

## J. Parker Valentine - Special Interests

Text by Lilou Vidal

### *Do you Believe in Ghosts?*<sup>1</sup>

To approach the work of an artist from the periphery of her sources can offer an intimate, internal reading of the active processes in formation. J. Parker Valentine intuitively gathers images, texts, photographs, graphs and various materials to question this latent state of the work in progress. "...The blueness of the atmosphere is caused by the darkness beyond it."<sup>2</sup> This phrase from Leonardo da Vinci's written observations of natural phenomena in the mountains (the Alpine peak *Monbo-so*) appears in the form of a photographed page in the archives of J. Parker Valentine. The duality he describes in the binary relationship between the atmosphere's blue limpidity and the inherence of an opaque obscurity – namely that of our cosmos – resonates in the foundation and modus operandi of the work of J. Parker Valentine.

Something in the realm of the spectral runs through the entire oeuvre of the artist in its formal, physical, and chromatic aspects. Abstraction flirts with an undefined figuration. Biomorphic, fetal, fleeting, tangential forms that seem traversed by the imprint of a body. The ambiguity of the images draws us into an exercise in false recognition, reminiscent of a Rorschach test. They seem to vanish, all the while materializing into a liquid, fluid state, a state of becoming, in which at times one can distinguish what appears to be a face.

A phenomenon of coalescence. Or perhaps these forms are dreamt up from clear waters where fleeting images are born, to *still waters* where myths and fantasies lie, those Bachelard refers to in *Water and Dreams, An Essay on the Imagination of Matter*. "...water is not only a *group* of images revealed in wandering contemplation, a series of broken, momentary reveries; it is a *mainstay* for images, a mainstay that quickly becomes a *contributor* of images, a founding contributor for images. Thus, little by little, in the course of ever more profound contemplation, water becomes an element of materializing imagination."<sup>3</sup>

These inner forms, migrant, sometimes even aggressive, are offset by the hand that constructs, led by the realness of the material and the support. Instead of the *laissez-faire* of pure automatic drawing, there is an equilibrium between the "*laisser*" [leaving be] of the matter and the "*faire*" [doing] of the hand.

Whether it is her work on MDF panels or paper, where the erasure of the graphite participates in the very process of the appearance of forms, or the various works on fabric in which the dilated oil, milk

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<sup>1</sup> The actress Pascale Ogier asks Jacques Derrida this question in a scene from English director Ken McMullen's *Ghost*

<sup>2</sup> Excerpt from a photographed page of "The Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci" in *J. Parker Valentine, Fiction* (Sternberg Press, 2014) p. 47.

<sup>3</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *Water and Dreams, An Essay on the Imagination of Matter* (Dallas, Pegasus Foundation, 1983) p. 11.

paint or stains are enhanced by the drawn lines – the accident, the smudge guides the creation of the work and its chromatic tonality. The result is a sort of grisaille that varies in tone between dark and light, recalling the layers of erased writing of the Palimpsests. J. Parker Valentine's palette fluctuates between shades of brown and black that seem intimately tied to the depths of water and earth, and areas of milky, ethereal white. The physical properties of the basic material used as supports – wood panel, fabric, silk, paper – set the chromatic background and lend the work its overall tone.

The notion of gravity (as force of attraction) is at the heart of the creation process. "It's the glue of our world;"<sup>4</sup> it is what guides the seismometric hand in the gestural shaping of drawings and forms. There is something sophisticated and savage in the oeuvre of J. Parker Valentine, and in her interest in the phenomena of gravity, as if she wanted to corporeally measure her gravitational field by bringing the drawing into play with the space.

The lasso sculptures, created in 2014 for the *Topo* exhibition at the Langen Foundation in Neuss, Germany, were conceived of as a system of elegant geometric white metal grids draped with lassos. The interplay of curves on the metal support – a sort of topographical survey map – combined with that of the lasso creates an intricate set of sinuous outlines of projected interweaving shadows. Besides being a reference to the Texan origins of the artist who grew up on a ranch, here, the lasso, recognized as an object of domination and domestication, becomes a metaphor for a system of multiple forces at once gravitational, cultural and societal.

On a dense diagram the artist sent me to map out her ideas, the drawing is at the center, connected to a multitude of concepts and referents – "movement, spatiality, animism, Asemic handwriting, memory, body, in-betweening, time, rubbing, Noa Eshkol, shadow..." It is thus the drawing that forms the base on which the artist builds her narrative three-dimensional structures in space, where forms, materials, color and architecture merge into a relationship of interdependence.

J. Parker Valentine's approach to drawing is first and foremost a physical experience of transformation based on discovery and improvisation. She photographs, cuts, carves, erases, covers, retraces, deforms, glues, pins, prints, colors. She proceeds by imprint, projection, exposure to UV rays and scale enlargements. It is a manual process, or one based on a soft technology, and domestic, that leads to the spatialization of the drawing. Each drawing contains its own trace and is photographed in a quasi-systematic manner; not only to fix the transience of its apparition, but to be disembodied into a would-be new form, like in the series of photographed drawings (pigment prints) printed, double-sided, on rice paper from 2013.

This zone of intersection, of negative space and space between (the recto and verso, the imprint, the trace, the hollow, the fold), is fundamental to understanding the process of stratification in the work and animist thought of J. Parker Valentine, where forms, materials and meaning converge. *"I think of things in a very animistic way lines, forms, material, objects, and architecture – everything has an essence of life. This is probably the most important thing to understand about my work."*<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> J. Parker Valentine, interviewed by Devon Dikeou, zingmagazine, 2011.

<sup>5</sup> J. Parker Valentine, excerpt from an email conversation with the artist in November 2018.

The work based on her mother's animal drawings, exhibited at the Galerie Max Mayer in 2015, illustrate this interconnection. The artist sinuously retraces in blue ink the green horse sketches drawn years earlier by her mother, then covers the whole thing with a brownish silk cloth created from a process of printing, soaking and UV colorization under the California sun. Beyond the mnemonic and deeply emotional impact of the work, the concept of dissimulation and discovery recalls the taste for a kind of blind creative process in Simon Hantai's folding and tying of canvases before painting them, renouncing any premeditation of a global view of the work.

*"For me drawing is not about recreating something, it is about finding something."*<sup>6</sup> The idea of the "trouvaille," dear to Surrealists, and reminiscence of Hans Arp's floating forms and Arshile Gorky's moving images, reappear in the fluidity, rapidity and nervousness of J. Parker Valentine's drawing.

This penchant for the immediacy of drawing asserted itself quickly. After training in video, film and painting, J. Parker Valentine turned away from these – particularly from the technological process, insufficiently direct, of film and video – yet retained the technique of editing, masking and fading. As for the spatiotemporal relationship intrinsic to video, instead of producing moving images, she infuses the drawing's image with movement.

J. Parker Valentine's few videos always bear the shadow of the lines of a drawing. In an untitled video from 2014, a train advances in sequences of jerky images moving forward or backward, as if halted by a spatiotemporal tension between past and future. A network of lines takes shape in the outer and inner interstitial spaces of the machine in the filmed image, giving rise to an abstract outline, or ghostly writing. The use of technology would seem to be one more attempt at capturing the invisible.

"I'd like to ask you something, do you believe in ghosts?" Rohmerian actress Pascale Ogier asks Jacques Derrida in *Ghost Dance* by English director Ken McMullen. One cannot speak about "phantom images" without mentioning Jacques Derrida. In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida proposes a reconsideration of classical ontology through what he calls "hauntology," namely a philosophy of haunting and *spectrality*. Though these phenomena are marginal in our society, Derrida claims they actually lie at the heart of all culture and history.<sup>7</sup> After drawing, photography and cinema proliferated this spectral logic; we are led to believe in a figure we do not see, but believe we see. In addition to the philosophical scope of the spectralized "images of images" that Derrida speaks of, the *trace*, the mark, also fits into the poetic foundation and method of J. Parker Valentine's work. Every trace testifies to the absence that shaped it. Being incomplete, it possesses the strength of the unfinished. A trace never totally disappears, it only fades to reveal new ones: "The ghosts of decisions are there to be seen."<sup>8</sup>

Another aspect of the trace is the physicality it maintains with the material life of things. When I visited Giorgio Morandi's studio in Bologna, I found out that he usually traced the contour of his objects' bases on large sheets of paper placed on the workshop tables, to arrange their composi-

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<sup>6</sup> J. Parker Valentine, interviewed by Devon Dikeou, zingmagazine, 2011.

<sup>7</sup> J. Derrida, *Spectres de Marx: l'état de la dette, le travail du deuil et la nouvelle Internationale* (Paris, Galilée, 1993) p. 18; *Mal d'archive. Une impression freudienne* (Paris, Galilée, 1995) p. 100-101.

<sup>8</sup> J. Parker Valentine, responding to a question from Claire Gilman during the panel discussion "The State of Drawing," March 2012, Parson's New School, New York City.

tion.<sup>9</sup> This relationship with the drawn line, and with the three-dimensionality and displacement of objects' silent lives, echoes J. Parker Valentine's fascinations, and her choreographic ability to set the drawing free in space.

The trace reappears in a series of drawings created in 2013 at Artpace in San Antonio, Texas, using a printing and rubbing method. The artist draws directly onto fabrics pinned to the wall, with the drawn lines moving from the support toward a spatial continuum directly on the surface of the walls. What comes through is a kind of semi-abstract, semi-figurative writing that could be characterized as "asemic writing," an undefined form between writing, language and drawing that leaves open a multitude of interpretations.<sup>10</sup>

In her latest installation on the occasion of her exhibition at KRIEG, J. Parker Valentine adopts a self-imposed work discipline based on the repetition of a motif in the architectural space. She sees this as an Oulipian exercise in which the formal constraint leads to experimentation with new forms. She created a long, broad frieze out of wood veneer panels, on which three characters are drawn in graphite, their jagged contours producing negative abstract forms revealed by the walls' white surface or the architecture's empty spaces. "Cutting is drawing," she wrote during one of our recent email exchanges. The counter-shapes of those intaglio spaces – specifically photographs of the cutouts – will be reproduced in the pages of a forthcoming publication which acts as a continuation of the exhibition at KRIEG, and in which this essay will be printed.

The use of figuration in these three characters becomes the driving force for new abstract forms, while the projected silhouettes sketch a shadow theater trapped behind a cast not visible in its entirety. "Every real effigy has a shadow which is its double."<sup>11</sup> Though not to be considered in the vein of a narrative show by Séraphin, still it entails leaving the matrix its autonomy and power to evoke. It is about sculpting the space contained behind and in front of the work.

The three grouped characters seem modeled on a phlegmatic central face that recalls the languid figures of the Symbolists. The one on the left belongs to the cartoon world, while the one on the right exists in a latent, evolving state. They are effigies, each seeming to belong to a world of its own. "Draw without anything particular in mind, scribble mechanically: almost always, faces will appear on the paper. Since we lead an excessively facial life, we are in a perpetual fever of faces. As soon as I pick up a pencil or a brush, ten, fifteen, twenty of them surge up to me on the paper one after the other. And most of them wild. Are all those faces me? Are they other people? From what depths?"<sup>12</sup>

The systematic ternary repetition of figures and of the multiple voids drawn on the walls creates a musical, choreographic rhythm in the space. The manual reproduction of the motif leads to a state of perpetual transformation, differentiating each from the others.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> See on this subject the two films by Tacita Dean dedicated to this aspect of Giorgio Morandi's work, *Still Life* and *Day for Night* (2009) filmed in Morandi's studio on via Fondazza in Bologna, Italy.

<sup>10</sup> See on this subject the book recommended to me by J. Parker Valentine, *An Anthology of Asemic Handwriting*, edited by Tim Gaze and Michael Jacobson, 2013.

<sup>11</sup> Antonin Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double* (New York, Grove Press, 1958) p. 12.

<sup>12</sup> Henri Michaux "Thinking about the phenomenon of painting", an introduction to *Peintures et Dessins*, 1946, quoted in *Darkness Moves: An Henri Michaux Anthology* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1994) p. 311.

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A kind of uniqueness is given back to each one, freeing them from their original source: a drawing sketched by J. Parker Valentine on a sheet of paper one evening in the half-light. Perhaps these are the “Special Interests,” those forms and counter-forms dancing out of the shadows.

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<sup>13</sup> See on this subject Jacques Derrida’s concept of “*Differance*” in a text on Antonin Artaud, “La parole soufflée” [“The whispered (prompted) word”], 1965.