

Rock and Roll

by Daniel Maidman

Posted: 03/27/2012

Back in the day -- and by *the day*, I mean the two years between college and real life when I lived on burritos and ganja -- I hung around Chapel Hill. This means that most of my friends were DJ's, musicians, and rock critics. Coming from a classical music background, I had a lot of catching up to do.

One time, my DJ friend Ehren was playing a soundtrack album called Dutch Harbor: Where the Sea Breaks Its Back. I said, "Ehren, what's interesting to me about this is that you have a melody, a structure, struggling to come out, and it is nearly overwhelmed with noise and chaos, and the drama of the music is not the evolution of the structure, as it is in classical music, but the struggle between structure and chaos." Ehren managed to make an expression combining sincere excitement for me, and eye-rolling, and replied, "Daniel, this struggle you are describing is the basis for much of the concept of rock and roll."

I ran my observation about rock by my rock critic friend RC, and he commented, "Yeah, plus dicksweat."

I think you can see what he meant without my having to get into a discursus on gender. Suffice it to say that the dicksweat parameter is chosen for pungency and does not exclude girls.

Now we leap to 2012. I'd like to discuss three artists with you, whom I see as displaying these qualities of rock and roll: Alexandra Pacula, Alyssa Monks, and Stephen Wright. Many artists display rock and roll, but for reasons I'll explain, it's tough to see if you don't study the work in person -- and I've had the good fortune to study the work of all three of these painters in person.

Let's begin:

Alexandra Pacula: The Samurai Brushstroke



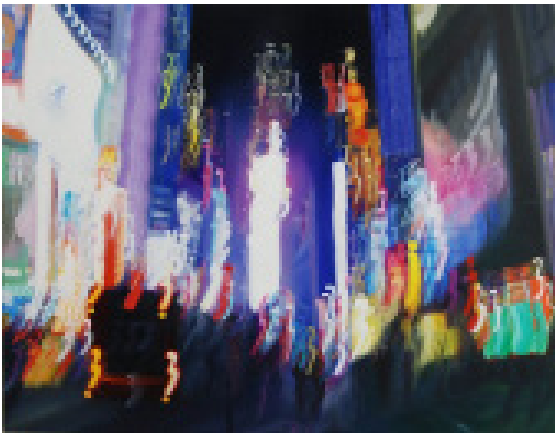
Economy, oil on panel, 12" x 18", 2010

This is a small painting, but she tends to work big:



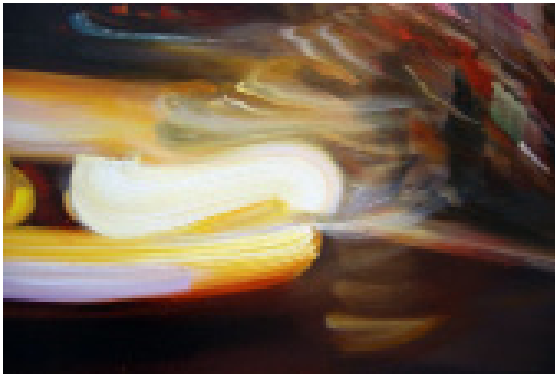
Alexandra Pacula in her studio

What's interesting about this work in terms of our purpose here? Pacula's current idiom primarily involves nighttime cityscapes, represented as if seen through a jostled camera.



Enigmatic Symphony, oil on canvas, 28" x 36", 2010

When a camera jostles during an exposure, every point source of light streaks in the same path, recording the motion of the camera. In choosing this idiom, Pacula translates the light-streak into the brushstroke. This mechanism strongly foregrounds the brushstroke itself:



detail, *Ardent Phenomenon*, oil on canvas, 90" x 108"

These brushstrokes are all visible -- remember, the paintings are enormous. Pacula has described using an entire tube of paint on a single brushstroke, and one time she thought about buying a broom to use instead of a paintbrush.

The brushstrokes are so big and distinct, in fact, that they inevitably bring to mind the act of their creation. These are bold brushstrokes, slashing across the canvas. Each one records a motion of the hand and arm. Moreover, each one records the same motion of the hand and arm. A single misshapen brushstroke destroys the composition. So Pacula constructs her paintings as a kind of high-stakes competition with herself: one false move, and the painting dies. Each move is a samurai brushstroke, a record of an intense physical discipline which allows her to replicate spontaneity again and again. And yet, each brushstroke is individually sincere and fully expressed: the spontaneity isn't mimed, it is real. How do you repeat spontaneity? I have no idea, but Pacula has done it.



Explosive Implosion, oil on canvas, 45" x 42"

Notice another thing about this painting: the perspective works. The Z's of the light sources not only decrease in size with distance according to the ordinary rules of perspective, but they also distort, spreading as they approach the viewer, according to the rules of perspective specific to the wide angle lens. When I first studied this work, I asked Pacula how the hell she manages her complex perspectives -- underdrawings or what -- and she said, "You know, I put down a few marks when I start, and then I just eyeball it."

The samurai brushstroke, the life-or-death brushstroke, repeats at the level of draughtsmanship. She can neither misshape, nor misplace, a single brushstroke without ruining the painting.

So what we have in Pacula's paintings is a testimony of physicality, of the athletic application of paint to surface. This high-impact paint and its history remain visible throughout her paint surfaces. And yet, the paintings all cohere into complex images when you stand back. This is very important -- the paint both presents, as paint, and represents, as component of image.

You might argue that this is true of all paintings, but much of the history of painting until the Impressionists is a history of suppressing paint as paint, of forcing paint to ever more perfectly represent, and ever less visibly present.

Then the Impressionists and their eccentric ami Van Gogh come along, and there is a brief period of fluctuating relationships between representation and presentation. Then the post-war period rolls around, and Abstract Expressionism rears its ugly head. This is very important -- AbEx foregrounds paint as paint and eliminates paint as representation.

AbEx is not rock and roll. Rock and roll, as we've defined it, is the struggle between structure and chaos. In our translation of this idea into painting, the structure is representation, and the chaos is presentation -- paint as paint. Without the struggle, there is no rock. AbEx is noise, not rock. If Jacques-Louis David, say, is as close to pure structure as we can come -- if you need a magnifying glass to see the paint-as-paint -- then Jackson Pollock is pure chaos. Neither one rocks.

There is no one formula for rock. There is only a terrain -- a zone in which representation and presentation grapple with one another, and both remain visible in the final painting. Oh, and dicksweat: the artist has to walk the razor's edge, the path must crumble behind the artist, allowing no turning back.

In this sense, Pacula rocks.

Alyssa Monks: The Thousandfold Path

[edited out - [read original article for more info](#)]

Stephen Wright: The Inside-Out World

Stephen Wright's and Alyssa Monks's paintings resemble each other, in a superficial way, far more than either one resembles Pacula's. Both of them paint oversized figures, employ high-key flat photographic lighting, and apply their paint thickly. But there the resemblance ends.

At this size, all you can see is the intense clarity of the image - the contrasts of light and dark, the vivid fleshiness not only of the woman, but of the chair, the cloth, and above all that gorgeous paper lantern, with its every ridge distinct and individual, its rip faithfully explored: