

Memory and The Real

Mark Stone

March 2011

www.henrimag.com



Michael Zahn

Stickies, 2006

Acrylic on canvas

84 x 120 x 8 inches

I saw a painting by Michael Zahn in a group show a few years ago, and it stuck with me. It looked slightly off. Not that it didn't work in the show with the other paintings – it did, but it just didn't fit comfortably. The painting was very simple, four canvases stacked one on the other, done in a minimal style, using high-keyed color, and balanced like light projected

from a monitor. The paintings were a representation of the Notes application on the desktop, overlapping like they are in that utility, blank and ready to be filled. I thought they were as bold as you please, out there on the wall. Frank Stella, Donald Judd, and Peter Halley came to mind immediately, but with a difference. Suddenly, I felt I had to step sideways to understand at what I was looking. This work wasn't necessarily about systems, about form, or even about minimalism, but about memory. This stayed with me, troubling me as I walked through Chelsea, blowing in and out of the galleries. Why the insistent color? Why am I supposed to remember something? Why was the application sharing my fucking space? Or worse, maybe I was in the app itself? I was perplexed by the idea of the empty reminder, had a nagging feeling I'd forgotten something important. The hint, glaring right at me, was a dare to come up with it. The painting was inscrutable. It didn't declare anything. Was I supposed to supplement these stacked things with my thoughts, ideas, passing quandaries? Perhaps Michael wanted us to recall, to think, yet all he gave us was this bright, colorful nothing, this painting which suggested the pure neo-Platonic beauty humming beneath the program's surface. Neatly scrubbed clean, it presented as an airless facsimile of an electronic representation, rematerialized on the other side of the program.

In many of Michael's works, he depicts the structure of digital images as they're displayed in the virtual world. Packets of information are sterilized on the surface of the modernist grid. The painting freezes the download, cauterizes the processes of apprehension, subverts the postmodern quotation. We're given the mathematical precision of reality unfolding in sequential equations. Michael then uses this blunt language of manufactured minimalism to drop an algorithmic fabrication right into our laps. The stretcher bar is deep at times, as with Stella or Halley, pushing the image into actual space, creating a thicker presentational surface. This trope tends to separate the image from the wall while disguising it as an emphatic thing, but Michael's works don't project into our surroundings like an obdurate object, or an image on a screen. They

insinuate themselves into the space of the room, at once both physical reality and virtual sign, ground and thing, As we confront this unfolding, something changes in our perception. We're participating in a tangential optical process as it manifests the codes of the image in actual paint. Michael is wrenching data from the nebulous electronic field, and representing it as reality. Something isn't right with the way we see these things. We've stepped sideways.

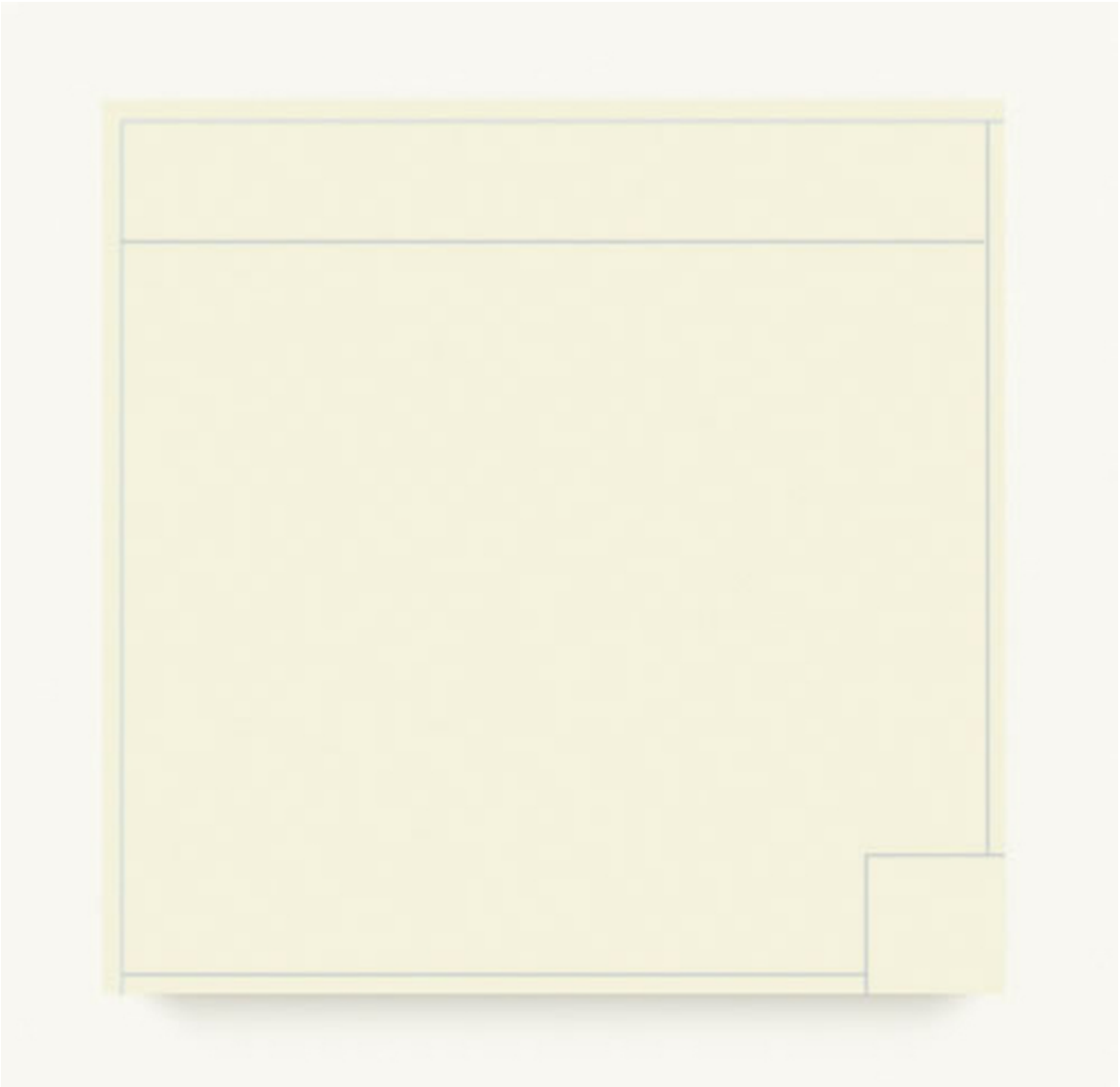


Michael Zahn
Stickies, 2006
Acrylic on canvas
42 x 42 x 4 inches

When the virtual and the physical collide, what happens to sight? How do we see our lives, care for the things we love, summon the world of our memories? Is it all a little off-kilter, slightly slanted through our dematerialized vision? Or are we seeing reality for what it is? Is there any

objectivity to our desires when we cannot see without our technological extensions?

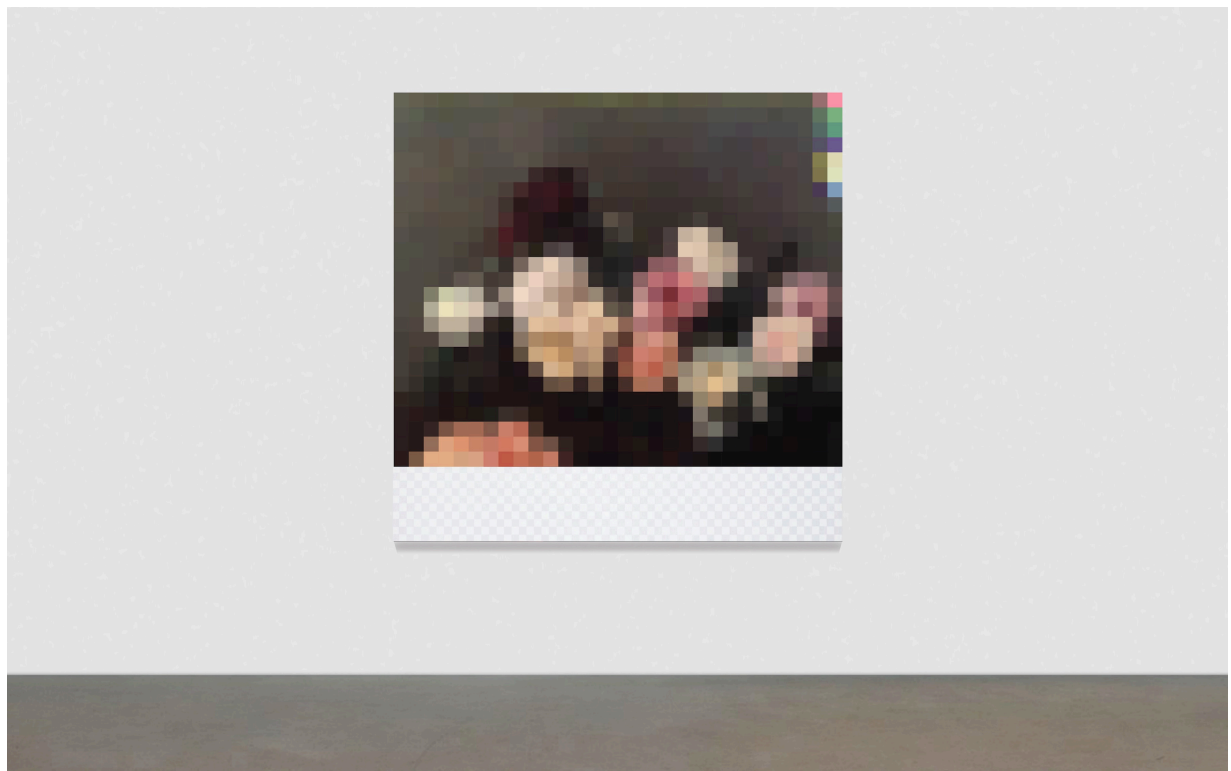
In Hans Holbein's painting *The Ambassadors* there's that famous bit of reality hunger* stretched across the bottom edge, a weird unknown intruding into our awareness. Looking at the painting through the lens of one-point perspective, the life of the time is there in front of you, a picture-perfect representation of two very grand individuals and their worldly goods. Step to the side, and suddenly the picture goes out of sync. What comes into focus is a *memento mori*, a skull rising up in crystal-clear resolution. Somewhere between picture perfection and optical play we're chided by the artist to recognize that even though we may find power and opulence desirable, it's ephemeral. A slight adjustment to one's perspective, and a new reality will intrude.



Michael Zahn
Title, 2005
Acrylic on canvas
36 x 36 inches

It's here that we begin to see how the contemporary electronic image has warped our idea of what painting should do, or what a painting could be. We can no longer submerge our vision into the ground, or slide away on the surface. In the reality of the gallery space, our physical memories become more important, more real. They cause a glitch in the program. It's as if this approximation of reality proffered by the painted surface

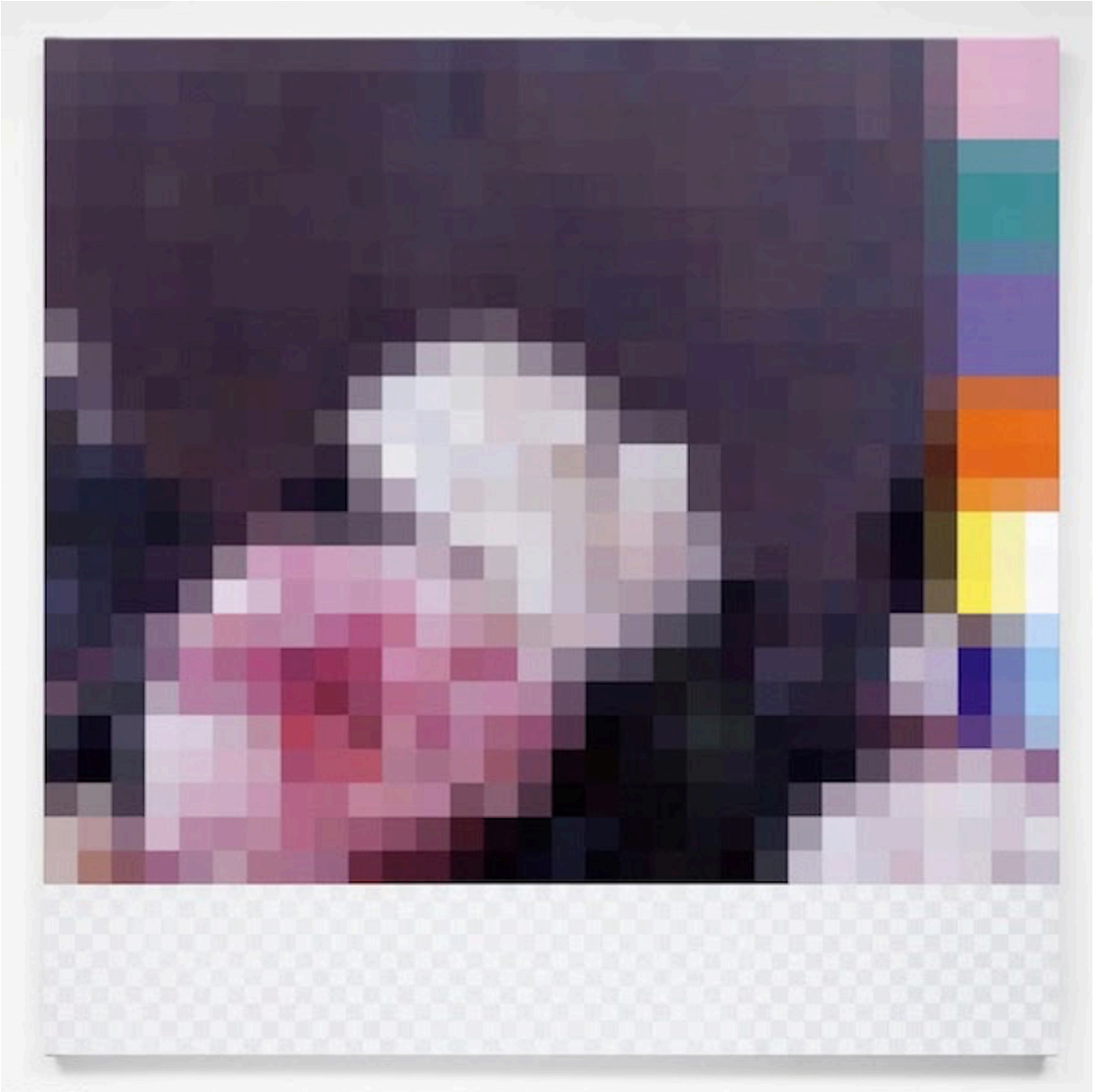
forces us to sidestep our point of view, away from the predetermined outcomes of the postmodern program. The haptic sense becomes imperative to ‘understanding’ as we address this unsettling discursive truth. We have to fill in the blanks and manipulate the virtual while it unfolds in painted time. This is a different kind of painterliness, one which doesn’t drip down the surface or dazzle out retinas in a false likeness of branded stylishness or graphic identity. We discover the material of our lives must lade this blankness, and provide a depth of focus to the blurred boundaries of this flowering reality. The work’s stark, beautiful, unapologetic color tugs at our physical perceptions. It pushes us to move away from a single point. We feel our fleshy existence edge forward against the program. As we do, we come up against the idea of painting itself. The subject, our existence, comes into sharp, crystalline resolution against the goddamned thing as it is.



Michael Zahn
Power, Corruption, and Lies (Version), 2008
Acrylic on canvas

60 x 60 inches

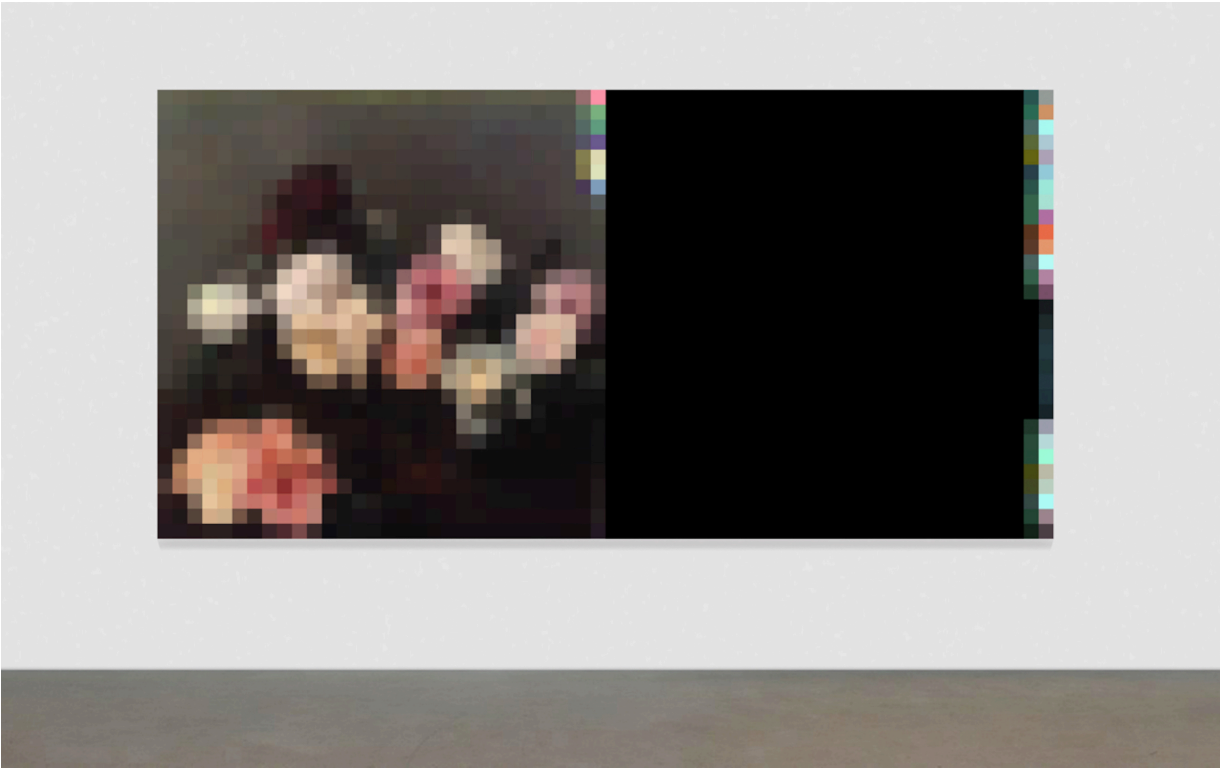
In several recent paintings, each titled *Power, Corruption, and Lies (Version)*, Michael has rendered the self-same image of New Order's album cover, transcribed from a JPEG found on the Internet. Originally, the picture at hand was a work by Henri Fantin-Latour, a nineteenth century academic realist who probably used lenses and mathematics to paint his subjects. The album cover, a reproduction of the Fantin, also included a coded color chart corresponding to information about the record. In Michael's painting, he has isolated that part of this image in pixels, and made the color chart different and more emphatic. The chart changes its meaning as the color is intensified and enlarged. Nothing on the surface of the work is quite as the original, or its replication — that's to say, the painting, the album cover, or the virtual image — but the feeling implicit in each of them persists. Scanning the silent face of it, we feel that maybe we've lost sight of something important about exactly that at which we're looking.



Michael Zahn
Power, Corruption, and Lies (Version), 2009
Acrylic on canvas
60 x 60 inches

Fantin's painting is a still-life which explores the fleeting nature of beauty, the certainty of death, and their implications within an academic lens-based image. The roses of are in full bloom, shown in a moment which doesn't last, a day or two away from browning, wilting, and dying. The painting presents just enough time for us to step sideways and relish that

brevity. The album cover, based on the painting, celebrates a similar fragility. As the record was released, the band New Order was at the end of one time and the beginning of another. For a generation coming of age during the 1980s, this image would prove prescient. The allusions to art history, youthful rebellion, visual language, genre, style, sex, allure, and rock&roll opened us to older forms, layered interpretation, and fresh understanding. All of this is ‘pixelated’ in Michael’s painting, a replication of the reproduction. Yet the download is not done for us. The grid remains incomplete. Michael dares us to complete it – but how? There’s no postmodern irony at play, no direct critique of the mediated experience. This painting makes demands of a different type of encounter, one connected to our own memories. It’s here that knowledge, code, and experience begin to work upon the image, and with the thing, rather than falling into the ground or skating over the surface. I had to reach further inward to understand this vision. It became, for me, caught within the web as I am, a Romantic encounter.



Michael Zahn

Power, Corruption, and Lies (Version), 2009

Acrylic on canvas

60 x 120 inches

What's happening, for a few of us, is we're looking for that which has been lost, glossed over, for something which was raw and imperative to painting, and might speak to the relevance of vision in our time.

Memories of moments in our lives, certain spaces, a sense of light, sound, and touch . . . all come into play through this vision, through the way we see. These are moments, lost to the cynical postmodern sense of nostalgia. So much contemporary painting has been about the former greatness of the visual encounter. It is false, and absurd, and is that which thoughtful painters should guard against. Painting isn't precious. It's tougher and more powerful than that, and to engage visually, one must remember.

Memory is not the same thing as nostalgia. It doesn't create a glow of comfort or wonder. Memory is viscous, alive, and engaged. It doesn't yearn for better days or the promise of youth. Memory is a subjective form of history, all good and all bad, all at the same time. It points out our shortcomings and reveals our strengths. It is bittersweet. Michael understands this, and uses it unflinchingly in his best works. The idea of the replication, of the empty ground, refers us back to our personal histories. It pushes us to remember the vision, the image, the space, the lull, the passcode, the secret. His paintings don't represent a past heated by the glow of a warmed-over present. Michael doesn't gently nudge the confines of academic styles. He pushes us into our own consciousness, through the passage of the downloading image. He demands we risk our humanity even as the technological sublime washes away our physical connections.

Romanticism, as it was manifested throughout modernity, took us into the unexplored selves of painter and viewer. The great works return us to the paradoxes of our visual touch, the insistent corporeal memory inherent in disinterested sight, and the feeling we get when we experience something

through and through. This emotional connection reveals us, bringing forth feeling which comes directly through us, and not from a manufactured idea of reality, or an ad man's estimate of comfort, or a clever theoretical appropriation. It's the part of us which makes each of us unique, and truly human. I've stepped sideways in front of a few of Michael's paintings as they describe these moments, this time. This reminds me I've forgotten, and dares me to remember.

* *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto*, David Shields. Knopf, 2010.