

C. MICHAEL NORTON
When Paintings Awake



Things Lost That We're Not Aware Of, (diptych), 2016, 90 x 160 in, acrylic on linen

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ESSAY BY RAPHAEL RUBINSTEIN

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Cover: Detail of *Striker*, (diptych), 2016-2017, 90 x 122.5 in, acrylic on linen



When Paintings Awake

BY RAPHAEL RUBINSTEIN

I DIDN'T PAY MUCH ATTENTION TO THE FLOOR during my first visit to C. Michael Norton's studio — and why should I have? Surrounded by large, complex abstractions, filled with full-throttle palettes and explosive varieties of mark-making, I was vaguely aware of the floor being covered with some kind of tape-and-fabric arrangement but really didn't give it much thought. It was only on a subsequent visit, when Norton began describing his typical painting-making process, that the significance of the floor, and the functions of its taped-down fabrics became clear to me. If I begin my discussion of Norton's work by focusing on the floor, it's for two reasons: first, that's where many of his paintings actually begin and, second, he has developed a unique and innovative way of incorporating the floor into his painting process.

The floor has, of course, been a vital space for painting since Pollock began working on unstretched canvases in his Long Island studio in the late 1940s. Creating a painting on the floor offered Pollock and the many artists who have subsequently chosen the horizontal over the vertical a more extensive, less encumbered space than the easel or wall: paintings could be larger, almost mural scale; artists gained the ability to step, crawl or lay on the painting (to be "in" it, as Pollock famously said) and to work from all four sides. They also found themselves on more intimate terms with gravity.

Arguably, it was only some 20 years after Pollock's first drip paintings that the floor really came into its own as a privileged creative zone in the work of post-minimalist sculptors such as Lynda Benglis, Richard Van Buren and Barry Le Va, and European artists (often painters) such as Claude Viallat and Sigmar Polke (I have in mind the latter's "Motorcycle Drawings" of 1969-1971); New York painter Jack Whitten is also a pioneer of floor painting. In his recent book *25 Women: Essays on Their Art*, Dave Hickey evokes this moment in a conversation he recalls from the late 1960s: "The critic Peter Plagens, myself, and a group of sculptors were wandering around the SoHo opening of a Barry Le Va scatter-piece. As we surveyed Le Va's receding plane of dispersed objects, Plagens said, 'The floor is the new wall.'" Since its

apotheosis some half century ago, the floor has been a prime exhibition space for artists looking to spread out and escape hierarchies. In Norton's work, however, it serves a different function—as active resource rather than zone of display.

Here's how it works: In Norton's New York studio—a below-ground space in a Tribeca loft building where the artist lives with his wife, sculptor Ruth Hardinger—Norton will lay large rectangles of raw linen on the floor, sectioning them off and securing them with wide strips of duct tape. I have often seen artists cover the floors of their studios to protect them from becoming splattered with paint, but no such concern motivates Norton. He positions the raw linen as a receptive rather than protective device; it's there to accumulate paint incidents as Norton works on other paintings that, after having served their time on the floor, have been stretched and hung on the wall. As he is positioning these rectangles of raw linen, he may already be thinking about the painting it will eventually become, sometimes taping over areas of the linen that he wants to remain free of color, but once the textile is secured he doesn't pay attention to what is happening to it for quite a while. Norton remarked to me that he sees the paintings on the floor as being in a "dream state." This seems like a perfect way to describe this initial phase:

Left: *Pink River Run*, (detail), 2016, 28 x 42 in, pigment print & acrylic on canvas

at rest, recused from any conscious intentionality, the painting is at liberty to imagine itself in all possible configurations as it accumulates the detritus of studio activity. And what comes after this dream state? Once on the wall the painting slowly awakens and begins to recount its dreams to the artist.

Norton began incorporating the floor into his process about four years ago. Before that he would just put a drop cloth on the floor and get to work. Then one day he realized he was standing on something that was already on its way to being a painting. In the first of his floor-origin works, *Euclid* (2012-13), the extent and density of floor splatters is limited, but since then the artist has given more and more scope to these messy incidents, as in the recent paintings *Working Title* (2015) and *Emotional Foreplay* (2016) where these complex parts are, arguably, the dominant elements.

Initially, the accumulation of paint on the floor linens is accidental, unintentional, and largely unobserved, a matter of drips and splatters generated by the work being done on paintings hanging on nearby walls. Some of these flurries of paint are let loose when Norton peels strips of tape off of a still-wet painting and whips them back at the painting, producing a shower of paint droplets, or he may flick the tape directly at the floor coverings. Occasionally there are partial footprints where the artist has stepped on and tracked wet paint across the taped-down floor linen. More substantial are the collateral drips and splatters made when Norton uses one of the various knives, spatulas, straightedge tools and other implements (including lots of masking tape) to apply and guide paint. Interestingly, or perversely, the only tool that Norton never uses is the paintbrush. It's unusual for a painter, especially one who pursues such painterly effects, to forgo the trusty paintbrush, but maybe a little less unusual for someone whose formal artistic training was as a sculptor, not as a painter.

At a certain point when one of the pieces of linen underfoot looks ready, Norton frees it from the duct

tape, stretches it and hangs it on the wall. Before applying any more paint to the newly stretched linen, he uses a roller to lay down irregular bands of clear acrylic emulsion. Not immediately noticeable — and probably missed by many casual viewers — amid the thickets of paint fragments and bold architectonic motifs that will follow, these swaths of transparent gesso nonetheless play a crucial, if subtle, compositional role. For one thing, their ghostly demarcations, slightly lighter in color than the raw linen, break up the ground, adding a visual rhythm to the backgrounds of the paintings. Its subtlety in color variation, as it lies over the linen ground, heightens our awareness of the material qual-

ities of the finely woven, linen, a support that is more delicate than standard canvas and even carries a touch of opulence. The large, soft, rolling swath of the application stroke creates a notable tension between the emulsion and the thin sharpness of the acrylic colors vectoring in to the painting. Additionally, the emulsion's slightly reflective qualities introduce a different

type of retinal fact, while acting as the thinnest of barriers between support and paint. It's when you look very closely at Norton's paintings—and he is one of those artists whose work repays nose-to-painting looking—that you notice the difference between how a painterly mark behaves when it touches raw linen and when it comes to rest on a layer of emulsion. Very recently, Norton has taken his experiments with clear emulsion further in a large triptych (inspired by some religious paintings the artist saw many years ago at the Prado) in which the two side panels are only painted with rolled-on emulsion, while all the painterly action is confined to the middle panel. Is an emulsion-only painting the inevitable next step?

Previous writers have noted the exuberance of Norton's palette, and, indeed, the overall tone of his work. In an insightful essay, painter-critic Stephen Westfall observed that Norton's paintings "shock with color intensity and material plasticity," as indeed they do. Westfall

also speculates that the "over the top" vivaciousness of Norton's work runs counter to a lingering Puritan strain in some sectors of American culture. Whether or not there are any shreds left of the Puritan legacy in the U.S.—it seems pretty doubtful after the 2016 Presidential election—clearly Norton is no subdued Minimalist. When I first encountered his paintings there was something about them, perhaps to do with that "color intensity and material plasticity," that I couldn't identify, some influence or attitude that set him apart from many of his peers. While I saw that he was clearly in close dialogue with canonical postwar abstraction painting—Westfall cites Richter, Johns and Stella as being among Norton's influences; one could add other younger painters—his unabashed *joie de peindre* seemed to be drawing on other sources. It was only when Norton began to tell me about his frequent sojourns in France in the 1980s, and about his encounters there with some of the Figuration Libre artists such as Robert Combas and Hervé di Rosa, that I realized what one of those sources might be.

A movement that emerged in France in the early 1980s, Figuration Libre drew on graffiti, cartoons, comic strips and art brut, as well as on Dubuffet's hyper-compressed compositions and love of lumpy, proliferating figures. It also gleefully rejected anything that could be considered good taste or intellectually pretentious, seeking instead street cred and populist scope. Although there were close contacts and obvious affinities between Figuration Libre artists and Americans such as Keith Haring and Kenny Scharf, the French artists never made a mark in New York. Norton only encountered them because in the 1980s he was exhibiting his work (figurative sculptures!) at Galerie Chanjour in Nice, which also showed Robert Combas and other Figuration Libre artists. In terms of style and imagery, Norton's current paintings have nothing in common with Figuration Libre, but what they do share with the work of Combas, di Rosa et Cie is a willingness to operate at full volume, to crank that painterly amp up to 11. Norton is never afraid of overloading his viewers. As critic David Cohen has said of Norton's paintings, "rife with the raw energy of heavy metal, perhaps, or complex free jazz, or even opera at its most, well, operatic, they are a euphoric fusion of virtuosity and

excess." Evidence of this can be seen in paintings such as the appropriately named diptych *What a Wallop* (2005-2008) or *Vortex of Desire* (2016). This is not to say that Norton only favors excess—there is an almost pastoral quality to some passages in his paintings, and he clearly understands the virtues of empty space.

The shift from floor to wall is not the only migration in the lives of Norton's paintings. Frequently, he will take works in progress back and forth between his New York City studio and his second home upstate. At least one of the paintings in this show, *Working Title*, made the round trip, having been started in New York, worked on upstate, then returned to New York for yet more changes. His work can also take a long time to be completed, as some of the dates reveal. It is probably not the result of the city/country split of studios, but Norton's paintings are full of dislocations and disjunctions, starting with the scraped and scumbled forms that he gradually builds up around the floor-splatters and marks, and, even more radically, with the carefully taped and often slender geometric forms that appear in most of his works. Look, for instance, at the backwards E motif in *Einstein's Edge of Winter* (2009-2011) which, incidentally, is one of the wall-only paintings. The predominance of white paint in *Einstein's Edge of Winter* evokes, intentionally or not, the white ground of primed canvas. It's a reminder that because he uses raw linen, Norton never starts with a "blank canvas," even when, as with this work, he skips the floor phase.

In a new series, Norton has found yet another way to paint on what we can think of as a "prepared surface" (analogous to John Cage's use of a "prepared piano"). Working with master printmaker Katy Martin, Norton has made digital prints of details from his paintings and then overpainted them. Painting onto photographic reproductions is a fairly common technique, but it's rare for an artist to overpaint a reproduction of one of his or her own paintings. (This may be an emerging trend: Amy Sillman has recently been painting onto reproductions of her digital drawings). Printed slightly larger than the originals, these are hard-to-pin-down hybrids: at once reproductions and unique objects, they are full of fascinating spatial and conceptual conundrums.

Unlike that forceful reversed E in *Einstein's Edge of Winter*, many of the taped-off forms in Norton's recent paintings convey a sense of fragility and lightness, like things made from paper, feathers or balsa wood. This weightless quality makes them seem to be floating atop the linen support like apparitions. I'm thinking, for instance, of the pink and yellow vertical forms in *Working Title* and the trellis-like structures flanking the central tangle of *Emotional Foreplay*. So different from the layered, shard-like marks and patches of scumbling that lie between them, these tapering structures, which oscillate between the totemic, the decorative and the architectural, appear to have dropped into the painting from another dimension; their delicacy is dramatically at odds with the blocky, almost brutalist forms that appear in many of Norton's paintings. Complicating matters still further, they feature internal color shifts that are the only visual residue of intermediate compositions that vanish when the surrounding tape is pulled off. Thus, at the same time we might take them as framing devices or figure/ground statements, they also function as ruin-images, inviting us to imagine lost topologies. For all his libertine embrace of paint in its most physical and retinal manifestations, for all his continuous—and deeply pleasurable—on-slaughts of color, Norton also acknowledges the share of the invisible. Amid these crashing chords of color and glissandos of dragged gestures, there are virtual images that exist only as a whisper, fugitive as the circumstances of a dream that dissolve the moment we wake up.

RAPHAEL RUBINSTEIN is a New York-based poet and art critic whose numerous books include *Polychrome Profusion: Selected Art Criticism 1990-2002*, *The Afterglow of Minor Pop Masterpieces* and *The Miraculous*. He edited the anthology *Critical Mess: Art Critics on the State of their Practice* and is widely known for his articles on "provisional painting." His poetry has appeared in, among other places, *Grand Street*, *Fence* and *Harper's Magazine* and in *Best American Poetry 2015*. From 1997 to 2007 he was a senior editor at *Art in America*, where he continues to be a contributing editor. He is currently professor of critical studies at the University of Houston. In 2002, the French government presented him with the award of Chevalier in the Order of Arts and Letters. In 2010, his blog *The Silo* won a Creative Capital/Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant. In 2014 *The Silo* was given a Best Blog Award of Excellence by the International Association of Art Critics.



Working Title, (diptych), 2015, 90.5 x 110.5 in, acrylic on linen



Memory Blues, 2017, 42 x 28 in, pigment print & acrylic on canvas



Don't Go Down, 2017, 42 x 28 in, pigment print on canvas



Cutter, 2017, 28 x 52 in, pigment print & acrylic on canvas



Trying To Get Away From Myself, 2017, 28 x 42 in, pigment print & acrylic on canvas



Emotional Foreplay, 2016, 80 x 90 in, acrylic on linen



I Am Not What I Am, (triptych), 63 x 154.5 in, 2016, acrylic on linen



Striker, (diptych), 2016-2017, 90 x 122.5 in, acrylic on linen



Vortex of Desire, 2016, 70 x 80 in, acrylic on linen



Einstein's Edge of Winter, (diptych), 2009-2011, 90 x 144 in, acrylic on linen



New Calakota, 2016, 90 x 96 in, acrylic on linen



Life on Fire, 2014-2015, 90 x 72 in, acrylic on canvas



Evidence of Existence, 2014-2015, 90 x 72 in, acrylic on linen



What a Wallop, (diptych), 2005-2008, 90 x 144 in, acrylic on linen



Euclid, (diptych), 2012-2013, 79 x 133 in, acrylic on linen



Humboldt, 2014-2015, 72 x 90 in, acrylic on linen



Hog Mountain Spur, (diptych), 2013-2014, 80 x 140 in, acrylic on linen

C. MICHAEL NORTON

SELECTED SOLO

2017	“When Paintings Awake,” David&Schweitzer Contemporary, (Bushwick) Brooklyn, NY
2016	“The Temptation of Space,” Art Virus Ltd., Frankfurt, Germany
2015	“The Wolf I Feed,” Brian Morris Gallery-Buddy Warren Inc., New York, NY
2014	PS 209 Gallery, Stone Ridge, NY
2013	“Over The Top,” Thomas Punzmann Fine Arts, Frankfurt Germany
2011	“Dancing In My Head,” Thomas Punzmann Fine Arts, Frankfurt, Germany
	“Cacophony Part 1,” FiveMyles, Brooklyn, NY
	“Cacophony Part 2,” Woodstock Artist Association & Museum, Woodstock, NY
2007	“Sudden Spring Suite,” Tama, New York, NY
2004	“Wangled Tabs,” Maxwell Fine Arts, Peekskill, NY Curated by Koan Jeff Baysa
2003	100 Broadway Exhibition Program, New York, NY Curated by Suzanne Randolph Fine Arts
2001	Recent Paintings, Barbara Greene Fine Art, New York, NY
	“Razing Space,” Galerie Terre d’Art, St. Paul de Vence, France
1992	Albissola/ America/Arte” Museo Civico d’Arte Contemporanea, Albissola, Italy
	Galerie Capazza, Paris/Nancay, Nancay, France
1990	Galerie Bercovy-Fugier, Paris, France
1985	Gallery 30, San Mateo, California
1984	Galerie Christine Le Chanjour, Nice, France
	Galerie Jean-Yves Noblet, Paris/Grenoble, France
1983	Markham Gallery/Museum Services, San Jose, California
1981	San Jose State University, San Jose, California

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2017	Chimento Contemporary, Los Angeles, California
	Unix Gallery, New York, NY, Modern & Contemporary Art Fair, Palm Beach, Florida
2016	David&Schweitzer Contemporary, (Bushwick) Brooklyn, NY
	Torrance Art Museum, “Sibling Rivlaries,” Los Angeles, California
	Nation IV Thru The Rabbit Hole, Sideshow Gallery, Brooklyn, NY
2015	Salon Zurcher Paris/New York, Paris, France, with Brian Morris Gallery
	Brian Morris Gallery “spacematters” New York, NY
2014	Pollux Tower, Frankfurt, Germany
	Thomas Punzmann Fine Art, Frankfurt, Germany
2013	Sideshow Gallery, Brooklyn, NY
2012	5th Beijing International Biennale, National Art Museum of Beijing, Beijing, China
	3 Person at Filser & Graf, Munich, Germany
	Sideshow, Brooklyn, NY

2011	ArtFair Cologne Germany, with Thomas Punzmann Fine Arts, Frankfurt Germany
	Thomas Punzmann Fine Arts, Frankfurt, Germany
	Collaborative Concepts at Saunders Farm, Garrison, NY
	Sideshow Gallery, Brooklyn, NY
	Exit Art, New York, NY
2009	Collaborative Concepts at Saunders Farm, Garrison, NY
2008	Sunshine International Museum, Beijing, China
	Collaborative Concepts at Saunders Farm, Garrison, NY
	Union Square West Group Exhibition (Tama Gallery), New York, NY
	“Inside/Outside,” Maxwell Fine Art, Peekskill, NY
2004	“Precipitations London Biennale New York Pollinations,” The Lab Gallery, Roger Smith Hotel, New York City, Curated by Koan Jeff Baysa
2001-02	Barbara Greene Fine Art, New York City
2000-02	Galerie Terre d’Art, St. Paul de Vence, France
1990-98	Galerie Capazza, Paris/Nancay, France
1989-91	Galerie Bercovy-Fugier, Paris, France
	Salon International D’Arts Plastiques de Valognes, France
1986	Zeus-Trabia Gallery, New York City
1985	San Francisco Museum of Art, San Francisco, California
	Arco, International Contemporary Art Fair, Madrid, Spain
1984	Salon de Montrouge, Paris, France

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

2017	“When Paintings Awake,” Raphael Rubinstein, Essay for exhibition catalog, David&Schweitzer Contemporary
	Chimento Contemporary: “Straight Outta Bushwick,” Genie Davis, 2/14/2017, Art & Cake, Los Angeles, Ca.
	“Straight Outta Bushwick,” Carolina A. Miranda, 1/5/2017, Los Angeles Times, Los Angeles, Ca.
2016	Otium Magazine for Contemporary Literature: Ein Sinn für Distanz (A Sense of Distance). Gespräch mit dem bildenden Künstler und Maler C. Michael Norton (Interview with Artist C. Michael Norton) by Sarah Schuster. (2016) »Otium« Magazin für Lyrik und Prosa der Gegenwart no. 12. [ISSN 2195-8513]
	“Ground & Consequence: C. Michael Norton and The Color of Noise,” by David Cohen
	Catalog Essay for Art Virus Ltd, Frankfurt, Germany
2015	Le Quotidien De L’Art Mardi 20n Octobre 2015, Salon Zurcher showing North American Galleries
	THE LOOKOUT, “The Wolf I Feed,” Brian Morris Gallery and Buddy Warren Inc., Art in America, (June)
	C. Michael Norton, Brian Morris Gallery and Buddy Warren Inc. by Alexa Lawrence, Art News, Summer 2015
	Artcritical, The Review Panel, April 28, panel took place May 29, 2015 with David Cohen, Peter Plagens, Roberta Smith, Christina Kee

	Gorky’s Granddaughter Studio interview by Zachary Keeting & Christopher Joy, 26 minute video, March 15, 2015
2014	“The Temptation of Space” by Richard Vine, Black Renaissance Noire, edited & published by the Institute of African-American Affairs at New York University (Fall 2014)
2013	“Over The Top” by Stephen Westfall, artdaily.com (July 2013)
2007	“Sudden Springs Suite” by Koan Jeff Baysa
	“The Sudden Spring Series” by Koan Jeff Baysa, dArt International (volume 10, number 1), Miami, Florida
	“Tactile Abpressionism” by Koan Jeff Baysa, NY Arts (March/April 2007)
2004	“Wrangled Tebs” by Koan Jeff Baysa
2001	“Razing Spaces: The New Paintings by C. Michael Norton” by Dominique Nahas
1990	“C. Michael Norton: From the Comedy of America to the Ceremony of Life” by Isabelle Coera
1987	C. Michael Norton, featured artist, Peninsula Magazine (April 1987), San Francisco, California
1986	Exhibition 86, 11th Annual Great American Arts Festival, Santa Clara, California (Alena Willcoxon/Eileen Hill/Bee Wax)
1985	“C Michael Norton” by Jacqueline Blance, Galerie Le Chanjour, Nice, France, Kanal Magazine (January 1985)
1984	Awarded exhibition and residency grants from Ministere de la Culture, Paris, France, Commission d’orientation des artes plastiques, Grenoble, France

EDUCATION

1981	Master of Fine Arts, San Jose State University, San Jose, California
1978	Master of Arts, San Jose State University, San Jose, California
1977	Bachelor of Arts, Humboldt State University, Arcata, California



Sentinel Blues, 2013, 90 x 55 in, acrylic on canvas



Left to right:
(Above) *Pink River Run*, 2016, 28 x 42 in, pigment print & acrylic on canvas,
(Below) *Red River*, 2016, 28 x 42 in, pigment print & acrylic on canvas,
Working Title, (diptych), 2015, 90.5 x 110.5 in, acrylic on linen,
Things Lost That We're Not Aware Of, (diptych), 2016, 90 x 160 in, acrylic on linen

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