

Erik Bakke: Black Flag in the Desert of a Future Ocean
Artist's Talk
2.17.19

Before starting and before forgetting to thank people, there are people to thank. First, thanks to Kevin Killian for offering me the exhibition. It was a very pleasant surprise. Thank you Kevin.

Then I would like to thank Juan Fernandez, Karl Bakke, and Linda Bakke for their help. I would also like to thank Dr. Shilpa Dasgupta and Dr. Michael Laufer in helping me understand more about “n” dimensional space. Thanks also to those that helped in some fashion, mom, but haven't been named. I would like to thank Right Window and ATA for their support of the arts.

And finally thank you all for coming out to look at some art and talk about it. To stay on track, I'm going to read a prepared text; I'm happy to answer questions and talk further when I finish.

When talking about my work, I usually point to process...and I will spend some time discussing how things were made and came about and the importance of the systems of thought and systems of construction in shaping the work, but at this juncture, I'd like to speak to the problem of the ineffable—speak to the non-language based call to make things and to the hope for a final impact of the work that exists outside that which can be fully explained in spoken and written language.

In spoken presentations, artists often feel compelled to avoid using the opportunity to align specific words with their efforts. As 21st Century artists, we at minimum know to be wary of words like “beauty” or “transcendence” or “revolution” in describing goals in creating art. But wouldn't it be an achievement to have a viewer of the work experience beauty...or transcendence...or for the viewer, because of engagement with the work, to immediately revolt against all their own crap behavior and similarly imagine revolution and start fighting tooth and nail to create a better society? But here today, what ridiculous things these would be to say.

Robert Ryman died just over a week ago; he was not so circumspect. In a 2007 interview with Art 21 he said, “The real purpose of painting is to give pleasure.” In working to put words to a practice this statement can also be used as a starting point even if we don't take it as an incontrovertible truth. I won't disagree that it is to works' advantage that artists and viewers have some kind of connection through pleasure to the art. But we know that pleasure does not look the same to everybody. There are those that like the burnt, others that like the raw, and many that prefer medium rare. Moist warmth may not work for those seeking dry, dusty pleasure.

Without, obviously, being the exhibition itself, the words of the title of this installation point in the direction of inclinations—“Black Flag in the Desert of a Future Ocean.” What the title does not explain is how the practice of making art is a chance to catch a glimmer of something wondrous but not yet fully revealed. By bringing to bear fleeting thoughts, dreams, intuition, desire, a gamut of emotions, research, contemplation, and formal and esoteric calculations to chase these glimmers and give them presence, an artist has a chance that an artwork may resonate with others and perhaps enrich culture or even move it. Finally, I'd like to be able convincingly illustrate where my work intersects with epistemology and aesthetics, but I'm short on evidence.

So, now, and perhaps sooner than is respectable, I've run out of things to say about the intellectual depth of my project and about the magical mystery part of making work and will address the history of the works themselves and what thoughts, systems, and processes were used to grapple with creating this installation for Right Window.

I'll talk about how this particular combination of artworks came together. Of course it is my hope is that the sum of these elements creates an experience for the viewer distinct from the counting of its parts.

My original starting point for the Right Window installation was a series of paintings I began in 2018 and have been working on recently. This is the "lavender ratio" series. The invention of the "lavender ratio," π over two if you are wondering, came out of working on this series. These paintings on wood started with consideration of Ivy Bottini's 1969 design of the National Organization of Women's logo and her subsequently having to leave NOW in 1970 for being part of the "lavender menace"--for being lesbian. If you can visualize the logo, the important part of our consideration here is that it starts as a circle, you will see the letters N.O.W are inside the circle and follow the top part of the curve of the circle. The lavender ratio was determined by deducing what the relationship of the sides of a rectangle would have to be if a circle inscribed within that rectangle had exactly one half the area of the rectangle. You can see the metaphorical potential of having the area inside the circle being equal to the area outside the circle. If the inscribed circle has a diameter of one (and thus one side of the rectangle must be one) then the longer side of the rectangle must be π over two. For further discussion of the lavender ratio see the text written at the bottom of the lavender ratio work in the exhibition. The lavender ratio work in the exhibition is not the homage to Ivy Bottini, a different painting, but an homage to the San Francisco poet Judy Grahn and specifically her work "A Woman is Talking to Death."

So, the lavender ratio was the starting point. An early thought for the exhibition was a consideration of how this ratio would translate into three dimensions. And connected was the idea that this additional ratio could also be connected with a color. Using primary colors as an organizing theme came to mind. In this case the colors I wanted to use were cyan, yellow, and magenta. We recognize these primaries as the CYM of the CYMK of printer ink. From here the idea was to have, for the two dimensional ratio, the lavender ratio be equal to and share naming with the cyan ratio. To be clear, though different ideas and organizing concepts inform the exhibition the installation itself also dictated changes. For example, though the original plan was to have both a lavender ratio and a cyan ratio painting in the exhibition, it turned out that it seemed better for the installation that only the lavender ratio painting was hung.

The three dimensional ratio following from the two dimensional lavender ratio is the yellow ratio. As the circle inscribed in the rectangle is half the area of the rectangle with a ratio of one to π over two the yellow ratio is the ratio that allows for a sphere inscribed in a rectangular box to be half the volume of the rectangular box. If the diameter of the sphere is one and the two equal and shorter dimensions of the box are also one then it turns out that the long side of the rectangular box is π over three.

The original drawings for the exhibition are of a sphere within a box. It took some time for the idea of the sphere being a glass ball to come about. Those particular glass balls in the installation are blown in Seattle, by Dehanna Jones I should mention, and are designed as pond floats. There is a connection to the Pacific Ocean here in reference to the Japanese glass floats (spheres) that were used in the past to keep fishing nets afloat and that it used to be possible to find on the shores of the west coast of the United States. There is a museum of these glass floats in Lincoln City, Oregon. These floats journeys and more recently the 2011 nuclear disaster at Fukushima-Daichi remind how the ocean currents pass Japan and head north and west before heading south along the California coast.

And as you can see, I was not faithful to the original concept. The balls are not inscribed in a rectangular box. In the version prior to the one seen here, the floats were sitting atop a significantly larger rectangular box than in the final version with the shallow boxes. The point

being here that in my production an original concept can be kept as a hard rule or just used loosely as an organizing concept.

The related fourth dimension ratio is then the magenta ratio. Of course, though we can complete mathematical calculations for any number of dimensions, we cannot see the fourth dimension. And the ratio for the fourth dimension version of the circle in a rectangle or sphere in a box where the volume of the sphere-like element is half the “volume” of the box-like element in which it is inscribed turns out to be pi squared over four squared or pi over sixteen. As there is no way to create this fourth dimensional object in our three dimensional space, my thought was just to represent it as a color, magenta. As you can see the magenta is a magenta gel adhered, thank you Juan, with sugar from Ritual coffee to the glass of the window.

The other painting of the exhibition that informed the overall installation is the black flag ratio painting. This is the smaller black painting hanging above the lavender ratio painting. This painting comes out of more overtly political work in which I incorporated black flags. The black flag ratio is 1 to 1.9. This is the official hoist to fly ratio of the U.S. flag, though many versions, even those flown at Federal sites, are less elongated.

If we look at the title now we have two elements in place. Originally the title of the exhibition included all the ratios with their associated colors. As you may be experiencing now, it is easy to get ratio fatigue, so I left the ratios and a good number of other words out of the title.

If the black flag points to politics and the dark side of power, is there any other side, then the ocean points not only to California history and the history of the Pacific but also to humans' relationship to their environment—to the planet. It seems our default position as producers of culture is to often emphasize the dystopian. It is pretty easy to conceive of all sorts of ways ecosystems and societies break down and make our and succeeding generations' lives worse. To pause just for a moment, I think of art about bleakness not being the bleakness itself. We often have difficulty in our culture understanding the basic idea that a representation of an action or circumstance or thing is not that action or circumstance or thing itself and nor does one necessarily lead to the other. All to say, a work of art has a different function than serving as an advertisement for its subject matter.

So, the desert in the title comes from the term “ocean desert” used to describe the growing areas of the world's oceans that are devoid of or have diminished life.

My original thought for the abalone shells in the exhibition as a reference to ocean deserts was to have shells suspended or otherwise dispersed throughout the space. The idea to place them on wood came from looking at the Maori totems at the de young museum and the Maori use of shells for eyes. I was interested in the historical and cultural connection to the Pacific this would make but also wanted to make the wood have a connection to California and thought to use a piece of burnt redwood to reference the fragile ecosystem that supports redwoods and to reference the highly disruptive, climate-change-exasperated, fires California experienced last year and is likely to face for the foreseeable future. Linda and I took a trip to Eureka this winter in part to find the right abalone shells and also the right piece of wood for the installation. The wood totems you see here are from one piece of driftwood taken from the county beach at Mad River outside Eureka. This particular piece was desirable because it was already burnt and because of its connection to the ocean. It was also waterlogged which made it quite heavy and necessitated having a custom steel sculpture stand fabricated.

Let's return to the black flag work. This oil on linen painting came out of the larger oil on canvas 1958 series of which three are featured here. This series came directly out of thinking about the dangerous foolishness of the slogan “Make America Great Again.” A pre 2016 installation focusing on ISIS and the CIA had already landed the FBI at my front door and perhaps this had

some bearing on my not immediately diving into a planned Trump porn series and instead working on these larger black oil paintings which utilized as a starting point upside down drawings of a map of the USA circa 1958—a time when the twelve-year-old future president was in the midst of his silver-spooned youth and may have indeed felt great.

As the paintings developed, they grew their own stories separate from their original impetus. The painting in the window is entitled “North Pole.” It is a polar azimuthal projection of the United States. An azimuthal projection is when you project the globe onto a tangential plane usually intersecting at a pole or the equator. (Show with hands). In this case only the rendering of the U.S. is projected and the rest of countries and lands of the globe are omitted. In fact the map of the U.S. is projected six times which makes the wheel of designs around the focal point of the painting. From a process standpoint, part of the exercise of making the images of maps in the paintings was not to use other images or notes or drawings or a cell phone as references while painting. I wanted the connection between mind and hand and canvas not to be interrupted by looking something up or at other material. As a result of this and of other concerns of image and mark making taking priority, the drawings of the maps and the individual states vary greatly and may even in some cases be just plain wrong.

A note here about materials. Often petroleum products are used to thin oil paint and clean up brushes. I decided for this project to use lavender spike oil as a thinner and cleaner and then later, in part because it was significantly less expensive, used walnut oil as a thinner and cleaner. Now, like for the black flag work, I just use walnut oil when painting with oil paint.

Another of the larger paintings from the 1958 series is “Before After.” Here the title refers to the one U.S. map right side up and the other upside down, but it also refers to the process. For this painting, I first painted a colorful abstract painting on the white ground of the canvas. Then I painted each state individually in black and left showing through, to make the lines between the states, the color from the original colorful abstract painting. These lines are clearly visible where the original painting is light or colorful but not so clear where the original painting is dark.

The third larger oil painting from the 1958 series is “Finite Space.” Here stars indicate where the states would be on the upside down map of the U.S. As I was originally attracted, aren’t we all, to contemplations of the infinite and the mysteries of the greater universe and what is beyond...and before and after...the first version of the title was “infinite space.” But of course, as humans on earth, our lives more relate to the finite than the infinite.

Thank you.

At this point I’m happy to answer any questions.