

A Time To Build

Williamsburg Artist Mark Masyga

reviewed & interviewed by Natasha Sweeten

Artist Mark Masyga lives and works in Williamsburg. The following is a review of his solo exhibition at Eyewash Gallery in December 2000, and a recent interview we conducted in his studio in November 2001.

Mark Masyga tends to begin his paintings with the mere suggestion of form. It was on a rainy afternoon that I viewed his solo debut at Eyewash, and there the soft shapes crowding into windows mimicked those hovering along gallery walls, blending into backgrounds. This is how Masyga sets the stage for the main events of his paintings. He then introduces whimsical line dances of varying marks that twirl and jut across canvases, pulling away from quieter atmospheres.

Like some slowly evolving Tinker Toy, these brushstroke contraptions seemed to find direction in the painting process itself. I didn't get a sense of each element being considered and reconsidered: there was a freshness here. Indeed, Masyga's compositions initially come across as random, with small shapes and patterns and lines of (mostly) muted colors sprouting from and bouncing off of one another in what resembles an architectural plan gone awry. But upon closer inspection I realized that the way he puts these paintings together is a slow process—the marks are often delicate, the paint does not drip, the effects are controlled—and (it is my guess) slow enough of a process to allow time for reflection. In other words, Masyga's decisions and actions are not hastily made.

The painting (untitled from 2000, oil on canvas, as are the rest) that greeted me by the gallery's entrance emerged from a blanket of muddied purples in Uta Barth-like fuzziness. On top of this, ribbony waves of paint and daintily crafted, orange grids defied real world gravity by snaking along three edges of the canvas, either spilling from or ending with a little, blue, squarish rainbow floating on the painting's left side. In his statement the artist writes of "brushstrokes as basic elements (or raw materials)...limited to a few types and sizes," and it is clear that Masyga is concentrating on creating a specific formula for his paintings. The paint itself is flat, a smooth film resting on the surface. The colors are muted. No one element demanded my utmost attention; instead, each part seemed to yell out, "Hey, check out how I connect with the next segment!" so that ultimately the train of segments as a whole became the center of attention.

The biggest painting in the exhibition, roughly 5' x 5', spread itself across a (painted) canvas colored sky, its blankness reading as virgin territory. Civilization crops up as gray and brown boxy shapes that twirl into spirals, into passageways, into flags of color, into a quirky balancing act. An unexpected moment occurs near the top, where one collection of forms ends and another, smaller one branches westward. Where they do not meet—the area between them—creates a tension, a vital contrast to the open space around them. This particular painting reminded me of Fischli and Weiss' "The

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Way Things Go," as if it were an overhead view of that film's kinetic sculpture in which each element did its thing—caught on fire, rolled, unwound—and eventually, somehow, triggered the next event, and so on. Masyga's painted forms take on similar responsibilities, acting as triggers of sorts for the direction of the painting.

Along with his paintings, Masyga showed recent photographs arranged into groups of five or six and framed in long horizontal formats. They depicted construction sites—stacks of cinderblocks, piles of dirt—that had intrigued the artist with their potential to become "some grand structure, but more often I imagined a boring apartment building." The photos became more meaningful once I considered that Masyga knows a bit about construction firsthand, as he has for the past few years been building up his work space in a Williamsburg loft. So while the artist has been constructing images for paintings, he has also been constructing the environment in which he does precisely that. This interest in building and building materials does link the photographs to the works on canvas, but the former lack the inventiveness and the feeling of spontaneity (however slowly conceived) of the latter. The artist describes his paintings as seeming to be "in progress, as opposed to resulting in an object or thing," and indeed the paintings are infused with the sense of searching, as in searching for direction or for completion or for a leader. What Masyga has been successful in doing in this exhibition is luring the viewer along to enjoy the ride.

NS: Both your paintings and your photographs, which are of construction sites around Williamsburg, reflect your interest in building materials and in putting forms together. The photos that I've seen, the ones that you had at Eyewash, look like they could be of almost any urban, industrial neighborhood. With your paintings, do you have a more specific place or moment in mind?

MM: Not really. I actually starting doing the photos as a note-taking thing: I would see a little form or a pile of stuff and I wanted to remember how it looked. I didn't know exactly what I was taking pictures of until after the fact, then I'd be surprised by it. I'd go back and see things, pick out a little area that was reminiscent of what I was doing in the paintings. So, they really started off being notes. I guess the atmosphere is important to me. If I thought of anything that reminded me of a specific place, it would be the overall atmosphere, and the light and the colors.

NS: Did the photos help you start your paintings, in a sense?

MM: Sometimes. From a formalist standpoint they helped me get a place to begin, but also to refer back. It's more of an informal thing, I go back and forth. I look at photographs a lot.

NS: One thing I've been curious about—I've thought about this for me—is the events of September 11th and your proximity to it. Has that become a factor in how you think of yourself as an artist, or how you think about your paintings?

MM: Oh yes, it's effected me. I had time to work in my studio right after that, because everything was shut down and I didn't have to go to work. But I really had a hard time getting anything done, I just couldn't concentrate. I sort of felt like the whole art-making process was silly for a while. That's changed, that was a temporary shock, but

it's still effecting me. Before, I had thought more about how to build things. Now I'm looking at these piles of things outside and the piles of things in my paintings and thinking in terms of entropy and how things might end up that way. Instead of being an additive process where I would try to build on top of things and make something out of it, now they sadly start referring to little piles of things that could've collapsed, even though that's not my original intention.

NS: I look at your paintings and see a fun quality to them. They look very fun to make. In fact, I would like to have the experience of making these paintings. There is also a whimsical lightness to them that, who knows, maybe with what you're thinking about now will be altered.

MM: That's good, I'm glad you see that, because I do think they are really fun. I'm always afraid that people will take them too seriously—just think of them as abstract paintings. I remember when I was a little kid, playing at my friends' house. They always had the best toys, and one of them was just a simple pile of 2x4 wood blocks that were cut up into various small sizes, and we would always have the most fun with that. They were just pieces of wood, but you could really use your imagination with them. I sort of feel the same playfulness when I'm painting. I've reduced the brushstrokes down to basic elements, kind of like the blocks, piling things together, building them, seeing how they form into things, stack together, and sometimes fall apart.

NS: I was wondering about the years leading up to you moving to New York: where you went to school, other things you may have pursued.

MM: I went to school in Chicago, at the Art Institute. I came from a small town in Minnesota, where I grew up, so going to Chicago was a huge step. I got interested in seeing the architecture, it's really wonderful there. I went to school to learn how to do graphic design so I could have a practical job, and then I got involved in computers and computer graphics. Fortunately, it has been a good job. I was always into cartooning when I was a little kid, making superheroes and crazy, absurd, grotesque characters, and doodles.

NS: So the interest in painting came out of the drawing?

MM: I guess so. It [drawing] was always a fun thing for me to do. My friends and I would do it to entertain ourselves. I never thought anyone would take that seriously, but when I got to Chicago I noticed that the Imagist movement was right up my alley. I wanted to concentrate on doing figurative type work back then, so I worked through that thing. If you're going through the painting program there, you have to figure out what you're going to take away from it, or somehow work around it. It's sort of like when you're around someone with the flu, and you know you're going to catch the flu eventually, so it's like, Here it comes! I know I'm going to be influenced by this somehow, I don't know how it's going to be, is it going to be really bad or is it an easy flu to get through? I enjoyed some of that work. I've always had a goofy sense of humor, and I found the Imagists who did really goofy-looking work were often times just the opposite in their personalities. They were very serious people, at least the way they treated us students.

NS: And then New York became the place to come to?

MM: I came out because all our friends were moving out here, and I got into that program at Skowhegan. It seemed like a good time to try moving out here.

NS: And you've been here for how long?

MM: 7 years.

NS: In Williamsburg?

MM: Pretty much 5 years in Williamsburg. I lived over in Bed-Stuy before.

NS: Your situation here at the studio (in the Gretsches Building) has been pretty tentative—you'll probably have to move out in a couple of months—how has all that instability effected you?

MM: I showed my therapist some slides at one point, and she said, "You've been describing your work and I didn't know what to expect, but when I see the slides they make perfect sense. I see all these things floating up in the air, and your life is really up in the air right now, so it's obvious that your work is effected by all the circumstances." It never occurred to me that was really effecting me. It's sort of a metaphor for everything. My view has changed about looking at all these construction sites.

NS: How's that?

MM: I used to be just interested in the aesthetics of looking, how things appear. I'd make notes so that I could refer back for the paintings. But now they've taken on more of a political bent because of my knowing how the real estate market has changed so much since I've moved here. The typical thing is happening where the artists are being shoved out again. I have a love/hate relationship with this building boom. Of course it's hard to take on one level. On the other hand, it's really beautiful to look at. It's sort of exciting to watch a building go up. But you know that it's going up, and you're going out.

NS: I came to Williamsburg in '93 and got in on a good lease, but the rent doubled within years. I built that space to make it workable, and I look around here and think the same thing, that you built this entire place. It must be difficult to let it go.

MM: It will be hard. We've fought [legally, with the landlord] for over a year. It's been over a year without electricity, because of pressure from the landlord to vacate the building so that they could turn it around and, the latest rumor has it, make 12 million dollars profit. When we came into the building, over half was vacant, and they were happy to have us, working and living and paying rent. But then there was a change of ownership, and of course that was the time when things were happening in the real estate market. People were getting greedy. I guess the bottom line is the bottom line. We helped create a community, it's the typical story, everyone knows how that goes. We came in thinking it was a financial thing, too. We had a five-year lease, if we could calculate how to recoup our expenses, rent out studio space to friends to help pay off the debt, then it would be worth it. We could enjoy a nice, big, sunny space for five years. And that's been great, so in that way it's kind of what we expected, we didn't expect we'd be allowed to stay much longer. We hoped that we

would. We tried to enjoy it as much as we could. It's hard to put all that work into it and then say "Bye!"

NS: What are you reading these days? Does what you're reading creep into the paintings you're making?

MM: This was something I was reading before September 11th.

[Mark hands me *Collapse: When Buildings Fall Down*, by Phillip Wearne. The cover is a multi-story, concrete building partially standing and resembling the aftermath of a bombing.]

I was thinking about how buildings are constructed, and I ran across this book. I've always been interested in entropy and how things happen by accident or just by spontaneous means, so that was a logical next step for me to start thinking about, how things disintegrate or fall apart. I kind of know intimately how these walls in the building go up, because I've done it, I've lived through that. It's really interesting to see how a wall can go up and seem flimsy at first, but then you put the sheetrock on it and it becomes very rigid. It's amazing how these lightweight materials can hold up. I've been reading some of the stories in here, like accounts about bridges collapsing just from harmonic distortion, wind going through the structure, and it's fascinating to figure that out. Then the World Trade Center happened. I was actually on my fire escape that day, watching it, and my first reaction was that it was very much like a building being demolished. It looked very controlled because it imploded, it fell inward. I was talking to my mom on the phone at the time and I couldn't believe what happened! You're not going to believe this, but it looks like the front of the building just slid off! And then the dust cleared and all I saw was blue sky, and I realized that the whole thing had collapsed. It wasn't what I expected at all. Something that tall, you would expect it to tip over, fall into the other building, almost like watching blocks tip over. But of course it was a lot more complicated than that. I was taking all of it in, watching how it physically it fell in, and I was in denial, because I didn't think of all the hundreds, thousands of people that were in their offices. My mind went ahead and said, They must've had time to have gotten out, because there was a fire. All I was doing was watching the physical building fall down, and then later all the tragic elements hit me at once.

NS: It was so horrific. It was hard for your mind to understand it, even though your eyes are seeing it.

One thing I think about, being a painter, is that people have been painting for centuries, and now there is a lot of new media, new technology. There's performance, video, installation, time-based art. Do you see painting as being or becoming a "quieter" art these days?

MM: Yeah. I don't want to get into the discussion of painting being dead, that can go around and around. Obviously there's always something to painting that's important, and I think it's always going to be there. It's important because people keep coming back to it. I don't think it's ever really lost its importance.

NS: Do you think the role of the painter has changed in, let's say, the past two decades?

MM: Yeah. I think in a way it's hard to be a painter, because you have all that history behind you. Not that it's any easier to be a video artist, or some new media artist, but there's not as much of a precedent for that thing, so people probably feel more free to experiment. You have to take responsibility for what you do no matter what kind of art you make. For painting it's very easy to trace back and see where you're coming from, and that's a lot of pressure in a way, because you have to deal with the past of painting.

NS: That's a big history to wrestle with.

MM: I think in general, though, we're in a phase where people are doing things that are a lot more personal. Idiosyncratic is a good word to use. It's exciting. I see the same thing happening with music, where there's a lot of interesting songwriting going on that's coming from a personal level.

NS: What artists do you look at or admire most?

MM: Lately I've been looking a lot at photography. (William) Eggleston, Bernd and Hilla Becher. And as far as painting, I just saw a really great show by Tom Nozkowski. He's one of my heroes, not just for the fact that he makes really quirky, beautiful abstract paintings, but I really admire the fact that they are modest in scale and they're sort of anti-heroic. That's the one thing when I first saw his work that stuck with me: you can really make great work that's not full of bombast and showmanship. So I guess you can look at the art world and say that everything is still happening at the same time, there are people still making great big paintings, probably, and making interesting videos, but I tend to focus on more personal work that says something directly from someone's experience, to see something from someone's viewpoint that I wouldn't have seen if I hadn't looked at their work, that's always interesting.

NS: Where do you see yourself in ten years?

MM: Wow. (Pause.) Hopefully I can keep doing what I'm doing. I would like to be able to keep painting and making work that's interesting. Beyond that, I don't know. Still having the ability and capability to do it would be a good goal. When I was moving in here and building this space, I had to take almost a year off from painting and making art, and it was so frustrating. I got depressed and thought I'd never be able to do it again! Oh I'll forget how. As soon as I got back in the studio I had so much energy and a backlog of ideas, so it was actually good to take some time off.

NS: Do you work pretty consistently now, or is it in spurts?

MM: Oddly enough, pretty consistently. I had a very busy summer with work, and with all this stuff going on in my life I've still been able to get work done. I don't know how. I guess it's the one thing I still have control over in my life, so I'm trying to take advantage of it. It's still work, it keeps me sane.

Natasha Sweeten is a painter who likes to write about art. Her recent exhibitions were at C.A.C.P. Gallery in Cleveland, Ohio, and at Plymouth State College in New Hampshire. She lives in Brooklyn.