



MARC TRUJILLO FAST



Combo 8

“I LIKE THIS MIDDLE GROUND OF COMMON EXPERIENCE BECAUSE IT DOESN'T PLAY INTO PEOPLE'S FANTASY LIVES.”

— MARC TRUJILLO



6182 Sepulveda Boulevard

MARC TRUJILLO - FAST

What force of attraction draws an artist to their subject? Finding a worthy focus and the ideal approach is a mysterious and highly personal process, and surprisingly, a relatively modern one. Before the nineteenth century much of the art we now revere came about through the desires of wealthy institutions (church, monarchy) and individuals (landowners, merchants). Today there are few constraints on artists, and because of these nearly limitless possibilities, that process is even more intriguing. How fascinating then to contemplate Marc Trujillo's captivating depictions of restaurant drive-through windows and fast food meals.

Trujillo grew up in Albuquerque, New Mexico, a high-desert city of clear air and wide vistas, where most human activity is dwarfed by the imposing landscape. He began to draw as a boy, and the practice remains a central one for him today. Wherever he goes and whatever catches his eye winds up in one of his sketchbooks, where it will likely become a reference for paintings to follow. The significant question is of course, what precisely does catch his eye? An MFA graduate of Yale University, Trujillo studied with the renowned American artist William Bailey. Bailey once posed him a memorable question about painting: is a painting an experience, or is it a representation of an experience that references something outside itself? For instance, does a painting of the Egyptian pyramids make you think of the actual pyramids in Egypt, or do you respond to what appears on the canvas in front of you? Trujillo's focus on these mundane episodes of everyday life, what he calls, "places from the middle ground of common experience," is an ongoing response to that question.

Now a resident of Los Angeles, Trujillo can hardly avoid the banal public spaces that mark the Southern California landscape—its commercial sprawl of gas stations, big box stores, and fast food chains—what he calls American Purgatory, (also the title of his recent book). Both omnipresent and apparently unremarkable, these places offer convenience and consistency over quality and originality, functioning as dependable dispensers of basic, familiar products. "People don't go to be there," says Trujillo. Despite, or more accurately, because of his conflicted feelings toward them, he realized there was "something about what I saw that made me want to paint it." So, rather than trying to escape, he moved in closer.

A careful look at Trujillo's work reveals him to be a meticulous and sophisticated artist. As an admirer of seventeenth-century masters Johannes Vermeer and Diego Velasquez, he researched their slower, more methodical artistic processes and adopted many of them. He cuts individual panels for each of his paintings, rather than adjusting a composition to fit a pre-existing support. As they did, he begins each piece with a drawing, working from his detailed sketchbook studies for reference. Finally, he follows with a classic grisaille (gray-toned) underpainting—now an essential step for working out the formal and tonal properties of a composition. Only after its completion does he begin to apply color. Paradoxically, in an unexpected juxtaposition of style and content, he brings these traditional, time-consuming methods to bear not on classical landscapes or portraits, but on drive-through restaurant windows and plates of nachos and cokes.

Although Trujillo works in an essentially photorealist mode, creating an exact facsimile in paint is far from his objective. Stylistically, the drive-through windows have more in common with Piet Mondrian's flat and gridded geometric arrangements than with a photograph, despite their apparent visual accuracy. Reflecting his deadpan titles that simply state the street address of each location, the paintings offer no personal cues or dramatic vantage points to suggest a particular narrative. Permeated with an aura of isolation, these straightforward glimpses of what Trujillo calls the "horror of our modern life—being no one, being nowhere," are today's everyday occurrences. A sense of solitude permeates the fast food paintings as well. Other than perhaps hunger, no commentary is offered (and titles provide none). Yet we are not just disinterested spectators looking through the window of the picture plane to admire the view. Trujillo makes us his unseen but essential participant, standing alone at the ordering window or sitting at the table preparing for a meal.



6182 Sepulveda Boulevard



1919 Pico Boulevard

In *6182 Sepulveda Boulevard* (2008), one of Trujillo's earliest drive-through paintings, a close-up view centers on the ordering window's two narrow rectangles. Through one side, two figures in blue shirts attend to their work but on the other only bland walls, stark metallic surfaces, and a tangle of exposed hoses fill the space—that isolating "nowhere" to which Trujillo alludes. Yet in this apparently straightforward depiction Trujillo makes use of some wonderful compositional strategies. He highlights that lone protruding elbow and centers it within the transparent gap of the restaurant's bright red emblem. He wields primary colors like pathfinders—red moves toward us, blue draws us in, yellow denotes the interior boundary. Our eye travels between the notices taped to the refrigerator, the young men working, and the decal on the surface of the window, finally landing us outside awaiting our order.

Throughout the past decade Trujillo has continued to explore a broad range of these distinctively American interfaces, zeroing in on their quirky individuality and their often mind-bending lighting effects. In *300 Lomas Boulevard NE* (2018), his usual square format turns horizontal to encompass the location's longer series of windows. The dramatic contrast between the two main elements—a small, well-lit interior and its surrounding expanse of cool, reflection-charged exterior glass—generates all the action. As Trujillo notes, "Once I decide in a larger sense what interests me, light is what I am actually painting—light is really what I'm getting at." The buttery yellow glow issuing from that captivating central space immediately draws us in. Reflections dance off the tile wall and the backs of the busy workers and issue from the oversize drink sign. But the blue gloom of the surrounding panes soon pulls us towards the less inviting, and lonelier world outside. A disjointed, wavering view of the street opposite comes into focus—its streetlight and apartment windows clarify in a series of skewed but absolutely convincing reflections. A subtler ambient light reflects off of the plant leaves and drops a few shadows from the vents above. Trujillo has orchestrated a remarkable scene that invites us to slip through multiple, color-generated dimensions.



14645 Roscoe Boulevard

Trujillo's observational virtuosity flourishes in these reflective and refractive environments. In the 2018 painting *14645 Roscoe Boulevard*, a fairly straightforward two-paned restaurant window rests above a bland course of bricks, a worker and coffee machine visible through the glass. But the plain façade transforms completely with Trujillo's extraordinary rendering of its surrounding red tile border. He conveys the most evanescent details tile by tile—the cloudy orange-tinged sunset with bits of clear blue sky peeking through, a shadowy, fragmented tree—all of which could dissolve in an instant with the merest shift of position or alteration of light. Despite its dramatic intensity, the passage maintains the painting's compositional balance, merging believably with the rest of the scene—the surrounding gray border, video camera above, and two small windows. "All parts of the painting have to agree, to convey a sense of light," he says. "It's like a crime where all the alibis have to match up or you don't get away with it." Without question, in another *tour de force* demonstration, Trujillo makes a clean getaway.

In the painting *1919 Pico Boulevard* (2018), Trujillo takes a deeper look into the intriguing puzzle of visual perception. Four distinct images produced by light alone play out on the restaurant's ordering window. At top left, a reflection of the buildings on the opposite street appears in bright sundown vermillion; to the right a blackened pane hides its interior and is itself partially hidden by an air conditioner vent; then just below, a transparent pane allows us a glimpse at the stove and worker inside; and lastly, the surface of the glass itself, plastered with decals, labels and signs, is the focus. Glass changes dramatically depending on the angle and quality of light, and he takes full advantage of all its anomalies here to point out these small visual marvels. As Trujillo notes, "this kind of close attention is always surprising." He invites us to consider our casual acceptance of appearances and to move in for a closer look. In a new context, even the most familiar things can become remarkable.

Trujillo's paintings of fast food meals, called "Combos," work in just this eye-opening manner. He reenvision our now ubiquitous American snacks into postmodern still lifes, picked out in glorious "Technicolor" verisimilitude. Nothing superfluous interferes with these minimalist meals; only essentials are included. Every detail is exacting except for one—the product lettering. Texts, signs and logos seem recognizable, yet none are actually legible. Trujillo employs this same strategy in his drive-through window paintings, and with good reason. He believes, "people latch on to text really hard in paintings, looking for meaning." He goes on to say, "I like the text to be a little bit muted. Ultimately I am making something to be looked at. The way things look is much more open ended and interesting to me than ascribing meaning." He recognizes that once language is engaged, a painting can no longer be purely an experience of time and place, or even an appreciation of a created scene, but becomes a conceptual device to decipher and to contextualize.

Arranged with precision on its tray, each item of food in *Combo 1* (2015) sparkles with neon highlights. Every potato spear is picked out precisely in its little paper pocket, and its two accompanying condiment cups of ketchup glow velvety red. A napkin-wrapped burger and tall cup of soda, with an astoundingly rendered plastic lid and straw, complete the meal. Millions of similar meals have been served and devoured, but Trujillo gives this food a rare aesthetic visibility. In *Combo 3* (2012), he seats us outside, likely under an umbrella, the sun low in the sky behind our right shoulder. The shadows and toned raking light situates us precisely in the space and time for a late summer snack, and turns an ordinary hotdog and fries into objects of marvel and an experience of nostalgia. In a very different take, *Combo Slice* (2016) brings us to a featureless, cafeteria-style table in a dim airport-like space. This otherwise barren surface holds only a slice of pizza, partially exposed under its spectacularly realized sheet of aluminum foil, and an icy cola. Most of these food items—hot dogs, hamburgers, French fries, nachos, pizza and sodas—would be recognizable the world over, but rarely have they been graced with such devout observation and reverent attention.



Combo Slice



Combo 1

Fast food culture would hardly be the prime subject of choice for most artists. In fact, as an American, Marc Trujillo admits to being slightly embarrassed that we've populated the world with these banal spaces, yet he also admits to patronizing them. His ambivalence, which lured him into a close examination of what initially was slightly repellent, only heightens the magnetism of this work. Out of contradictory feelings Trujillo proves that even in the most familiar situations, we can awaken to amazement at what is right before our eyes. He often quotes a line from the poet W. H. Auden: "Poetry is the precise expression of mixed feelings." It's a wonderfully accurate description of this body of work. Trujillo does not intend his art to be a conceptual commentary on American culture but a revelation, so that we might experience the ordinary in a totally new way and discover what, if anything, the image is really communicating and what that means to us. And, unlike the actual places, the longer you stay with the paintings, the more intriguing they become.

—Helaine Glick, Independent Curator

“ONCE I DECIDE IN A LARGER SENSE WHAT INTERESTS ME,
LIGHT IS WHAT I AM ACTUALLY PAINTING —LIGHT
IS REALLY WHAT I'M GETTING AT.”

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INTRODUCTION FROM MARC'S STUDIO

These small plein air paintings are created for the most part in one sitting, though some of them took a little longer. Some are from Rome, where I teach a plein air workshop in summer when that's possible (except last year—2020's Covid-19 lockdown). Here is Borghese Gardens, and a couple from Santa Monica, and lots of cloud studies. I'm from New Mexico and I like to paint the sky, and whenever there's good clouds here in L. A., it's something I like to paint. The title of the show is *Fast*, and I like all the multiple meanings of it. These plein air paintings of clouds are literally the fastest paintings I do. They take about 20 minutes, once I get the palette going. I do a lot of painting from observation, which helps me mediate what I get from photography. Here is a Joshua Tree painting done out in the desert, where I travelled with my wife, who also is a painter. We love going out to Joshua Tree together and working out there together. I've made several small paintings that relate to what's in the show—a 'Croissantwich' painted from direct observation, some pretzels, some other snacks and things, some condiments, which would be a subset of those fast food still life paintings, some ketchup, mustard, butter, and honey, and some hotdogs, and a few figure studies, and a palette from a painting, I like keeping track of the color, and I like looking at how people organize their palettes. I have some other little treats, a little Starburst, some good junk food, lots of unhealthy things—they stay the same too. If I paint natural things, they can change too fast.



THE SKETCHBOOKS

As mentioned in the essay, I keep sketchbooks and I draw all the time in them. These are some that I have with Arches watercolor paper; one of my students from Rome makes sketchbooks, so I had him make some for me. They are little gouaches—paintings of Albuquerque, of waiting to board a plane, Ponte Garibaldi in Rome, that's near Galleria Bruno Lisi, where *Fast* was first shown last February. So, in sketchbooks I'll do a lot of drawing in preparation for painting; using larger sketchbooks, making figure studies for painting and doing larger gouache studies.



Flowers (Work in process)

One of my teachers at Yale was Andrew Forge. At a retrospective, he gave a toast to his teacher William Coldstream, who also taught Euan Uglow. Then he walked it back a couple more steps to mention the teachers who taught him, then that teacher's teacher, until he came to the 18th century neoclassical artists Ingrès, and then Jacques-Louis David. There's a lineage there. Andrew Forge was a great teacher, I loved him and learned a lot from him—so I put a little Napoleon in this painting kind of as a shout out or thanks to Jacques-Louis David. It's kind of surprising how little he shows—that I could put Napoleon in there in a gold crown in Ralphs, because there's so much color. And as more color comes into the painting I think he'll stick out even less... he's not even that noticeable, and he's definitely fiction. I like to keep the deep space open in the paintings, build up the space, get the architecture of the painting going, then I can start focusing on the figures and the light and the other things that make the painting.



Preparatory drawing

This one is like a first draft for a painting that I think might make an interesting composition for a larger painting. The paintings are like one frame movies, so these are like my script revisions. Here's a Ralphs looking out from the flower department, which has a lot going on. I needed to make a larger study that had a little more detail to it.



Underpainting

This is an acrylic, a little grisaille, which is just French for gray, and is really an important way for me to sort out my visual motive for making a painting. This is what the blank canvas comes out of, so rather than start with a shape, and have to compromise between a preexisting shape and what I want out of it as a composition, I'll have the blank canvas or the panel I'm painting on be a function of what I want out of the painting as a composition. The first thing that goes on is a little orange dot that's the vanishing point. Like in one-frame movies, I really do have to build the set, light it, and cast it.



Work in process

Here is the painting in various stages — some parts are in the underpainting stage and some parts have more color. The underpainting, what the Dutch call a "dead color" underpainting (which means umber and white, dirt colors), is a really simple palette. I first tried this because lots of painters I love did it and it looked like fun, so I decided to test it out. But once I did it, it made so much sense, especially when something is more complicated and has a lot of layers to separate out of the drawing.



3816 S. Sepulveda Boulevard

THE INTERVIEW

On March 5, 2021 Helaine Glick interviewed Marc Trujillo for Monterey Museum of Art.

H: *Why don't we start off with your art background and the development of your techniques first. We've just seen your wonderful sketchbooks, and I know you draw all the time and always keep a sketchbook with you. How long have you been drawing and how has drawing informed your practice?*

M: Drawing is super important, and for me it was pretty primal. Early on my parents put me in gymnastics, because all I wanted to do was draw and read. They were a little worried that I wasn't going to talk to people or have friends, so they started me in a sport. That was really good because gymnastics gave me a lot of discipline, but secondly, gymnastics was something that, best case scenario, was going to peak for me when I was nineteen. Whereas painting... well, in your essay Helaine, you mentioned my teacher, William Bailey, who passed away this year. But, I talked to him a few weeks before he passed and he was in his studio every day, painting. So painting is definitely good for the long game. But drawing is the first step for all these things, and I think that drawing is really important.

H: *You have an MFA degree from Yale University and are the recipient of a Guggenheim fellowship, and a Rosenthal Family Foundation Award in Art. How has your art education and this recognition influenced your development as an artist? Are there specific teachers or other individuals or ideas from this time that contribute to how you work and think about art today?*

M: Absolutely, I mentioned Andrew Forge and William Bailey, and both of them continue to be a big influence on me. Both of them believe it's very important that what you're doing is a *painting*, and 'what is a painting?' that's important. Also, asking should something *be* a painting, versus a movie, or a song, and why, is an important philosophical question since they are all different forms. William Bailey presented me with the Rosenthal Award, at the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and I miss him terribly. But I also continue to learn things from the way he puts paintings together, and even from some of the statements that he's made.



8810 Tampa Avenue

There are a lot of painters that influence me and a lot that I really admire as well. A lot that I like don't necessarily look anything like my kind of work, Malevich for example, those are kind of icy...and Kandinsky, and a lot of the Abstract-Expressionist painters early on. Joan Mitchell is a great painter, her physicality, and her palette, which comes from nature. Andrew Forge has that and is also an abstract painter, and his palette definitely comes from observing nature.

My first memory of being in a museum is at LACMA (Los Angeles County Museum of Art), and the piece I remember was by Claes Oldenburg, a big motorized ice bag. There was a velvet rope around it, and it was probably a dangerous thing, but I wanted to climb on it. My liberal parents saw no problem with this at the time and my dad lifted the rope, and I was happily climbing around on it. The museum guard was horrified and immediately asked me to get off the art! But Oldenburg had this kind of Pop sensibility that I loved. At the Fogg Art Museum at Harvard they have one of his little cafeteria tray sculptures, so Oldenburg was my first museum memory, and continues to influence me. A lot of the paintings I love I really dig into formally and steal ideas, like Velazquez and Vermeer, the painters you would suspect probably.

H: (comment) *It's fascinating to see the range of artists you talk about whose work you like but which is nothing like yours, at least on the surface.*

M: With Joan Mitchell and Andrew Forge, there's a real rigor in the color, and color is so important. I spend so much time on the palette, trying to get at light...



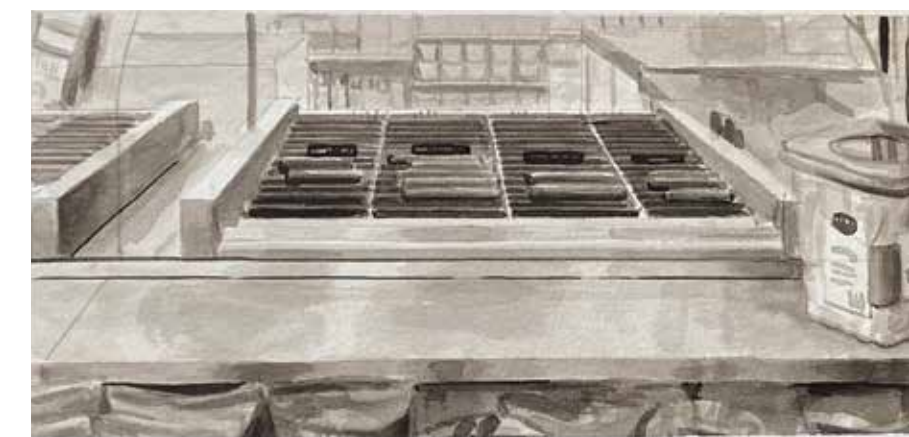
39 Union Square



7950 Santa Monica Boulevard

H: They all came to it from their own perspective I guess. I was going to ask you about your painting procedure, which we have really already seen a little bit of—how you start with grey tones, and build up from there, and how you create your own panels to fit the size of the painting (composition) that you want to make—so can you talk a little bit about how you came to that process, how you developed that process?

M: Corot was another painter who was a big influence on me. My mom would take me to museums, good museums. We lived in Washington DC a little bit and she'd take me to the National Gallery. She loved the Impressionists, and she loved Monet, and every once in a while I'd see a "Monet" that I really loved, and I'd go up and see a little "C-o-r-o-t" on it, so I loved Corot! His hierarchy for painting is: form, tone, and color, in that order. You draw things out, you kind of make a plan, (shares his screen) I didn't put a Corot in here, which is silly of me. Here's an ink and wash drawing for my painting with the hot dogs (shows), and here's the underpainting for it (shows). So, Corot would do a little pencil drawing to distill the response he had to the thing that made him want to paint it in the first place. I don't just do it because he did it, but once I did it, the way he organized building a painting made so much sense that I kept on doing it. Here's the finished hot dog painting (shows), and we're talking about specificity of color, which is so important in painting. If you look at these hotdogs you can kind of tell... For example, if you were going to buy one of these hotdogs, the top one is the most recent one that's on the cooker, the second one down has probably been on there the longest, then the other two at the bottom are between the two. That specificity of color as detail is really important in painting.



7950 Santa Monica Boulevard - Ink and wash drawing



7950 Santa Monica Boulevard - Underpainting

But that's basically how I build them up, I'll work out the perspective of the still life paintings (of meals) because I really want it to be like your meal, because you're looking down on it. So here's the vanishing point (shows a preparatory drawing of a Combo painting). Here's the one that's half underpainted, and then the completed painting (shows both). The layers of drawing helps me sort out what my visual motivation is for it, and in that process I also take from other painters.



Combo 3



Combo 3 - Preparatory drawing



Combo 3 - Underpainting



Johannes Vermeer, *The Milkmaid*

Here's a Vermeer painting (shows on screen), *The Milkmaid* (c. 1557-58), and he has the vanishing point in this painting right over her hand. That is the place where you will have a lot of lines converge on, so in a way it's like pointing at something in a painting, it's a tool of guiding attention. The places I tend to paint are often the opposite kind of spaces.



Ralphs Flower Aisle - Underpainting



3250 Vernon Avenue - Costco interior

So here's a little Costco interior (shows his painting), and there's nothing under the vanishing point, like the painting on the easel (from earlier, of Ralphs), there's nothing but a lot of empty, shiny surface between you and the vanishing point. So I'm using Vermeer's strategy and kind of inverting it, which I guess is your last two questions. So my education continues from looking at other paintings.



KL603

H: You have described the fast-food restaurants depicted in your series *Fast*, as “places from the middle ground of common experience,” or “mundane episodes of ordinary life.” What about these places, which most of us don’t really pay attention to even when we are in them, makes you want to focus on them and paint them?

M: I’m from a square state, where a lot of it is not very interesting, except for the landscape. The architecture there is really nowhere. I have a Russian friend, Katya Kompaneyets, who says about my paintings, “Man complains that God is indifferent, and look what he builds for himself.” When I was talking about (artists) Bailey and Forge, Bailey said the painting is the thing, the experience rather than the representation of the experience, and if you want the painting to really be the *thing*, and you’re painting Niagara Falls or the Taj Mahal, you will be painting something that is probably going to remind the viewer of this greater experience outside the painting. But if I’m painting the inside of the Ralphs, or a drive-through window, the painting has a chance of being more of an experience than when you were actually there. So I like that. I like this middle ground of common experience because it doesn’t play into people’s fantasy lives, because to me that’s kind of narrative poison. If I’m being shown something, or feel like I’m being enticed, then it becomes more like an advertisement. James Joyce said that his definition of pornography is when you’re shown something that makes you want to possess it in some way; it could be a Porsche or something, it doesn’t have to be sexual. I like that these things have a little bit of ice to them, because then I think that the painting can then really be the thing.

H: You compose the *Fast* paintings so that the viewer is in the position of the customer, setting eye level where the implied (but invisible) person would stand or sit. We are the one waiting to eat the burger and drink the coke. This approach makes the paintings feel especially personal and intimate. Can you talk about how you structure your paintings in this way? Do you think the fact that you’re painting tempting and familiar food—which generates anticipation—heightens their power and effectiveness?

M: It could. Here, I’ll pull one up (shows *Combo 1*). So I have to say I have mixed feeling about these things. I come from a square state, and when I was growing up these things—going to McDonald’s or Wendy’s—were a treat, so they do have an allure to me, and also I know they’re not that great for me. For me the mixed feelings I have about them are really important, because it makes a subject that’s better for painting. I believe what Auden said (poet, W. H. Auden). Auden said that poetry is the precise expression of mixed feelings. And I find when I’m looking at other works of art that that’s true for me in relation to things I can look at over and over again; they’re not telling me what to think about them.



Combo 1



517 East 117th Street (meat aisle at Costco)

So for me, the mix of enticement and shame that I feel about them is part of it. And also (shows his painting *517 East 117th Street, of the meat aisle in Costco*), I'm North American and Costco isn't our greatest cultural achievement. I'm a little embarrassed about it, and also I kind of love it, the large stretches of concrete and the merchandise stacked to the ceiling is a sort of awe inspiring spectacle. For example in this painting, this carpet of meat in here, next to this big stretch of concrete was the allure that made me want to paint it.



KL596

Here is an in-flight meal, which ironically was a flight out of Rome (shows). I mentioned some of these Abstract-Expressionist painters before, and I guess you can see there's almost a little (artist) Larry Poons painting there, and even the piece of pizza itself is kind of like a painting—the bread it's on, the crust is like the canvas, the cheese and sauce are like the painting, and it's really fun stuff to paint. I really do get pleasure out of painting these things. Like in this one (shows *Combo 1, see above*), the ketchup I kind of save for dessert because ketchup's a little like paint, maybe more translucent, but that makes it a lot of fun to paint, which shouldn't be lost because we're talking about why I do these things. For me it's a cycle, I look at these great paintings by these artists we've been mentioning that define what a painting is for me. I go into the world to see what I think might make a good painting based on what I think painting is, and then I make a painting to test these ideas. Which kind of sends me back to the other paintings to see how I did. I know that's a painting...

H: *That's a really thoughtful process you go through, a really considered process...*

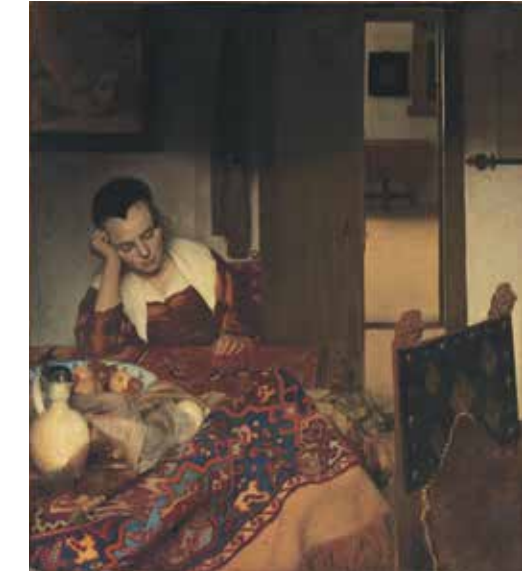
M: It's kind of a natural one. Those other painters really let you know how you're doing, and then you look around the world, like hmmm... (smiles),



300 Lomas Boulevard

H: So speaking of looking around the world at all kinds of things, you capture the various color distortions and reflections of light on glass, metal, and tile surfaces to an extraordinary degree. They are breathtaking. You've said that light is your true subject of interest. Can you talk a little bit more about that?

M: Even that painting that's behind you (virtual background using Marc's painting *300 Lomas Boulevard*), that's a good example. The actual size of this painting is about 8 inches high, making it about 18 inches wide. It has a mixed light temperature, going into late dusk, verses that warm temperature inside. It's something that photography is really bad at reconciling. Photography is a great tool, but one of the practical reasons about doing so much painting from observation is that it really helps calibrate the information I get from photography, and understand what the light would really be like. And one of the reasons that I think that light is such a good subject matter for painting (shows on screen: Johannes Vermeer, *A Maid Asleep*, c. 1556-57), so if we look at Vermeer, this is at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the light in this is as important a character as anything in the painting. And I love this painting, and that's one of those things that I think is important about painting and about really trying to get at a sense of light, because in order for a painting to convey a sense of light, all the parts of the painting have to agree. So it's a good thing to pay attention to because it's one of the things that helps make sure your painting is more than the sum of its parts.



Johannes Vermeer, *A Maid Asleep*



2636 San Mateo Boulevard - Kentucky Fried Chicken drive up window at dusk

The painting that you're in front of ([300 Lomas Boulevard](#)), or some of the others like this ([shows Kentucky Fried Chicken drive up window at dusk](#)) show a lot of different light temperatures. They're similar because there's late daylight outside and a warm light inside, so reconciling those temperatures is something that I have to do in the painting, and—maybe should've shown on the studio viewing—I keep color notes. So here are the colors (shows sheet of paper with painted swatches) I end up with from a painting. This kind of frees me from photography more, because I can look and see, here's what I used last time I painted something similar. So the next time I approach it I can try and get closer to the sense of light. I spend a lot of time on the palette trying to get those big notes right, to give back the sense of light that appeals to me. That painting that's behind you, that cool light everywhere, but then there is that little warm spot—it is something that Rembrandt does in his paintings. So the paintings that I like, and some of the visual things that appeal to me about them, I will find excuses to use them in my own paintings.

H: I was going to mention Mondrian... all your fast-food takeout windows are organized more or less on a grid, not unlike one of Mondrian's geometric abstractions, although yours are infinitely more complex. Mondrian works with flat planes of solid primary colors, while you describe multiple levels and surfaces. Did his work influence this series, and if so, how?

M: So the frontality of Mondrian's work, but not through Mondrian, because William Bailey does a similar thing. In his still lifes—when you really look at one closely you'll notice that the ellipses are ellipses as they would actually be seen from much further away, so there's this presumption that you're close to it, and when you really sort it out, it does this push back in the drawing, which I like. ([William Bailey painting](#)). So Mondrian has that frontality, and one of the things that a lot of the moderns pride themselves on is the acknowledgment of the flatness of the picture plane, ([puts up Vermeer's A Maid Asleep, see above](#)), you definitely have space: here the table's in front of her, in front of the wall, in front of the other room, and the furthest thing away is this little black square he put on the painting. If I draw a square on the screen there's no illusion of depth, so Vermeer is using the frontality in a really sophisticated knowing way; the conflation of space, is it the furthest thing away? The furthest thing away figuratively is the thing that snaps right up to the surface abstractly, which I think is a really interesting and sophisticated way of using flatness. And Mondrian is also Dutch, so kudos to the Dutch, because every century they have an artist the rest of us know.



William Bailey, *Tavernacci*

H: *Even though they are ubiquitous, fast food take-outs and big-box stores like Costco can be isolating; we can feel like a stranger in a landscape of strangers. This sense of modern isolation and loneliness is inherent in many of your paintings. Right now though, many of us would be happy to find ourselves a stranger among a group of strangers because we miss this kind of human activity and interaction. How has this past year and the pandemic affected you and your work? Has it influenced your outlook? What do you most look forward to painting (and doing) when you can be freely out among people again?*

M: Luckily for me (my wife) Linda and I took a trip out to Joshua Tree in November because we could isolate by ourselves and be out in the desert where we like to work, and that was kind of perfect, so more of that. And you're right, the isolation is one of those things that I mentioned.... man complains God is indifferent, but look at the world he builds for himself. But to me, this being nowhere and being no one is of one of the horrors of the world we've made for ourselves. But if you make a painting of something it changes it, and that is one of the reasons I like to choose these kinds of places. This kind of purgatory of places where people don't go to to be there. It's like this architectural instantiation of this state where we spend a lot of our life, where we either think about what we did before or what we're going to do next. So the inside of a Costco is really built like this state of mind, like you're really nowhere, you could be in any state in the United States, and even (you're welcome England), there's one in London, there's one outside of Madrid, and that nowhere-ness gives me a little chill that appeals to me as subject matter. I guess too, that that sense of isolation is one of the things that appeals to me. And now that everyone feels that more maybe makes the paintings more resonant to more people (I would hope). But to me it's also sort of mixed, because there's usually something kind of funny because it's not that it's entirely horrible.

But it is an interesting point of departure, and I do like this kind of nothingness. The way that Dostoyevsky said looking forward we die too young and looking back we die too late. So we do spend a lot of time thinking about what we are going to do and what we did before, and these spaces are really built like that. And the painting behind you (*300 Lomas Ave.*)—that's not built for you to spend any time there, say in front the actual drive through window. As opposed to... well, I think the harshest critique of it would be something like the Vatican, or St. Peters, or any number of spaces in Europe, where no matter where you look, some craftsman who was very good at what they did lovingly cared that you might look there. As opposed to being inside a Costco, where there's nothing, it's like get it and go.

THE CREDITS

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300 Lomas Boulevard NE, 2018, oil on panel, 8 x 19 inches

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6182 Sepulveda Boulevard, 2008, oil on polyester, 8 x 8 inches

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Combo 3, 2012, oil on polyester, 18 x 18 inches

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1919 Pico Boulevard, 2018, oil on panel, 11 x 18 inches

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14645 Roscoe Boulevard, 2018, oil on panel, 12 x 12 inches

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Combo Slice, 2016, oil on polyester over aluminum panel, 15 x 20 inches

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Combo 1, 2015, oil on panel, 16 x 20 inches

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Plein air paintings on wall at Marc Trujillo studio

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8810 Tampa Avenue, 2015, oil on panel, 12 x 9 inches

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39 Union Square, 2018, oil on panel, 9 x 10 inches

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Combo 3, 2012, oil on polyester, 18 x 18 inches

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Johannes Vermeer, **The Milkmaid**, c. 1660, oil on canvas, 18 x 16.25 inches, Rijksmuseum, The Netherlands

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3250 Vernon Avenue, 2017, oil on panel, 13 x 16.5 inches

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KL603, 2017, oil on panel, 14 x 24 inches

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517 East 117th Street, 2016, oil on panel, 25 x 24 inches

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KL596, 2018, oil on panel, 15 x 24 inches

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Johannes Vermeeer, **A Maid Asleep**, c. 1656-57, oil on canvas, 34.5 x 30.25, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY

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2636 San Mateo Boulevard, 2016, oil on panel, 8 x 18.5 inches

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William Bailey, **Tavernacci**, 2013, oil on linen, 18 x 24 inches, courtesy of the Betty Cunningham Gallery, New York

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Combo 6, 2013, oil on polyester, 16 x 20 inches



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