas Trembley: What's your background? Where did you study and what did you study?

Blair Thurman: As I've said, I had a very fortunate childhood in regards to art. In my teenage years, I drifted away from it — typical '70s high school — sex, drugs, a lot of road trips to the beach. When the time came for me to find a profession, the only thing that I was cut out to do really was to be an artist. Perhaps we had always assumed that's what I would do. In Nova Scotia where I went to school, there was a very strong art history and conceptual program, but I felt I needed some kind of discipline, which I found in printmaking. I guess I was trying to pick up some kind of work ethic. It was labor intensive but I discovered a lot of interesting things about seriality, modification, and things like image reversal — I always wound up liking the backwards plate more than the finished print no matter which one I started with, it was always the other one that was better. And I thought about this when I read something that John Armleder said about how he felt that my work was a lot about customizing, and I also realized there is a lot of customizing in the hot wheels influence — the Spectraflame paint, the way they would die-cast a car like a Camaro, for example, and then every season, every new series would be painted or customized, modified in some way, so it's like different ways of handling the same painting. And a lot of my work in painting is layered on previous works. If I make a painting and I like it, I want to relive that because I enjoy painting, and you wind up with a natural lineage.

NT: You always say that your work is very personal and connected to your past, so how did this background, family and the culture you were raised in shape your identity and taste?

BT: The answer is very self-centered and egotistical. I felt from the time I was very small that I kind of knew what art was. By time I got to school, the fashion was to analyze art as a derivate (post-modernism) and I was annoyed by the idea that it could be studied and learned by anyone, like geology. Art history had become art. Nevertheless, it took me a very long time — until I was well into my '30s — before I made anything that I really felt like qualified to be called a painting.

Steve (Parrino) had given me a very useful bit of advice, among many, which was to picture the best work of a favorite painter and then try to imagine my work hanging next to it. And I feel like if you're honest with yourself, this is still a really great test, which I still fail quite often.

NT: Who inspired you? What were your references in art at that time?

BT: Of course I always liked Warhol — the pop flatness, also, John Wesley for the same reason. There are so many painters I admire and love.

NT: You are mainly known for your neon sculptures and your shaped canvases. How do you shift from one medium to the other and in which category do you feel the most comfortable and why?

BT: I became really proficient with neon working with Nam June Paik and then, in my own work. Initially, the neons were conceived more as atmosphere or environment to the paintings. Previously, I had created painting soundtracks, like mix-tapes, audio complements, for the same purpose — to work with the painting. The difference between painting and neon is not so much an issue — a bit like with Martial Raysse, perhaps. They can accomplish similar ends. Aesthetically, the morphological difference isn't so extreme as one might think. Sometimes I do a painting based on a neon based on a painting; or use the two together.

They can both be very poetic, very nostalgic. Of course, both neon and canvas have their strengths. Neon can be an edge and so it makes a beautiful curve as in a Haida painting, but it also can create a kind of a volume or an atmosphere — which can be a sacred effect. Canvas can do the same edge, curves, et cetera and has weight and a kind of age. Neon can have an age, too. Painting obviously is quieter, therefore a lot easier to live with.

NT: Can you explain the series that you call "business card paintings"?

BT: One of my only real "innovations" was the "banked track." I had not seen one done before, certainly not as a painting. I did my first ones in 1991 at the Thai Cafe show in Brooklyn. It was a group show that included artists such as Olivier Mosset, Rikrit Tiravanija, and others. For that I just used actual model track, but laid it out in relief against the large wall.

Later, in '94 I was working for Nam June Paik down at the old art fair in Miami. Hans Mayer pulled some strings to get me into a 'sculpture garden' exhibit in an empty hall next to the fair — this was a classic Miami thing with AstroTurf and lots of fruity colors and little gold name plaques with a little winding path around the sculptures. I remember that they let me put a model track out next to a Cesar 'Thumb' and I actually got a little name tag, just like the one that said 'Cesar'. The punchline is that the cleaning people came along and took it away overnight. So of course I was very proud to be refusé. Around '96, I decided I needed a business card. I liked that European style of the sort of oval, because it was like a little track, but in those days the way you would typically make your own cards was to lay the design out in repetition and Xerox them. I wound up saving the layouts of the repeating ovals.

Around this point in time, I got very paranoid that someone might steal my banked canvas idea as I was always very concerned about owning the original idea. So when I did the Ecart booth for John (Armleder) in '99, I was looking for a way to own the idea and I hit upon using these loops of my business card as a wall painting for the booth. Later that lead to a painting and then a neon of the painting and so on. Until today — what is known as the "4-hole" and the "12-hole" are really just four and twelve business cards combined with a banked track.

NT: Do you produce all your pieces yourself? Do you invent new techniques? Do you push the boundaries of their realization when producing pieces? Is the technique important in the reception of your work?

BT: I was very spoiled as a child for this business in the sense that I was surrounded by a lot of beautiful '50s and '60s painting — the pop flatness; also, abstract minimalism, which I never found that different between a very flat Warhol and a monochrome. Here I mean a kind of dry awareness of oblivion that finds expression in painting, which derives from a manmade landscape with the predominance of reproduced and perfected forms. I give you the example of Richard Smith, a British painter, I must have seen his work when I was 5 or 6 years old (the London scene, ICA Boston, 1966). The paintings were monumental, like a kind of 3-D billboard advertisement, with minimal color, a minimal surface, geometric cigarette boxes loom physically from the rectangle in a relief, a kind of escape from the Greenbergian plane. I only realized much later, maybe a few years ago, how much influence the Smith 3-D paintings clearly had on me. I remember seeing Stellas from the time and being very impressed with the monumentality, the aluminum paint, it was very sexy for a kid. I rushed to see the Stella retrospective at the Whitney recently — I had seen some of the works as a child and was familiar with most of it, but seeing it in the flesh again, I found myself so inspired. As an artist I feel more akin to a used-car salesman, selling interesting models rather than a new car dealer.

NT: You are inspired by found images, popular forms and pop culture. How do you translate that into your work?

BT: As a student, I had invented a system of painting that I called “less-than” painting. The idea was an allover matrix, like tiles of relatively simple rectangles, a color or a simple shape. The object of it was to encourage a kind of a scan rather than a gaze. I realized after several painful years that this system was too heavy, too much theory. Around this same time, I was also experiencing a strong nostalgia for childhood aesthetics, toys, for example, and I made the connection that modular toy tracks (like Hot Wheels and Slotcar tracks) were already achieving the same effect, but in a much lighter, more elegant way. Since then I’ve become more able to see the found art solutions.

NT: The cars, the guns and their symbolics are the main subjects in your work, why?

BT: I would actually disagree on that. Those are sources from which I was inspired at a certain point in time, and to which I certainly return, but I have a much broader interest in not just vernacular culture as a point of reference, but in different aspects of culture at large. Agro-industrial architecture; Native American, particularly Northwest coast Tlingit and Haida, visual culture; landscape; literature; I saw a Redon show at Beyeler a while back that was magnetising. Yeah, I love racetracks, Petroliana, the road, the road trip, hot wheels, le Mans... but I don’t want to get boxed into ‘BoyTown’.

NT: Are you inspired by movies? Songs? Which ones? Other subjects?

BT: Yes, I watch movies constantly. Two or three nights a week as a teenager I would go to a movie with my dad instead of doing my homework. There were a lot of retro theaters around Boston so we never ran out and movies were better in those days. Perhaps he was training me. In any case, I have to have a TV on with movies constantly. I give you an example of a movie that helps me paint (actually helps me paint better — ‘Runaway Train’ (1985) with John Voight, Eric Roberts, Rebecca Demornay, John Ryan. This movie is like watching Moby Dick as it is being written — from an original script by Akira Kurosawa, it’s bleak — but it’s full of fate, redemption and transcendence. It’s life, and it is death. And sticking out of the front of the horrible engine is a giant Frank Stella! Black and frozen in a brutal Alaskan winter landscape.

NT: The titles are very important for you, how do you choose them? What do they mean? Can you give me examples of titles that you use for Almine Rech Gallery’s exhibition?

BT: I often find that the painters and paintings I really like seem to have great titles. The title is an opportunity for the artist to identify their position in relation to the viewer. Am I giving you the finger? Are we sharing a joke? Sharing a secret? Am I patting you on the head? Am I happy? Am I sad?

NT: Do you produce pieces just for an exhibition or are they produced before and the exhibition is the opportunity to show them?

BT: I always paint until the last minute, what I call a white-knuckle ride. I don’t know exactly how I do it really, except that I’ve been pretty lucky. They seem to come together in the end. I always paint a group of paintings at a time and I finish them like a family of acrobats, like a small circus. They’re designed to make a good show, but individually they have their own purposes.

NT: Do you feel being part of a certain new generation of artists or a certain group of artists? How would you describe it?

BT: I find I do my best work when confronting myself. And it’s not always that easy — even though I’ve been doing it a long time.

I think I would find it very hard to focus if I was in the city, for example. I find openings can be very frantic. I’m not used to seeing so many people at one time. I have my “art family” — people I care about. I try to stay in close touch with them through Instagram or whatever. I do miss them, but I think to do the work, actually you really have to be alone.

NT: Who are you talking to? Who is your public? Audience?

BT: That family — those same fifty people. And the people like them I haven't met, but I'm glad to know they're out there.

NT: Is there anything you would you like to change, or make people conscious of through your art?

BT: It's an amazing feeling when you meet someone through your art and you immediately know that they understand you. It's hard to imagine another line of work or way of life that contains that possibility.

Blair Thurman (b. 1961, New Orleans) lives and works in New York. He has exhibited in institutions and galleries such as Oklahoma City Museum of Art (Oklahoma City, 2015); Half Gallery (New York, 2015); The FLAG Art Foundation (New York, 2015); Peres Project (Berlin, 2014); Gagosian Gallery (New York, 2014); Galerie Frank Elbaz (Paris, 2014); Karma (New York, 2013); The Kunsthalle Bern Fondation (Bern, 2012); Centre National d'Art Contemporain de Grenoble (Grenoble, 2009); Kunstmuseum St. Gallen (St Gallen, 2009); Palais de Tokyo (Paris, 2007).