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Wade Guyton, "Obscuring the Icon", Interview Magazine, March 4, 2015

Interview

ART

## OBSCURING THE ICON



Judith Eisler in Los Angeles, February 2015. Portrait Taken by David Schulder for Gavlak Gallery

Living between Vienna and New York provides Judith Eisler with a variety of cultural influences that she could reference, yet her focus remains clear: notice underrated moments in film, press pause, record the frozen image through a camera, and use the resultant photograph to create a painting. Her paintings often distort the subject matter, blurring the lines between and exploring the ideas of iconography, motion, and light. In previous works, the distorted actors and actresses remain entirely anonymous. However, in her most recent works, which are now on view in the exhibit "Close-Ups & Two Shots: Judith Eisler" at Gavlak in Los Angeles, portraits of Hollywood icons such as Dorothy Malone, Liz Taylor, and Rock Hudson are immediately recognizable. Despite the presentation of clearer imagery, Eisler retains her focus on light through the use of

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shadow and contrasting colors, as well as devoting entire canvases to the subject of light itself.

While installing the show, Eisler took a break and spoke with her peer and friend of 16 years, Wade Guyton, a post-conceptual, digital artist. Eisler and Guyton were at Gavlak; we listened in from New York.

WADE GUYTON: Okay Judith, we're here in Los Angeles. We're going to have a professional conversation.

JUDITH EISLER: Great, what would you like to ask me?

GUYTON: Well, we're here with your new show. I have to say, these paintings are surprising to me.

EISLER: Why do they surprise you?

GUYTON: There's a Dorothy Malone, or three Dorothy Malones, and let's just say, they are more iconic than I usually see or know about your work. Do you see them any differently?

EISLER: I think her gaze is more outward. I think all female characters in the paintings are very strong, but she has an optimism that might be a bit different than the earlier work. I think they're very interior in gazing outward a lot of the time, but she really sees something, not looking to herself.

GUYTON: I was also thinking that the image itself is clearer or more articulated than I've seen in a long time with your work. Is it because of the photographs?

EISLER: They're based on photographs, but they're painted, let that be clear. I know what you're talking about; you're talking about that abstraction. Sometimes they're more abstract than representational.

GUYTON: I guess the viewer's relationship to it is a clear visual articulation of a body, where sometimes, I guess, they are more abstract.

EISLER: Although, even when I'm defining something so realistic or representational, I flip the paintings. I never paint them in the direction that you finally see them, so my concerns are very abstract—how does this form meet this form? How does this color shift into this color? And then when I turn the paintings around, what I'm painting becomes the figure. But I know what you're talking about, that these are really present, in the way that sometimes things were obscured or not readily identifiable. Is that what you mean?

GUYTON: Yes. Maybe we should talk about how they're made. We've known each other for so long and we shared a studio [for seven years] and I would see you painting, but I

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would never see you creating the photograph from which the painting would come out of. I always imagine you coming home to your little apartment on Thompson in the glowing light of your TV, looking through a camera, watching movies—

EISLER: I don't look through the camera the whole time I'm watching a movie!

GUYTON: But I like that image of you too! That there's something dark and dystopic about the artist looking through lenses and screens to capture light and space that's being constructed from the other end with these other lenses and recording devices.

EISLER: Right. It's a fake reality, it's a cultural fiction, it's translated through all these different mediated layers. What I'm trying to capture [or] transcribe is the distance that exists between all these layers, from the transmission to the photos to the painting. I wanted to find the atmosphere that exists between the viewer and the painting, the photo, the DVD, the transmission, the film.

GUYTON: What's the material result of that? How would you describe that?

EISLER: I paint it. My concerns are really about painting, about putting marks of paint on a canvas and working with formal concerns like light, color, and space.

GUYTON: Light seems to be the huge aspect of the work. We're in Los Angeles. You're coming from grey Vienna. Where were these paintings made?

EISLER: Most of these paintings were made in Connecticut. The *Sadie Thompson* is from Vienna, and the Fassbinder paintings are also made in Vienna. The drawings were made in Vienna. It's interesting—we're sitting in the main room of the gallery and all these paintings are American actresses and actors and the back room is German.

GUYTON: Can we talk about the symbolism there? *[laughs]*

EISLER: No, I would talk about the fact that I live in two cultures and sometimes I'm gravitating more towards specific films or specific actresses. *[both pause]*

GUYTON: So, the light.

EISLER: Again, I'm really trying to define the light that occurs in the transmission on the monitor. If I can capture that in the painting, it's resolved, it's a resolved image.

GUYTON: That reminds me, I have the John Giorno painting that you gave me, and I've been struggling—

EISLER: That I traded you for. *[laughs]*

GUYTON: Well, we're trading, right. I've been struggling to make a painting that can stand up as an equivalent to yours. I love that green light that comes out of that painting,

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so I've been trying to create it in a painting for you, so it would glow green in the same way. It's a touch of this strange...

EISLER: It's an underwater color, I think. I made that painting, actually not from a monitor, but I was at an exhibition where it was being screened. I took photos of the projection and those green colors came out in the photo, which were unusual for me to use at the time. It was interesting to go in that direction because he's sleeping in the film, he's sleeping in the photo, but it had a really beautiful underwater quality for me that gave it an otherworldly character.

GUYTON: Should we talk about them and the glow, the space between them? The blue between Liz [Taylor] and Rock [Hudson], can you talk about them?

EISLER: The show is called "Close-Ups & Two Shots" and I was really exploring what the camera does in the paintings. Sometimes it's a close up; sometimes it's two people in the frame. I was really interested in what John Huston said about the two shots and the way you define distance. It's not a close up, but it's in a two shot in which you define distance between the characters. Here, I tweaked the colors so that the space in between the characters was amplified and glowing and it could become a substance of itself. In a way, the painting is not about Liz Taylor and Rock Hudson. It's about the blue that is in between them.

GUYTON: The blue and the white, the light coming in between those lines is what that painting is all about. It's the vortex.

EISLER: It has a life of its own.

GUYTON: When I first saw it, I didn't even look at the faces.

EISLER: That's good. That's what I hoped. For me, I know they're all faces, but I think I'm really interested in the mark-making and in what's going on here, the kind of light that's emanating from abstract consideration.

GUYTON: So the other thing that is really clear, it's not only the space between two things within the painting but the drama and the antagonism and the gazes among the paintings in the room, especially between *Dorothy Malone* and *Gloria Swanson*. And I noticed yesterday that when the paintings were being moved around, all these relationships started developing that maybe you don't think about in the process of making each painting, but then something electric happens when they're next to each other.

EISLER: It becomes my own little movie and these are all different periods of time in here, like '60s, '50s, '20s. There's something about all of them that had the timeless quality that's part of our collective unconscious. Even though Dorothy Malone's clothes indicate some kind of distant time, I think they also...

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GUYTON: What were you saying about the Fassbinder film too? I haven't seen it but it takes place in the '30s?

EISLER: Oh, it's not that one. We were talking about Fassbinder and how his films are shot in the '70s, they're made in the '70s, but they're made about the past, about the '30s or '40s, so there's this interesting quality in terms of the style. The style is not *echt*, not genuine.

GUYTON: What's the word in German?

EISLER: *Echt*. [laughs] But there's a distance again, I'm always coming back to this idea of distance. I really want to define that in the way she's staring out into space, out into the distance, or the light—this idea of what the mood is. What started me painting the movie lights is that the people I was painting are these faces and I thought, "What are they actually looking at?" They're not looking at other people; they're looking at a bank of movie lights glaring in their eyes. It was interesting to go into that and explore the flip side of their expressions. Not just the interiority of the characters, but also what they perceive.

GUYTON: Then you also have this implication of the viewer. Basically, in this show, you feel that the paintings are implicating each other. Also, I like the idea of time travel that happens in images. We are looking at screens all the time, and in a way, each time this movie gets played, it exists again in the world. I like that relationship between you and the image, for stopping the film, looking for this moment in between a frame, then expanding that time in the studio, and then with the painting. It creates a whole other trajectory of time and space.

EISLER: Right, I'm doing that, but the painting also, by definition, is not index-able. The narrative goes way beyond the frame, into the distance, using different directions.

GUYTON: What else were we talking about? Let's have another glass of champagne... [laughs] Oh, I remember. I was thinking about attention and distraction—

EISLER: Speaking of which...

GUYTON: [laughs] I'm interested in how you find this moment in a film, like what becomes the right thing? It's not arbitrary. I get that there is a lot of accident that happens in the process of painting, but there is an intentionality finding that perfect moment.

EISLER: That perfect moment is a happy accident for me. Something that is not essential to the narrative becomes the whole meaning of the film. These are paintings and they should function as paintings. Cinema is really important to me and I probably would be involved in film as a cinematographer, but I'm a painter and I love painting. But...[pauses] What's the question again?

GUYTON: [laughs]

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EISLER: Thinking about...

GUYTON: Attention and distraction... It seems like it's probably not so fun to watch a movie with you, Judith. I remember us going to see *Ms. 45* at Anthology [Film Archives].

EISLER: Yeah, that was in the theater.

GUYTON: And you didn't have your camera out.

EISLER: Well, no, but you did notice. You were like, "Oh that's your painting!" [*both laugh*]

GUYTON: I do remember finding the painting.

EISLER: But in cinema, it's totally different watching it in the dark at home with the monitor. That's not fun because I have to stop the movie, but I have to lose control when I'm watching the movie in the theater, and I have to rent the movie later. [*pauses*] But it's always something that I can really only define it as a happy accident. I see something and I think, "What was that?" There's some peripheral activity that interests me. It doesn't seem essential, it seems fleeting, and I want to capture that fleeting moment and catch it in a way that it still vibrates and still has possibility. That's also why I'm interested in taking something from moving images because they are in between what they were and what they will become and how things become manifested in those loaded moments.

GUYTON: You can see in so many paintings that it's not just a freeze frame, but there is that vibration in a moment. The vibration comes through your work, through the light, through the painting, through the space.

EISLER: Through painting, through finding what it is. I do use a photo. I like to look at something, I like painting from seeing. It's very important to me, and I want to... [*laughs*]

GUYTON: [*laughs*] Judith just spaced out.

EISLER: We were talking about what's essential to the narrative. I remember, it's about seeing something and looking at what exists in something. It's not that I want to define it as something that's correct and that's why I flip them all the time.

GUYTON: What do you mean you flip them?

EISLER: I paint them in different directions from when you actually see the painting. I rarely paint them as you see them. For me, I'm interested in the abstraction that occurs in the painting. It's not really something that's about, "Oh that's her eyebrow, or her eyelash." But, what happens, and you can see it in the dark and alone, a lot of the times,

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her gaze is wonky. It's one eye looks down and one looks up, but it is how our expressions are. They are clear, but it's also...

GUYTON: Vision is wonky.

EISLER: Vision is wonky! There's something always a little bit off because I'm not trying to show what she looks like. I'm trying to show what she's made of, whether that's her fortitude, endurance, power, or just marks that compose her—how her hair is defined, how the light illuminates the back of her head, and her face. Where's the light coming from? It's interior and exterior.

GUYTON: That's the interesting thing of the show too. You have so many light forces that are invisible and become manifested in the painting. You also have all these paintings of light, this whole network of moving light particles, and they're trapped in this drama here. *[laughs]*

EISLER: It sounds very scientific.

GUYTON: And magical.

EISLER: Thank you, I like that.

GUYTON: And sexy... What do you want to talk about? Do you want to talk about Lichtenstein? I was thinking about Lichtenstein.

EISLER: That's funny that you say that, I thought of that too.

GUYTON: I was reading about Lichtenstein and I realize there is a connection between [you both] in capturing things from pop material or popular imagery, but also zeroing in on the materiality of that and trying to translate it into paint. And you're looking at film and narrative.

EISLER: I used to work much more with film and I like that analog process, that quality and texture of film and painting what happens there. Then I started using digital because it became expedient. There are different abstractions that occur in digital material, there's weird rectangles and weird color shifts. I'm interested in the breakdown in the imagery on the screen, so maybe that's what you were talking about.

GUYTON: I think about how, as someone who has always been envious of your work, when we shared the studio, I could see you come in and work on the painting for weeks or months. You would go in and the painting would come into being and you could change it. I would see the change that would happen over the course of days. In my work, I could never do that. I could never go back in and change anything.

EISLER: But you can repeat something, you can change something in a file.

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GUYTON: I can repeat something but then I throw it away if I don't like it. So if something's not right, it can't be shown. You have a different relationship to an object. The object can keep changing.

EISLER: Sometimes it takes a long time.

GUYTON: But when is it done?

EISLER: It's a good question, but I know it's done. Sometimes it can take forever, and sometimes the process is really fluid and I can get really picky, especially with faces. It's hard to get the expression how I want it to be, so it's not sentimental.

GUYTON: But you're not copying the photograph either.

EISLER: I'm using it, I'm not copying it, and that's a big difference. It's a way for me to get into the painting. Like you, it's a way for me to find what I want. I'm looking for something that I want to work with initially and it's not a file, it's a photograph of something. But then the process becomes very physical, especially on this large scale and flipping them around.

GUYTON: That's great. *[both laugh]* Well thanks so much for our professional conversation. I've never had to talk this way to you before.

EISLER: We would talk about our work a little bit back in the day. We would borrow materials from each other too.

GUYTON: You would say, "Keep the canvas." I wouldn't be a painter without you. I mean, I'm still not a painter. *[laughs]*

EISLER: You repaid me with very nice linen later on.