# Patricia Treib

# *Artist Acknowledgments*

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*Patricia Treib*

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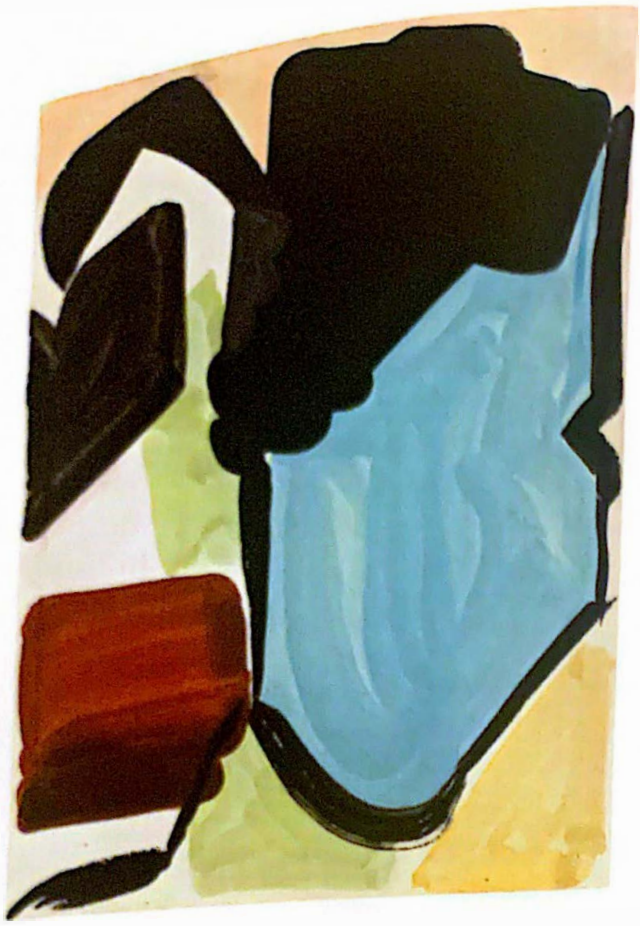
# *Three Items*

JOANNA FIDUCCIA

## *Camera*

In an anteroom to her studio, Patricia Treib keeps many well-ordered drawers. Inside are hanging folders of art reproductions, albums of photographs, old magazine cuttings, and flat files of painted sketches, layered with interleaving papers like a ***millefeuille***. Among them is a snapshot of a young man standing on a bridge with his hand on his hip, a tan raincoat looped over his arm. Treib shows me the photo, not to remark on her memory of the man or the composition, but instead to point out the lozenge formed where his arm meets his waist, beyond which lies a green lawn (fig. 1). We pass our vision through him like thread through a needle; it stitches us to the scene. Or it binds us to him, this bubble of ground that rises up as we bend our attention to it. Seeing, suggests the emblem of the armhole-eye, might be just precisely this fusion of consequential forms and seemingly inconsequential atmosphere—seeing, that is, before recognition has parsed the figure from the ground and given only one of these a body worth remembering.

Treib's paintings are populated by unnameable and idiosyncratic shapes. They take as their point of departure both still lifes arranged in her studio and two-dimensional images, the same that live in her drawers. Her source repertoire is restrained, with the same compositions recurring across multiple paintings, but also sundry. It includes a glass clock once belonging to her father; a detail from Piero della Francesca's *The Legend of the True Cross* (1452–66), a fresco cycle in the Basilica di San Francesco in Arezzo, Italy; a portion of a religious icon; a vintage dress pattern; and three cameras arranged on a surface. The cameras make for particularly canny subjects, not least because of the camera's putative "this-will-kill-that" agon with painting. In fact, it is less photography's threat to painting that Treib scrutinizes than its modernist model: the notion that the picture is a view held fast by an eye and projected onto a surface. The camera does not need to name its subjects; it simply registers them in one exact moment. Yet if photography promises to return us to that moment—a promise multiplied by the glut of digital pictures today into a fantasy of omnipresence and total recall—Treib's gambit is to offer a different means of reseeing. She does this by insisting on the ways in which we simply don't operate like cameras. Her paintings are deliberate where the snapshot is casual, bodily where it is cyclopic, and temporal where it is instantaneous.



In 2013 Treib began to work from a still life of two reflex cameras positioned alongside a point-and-shoot, distilling this arrangement into a configuration of shapes (fig. 2). The cameras are discoverable enough once you know what to look for: a squidgy, cartoonish figure striking a diagonal (the telephoto lens); a calligraphic boundary line surrounding a field of translucent color (the camera strap); and a prism puckered like an open book near a rectangle with rounded edges (the point-and-shoot, still in its case). The figures repeat across more than a dozen paintings, though each time the compositional phrase takes on new color (fig. 3). Quite literally: the same form might be a milky amber in one work, malachite-green in another, and velvety black in a third. To read these figures across the set of paintings is something like listening to an idiom in a foreign language repeated by different speakers, the melody of the phrase recognizable even though it hasn't given up its meaning. Whatever knell these devices once tolled for painting, the cameras are now antiquated, consigned to the past, while painting continues to generate new images.

Treib's palette shifts boldly—not just across the works, but within each composition. Inky blue-black sits across from swimming-pool blue; a searingly bright yellow is stitched in place by a single black stroke that laps its edge. Some are titled straightforwardly, *Aperture* (2015) or *Straps* (2015), while others go by the more oblique *Ensemble* (2016) or *Gathers* (2017)—titles whose noun-verb oscillation suggests the equivocation of the forms themselves, as they teeter between shape, contour, and surroundings, and between pure painting and still life. Each element is both definite and suspended in a tense dance with its

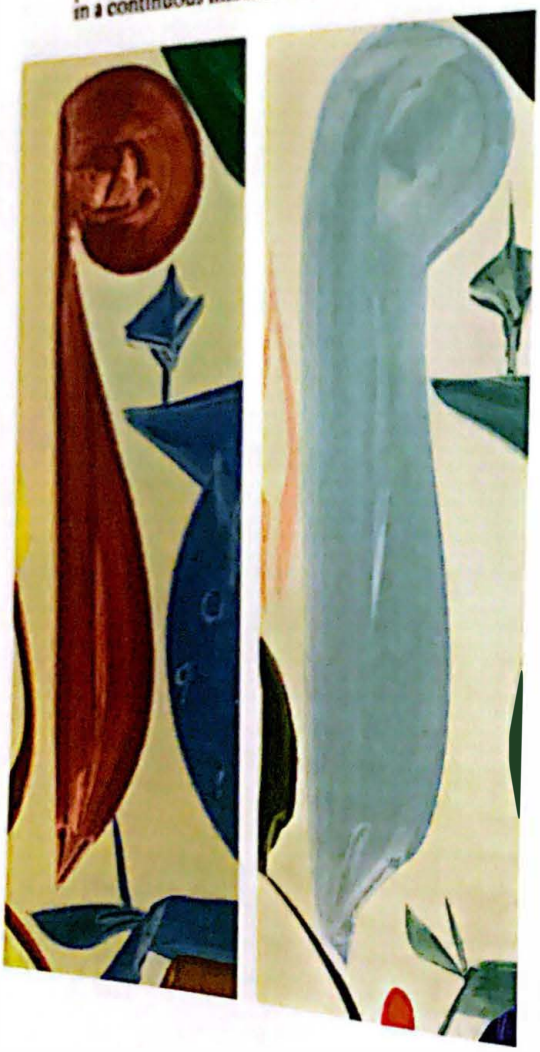
FIG 2 *Cameras*, 2013, gouache and watercolor on found paper, 32 × 23.5 cm (12 ¾ × 9 ¼ in.)

neighbors. The result recalls Maurice Merleau-Ponty's observation from his essay "Eye and Mind": "When through the water's thickness I see the tiled bottom of the pool, I do not see it despite the water and the reflections; I see it through them and because of them."[1] The interdependence of Treib's forms delivers this lesson about vision: namely, that looking is not about parsing one thing from another, but recognizing their relations. Which is because their relations change as our position does. Which is because we share the same space. The opposition of negative to positive space, like the inversion of values in the photographic printing process, has little bearing in paintings that seek to deliver this experience of looking. This experience aims not at the exact vision of an object, but rather at the means by which we know it—through proprioception as much as perception.

Treib has marshaled modernism's strongest teachings to the task: Cézanne's wobbly contour to activate boundaries that belong neither to objects nor to space, Matisse's use of the proportion and intensity of color to produce spatial effects, and Frankenthaler's staining to wed form and atmosphere. But one could equally look to the work of the generation that preceded and taught Treib, from Amy Sillman's orchestration of idiosyncratic shapes that seem alien yet corporeal, like a limb after it has fallen asleep, to Charline von Heyl's delaminated compositions, which stoke a constant combat of figure and ground. Treib assimilates these lessons into something rarefied and poised. Even the nerviest works produce a magisterial calm. Matisse, in a much-maligned phrase that all but assured his disaffiliation from the avant-garde, once stated that he wanted to make paintings that would soothe the mind of the businessman or so-called mental worker "like a good armchair." It has taken more than a century to hear in this wish something other than its class attachments—namely, that as the capitalization of our attention by contemporary media has turned most of us into mental workers (no matter our day jobs), art's role in counterbalancing this labor takes on new significance. Digital pictures leave us crouched over tiny screens, executing that boring dance of one finger wagging. But Treib's paintings receive us whole.

FIG 3 Details of *Pivot*, 2018, oil on canvas, 188 × 142 cm (74 × 56 in.) and *Gathers II*, 2017, oil on canvas, 183 × 137 cm (72 × 54 in.)

Treib works at an immersive scale, one that feels closer to the size of a bed than a door. You enter these paintings rather than pass through them. Nearly all are executed in the span of a single day. Working quickly but deliberately, Treib lays the canvas on the floor and then uses wide *hake* brushes to sweep paint over the surface, wiping out a gesture and then repeating it until each trace appears fluent and precise. These gestures appear as supple as her forms are mobile. With a turn of the brush, a contour line pools into a field of limpid color, which then divides into rhythmic strokes—contour, figure, and ground, all unified in a continuous mark. A soft skein of color can be flipped and pleated like a ribbon; a giant blue blot can be broken by the fluttering motion of a brush weaving through it. Just as the vibratory arrangement of forms in her paintings invokes the relation of the body to what it sees, these strokes suggest a mode of seeing through contact with the world, like the blind sculptor described by Roger de Piles, whose eyes were at the tips of his fingers. (The image returns in the curious treatise on sculpture written by Johann Gottfried Herder, who describes how a viewer circumambulates a sculpture, seeking to convert his eye into his hand and his soul into an even finer finger so that he might "*grasp* the image that arose from the arm and the soul of the artist. . . . His soul speaks to it, not as if his soul sees, but as if it touches, as if it feels."[2]) Treib thins her paints slightly so that they appear saturated yet translucent, and this gives her forms neither the solidity of still life nor the atmospherics of landscape. Instead of imagining that you might manipulate these figures or transport yourself into their midst, you are enjoined to follow the movements that produced them—the hand that wimpled or smoothed a shape, just as the body might sculpt a bed sheet.



The sheets referenced by Treib's paintings, however, belong not to beds, but to sketchbooks. Their off-white grounds suggest the small rectangles of paper on which Treib first works out her compositions, developing them sometimes over the course of years. The same composition can serve numerous works, which as a result share a sibling relationship, differing in their palettes, the subtle inflections of their features (the swelling of the fiddlehead form from *Chime* [2018] in *Patina II* [2019]; fig. 4), or the expression of their elements (the transformation of the fluted shape in *Asturian II* [2017]; page 27; into something resembling Hebrew pseudoscript in *Glint II* [2019]; page 43). Because she rarely hangs works

FIG 4 Details of *Chime*, 2018, oil on canvas, 183 × 137 cm (72 × 54 in.) and *Patina II*, 2019, oil on canvas, 188 × 142 cm (74 × 56 in.)

that share the same source close to one another, these resemblances might at first elude the viewer. An apparent automatism at the level of production carries into an automatism at the level of reception. In this mode, paintings appear like echoing phrases or, as the artist suggests, like afterimages, their tones inverted and vibrating on a new surface.

Seriality is surely not the name for it. Nor is repetition. Counterintuitively, for an artist whose work seems to militate against the habituation of vision, the word might be "habit." Habit, according to the philosopher Elizabeth Grosz, is the site of integration with the environment; it not only demonstrates our internal natures (we are "creatures of habit"), but also shows how we have internalized the world outside of us or accommodated ourselves to it. Because of this interplay of assimilation and adaptation, habit is equal parts a consolidation of our past and a dynamic preparation for our next act. Habit, Grosz writes, is "change contracted, compressed, contained. It remains there as possible or potential action even when the change which brought it about ceases. It anticipates a possible change. It is, in other words, a potentiality, a possibility, a virtual mode of addressing a future change."[3] Habits are not calcifications, as we might suppose, but something far more pliable. Habits are renewable; habits refresh. For Henri Bergson, who is Grosz's touchpoint here, the habit is one means by which the past revitalizes itself, manifests itself, survives in the present, and actualizes itself there. (Recollection is the other.) Habit might be the body's timepiece.

The cardinal reference for Treib's relationship to time is nevertheless not Bergson but Marcel Proust, for whom the utility of time's contraction lay less in economizing a new action than retrieving a past one. Treib's interest in unnameable forms and contingent phenomena finds an echo in Proust's involuntary memory, which holds that only the margins of experience—necessarily sensuous because they have never been distilled

FIG 5 *Anniversary Clock*, 2017, gouache and watercolor on found paper, 32 × 24 cm (12 ½ × 9 ½ in.)

into language or abstracted in narrative—can return our remembrances. Involuntary memory, the mechanism of this retrieval, is thus a condensation of then-now and here-there, as well as a condensation of the interval that separates these coordinates. "There's an echo, a rhyme between those two moments," Treib explains. "It's not the past moment or the present moment; it's both and neither. It's this way of collapsing the space between past and present, so it's a pure presence. I feel a real correspondence between Proust's conception of involuntary memory and pictorial space in painting, which has the unique characteristic of being experienced all at once."[4]

The execution of the painting is one contraction of time: namely, the time of preparation, which spans from the first sketch on paper, which might have been made years before the large painting, to the day the canvas was laid out on the floor. The legibility of the painting's production is another contraction: namely, the brushstrokes, through which one can almost reconstruct Treib's movements over the canvas, each one as particular as the way someone picks up a glass or sits in a chair. The conveyance of perception is a third: namely, the full spatial and temporal situation in which Treib beheld something—a fullness that included her in it, and now similarly implicates the viewer.

Is it any wonder, then, that among Treib's recurring motifs are two clocks: one, an Art Deco object whose face is mounted above a plane of pink glass; the other, a round-faced clock capped by an ornamental crown (fig. 5). Both are from the collection of the artist's father, who had repaired clocks during her childhood. This makes for a poignant biographical detail, in part because the means by which father and daughter proposed to "keep time" could not be more different. The broken clock submits to a sudden and dramatic inversion of status. Whereas our tasks were formerly measured by it—we were late or early, slow or quick in relation to that clock—now we see the object in all its contingency, having lost its privileged relationship to the quantity it meted out.

A functioning timepiece makes pieces of time, parsing it into minutes and seconds, and assures that these pieces run forward, and only forward, at a steady clip. The clock repairman returns the clock to this task, and to the utility that plunges the clock back below the surface of our awareness. The clock painter, on the other hand, does the opposite. She halts the clock's action and draws it into view. Like the broken timepiece, the clock in her picture runs time together instead of piecing it apart. On its face, time spills laterally and slips backward.

## *Sleeve*

*Glass Clock* (2013) (page 19) has no "face" to speak of—neither the numbers and hands that demarcate the hour, nor the ordered and symmetric features, nor the sense of plane for inscribing some sort of expressive content. Instead, an irregular rectangle of muted peach occupies the center of the composition, sandwiched above and below by bulbous blue forms. Markings dance across its surface and their continuation in the yellow and eggshell planes on either side of it suggests its transparency. There is nevertheless the idea of a portrait here, a front-facing head divided down the center like Matisse's 1905 *Green Stripe* (a portrait of the painter's wife credited, famously, with undermining portraiture's project of expression through its sheer chromatic

lunacy). In *Glass Clock*, the vivid planes of color that flank the muted clock face press forward, subverting the division between the significant surface of the timepiece and the blank ground. Instead of tracking the regular progress of the clock hands, our eye flits around the canvas. This circulation of the eye returns us to the problem of negative space in a painting. It is worth noting that the contrary of negative space in sculpture is not positive space, but mass. In the body of the painting, however, everything coheres: both a clock and the atmosphere surrounding it are pigment on a flat surface. Illusions aside, everything in painting in fact exists simultaneously in view and on the same plane.

*The Mobile Sleeve (green)* (2013) (fig. 6) is an early example of Treib's interest in this theme: a paper oddment covered in soft green pastel and loosely collaged onto a page, like a dress pattern pinned to a wall. The mobility in question is both self-evident—the paper can be displaced, even ruffled by a breeze—and ironic. For should not all sleeves be mobile, moved this way and that by the arm inside of them? All sleeves, that is, except the painted ones, which stay still precisely because they have a role to play in the service of an illusion of solidity. A painted sleeve calls upon the viewer to imagine the continuity of the body underneath it, running from the bared hand to the neck. Of course, no underlying body exists. The painted sleeve is therefore a figure for figurative painting itself: a colorful swath of fabric that is credited with containing a body.

"It is well to remember," Maurice Denis once pronounced, "that a picture—before being a battle horse, a nude woman, or some anecdote—is essentially a plane surface covered with colors assembled in a certain order."[5] In the context of his fellow Nabis (a group of Post-Impressionist painters that included Édouard Vuillard, one of Treib's touchstones), Denis's phrase was no simple bellwether of abstraction. It evokes the heaps

FIG 6 *The Mobile Sleeve (green)*, 2013, pastel and collage on paper, 40 × 30 cm (15 ¾ × 11 ¾ in.)


of patterned fabrics and reams of wallpaper, the work of seamstresses, and the movement of women's dresses that filled their paintings.

A number of Treib's paintings play upon this homology of clothing and painting. *Hem* (2015), *Pleat* (2015), *Enfold* (2017), and *Skirt* (2017) reference two sources, almost as different as can be. The first is a photomontage from *The Vogue Sewing Book* (fig. 7) featuring the "mobile sleeve," whose description seems to encompass all sleeve types: "[s]hort and snappy or long and skinny, trim and efficient or flowing generously from a gathered wrist." Three images of women, each one cropped to show a single arm and a portion of torso, illustrate the look. The second sleeve comes from a detail in *The Legend of the True Cross* (fig. 8). In the panel in question, likely executed by Piero's assistant Giovanni da Piemonte, two men hoist a third, who is being interrogated by a fourth figure, from a well. The interrogation will eventually force this unhappy third, one "Judas the Jew," to divulge the location of the true cross (which, according to legend, had been hidden following the crucifixion). One of the hoisters wears a curious capelet from which drapes an empty arm of fabric, which resembles nothing so much as a giant pointing finger indicating the very ground beneath them. Like the *Vogue* sleeves, this detail is a fragment in an unrecoverable whole, one that substantiates but never substitutes itself for the whole.

In *The Legend of the True Cross*, the empty sleeve appears like a mutation or a mistake; the mind stutters, trying to make sense of it. Treib has met this strangeness by drawing out the space between the hoister's body and the free-hanging sleeve (fig. 9). That shape, which looks something like a musical note, runs the full height of the canvas. All the other forms in the work sidle

FIG 7 *The Vogue Sewing Book* by Patricia Perry (editor), p. 281, published 1970 by Vogue Patterns
FIG 8 Piero Della Francesca, detail from *The Legend of the True Cross*, Basilica of San Francesco, Arezzo, c. 1452–66

up to it, recasting the body of the *Legend* as a group of glyphs: signs for the body, or rather, for what the body wears. By simultaneously signing this body and bodying the space around it, Treib sets out a vision of the fresco as something whose significance lies in the crossing of forms on the surface, rather than in the meanings embedded in their symbols. The "true cross" is not buried, as in the legend, but sits right on the surface.

Treib's paintings are nonallegorical. They are not symbols of her inner state, and they are certainly not ironizing figures for the conscription of painting by capitalism or its contemporary meaninglessness, or any other way that painting has been turned into a defeated sign of itself. But nor are her works simply assertations of the material fact of painting. If painting is, first of all, an arrangement of colored forms on a plane surface, it is equally a record of that arrangement's contingency and specificity: the shifting relations of image and space, and time and the body, that figure so centrally in her work. Treib's work insists that these relations can be communicated without resorting to the totalizing logic of perspective or the illusion of buried coherence. And this is perhaps why they can be so grand without being domineering, and so intent on the relations of things without asserting their hierarchies. You are free to look, they say, and to discover how looking binds you to the world—not fast or fixedly, but continuously and changeably. One is put in mind of Philip Guston's reflections on Piero's *Baptism of Christ*. "[W]e are suspended between the order we see and an apprehension that everything may again move," he notes. "Is the painting a vast precaution to avoid total immobility, a wisdom which can include the partial doubt of the final destiny of its forms? It may be this doubt which moves and locates everything."[6]

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1 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," *Maurice Merleau-Ponty: Basic Writings*, ed. Thomas Baldwin (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 313.

2 Johann Gottfried Herder, *Sculpture: Some Observations on Shape and Form from Pygmalion's Creative Dream*, ed. and trans. Jason Gaiger (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 41.

3 Elizabeth Grosz, "Habit Today: Ravaisson, Bergson, Deleuze and Us," *Body & Society* vol. 19, nos. 2 & 3 (2013): 220–221.

4 Joe Fyfe, "Patricia Treib," *Bomb Magazine*, issue 136 (July 2016), https://bombmagazine.org/articles/patricia-treib/.

5 This line is the opening remark of Denis's 1890 tract, "Definition of Neo-traditionalism," written when the painter was only twenty years old. Originally published in *Art et critique* (Paris), 23 and 30 August 1890, and republished in Maurice Denis, *Théories* (Paris: Rouart et Watelin Editeurs, 1913), 1.

6 Philip Guston, "Piero della Francesca: The Impossibility of Painting," *Artnews* (May 1965): 38.

FIG 9 *Armless Sleeve*, 2010, oil on canvas, 167.5 × 127 cm (66 × 50 in.)