

BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE



MAILINGLIST

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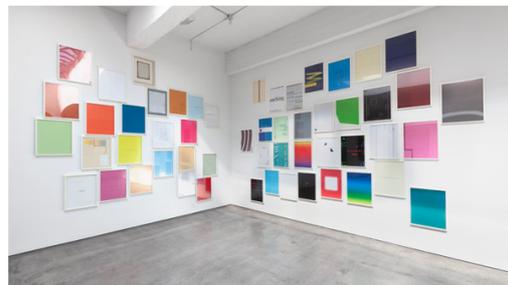
DAVID DIAO and WALID RAAD

by Joan Waltemath

PAULA COOPER GALLERY | SEPTEMBER 22 – OCTOBER 27, 2012

David Diao and Walid Raad met at Hampshire College in the late '90s where they were both on the faculty—Raad having just completed his Ph.D. and Diao, though born in Chengdu, a veteran of the New York art world with a history from the early days of SoHo, where he had the first one-person show at Paula Cooper's gallery in 1969. They soon found that they shared a keen interest in the archive and the way histories are kept. Widely divergent in their chosen subjects, the fruitful dialogue they have maintained for nearly 20 years is the impetus for their exhibition.

Raad's work for the current exhibition, "Appendix XVIII: Plates 63-257" (2012), which was also shown in part at DOCUMENTA(13) this year as "Scratching on Things I Could Disavow," takes its point of departure from the explosion of infrastructure for a burgeoning art scene in the Middle East. A native of Lebanon who came to the U.S. in 1983 fleeing a war in his homeland, Raad has both a vested interest in and an informed viewpoint on these recent developments.



Installation view from Walid Raad and David Diao, Paula Cooper Gallery, New York (September 22 – October 27, 2012). © Walid Raad and David Diao. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York.

Reconfiguring the bits and pieces of materials and text that bear a central or tangential relationship to the new art practices, Raad's less than sensual but certainly sleek works are the perfect vehicles for investment: none are too big, they are bright but not too loud, smart looking and cryptic enough to seem somewhat mysterious. Each is grounded by an informative backstory. And indeed, Raad is talking about history, the history of the present moment as documented through a rapidly expanding art network. These works invite their onlookers to become a part of it all, too, as both collector and archivist, through ownership.

Output as scans that for the most part use fragments of text on monochrome fields, the framed scans fill up one corner of the room in Paula Cooper's alternative space in a seemingly random salon style hanging. Here the familiar framework of institutional critique tends to move us away from attaching anything more than a passing glance to the blue ground, the rainbow fade or the shapes of yellow on gray-violet that make up the grounds. Their lack of engagement with a formal vocabulary pushes them towards design; their content as it is, being written. They feel like the trappings of an overtly thorough, precise and categorical intellect, qualities any archivist would cherish.

Raad's project, which has long been recursive, meets a more expanded end in his photographs of exhibited objects as they appear reflected in the high gloss floors of undesignated but new, Middle Eastern museums. Simply titled "Preface to the Second Edition _ III" (2012), the work is catalogued with ascending numbers. Where gray melts into glare with shadow defining edge, the true nature of the object photographed remains shrouded; reduced to an essential aspect of themselves, the objects which are his subjects open up through the process of being photographed and become fluid. At first view their resulting enigmatic nature serves to facilitate multiple readings and then allows for both a re-contextualization and reinterpretation or the seeking of a referential clue to carry their signification beyond the initial apprehension of their appearance. Reflections on the framed works' Plexiglas surfaces add the present to the other locations recorded—bringing the two worlds together to sonorous effect.

Raad's sculptural works seem to reflect a somewhat different premise than "Appendix XVIII: Plates 88-151" (2009), creating an apparent evolution of thought moving through the three bodies of work. As "Untitled (floor piece)" (2011) frames an absent wall, it opens a white space that is latent—to be filled by the perceiver. The floor, usually relegated to the non-privileged position in a figure/ground dialectic, is here rendered beautifully and painstakingly in wood inlay as the ostensible subject. The reversal parallels the change in the position of the perceiver, as s/he is now given interpretative responsibilities. This tendency, apparent here as well as in a few of Diao's pieces in the large room of Paula Cooper's alternate space, is refreshing. In opening up the dialogue to not only be received, but to embrace how works are conditioned through receivership, the relative nature of communication is affirmed.

Framed work and paintings usually prove difficult to hang together—not for the framed works so much in this context, but for the painting's ability to command the space of the gallery. Here though, they make the two artists' works immediately distinguishable. Diao's large acrylic painting "KM" (2012) finally dominates the space and speaks out of its void when, like architecture, it makes a subject of the body.

Diao's history of referencing Modernist icons has played out over more than two decades, examining benchmarks in the art historical debates of the last century. Here his familiar

referencing of Malevich's 1915 exhibition of Suprematist paintings, which Diao first begun in 1984, is paired with an image taken from Russian architect Konstantin Melnikov's studio. Called "M & M"(2012), it shows off Melnikov's signature hexagonal windows to effect, creating a pattern of geometric figures that is on a plane oblique to the picture plane. The regular pattern the architect's windows create makes for an interesting play of depth when painted, an effect that Diao explores in a number of paintings here.

Diao's work points to many things, including but not limited to the complex and sometimes fruitful exchange between architects and painters. His glance back at the turn of the century is but one example. While talking with Diao, his interest in historical information is amply evident, though the wealth of information is not necessarily available when looking at his works. The complexity of both the formal and historical relationships here is a fertile ground, which with a little effort, can be unearthed.

Diao makes a gesture towards an historical lineage in "Diamond-hexagon"(2012), a single hexagonal form suspended in a square. It is installed in the upper corner of the room, just above his screened image of the 1915 Suprematist painting installation, in which Malevich's black square hung, like an icon would have, high up in the corner of the room. As well, it harkens back to the family and guild crests of the 17th century that are visible hanging high up on the columns in Saenredam's paintings of the same time. No doubt a source of inspiration for Mondrian, who would have been familiar with his countryman's work, Diao intones the lineage of contemporary non-objective painting in the melding of diverse cultural references. For the most part formally inert, "Diamond-hexagon" rests on its context in order for us to take something from its blue and black surface. What is interesting in this exhibition is how Diao moves his work out of an anti-formal position, without embracing the problematics of Formalism.

In "Kaleidoscope"(2012), the other large piece in the room, a layering of shape and color works together with the silkscreened image of Melnikov's hexagonal windows as they wrap around his studio, creating a play of forms that hints at the complexity of the backstory of the two men that so engages Diao. Melnikov, famous in 1924 for his design of Lenin's tomb in Moscow's Red Square, soon became, like Malevich, a censored member of the avant-garde and turned to painting when his architectural license was revoked in 1937. Malevich, after the early Suprematist exhibitions were similarly restrained, as we understand this history from afar, and began to make, among other things, highly abstract architectonic models that foreshadow the architectural modernism that was yet to come.

"Kaleidoscope" works formally here in a way that is counter to "Konstantin Melnikov Architect" (2012), "Suppressed (small)"(2012),and "Hobbled"(2012), the text-based paintings hanging next to it. Using a schematic plan of Melnikov's 1927 house and studio configured as a Venn diagram, Diao overlays a text meaning "hobbled" or "suppressed" in Russian, allowing the content to be determined both referentially and linguistically. The words Diao chose for

this body of work—“hobbled” and “suppressed”— point to not only aspects of Melnikov’s creative life, but also to the condition of receivership on the part of the works’ audience. Formal interaction and interpretation of nomenclature is by definition nil, and these works, next to the more fluid and permeable large works, “Kaleidoscope” and “KM,” seem both limited and paradigmatic of the shifting currents we are moving through at present.

When Diao’s use of Melnikov’s architectural space opens up a void in “KM”(2012), a “K” and an “M” (the initials of both men), seem to hover, stationed neither on the depicted wall—here rendered in a brilliant turquoise—nor on the surface of the painting, despite the texture resulting from being sponged on with stencils. Suspended, they signal his life, as well as Malevich’s, caught as they were in and by the imperatives of the given political regime. The simple forms of the wall in the painting reach out and wrap around the room, which is a relief in this context, as the forms and color are released to speak—each in their own way. Unrestrained by a dominance of theory or dependence on text, and where tendencies and materials that are familiar are being employed, a shift in emphasis is evident. In this formal working through of paintings’ language, both subject and object are finally released from the hegemony of an oppositional sensibility. The questions Diao’s work raises: Are we distant enough from the reign of semiotics for color and form to begin to regain their autonomy and power of signification? Is it only through recourse to the architect’s subject—the body—that a door has been opened for painting?

In the back room three works by Diao and an additional wall sculpture by Raad extend their longstanding dialogue.

The dominance of theory and semiotics in art criticism over the last 25 years has taken its toll on the art experience. Beauty too, has been its causality. Where it would be overstepping the bounds to say that beauty in any form is a primary concern here, the workings of formal language do allow for an entry point.