

A Happy Feel-Good Emotion: Jack Hallberg's Touching Abstraction
—Katie Anania

2103..., Jack Hallberg's acrylic-on-panel painting completed in 2006, seems above all else to illustrate the fantastically illusory qualities of paint. Orange and white bands swirl around one another, and the raised dots festooning the painting's surface give the work the appearance of being infected with candy buttons or psychedelic space pox. A mechanical arm seems to have burped these objects-on-objects into existence, and the loops and spirals seem suspended in time: these are forms that can be made visible only through modern technological means (fractals, DNA strands, and spermatozoa come to mind), but are as primal and elemental as life itself. Similar paintings, like Hallberg's recent *2823...* and *931...*, employ closer and closer color values to achieve this same end: abstract forms engaging in prelingual musical chases, darting in and out of one another while floating cheekily in Victoria's-Secret-colored ooze.

Despite its apparent allegiance to the lurid colors and effortless dynamism of the digital age, Hallberg's artmaking process is equally akin to the digital and mechanical processes associated with postmillennial art as it is to an obsessive play on hobbyist enthusiasm. While the finished whole may seem mechanically produced, the slick, object-like quality of works like *2823...*, *2103...*, and *931...* belie their hand-tooled, carefully crafted facture. The raised dots populating their surface make many of them shimmer like a magnified metal-flake paint job or Côte d'Azur dew. The paintings evoke many sensual experiences: Pattern and Decoration compositions, cake-frosting filigrees, latter-day Play-Doh experiments, the hard-edged delight of Ellsworth Kelly paintings, Jean Arp's amorphous forms, the simultaneously monstrous and grotesque qualities of octopus tentacles, and sexy Fetish Finish sizzle. *Touch me*, they shout. Hallberg names the works after the number of raised acrylic dots that populate their surface, indicating a sly reference to the meticulousness of practice; one thinks of Georges Seurat counting individual points of color in his studio, or Tom Friedman measuring every millimeter of the pinprick-size "contents" of his Play-Doh pills.

Hallberg's favorite formal device is his pancake-like acrylic disc, tessellated across the surface of each picture and forming individual occasions of pattern among the already breathtaking curved forms. The discs are formed by squeezing various colors of puff-paint, usually found in craft

shops, or standard acrylic paint onto a length of waxed paper that rests on a baking sheet, and flattening them into candy-button-shaped mounds using the end of the paint tube. Since the discs are produced individually, there are slight differences between them – invisible to the naked eye, but microscopic irregularities nonetheless. (Think of Eva Hesse's *Repetition Nineteen 111* of 1968, in which the minute contingency of the hand-formed cylinders undermined the emotionless premises of Minimalism, to an endearing end.) The discs are made in candy-colored swarms, between 50 and several hundred at a time, and placed on drying racks in Hallberg's studio, where the drying process is abetted by the moistureless days in Las Vegas, where he lives.

After the discs are dry, the cutting begins. To form the interlocking spiral patterns spread over Hallberg's painted wood-panel compositions and to facilitate his meticulous evocation of borders and boundaries, many of the discs must be cut to produce the illusion of the an overlap between each line. Slivers appear, and in a work like *2103...* of 2006, where purple and orange loops and dots "pass over" one another no less than 120 times, each interlock must situate perfectly. They never do; many of the intersections are slightly askew, and Hallberg points out that the key "moments" in his paintings have to do with the inexactitude of the cuttings not reaching their mark, because they help to break down the barriers normally struck between the modernist viewer and its object.¹ This is the same inexactitude extracted by Henri Matisse when, in a flurry of cutting of his own, he arranged paper shapes on his studio walls that were to bring a revolutionary loveliness to the discourse of modern art. The hand-made qualities of *2103...* become visible when viewed up close, and it is in this way that Hallberg's work undermines the distance between producer and produced, evoking a touching intimacy.

2823..., Hallberg's largest work to date, displays a good amount of this false / authentic balance. The composition of the painting sidesteps its horizontal diptych shape by treating the space between the two halves as a mere accident; the amoeboid yellow shape in the center of both sides of the diptych is set against a pale blue ground and seems to flow contiguously between the painted panels. Two curved passages of pale green, bordered by various size dots of grass green, swoop through the center and the bottom right quadrants of the painting and are embellished with "loops" of cool white bordered by a thin row of glaring orange dots.

¹ Hallberg, Jack. Personal interview, 8 Oct. 2006.

The interplay of circles is placed over and around the amorphous yellow form, combining the extreme flatness of Modernist abstraction – the kind of flatness referred to by the critic Clement Greenberg in 1960 as “the guarantee of painting’s independence as an art”² – with the structured illusionism antithetical to it (“...for,” Greenberg went on to assert, “three-dimensionality is the province of sculpture. To achieve autonomy, painting has had above all to divest itself of everything it might share with sculpture, and it is in its effort to do this, and not so much to exclude the representational or literary, that painting has made itself abstract.”³). The painting defies gravity in every sense of the word, and its lyrical loveliness recalls that of Matisse’s *Blue Nudes* series of 1952, in which pieces of two-dimensional female forms “cut” in front of themselves to simultaneously reinforce and derail the flatness of the picture plane.

Loveliness is, in the 21st century, only just emerging from being part of a dangerous game, rather akin to inviting the neighbors over for Fragonard-themed parties. To Hallberg, it is at the fore of his practice: “There are no angles or sharp corners in my paintings, because they evoke these negative emotions. I’d like my paintings to produce...” He pauses, then finishes, “...a happy feel-good emotion.”⁴ And Hallberg’s works are successful, if at least to the point that their efficacy is a testimonial to the problematic and often polemical nature of “the beautiful artwork” in the current cultural climate. These paintings are attractive; so much so that the viewer may indeed be bothered by their apolitical loveliness just as Matisse’s detractors saw his later work as “safe” and therefore counter-revolutionary. This is an opinion still held today; in a 1993 review, the critic Linda Nochlin derisively referred to Matisse as “uncontaminated by a political or ideological agenda.”⁵

However, although paintings like *2103...* embody no overt ideological narrative, their composition and color express a *joie de vivre* that helps substantiate current conceptualizations of pleasure in contemporary art. The postmillennial formal vocabulary, through artists like Fred

² Greenberg, Clement. “Modernism.” *Forum Lectures* (Washington, D.C.: Voice of America), 1960.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Hallberg, Jack. Personal interview, 8 Oct. 2006.

⁵ Nochlin, Linda. “Matisse and its Other: Comparing the Paintings of Henri Matisse to the Art of Russian Avant-Garde Artists,” *Art in America*, May 1993: 61 – 65.

Tomaselli, Sharon Ellis, and Lari Pittman, is becoming increasingly concerned with the rhetoric of pleasure, and Hallberg's gyrating "happy feel-good" paintings are clearly along for the ride.

And it is the pleasures of formal flourishes that may ultimately liberate art from the strictures of 20th-century art theory. Like David Reed and James Hayward, Hallberg's forms evoke baroque modes of embellishment while employing a uniquely sculptural approach to paint. The 3-D qualities displayed inside these intertwining riffs of paint interrupt their flatness and heighten their touchable, candy-colored, and candy-textured qualities – the same qualities that provoke the viewer to want to taste a Wayne Thiebaud painting, a wedding cake, or a polycarbonate Kartell chair. Hallberg's most succinct and successful argument made through his work is that modern acrylic paint is little more than plastic, and the tactility of his trademark patterned dots layered upon already illusionistic curves proves the synaesthetic potential of paint. A simple argument that, when further plasticized with puffy dots, turns recursive: Hallberg is using three-dimensional forms to give off the illusion of a third dimension. The devices of painting are subverted through the techniques of sculpture, and any teleological history of either medium is undone.

Lurid in their cheerfulness, these works embody the potential of matter and color to evoke intolerably pleasurable sensory experiences, and while the structures of these paintings seem far more social than those of their predecessors, they can (and must) still be regarded as radical meditations on prelingual desire. The paintings tap into primal feelings using devices that are the result of thousands of years of development of the medium; like the DNA strands that appear utterly synthetic and yet constitute the most basic principles of life, Hallberg's works represent the very kind of falseness that is inherent in real sensory experience. By evoking falseness, they elicit astonishingly touching emotions.

The writer, **Katie Anania**, has studied at New College of Florida, University of Turin, and the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, where she completed her Bachelor of Arts degree in Art History. In 2005 and 2006, she served as a contributing art critic for *Las Vegas CityLife*, and has written for other national and local publications including *ArtWeek*, *944*, and *American Craft* magazines. She received a second place distinction in critical writing from the Nevada Press Association in 2006, and currently serves as a gallery educator at the Guggenheim Hermitage Museum.

The mentor was **Michael Duncan**. Duncan, a critic and independent curator, is a corresponding editor for *Art in America*. His writings have focused on maverick artists of the 20th century, West Coast modernism, 20th-century figuration, and contemporary California art. His curatorial projects

include surveys and recontextualizations of works by Pavel Tchelitchew, Sister Corita Kent, Kim MacConnel, Lorser Feitelson, Eugene Berman, Richard Pettibone, and Wallace Berman.