

The Highlights - Wayne Gonzales at Paula Cooper

Wayne Gonzales, installation view,
Paula Cooper Gallery.

Wayne Gonzales' newest paintings depict crowds witnessing some off-screen event. Derived from anonymous images of sporting events downloaded from the internet, these paintings are the latest installment of a continuing exposition by Gonzales: pictures that reflect America's ever expanding upper-middle class and its integrated involvement with the political landscape.

Gonzales employs a strategy inherited from Warhol and Lichtenstein. He uses paintings' decorative impact as camouflage for complex, and in this case, somewhat sinister content. The paintings are clearly made by projecting images and quickly filling in the enlarged shapes. The use of a gestural, loose mark-system denies detail and creates an optimal viewing distance of several yards. Moving closer to the paintings, the images become less clear, though the painterly application is revealed. In these new works the acrylic paint has a semi-translucent quality that brings to mind the adjective *slippery*. These paintings are manufactured very directly, a factor that had remained hidden in Gonzales' earlier work. The palette, too, has changed. Gone are the acidic greens and jaundiced yellows of his stenciled renderings of McMansions. Now, the palette of carefully modulated grays mimics a sort of photographic representation that has not been a part of Gonzales' painting to this date. They recall underexposed film, or prints left in the developer too long. The color has a gritty quality that alludes to the polluting residue of coal.

These paintings bring to mind certain works by Manet; specifically his *Music in the Tuileries* of 1862, *Un Bal Masque a la Opera* of 1874, and *The Battle of the Kearsarge and Alabama* of 1864. Almost all of Manet's paintings explore the various relationships between spectator and image, but these paintings are emphatically about the viewership of the public, and in doing so anticipate Gonzales' project. The *Tuileries* painting is perhaps the most obvious in this respect. In it, a park full of petty coat and top-hat wearing bourgeoisie are engaged in no particular activity other than demonstrating and scrutinizing each other's status. Lined up as if onstage, half of the figures in *Tuileries* (including the self-portrait of Manet) are looking directly at the spectator, implicating us in this most middle-class pastime. Additionally, in this painting and in *Un Bal Masque a la Opera*, Manet's figures merge, collide, and lose their silhouettes into masses of black paint - as T.J. Clark describes it in *The Painting of Modern Life*, "the visible comes to be the illegible." The figures in Gonzales' crowds also lose their definition; not only do they merge with each other, but some figures shape-shift

and disintegrate before our eyes as we move closer to them. What appears to be a perfectly fine head from 20 feet away melts into a grinning skull at 10, and is nothing but formless clouds of grey gas at 5.

Wayne Gonzales, *Waiting Crowd*, 2007. Acrylic on canvas, 33×38 in.

Manet painted another illegible event in 1864. The naval battle between the USS Kearsage and the Confederate Alabama was nearly visible off the coast of France and the scene rendered by Manet in part signifies the desire of the public to see such violence in real time. John Elderfield, in his remarkable catalog for *Manet and the Execution of Maximilian*, has drawn a parallel between the naval battle and Napoleon III's intervention in Mexico. Both events became subjects for Manet's imagination as he received reports from newspapers; both were significant in reflecting Republican politics; and both became allegories for the act of painting.

Manet was painting a burgeoning middle-class that was engaging in the potentials of the urban spectacle, whereas Gonzales paints the entrenched, anesthetized crowds of today. These crowds do not engage the spectator or even each other, for the position of being watched is no longer novel. Assuming we are always under surveillance, all we can do is glance to the side and wait to be entertained. The progeny of both the Union defeat of the Confederate Alabama and the development of the Republican revolutions of Europe, we are now rendered giddy by the spectacle of auction houses, NASCAR, and the shuffle mode of our iPods. The spectacle has evolved beyond the point of engagement; now we applaud ourselves and hope for the best. Manet's paintings used wars in unseen lands as allegories for waging the battle of modernism; Gonzales' paintings stand as an allegory of our mute position in a current war that rages overseas.