

INTRODUCTION

The impossible is easy to reach
Who knows the way out of the labyrinth?
These are not rhetorical questions
the heart has its reasons though reasons not
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In her paintings of the past decade Andrea Belag made a number of ambitious changes, both conceptual and procedural, which enabled her to enter into a singularly evocative and fecund territory. My feeling is that by virtue of this still ongoing body of work, Belag has become an important artist whose work contributes to the discourse regarding the future of abstract painting. As both purely material paintings and as richly metaphorical syntheses of structure, color, and light, the paintings done between 1996 and '98 stir up deeply contradictory responses in the viewer. The viewer is swiftly pulled, and pleurably so, in two opposing directions, choosing to either succumb to the paintings's evident material strengths, particularly their shifting registers of luminosity, or to recognize that a narrative of longing and unbridgeable distance exudes throughout their layered, architectonic compositions. It is to Belag's credit that her paintings are rigorously formal yet also open and secure enough to

accommodate both points of view without privileging one over the other.

In order to understand the extent of Belag's recent accomplishment, it is necessary to examine the work's indivisible dualism in the context of both her earlier work and postwar American abstraction. In the mid 1990's, in an attempt to satisfy her desire for a more complex, more open-ended encounter between viewer and painting, Belag jettisoned her use of figural elements in favor of a limited vocabulary of horizontal and vertical bands ranging from the physically sensuous to the visually transparent. In addition, she changed her palette from one with allusions to nature, particularly sky and sea, to one derived in part from her Lower Manhattan environment.

Belag's shift from a hybrid form of painting, its combination of figural and abstract elements, to a more formal abstraction bears certain parallels to the changes that occurred in Mark Rothko's work in the late 1940s and early '50s. Like Rothko during that breakthrough period, Belag's deliberate narrowing of choices empowered her to consciously exploit the particular formal possibilities that had emerged in her work in the early '90s. However, rather than purifying her work of all referentiality, as Rothko and others of his generation did, Belag utilized her abstract vocabulary not only to investigate the contingent relationship between light and color, and transparency and solidity, but also to establish echoes of one's urban experiences, such as the passage of light and shadow. Because Belag places her bands horizontally and vertically, often in overlapping configurations, thus bringing to mind basic architectural structures such as post and lintel, she is able to court narrative

without departing from a purely abstract vocabulary. Moreover, her use of titles, such as Noir (1997) and Neighborhood (1997), in conjunction with her achitectonic compositions, further opens the door on this way of reading an abstract painting, as well as recall its roots in symbolist art.

That Belag is able to achieve meaning so convincingly must be regarded as part of her accomplishment, as well as be recognized as central to the pleasure with which the paintings reward prolonged contemplation. That she strives for meaning in her recent abstract paintings is not altogether surprising when one considers the work immediately preceding it. Typical of Belag's early '90's combinations of figural and abstract elements is Descent (1994). In the painting, the artist has depicted two pairs of shoes, seen from an aerial perspective and pointing downward, superimposed against wide, equally sized horizontal bands of alternating colors (blue and white). The spatial compression of Descent, as well as the inversion of top and bottom, gives viewers the impression that they are standing at the top of a long, wide, institutional staircase, and that the shoes are the sole remnants of lives that have been annihilated or "disappeared." This scenario suggests that the viewer has survived, while those following behind him or her have not. Seen this way, Descent can be understood as a contemporary re-visioning of the myth of Orpheus and his reemergence from Hades.

At the same time, because the top of the stairs coincides with the bottom edge of the painting, one cannot help but read Descent as tragic on both a formal and expressive level. The painting is a self-sustained vision of the world after it has been turned completely upside down. Belag's inversion causes the

composition to appear to circle back on itself, so that the bands become a relentlessly circling wheel of stairs. Tragedy, the painting suggests, is not only inescapable, but each of us is ultimately implicated in its continuous passing. Finally, while open to interpretation, and thus not didactic, Descent, along with other paintings Belag did at this time, do bring to mind this century's innumerable destructions of civilian populations, the nameless and nameable ghosts that continue to haunt us.

Formally, Belag's mottled, scraped down, and soaked up bands recall the kinds of transparencies one associates of monotypes, a medium which Belag had started investigating in the late 1980s. In her superimposition of figural elements (shoes), schematic structures (houses), and simple shapes (boats) on horizontal, abstract bands, one recognizes Belag's attempt to contextualize the bands as stairs, as ocean and shore, or as sky and landscape. One reason Belag might have used figural elements to undermine the horizontal bands as pattern, is because, for her, painting is not about the object but about place. This is ultimately what differentiates her from formalist abstract artists.

Among other things, Belag's attempt to marry figuration and abstraction suggests an uneasiness with both formalist and minimalist abstraction, and the need to question, as well as subvert, their premises. In retrospect, it seems likely that Belag recognized that her combinations of abstraction and figuration raised the problem of how to contextualize an abstract vocabulary without resorting to figural elements. Was it possible to make the structural bands become complexly allusive rather than singularly referential? Without resorting to figuration, was it possible make the bands something more than either self-referential or

decorative marks? This was the territory Belag wanted to, and eventually did, enter; it is a realm which must be discovered rather than be preconceived.

No doubt aware of the stripe paintings of Frank Stella and their influence on artists such Sean Scully and Valerie Jaudon, Belag understood that she needed to do something more than place equally sized bands side by side or turn them into sturdy, interlocking lacework. Had she taken one of the paths suggested by the work of either Scully and Jaudon, she would have continued in the tradition of artists who use repetition and modular units to arrive at objective, non-relational paintings. Certainly, the potent subject matter of Descent suggests that she would have found neither of these solutions particularly satisfying, that they ultimately left too much out.

Belag's dilemma, one which I believe is central to many artists of her generation, is twofold: Is it possible to move beyond the self-imposed, historical limitations of abstraction, particularly as they were codified by minimalist painting and formalist criticism, and is it possible to recover that which has been marginalized or deemed obsolete. In contrast to the minimalists, and their fierce advocacy of self-sufficient objectivity, she wanted to learn if it was possible to enter a territory that is simultaneously objective and subjective, self-sufficient yet openly allusive. And, having identified this territory as her goal, she both isolated and focused on a question that has confounded, as well as upended, numerous contemporary abstract artists: How does one reintroduce composition back into overall abstraction? It is one of the central questions to emerge in abstract art in the wake of Jackson Pollock and the subsequent

generation of minimalists, all of whom, because they believed it was their historical legacy, purged composition from their work.

At various points in her career, Belag has come close to purging composition from her paintings, but it is because she is clearing the way for herself. In the intimately scaled Stairs (1994) and Rainbow (1996), for example, she utilized the horizontal bands to make paintings that are simultaneously abstract and allusive, formal and referential. Preceding the large sized Descent, Stairs set the stage for her introduction of figural elements into her work. Her investigation of abstraction begins after she finished Rainbow, a composition which both echoes and undermines the classical representation of landscape, and the use of a horizontal division to differentiate sky from earth.

In Stairs the horizontal bands look weathered and worn, scraped down, while the curving bands in Rainbow are transparent and airy, more colored light than solid paint. In Rainbow, Belag uses paper to soak up the paint, thus changing its consistency from solid to transparent, and from physically insistent to ghostly traces. In both these paintings, however, the compositional solutions and slight hints of spatiality that she arrived at were temporary; overall, the paintings still conformed too dependent much to mimetic representational models.

In the intimately scaled Timely, Sediment, and Wave (all 1996), which were done immediately after Rainbow, Belag moved away from referentiality and began investigating both the material and formal possibilities inherent in her paintings of stairs, seascape, and sky. All three paintings are made up of horizontal bands of more or less the same width. Done in different colors and resulting in different levels of transparency (or solidity), often

in the same stroke, it's apparent that Belag was deliberately working within a limited format in order to discover what would happen when she abutted the bands together in a rigorously abstract format without reference to landscape. Instead of subject matter, which had preoccupied her in the early '90's, Belag had turned her attention to the expressive possibilities inherent both in her materials and in her application of paint. Thus, in contrast to Rainbow, with its evocation of sky and curving horizon line, in paintings such as Sediment Belag worked in a largely non-relational manner, causing the bands to coexist on the same physical plane.

It is in Rainbow, Timely, and Sediment that the viewer becomes aware of Belag's increasing interest in light, and the changes that occur when opaque and transparent elements are placed side by side, as well as when the substance of a brushstroke is made to shift from solid to granular to airy. In fact, the central subject of Belag's recent work seems to be changing light, and that the artist has in mind light in both its natural and artificial manifestations, their interactions with the variousness of the material world. Living in Lower Manhattan, where the island narrows, and the Hudson and East Rivers are easily accessible, Belag is attuned to the way the Tribeca's buildings (its neighborhood of gleaming office buildings, refurbished condos, turn-of-the-century warehouses and loft dwellings) and surfaces (smooth, gleaming granite, ochre and red brick, asphalt, glass, and wood) dismantle the sun and sky's changing light, parcels it into reflection, shadow, sliver, and atmosphere.

In Descent Belag was concerned with history and the individual's relationship to it, while in her recent work she is

sensitive to the relationship between the individual and place. In both instances Belag is focused on the interdependent continuum between the individual and the world. Not only is there an entangled connection between the self and its circumstances, but also neither is static. In this regard, Belag's work extends out of the trajectory started by Cezanne and the fact that in his work everything has motion but is contained. The other connection between Cezanne and Belag is their use of strong verticals aligned along the painting's outer vertical edges to direct the viewer's attention to a central area that is simultaneously complete and incomplete. However, whereas Cezanne integrated contour with stippled, shifting color and tonality, Belag's glowing, sensual bands shift along their seams, becoming, in the adjacent band, another color or a lighter or darker tone.

An urban dweller, Belag recognizes that one is often simultaneously inside and outside different kinds of structures, and that dazzling shafts of light fall vertically and horizontally, next to as well as across cool plush shadows and harsh, glinting reflections. She knows that all of these facets are inflected, of course, by one's mood and private associations, including memories of films and music. In this regard, objectivity is moot goal, more fiction than fact.

In paintings such as Island, Inside Out, Shadow and Light, and Jalousie (all 1997), Belag begins entering fully into her own remarkable territory. Made up of substantial, different sized, horizontal and vertical strokes, which look as if the paint has been pulled across the surface in a single decisive movement, these paintings integrate content and process in ways that are,

for Belag, groundbreaking and unpredictable. Seen against the background of art history, it could be said that her recent paintings build upon the integration of content and process that was central to Eva Hesse in the late '60's. Like Hesse, particularly in her drawings, Belag makes each act (the width of her brush, color, and paint's viscosity) specific and self-sustained. Rather than recycling a predetermined set of decisions, Belag arrives at her unity through a process of intuitive decisions.

In Belag's work during the '90's, a number of significant changes took place. Repetition and patterning was replaced by differences in color, materiality, and shifting light. She opened up her process of applying paint so that she could move toward completion step by step, always managing to defer the knowledge that the painting is finished until the final stroke of paint has been applied or soaked up with paper. In further contrast to her paintings of the early '90's, the recent paintings articulate a space that is at once physical and layered, rather than compressed and illusionistic. The shifting interaction of color and light, solidity and transparency, causes the space to become both actual and metaphorical, material and metaphysical. The paintings' specifying power, which expands beyond the canvas, is due to Belag's ability to emotionally inflect the space through both her use of color and her juxtapositions of various kinds of transparency and solidity.

Typically, in the recent work, Belag places a wide vertical stroke, often darker and more physical, along each edge of the painting. In Island, Shadow and Light, and Jalousie, for example, she places a darker, more physical brushstroke along the bottom or

top edge or both. These strokes frame the interior, which consists of horizontal strokes, usually done in varying degrees of transparency. Each strokes defines its materiality differently. In some cases the paint is subtly grooved, as if every hair of the wide brush (some are without handles and must be guided with both hands) traced its impression in the viscous paint before it dried. In other cases, the paint is mottled, the sediment of what can't be scraped away. And in still other instances the paint is transparent and light emanates from its interior.

All these perceptual differences suggest that there is a task for a particularly devoted observer to detail the identifying characteristics of each brushstroke. And yet, despite the very real and evident differences in the way Belag manifests each and every brushstroke, the paintings are all of a piece, as solidly integrated as the dense weave of the canvas itself. There is a homemade sturdiness to the paintings; each brushstroke is as physically and visually insistent as the planks of clapboard house, whether newly painted, weathered, or faded.

There is little that is preconceived about these paintings. Whatever was the inspiring experience has quickly become subsumed by the painting itself, the process by which it comes into being. At the same time, Belag's palette, with colors such as thalo blues and greens, electric blues, olive and lime greens, mustard yellows and ochres, alizarins and crimsons, evoke her urban environment just as much as Richard Diebenkorn's dusty palette evoked the light, atmosphere, fauna, flora, and streets of Southern and, later, Northern California. The difference is that Diebenkorn's palette embodies the intersection of city and nature, while Belag's is more artificial than naturalistic. Belag's palette,

which seems to have its sources in Manhattan's cacophonous streets and river views, as well as in personal experience, art history, and American films of the '50's and '60's, their sharp acidic colors and oversaturations, is particularly unique among postwar American abstract artists. It is one of those salient facts about postwar American abstractionists that very few can impart a subtle emotional weight to color. In doing so, Belag joins a rather small group that includes Brice Marden and Mary Heilmann

Noir (1997-98) is a small squarish painting. While we can hold it in our hands, like a book, it embodies a world that feels large and remote to us. This is something completely new in Belag's work. She now possesses the ability to make an intimate painting seem large and a large painting seem intimate. In doing so, her work embraces a complex emotional density, simultaneously celebratory and elegiacal, compacted and open, sensual and austere. The wallop her paintings pack is quietly efficient, devastatingly smooth. They go right to the heart.

Compositionally, the painting consists of two vertical, deep blue, slightly wavering, semi-transparent yet physically insistent brushstrokes, which both frame and partially obscure a series of glowing horizontal bands. At the same time, the horizontal strokes are like slats; they too seem to be obscuring something, particularly because of the sensually rich light steadily flowing from their depths. It is this interplay between what is present and what is absent, and what is seen and what is glimpsed, that gives Belag's latest works their erotic and spiritual overtones that are simultaneously erotic and spiritual, at once saturated and elusive, unfulfillable. The deep colors and material density

of some of her bands is matched by the optical richness of others. Much to her credit Belag doesn't paint spiritual light, concoct that kind of drama. Her work is dramatic, but not theatrical. The light emanates from the painting's surface, as if passing through the transparent bands of color.

In Noir, the wavering vertical blue strokes are simultaneously visual and physical, the paint grooved by the pressure put on the brush. It's as if they are thick gauzy curtains, which leads the viewer to ask: whose apartment is this? As in Descent, Belag is able to implicate the viewer, make him or her part of the painting. It is the viewer who is looking out the window, into the painting, looking at (and into) a world that is both fragmented and complete, a world made up of warm and cool colors, all of which glow. Noir reminds of the different surfaces and textures we overlook.

In Noir, we don't know if it's evening or dawn and whether or not the light is natural or artificial. Moreover, we can't decide if we are sitting back in a chair, lying in bed, standing and staring, perhaps absent mindedly, or walking towards the window because something has caught our attention. While some colors are intensely sensual, and visually rich, almost romantically so, the layered composition imparts both a physical and disembodied distance to the painting. This paradox gives the painting an emotional weight. We are in a drama, but we don't exactly know the nature of the drama.

Flooding through all of Belag's recent paintings is a silence that is very different in mood than the one suffusing through Descent. Surprisingly enough, this silence, as well as Belag's juxtaposition of warm, hot, and cool colors, bears comparison to

the work of Edward Hopper, whose most enduring subject is the city, and the aura of isolation surrounding its inhabitants. However, Belag's silence is less about the individual's social alienation and personal isolation than Hopper's. Because her luminous, transparent light registers passage, change, and transformation, rather than depicts specific things and individuals, her paintings don't convey the introspective despair animating many of Hopper's paintings. Moreover, despite Hopper's lifelong commitment to realism and Belag's equally strong commitment to abstraction, there are obvious parallels that can be made between their use of vertical and horizontal divisions to acknowledge the very different ways the things of the world, be it neon light, movies, afternoon shadows, sunrise, tenements, or abandoned piers at sunset, manifest themselves.

In Hopper's New York Movie (1939), its juxtaposition of a smaller vertical rectangle, which consists of bright reds, yellows, blues, and lime greens, with a larger darker rectangle consisting deep browns, blacks, brownish-oranges and reds, both what both connects and separates Hopper's work to that of Belag's becomes apparent. Hopper uses the divisions to isolate a woman lost in thought, one of his most prevalent themes. Standing in a hallway, bathed in bright light, she has retreated to the dark recesses of her own thinking. In the area directly adjacent to the hallway and her, in a largely empty movie theater, the viewer sees the audience, the backs of their heads, and a small portion of the movie screen. The film goers are also lost in thought, but their attention is directed outward, toward the film.

In Belag's Alizarin Crimson (1997) or Nocturne (1997), the rectangle of luminous horizontal bands glows like light seen

through a stained glass window. In these and other paintings, it is the viewer who is the unseen figure in the painting, and his or her attention is both outward and introspective. Belag's paintings further underscore this duality by being simultaneously self-contained and incomplete, with the framed areas managing to suggest a glimpse of something mysterious and unnameable, while also evoking something disarmingly familiar. While the mood is contemplative, replete with sadness, eroticism, and a feeling of unbridgeable distance, her work reminds us that there are pleasures to be had in the most ordinary moments of seeing, that one's experiences may be isolating, but they are also rewarding. After all, it's not clear in Noir whether one is alone or not, whether something has just happened or what will happen next.

One of the abiding strengths of Noir is that it succeeds in suggesting a narrative without ever departing from abstraction. The title even hints at film as being a possible inspiration, thus further complicating the way the painting can be read. Belag knowingly and imaginatively reinvents the format of a window, as well as the relationship between interior and exterior. One thinks of the paintings of Vermeer, Bonnard, and Hopper, among others, all of whom reinvented this format in their work. However, within the history of postwar American abstraction, its insistence on flatness and the grid, the format of the window has been both scorned and marginalized, regarded at best as obsolete.

Belag goes a long way to recovering the window as a structuring device, as a way of making the viewer aware that the world is layered, multiple, expansive, and various. The tension between completeness and incompleteness conveys the feeling that all our views are partial, that there is no place from which the

world can be fully seen. At the same time, her compressed layers of semi-transparent paint serve to remind us that the surface is never all that there is to see, that something more is waiting to be glimpsed, that the world both reveals itself and eludes us at every moment.

In Piano (1998), a large painting, Belag not only jettisons her use of verticals as a framing device, but she also reinvents her use of horizontals. Some stretch across the entire length of the painting, while others do not. Along the left side she has broken up a dusky rose vertical with densely painted horizontals in such a way that it appears to be beneath some of them and adjacent to others. Placed horizontally near the middle of the composition is a dark blue stroke, which is aligned with, as well as abuts against, a pale blue horizontal stroke. The dark blue is transformed along the seam separating it from the lighter blue, becoming the other color as it crosses from one band to the next.

Piano should be considered a breakthrough painting within Belag's recent, ongoing body of work. Among other things, it reveals that she has not come anywhere near the end of her run, that there are still many more possibilities to be discovered within her format of tightly compacted, vertical and horizontal brushstrokes. Because the bars in Piano are largely horizontal and used without framing vertical bands, the viewer senses that the composition expands beyond the physical edges. At the same time, the composition isn't a pattern; and it doesn't suggest something that is infinitely reproducible. Rather, the viewer's attention shifts vertically and horizontally without being to fix on either the center or the edges. In a series of four different sized

rectangles arranged vertically along the left side, for example, the scraped down alizarin crimson seems simultaneously part of an interrupted vertical band and a series of self-contained rectangles.

That we can read the the alizarion crimson as both an interrupted veretical band and as four different sized rectangles, causes us to consider its identity without being able to reach a conclusion. This inability to name what we are looking at opens the painting up, makes it something speculate upon. Thus, in Piano, Belag goes beyond narrative possibilities and arrives at what must be regarded as the realm of metaphysical speculation, particularly since her subject matter is the relationship between materiality and light. Elsewhere in the painting, the horizontal brown band, which divides the painting into almost equally sized upper and lower halves, seems to be superimposed over the scraped down alizarin crimson. Directly above it, the horizontal band that changes from dark blue to light blue seem to have penetrated the scraped down alizarin crimson. The horizontal grooves in both the brown and blue bands register movement. Despite how much a painting can slow down time, the world itself has never been still. It is a fact that Belag always acknowledges in her work.

In Piano, color is both material and immaterial, both a thing and light. The juxtaposition of physicality and opticality underscores the fact that our relationship with the world is based upon both seeing and touching. It this investigation of the individual's relationship to the world that has been central to Belag's work since '96. The various rectangles, horizontal, and vertical bands become windows connecting us a world we never fully see, only know that it is right there in front of our eyes, remote

yet vivid. Within this context, Belag's use of framing bands to evoke a window (or a frame) gains in emotional weight; one is always trying to see what is approaching, whether it is something beyond the horizon or in the future.

Like Noir, Nocturne, and other recent paintings, Piano stirs something up in us. And what is stirred up in us is marked by the rectangles in which the horizontal bands have been abutted together, the feeling that they are both enough and somehow, and somewhat painfully, not enough. Want to drink in more, we are reminded of our thirst, reminded perhaps that it is part of our unreasonableness, part of abiding dissatisfaction. At the same time, for all their intense hedonism, Belag's paintings aren't hedonistic; they don't offer us an escape. It is at this limit that her paintings exist, the brink of that place where one is bathed in light and the liquidity of color, where time neither ravages us nor stands still. Belag knows there is a difference between imagination and fantasy. This is the pleasure her paintings offer; it is about as pure a pleasure as one can get these days.

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