THE ARABESQUES REVIEW

Nichole van Beek: Glam Math

Interview by Maxwell Taylor-Milner

MTM: To begin at the beginning, something you've alluded to in the past are pieces that were more photo driven. I've seen some pieces from 2010 that had photographs with patterns overlaid on them that seemed to be connected to your current paintings but I was wondering if you could talk about those early pieces and the transition from using images to working solely in paint.

NVB: I think I've always flipped back and forth between doing photography and drawing or painting by hand–all through undergrad and then after. But as an undergrad I had this idea that I had to learn a technical skill, so I put a lot of emphasis on learning photography and video. I was also doing computer animation at that time but I went to art school because I loved to draw and paint.

MTM: These photographs and the animation that you were doing then, were they like what the paintings became? Because it seems like a lot of your paintings have this aspect in which it's a three-dimensional form that has been manipulated: extruded, convoluted, pushed and pulled.

Nichole van Beek, *Garden Maze*, 2016, acrylic and fiber paste on dyed canvas, 18 x 5 inches.
Image courtesy of Jeff Bailey Gallery

NVB: I've always been interested in ideas about perception and how we construct two dimensional spaces. I'm fascinated by the play between 2-D and 3-D and especially what happens when you're trying to create the illusion of reality, a three-dimensional space that you can walk through. So even very early when I was doing 3-D animation as an undergrad I was just taking photographs of things and then bringing them into the animation program and mapping them onto an object, which is a very basic technique of 3-D animation. So you're just essentially taking the real lived experience, taking a slice out of it, slapping it back on the surfaces, and then creating–recreating–an object out of that.

MTM: Yeah. There's something interesting in the way in which a lot of art that incorporates pattern, like Islamic tile patterns, is something that seems really infinite, in the way these patterns can be extended to cover an area of any size. There's also something very limitless, even cosmic about your work that sort of points to this, and I wonder if there is something to the tension between the way they suggest infinity as well as being singular in the way that objects are?

NVB: I haven't really thought so much about infinity, but in this recent work there are more repeating patterns so it's definitely something that's been coming up more. In the past, the images I've made have been mostly of singular objects, and maybe this is why I'm drawn towards repeating patterns in this group of work, because I've often focused on a kind of closed object with a limitless space around it.

Nichole van Beek, *Ban Bannon*, 2017, acrylic on dyed canvas, 26 x 22 inches.
Image courtesy of Jeff Bailey Gallery

MTM: With this iconic quality to these images, how the object is framed without any cropping so you're seeing the entirety of that thing, do you visualize them as fully formed or do they come out of a more intuitive process of iteration?

NVB: In the last six years a lot of them have been based on idealized letter forms. So an "A" would just be a triangle, and a "C" would be a half circle, but they're not meant to be read as letters. A lot of it has been a play on different ways I can combine those forms. In the process of making them, I do a lot of sketches. I'll remove or add certain elements to make it all work together better and the whole original form might not be there.

MTM: It's interesting that there's a way in which the formal language comes out of literal language. The alphabet becomes very literally the building blocks for these paintings

NVB: And they have been for a while. It feels endless. There's just 26 shapes but with every word you have a new combination of shapes that can come together in so many different ways. But even so, it was a long road to start using letters–I know it doesn't sound like anything major. After graduate school, when I was doing photo-based sculptures, I decided to move away from using a lot of equipment and doing sculpture because I didn't want to have all that stuff. I started working small, on paper. I chose one shape: a teardrop shape, and I just worked on that for about four years, in whatever variation I could come up with in terms of color, pattern, and dimension. There was a lot that could come out of reiterating that one shape again and again and again, trying to push it each time into something that I hadn't done before. After about four years I was like… I want to do something else [laughs]. And that was that painting [points to it on the wall] where I just was like, I'm going to put an "X" through this shape.

MTM: –and it's interesting because then it's a crossing out.

NVB: Right, and then for about a year, it was just an "X" and a teardrop. The "X" eventually suggested other symbols or letters, so that opened up the whole alphabet. At first it really was about just using the shape of a letter. It didn't matter to me that those letters built up to a word or some other reference. Letterforms were enough to play with. But of course it led to thinking well, what if it was a word? Oh! Amazing! I mean it took *years* to get to, oh, how about a word?

MTM: Like learning language: you learn the alphabet and then you learn words. And with that realization was it also that, oh now I can spell, or was it, oh there's a wider formal vocabulary that is now available to me, now that I've decide to work with letters?

Nichole van Beek, *Black Snake*, 2017, acrylic on dyed canvas, 30 x 36 inches.
Image courtesy of Jeff Bailey Gallery

NVB: It was the spelling that opened up a new formal vocabulary. The way that I was making letters into objects was by extruding them. Like the triangle of an "A" would just be extruded and become a very basic three-dimensional shape. And that led to the idea that you have two of those letters: you have the front of the "A" and you have the back of the "A". The first couple of years of exploring that idea was largely about repetition, about finding words that had a doubling of letters, or words that implied a doubling of some sort.

MTM: Right. I think there's also something about a lot of these phrases are idiomatic and thus recognizable, but still very open-ended. Like *OMG GMO*.

NVB: Yes. But in the last eight months or so I've been very involved with going to protests and making signs and seeing other people's signs and I feel like there are often these very iconic phrases. Sometimes kind of jokey, you know? People are trying to bring attention to something in a short, pithy expression. And because I've been working with words and now I'm going to these protests and making these signs it seemed natural to let some of those things come in. In paintings like *Ban Bannon*, there's still the kind of repetition that I was focusing on in my work but the phrase was being used as a common protest sign.
MTM: It seems like a lot of your pieces do this thing where they bring the world in, bringing in language or texture, importing your surroundings and it seems like this is a continuation of that. A way in which the paintings have adapted or reacted to the current political climate.

NVB: Yeah, there's certain words that have become so prevalent like the word "rise." I see it everywhere and it's such a big part of activist language. Maybe it's overused but it has a lot of meaning for a lot of people. And so when I was making the painting *Rise to Set,* the background was already like a sunrise or sunset, so it did seem like a natural fit to play with that word and to bring that into the painting. There was also a connection between a sunrise

as something beautiful and natural, and also everybody waking up and realizing what's going on in the world and trying to do something about it.

MTM: Yeah, reflecting the overall politicization of language. To go further with the paintings absorbing or reflecting the world around them, I wonder if you could talk about the residency that you did in Vermont and the context for the work you did while you were there. Since that has a really interesting connection to place and to your personal history or your family history.

NVB: The exciting thing about this photosensitive dye is that it is such a direct way of recording something that you find or come in contact with. And it has also been a really fun way for me to bring some of being outside into the work. I love having some part of the process happen outdoors and to have that record of or connection with an outdoor space. The first time I made sunprints was at a friend's studio and we were in her backyard and I looked around at what was growing in the yard for something to print. I wouldn't normally be that attentive. That was the starting point of this way to pay more attention to what's around me when I'm outside. After that I worked in people's backyards for two summers and it was great because it got me out of the studio. I didn't realize when I applied for the residency that it was only 10 minutes away from where my aunt used to live. So that was amazing because I had spent my childhood there already. And, when I was a kid I had more time to sit around and play in the dirt so it was like having the opportunity to go back to that.

MTM: You have a very freeform experience of the outdoors.

NVB: As an adult you lose connection with that a little bit–you always have a purpose or you're doing something. So this process is giving me an opportunity to just dig around. You know, just walk around and look for things in the bushes. It's a different way of interacting with the landscape.

MTM: And of encountering source material.

NVB: Yeah. It's not the same as just sitting and painting something because I have to go and pick it. Cut it. And decide whether that's OK.

MTM: Also an interesting reconciliation with photography–doing this sort of very early photography. Weren't cyanotypes the first photographs?

NVB: Right, the originals. It's special that you're able to just put it out and have the sun and work on it. I had to be really aware of the weather; the first two weeks I was there I couldn't do it because it was cloudy or raining. And even when I was printing in people's backyards it was so temperamental because it has to be full sun and it has to be the right kind of day.

MTM: Exactly. So it really is both place and time–a time of day, a very specific moment or window in time. I was thinking about as akin to a John Cage piece, as a recording of open-ended circumstances. The photosensitive dye and the plants are the givens, and then it's up to the sun and the atmosphere to determine how that's going to happen. There's a lot of variation, even in relatively uniform pieces, a gradient from crispness to haze.

NVB: Yeah, I think if I If I could just do it all the time every day for the next 10 years I might be able to control it a little bit better. But it is so finicky that I just get what I get and that's OK. The fun of the work is not having too much control over it and then seeing it for what it is and deciding what can be built into it.

MTM: You use stencils to create some of these so I was wondering about the intersection between those–on the one hand you have these photograms that create kind of not a totally aleatory structure but one that's certainly less predictable than working inside the studio. And then that's coupled to this sort of a very precise way of painting using pastry bags.

NVB: I think it's in part an effort to look at paint in a different way. Why does it have to go on with a brush? There are different ways that you could apply it and if you're working abstractly then you don't have to blend the paint or create something that looks realistic or whatever you do with a brush. And there's obviously a lot of other tools you can use to slap the paint on. For me there's also a little bit of humor in using a pastry bag to paint with.

MTM: Because that juxtaposition is inherently comic to be making a “serious” painting with something that's kind of materially comic. The floppiness of the bag has a kind of comic pathos as well as being somewhat incongruous in the studio.

NVB: And the austerity of the idealized forms that are very sharp and geometric combining with these very decorative and dimensional marks… I mean maybe just my sense of humor.

MTM: But it also does get to what you were saying earlier about different kinds of labor and different kinds of treating the surface using this bakery tool that also creates a sort of texture or pattern that is similar to crochet. So has this connection to both culinary and also to textile arts.

NVB: Yes it definitely brings that in. I mean it feels often like I'm just laying down a piece of rope or a yarn. So yeah, it can veer off into other references pretty easily, having that texture there.

MTM: Yeah. And the way it's continuous and also that there are no pauses or breaks. It seems as if just something like weaving where you're passing this one thread through a larger structure.

NVB: I think everything with the pastry bag that I've done references some kind of weaving or textiles. In the first one everybody that came to the studio was like, did you just cut up some carpet and put in on your painting?

Nichole van Beek, *From Rise to Set*, 2016, acrylic and glass on dyed canvas, 48 x 38 inches.
Image courtesy of Jeff Bailey Gallery

MTM: It's an interesting way of bringing in illusion since it does this thing with paint where it seems to be addressing one kind of craft but is actually using a technique from another to do something that's fundamental to the mission of painting, if you will.

NVB: This new one that I'm working on is coming from this book [*The Book of Knots and Ropework*, Eric C. Fry, 1981]. I really like the idea of knotting and rope work because I feel like it's a very practical craft. But it's also a decorative endeavor and was the basis for women's crafts in the 70s. Often the work seems like it should have practical applications but a lot of the time it doesn't.

MTM: Yeah especially like this hanging planter here. This is a beautiful functional display--it has a purpose to display things but it's also so much more complicated than it would ever need to be. Or knot work in general is like marlinspike seamanship: every line is in its proper place even though it's like an amount of effort that is kind of superfluous or gratuitous–the way in which things are raised to an art through lavishing more attention on them than they need or applying more intent than is really necessary.

NVB: I like that reference to seafaring culture, which would traditionally be part of a man's world, and then you have the decorative knotted works which refer to women's craft. There's an interesting genderization of process in the history of it, which is fun to deconstruct. And it's actually really complex how these things are done; there's a lot of math that goes into it. It's a language that is passed on from one person to the next, so someone at some point started a lot simpler than this. They had to develop it into this complex system that's passed from one to another.

MTM: Can you speak about some of the non-paint elements in your work? The glass or glitter your canvases are sometimes encrusted with?

NVB: Part of it comes from knowing that paint is pigments that are natural materials that are ground up and then saying, well, what other materials instead of pigments could be bound together and put onto the canvas? In the past I used a lot of glitter, which is often plastic, and more recently I've been trying to focus on natural materials to throw in there. In this group of work I've used a lot of mica and glass.

MTM: That's interesting to think about it in relation to pigment.

NVB: It goes back to that play with illusions; the history of painting is where you're transported from the surface into some other place. Before the Renaissance there was a lot of gold or gold leaf and the presence of the gold itself was important and added value to the image. Then people started painting the gold without actual gold in it-just painting the appearance of light reflecting off of the surface of an object. The mica that you see in my painting is actually the mica; it just is what it is, by itself on the surface. For me, they're referencing those times of being outside just sitting by a river and holding a rock that's shining and beautiful. I like bringing some of those actual experiences into the work.

MTM: And to have this context that Yeah. It functions in a similar way to the plants and the photograms but is not something that can be captured the way that the photograms are or the way know that foliage can be captured by a cyanotype.

NVB: Yes, it's just a real experience that you're having with the material at that moment. And it also connects back to that idea of gender. A lot of makeup is made with mica and it's sparkly and pretty I feel like that's a good way to also throw off the austerity of the composition or the geometry and also maybe the references to minimal compositions.

MTM: Exactly, more personal and intimate and even glamorous than minimalism.

NVB: Yes. I've been thinking of it as glam math.

MTM: I love that! Absolutely. Which is great because you know the math gets such a bad rap. you know everybody thinks math is pocket protectors and bad lighting... graph paper. There's not enough sizzle in the popular imaginary of math.