

Transfusing Abstraction: Darren Harvey-Regan's *Metalepsis*

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Darren Harvey-Regan's new photographic suite, *Metalepsis*, presents a precise, yet open-ended group of small photographic images. Pared-down, formalist, geometric, very nearly black and white images depicting arrangements of surface textures (are they rocks? concrete? polystyrene?) in a nondescript, shallow space; two identical "bracket" images at either end of the series—meant to highlight the latter's circularity—each consisting of a double image of a single orange appearing side by side on a plain background. On the left, both the orange and the background are the same uniform shade of orange; on the right, the entire image is black and white. In the centre of the series, there is just one more instance of saturated colour, in the form of an image of a sharply pointed stone squashing an orange in what appears to be a vaguely studio-like setting. Interspersed with these images are two paradoxical images of prayer: to the right of the central, squashed orange, what appears to be a black and white photograph of a kitschy postcard of Jesus, hands clasped, looking to the heavens; to its left, another praying figure (the young prophet Samuel) whose image has been cut into shards. Just three triangular chunks of the figure's image have been placed against a rich black background.

This suite stages a dense thought process: threads and strains of almost-arguments seem to circle endlessly around an absence of a central "content." This affective absence, however, at the heart of the work, feels highly specific, full of the feeling of emergent thought; it embodies the same sort of future-facing, but as of yet still silent fullness of a pensive face that is just about to speak. The suite proceeds meticulously through additions, negations, obfuscations, juxtapositions, and inflections of one image with another. Yet within this plurality of processes emerges an oft-reiterated concern. Without, I hope, placing too centralizing a claim on this concern (I would still rather say that the heart of this work can't be said, and even more than this, that this sense—and concept—of the unspeakable is itself central to the logical/affective structure of the work), I want to argue that this suite performs a double procedure, according to which the mysteries of transcendence are staged as both a trope and a mode of enquiry. This enquiry proceeds largely though a methodical and multi-faceted examination of the historical conditions through which conceptions of abstraction have been linked to—or severed from—conceptions of transcendence.

One aspect of this suite of concerns, which several of the photographs perform (and which are also performed between various pairs of photographs the eye selects) is doubt as to whether the depicted qualities in a given photographic image are properties of the objects depicted or of the medium itself. Is the orange orange because of the pigments in its skin, or the idea of "orangeness" that has seeped from the orange into the image's processing? Is a sudden darkening of the background due to a darkroom trick, or a nearly imperceptible change of materials? These images stage a sublimation of the representational concerns of the image towards transcendental interests in the dematerialization of imagery, and in the conditions of the medium itself as the very ground for the staging of that

materiality. As such, they enact an epistemological doubt about the difference between the object of one's perception and the perceptual grounds through which that object must come to be known. This is well-known art historical territory; the Greenbergs and McLuhans of the mid-twentieth century have produced (through argumentative description) a firmly entrenched portrait of a cultural and historical moment in which a concern with content, representation, and messages gave way to an urgent concern for examining the background, the medium, the conditions through which representation could come to be staged in the first place.

Yet for all this, the use of photography, here, as a medium for examining the genealogy of abstraction's concerns ups their indexicality, their ostensible drive to have "content." Indexicality—the ability to rhetorically point to an actual thing in the world that remains outside of, yet is metonymically linked to, representation—is a "native" concern of photography in much more pointed a way than, say, painting. As such, it is also, perhaps, photography's red herring; these images' indexical properties—their insistence on referring to an actual space that exists outside of the photograph—disintegrates under close inspection. Planes that seem to represent a swath of space from a distance, up close appear to present flat surface textures, perhaps of construction paper, MDF, or another mottled, pulp-based surface, that have been carefully placed (Thomas Demand-style but flatter and more formalistic) to give the illusion of three dimensionality. (Harvey-Regan's images disperse their own indexicality, taking it through detours, pinging it in unexpected directions.) For all these images' panache in exploring such complexities of mid-twentieth century attitudes toward abstraction, this in and of itself is only one strain of *Metalepsis*' thought. For what, after all, are those puzzling images of prayer doing in the mix? These images prevent the series from becoming too pat in its handling of the above concerns; they open it out onto a much wider enquiry, tracing a broad historical change in the relations between abstraction and transcendence.

At the turn of the twentieth century, abstraction, spirituality, and transcendence (both as concept and as embodied practice) seemed to go hand in hand. For Kandinsky, Mondrian, and Malevich, abstract painting was a means though which to explore theosophy, to transcend and sublimate representational and quotidian concerns in order to arrive at a more general, philosophical enquiry into origins. This prevalent link between abstraction and transcendence persisted well into the 1950s; emblematic of this insistence is Barnett Newman's work, in which interests in both the sublime and mythological/religious references are inextricably intertwined. Newman sought to reduce, to abstract a sense of encounter until it was merely a "zip," a sense of felt particularity that emerges before words, before symbolization can catch it. The sense of emergence-before-words his zips aspired to was a gateway of sorts to the sublime dimension of experience.

Yet the emerging generation of postmodern artists of the 1960s identified, pronounced, and helped to produce a fundamental shift in the epistemic relation between concepts/practices of abstraction and those of transcendence. For them, abstraction, having become a normalized, and even hegemonic procedure in New York School painting, became simply repression. Martha Rosler was among the many artists of that generation who would come to view Greenberg and the bland, wallpaper-like canvases he touted to be fundamentally conservative, exclusionary, duplicitous. Their claim to "contentlessness" could only function as a tacit claim to privilege—a short-sighted, individualistic abandonment of the aesthetic tasks of citizenship, the latter of which, for many in Rosler's generation, urgently required representation as both a mode of enquiry and a subject for analysis.

In the face of this fundamental epistemic shift, Harvey-Regan's images of prayer enact an argument through inflection. Let's say (they seem to say) that the link between abstraction and transcendence has been severed over the course of the last century. How can this link be reactivated, re-energized—and what can be learned from such a reactivation? The prayer images—which are infused with an ironic distance (but ironic in the very particular sense that Franco Bifo Berardi identifies, not as sardonic, cynical or overladen with an all-too-knowing referentiality but as opening up a space between an image and how it is read¹)—lend a hand to the abstractions, transfusing them with their once-transcendent, “native” content. The idea of the “native” that I am proposing here is more akin to “nativity” than it is to “natural”; the idea of an originary link between abstraction and transcendence, a link that emerges from the moment of the very birth of abstraction at the beginning of the twentieth century, does not necessarily make that link “natural.” Rather, it makes it seem naturalized; it acts as a kind of mythological scaffolding for this linkage, an inherent ideological procedure according to which transcendence comes to have been “native” to abstraction at the point of its emergence. Religiosity, once viewed as a repressive content—and a repressive relation to *representing* content—by many of the postmodern generation, flips, and becomes the repressed of postmodernity. Under what conditions can—and should—the link be resuscitated? The series as a whole—a kind of motor-circuit powered by the differentially charged, yet inextricably linked, conceptual pair Abstraction-Transcendence—both reactivates this once-native coupling of concepts and questions the mythological tendencies inherent to the drive to reactivate such a linkage. The series is deliberately and necessarily inconclusive on this point; its job is to lay out the circuitry of its paradox and to chart a contentless space in a centre between these conflicted, differentially charged poles of thought. As such, perhaps it performs a relocation of the concept of the contentless—a reordering of the secularized contemporary transcendental as a space between two poles of an epistemic paradox.

For me, there is one image in this series that has the final word, that invents its own modality of abstract-imagistic transcendental enquiry, or perhaps poses the series' questions most urgently. The praying image of Samuel cut into triangular shards, linked up side by side on a black background, carries a small but potent hint of violence toward embodied materiality, enacted through geometry (it is an image whose geometry flagellates its own reverent subject). It hints at a history that would link abstraction not only to transcendence but also to iconoclasm. It enacts the disembodiment of an aim toward the heavens as a both a reverence for, and a violent aim to break away from, the powers of images and their indexical procedures. On its own, perhaps the image would not do this, but in its place in the series, given the specificity of the content stream it swims in, it retells the sublimation story by posing another problem with representing sublimation through images (against what ground can it be shown, given that the ground is always already infused with a faith in images?). The fractured Samuel speaks powerfully to the embodied experience of the discipline of transcendental experience arrived at through (among other things) intense questioning: an experience which is potent enough to shatter represented reality into shards, and yet at the same time hold those shards dear, protect them in an alien pasture of geometric, self-similar, abstractable space.

Bio:

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1 Franco “Bifo” Berardi, *The Uprising: On Poetry and Finance* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2012), p. 159–66.

Abstract:

Darren Harvey-Regan's photographic suite *Metalepsis* (2013) juxtaposes formalistic images, often on the verge of abstraction, with images of religious figures. What does this juxtaposition do within the series and within the broader context of contemporary photography? The answer requires a longer look at the shifting relationships between concepts of abstraction and transcendence over the past century. Broadly speaking, abstraction, once closely allied with concepts of transcendence, came to be linked instead to repression by the 1960s. In light of this conceptual shift, Harvey-Regan's juxtapositions transfuse abstraction with a dose of its "prior" transcendent content. They also stage a series of questions around the relationship between two forms of faith in imagery: faith as a disposition to be represented, or performed, by images; and faith in the relationship between images and their ostensible referents.