

UNTITLED

Phil Wagner

January 16 - February 20, 2011

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Gracias

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ESSAY

Conversation, Olivier Mosset, Haley Mellin, June 26, 2011

OM: I don't like to talk too much about painting. For me there is a kind of silence related to painting, I am interested in a kind of mute aspect within painting. It is something you look at and you either get it or you don't.

HM: For these paintings I wanted to focus on one thing and was reading Annie Besant's essay, "On Concentration." She was a theosophist writing during the turn of the last century on silence, stillness, and how those qualities allow our senses to work on other levels. She writes about attunement, the stretching of the senses, of the removal of style or a momentary trend, of seeing something as it is rather than from a perspective. So one does not just reproduce what an object looks like, as in photorealism, but also tries to capture its felt sense, looking beyond a surface to something deeper. I used rags and paint buckets for these paintings because they are active tropes and are there already. It is similar to your work in that there is no identity present when you are making the work because you are just focusing on the thing, like the white circle, it just is what it is.

OM: The nice thing about your painting is it shuts off the discussion because it is clear what the object is, and the problem then goes to, like with any other painting, how is it painted? You know, it's not really what you do but how you do it that counts.

HM: I think there is a talismanic quality to painting made by one person's hand, out of necessity, quest, or question. This is something I am interested in and obsessed with these days. This quality is more obvious as simulation is becoming a global aspect of life. So many things are experienced online, we live in this hyper-fast viewing environment. It is like a stew of digitized data, feedback loops, and so on. And we apply the mentality that

is generated by this screenic culture when we look at paintings.

OM: The art of the 20th century – films and video.

HM: I think that is our contemporary vision. We comprehend things quickly, look quickly, and think that what we first see is what is there, that we saw it all. I'm really interested in how you don't actually see a Rothko painting until you've looked at it for over a half hour, and how historical paintings with spiritual reference don't engage a rational sense of looking. This hyper reliance on seeing, visual access and accumulation of images, doesn't lend itself to seeing what is more subtle, such as Turner's glazes which sometimes took two years to dry.

OM: Rothko said "people should cry in front of my paintings." But for me, I don't try to communicate anything. What I do is totally selfish, especially now that I am at the end of the road, in a way. I'm glad that some people are interested in the work but that is not the point. The point is the relationship with the object and the material, the object is the stretched canvas on the stretcher and the material is the paint. Basically I am interested in this kind of relationship, and dealing directly with this kind of object and what people see or don't see.

HM: Painting is something that carries an innately personal relationship. Maybe it is the physical reality: there is the you and there is a painting you are looking at and

something can happen in the space between those two points. Certain paintings are rather alchemical in that way. There is poetry to it, and it necessitates your physical presence rather than online viewing.

OM: These days I am interested in doing paintings on a really private level for myself. I liked doing something with you. It is interesting to have shows because you can look at

the work better than when it is in the studio, and of course it is nice to sell some things from time to time. That allows you to go on.

HM: For this show, Joel's idea of making a front room/ back room out of the gallery space was brilliant. It gives play to the conversations, community and relationships that are behind all ideas and making work; and at the same time it is a good mirror for the gallery and market situation. The false wall becomes a membrane that allows passage between these two spaces.

OM: And of course the false wall separating the front and back room, which itself ends up being a piece, makes it what it is: the apartment/gallery concept, the private/public space concept, and so on. The market? I guess, we can't escape that. It's all about economy anyway.

HM: During the opening you could sense there was an activity coming from within the back room gallery space, conversations and so on. You could hear voices coming from behind the veneer of the wall but you couldn't see anything. It was like this hum of energy emanating from the wall.

HM: There are few unique things today that carry the human hand. But for you, why painting?

OM: Well, you start painting at the beginning for one reason and there is a dialectic in the process of painting that kind of keeps you going. For me, everything I do is related back to painting. Even if I show a motorcycle, it is related to painting. Whatever I do, it is always related to painting. You do something different than I do, you do figurative painting which is a Cezanne type of story. Of course it is difficult to paint in that manner. I took the easy way. Your work is very much self-portrait, in a way. Someone said that about a piece of yours that I purchased, I didn't get it until someone said that.

OM: My first question when we began talking about this exhibition is why were you interested in what I do? That was kind of a mystery to me, because I like abstract paintings and you work in a representational manner. I did some figure drawings when I was in school and now anything figurative is especially interesting because of the process involved. But these days everything is possible, you can make anything you want to. The art of the 20th century was videos and films and you choose to paint.

HM: I see a number of similarities in what we do. Our work stems from this issue of making very personal works that exist between one person and one object. As you said earlier with your circle paintings, you remember the time and place that each was made, and that moment of origin is something I am interested in. Of course, many forms or ways of making art are possible today and anything can be made, but right now there are

a lot of things being made, and more often than not things are being made very quickly.

HM: While you've collected my work and we've included each other's work in exhibitions, I've always had a long attraction to your circle paintings and wanted to do some form of an exhibition with them. There is one in this show, what is the history of the series?

OM: The circle paintings started in early '66. They engage no images, no emotions, and no communication. I was interested in anonymity, neutrality and repetition. I guess, what made it interesting for some people was less the image than the repetition of the image. Circles had been painted before, by Liberman for example, though I didn't know that. I was not trying to do something new, I was just trying to paint. When I did that first painting, repetition seemed a good solution in order to continue painting. Others have

spoken about these paintings better than I could (C. Perret, *Ides et Calandes*, 2004).

HM: And your work with negation?

OM: When I was working with Buren, Toroni and Parmentier, we were against art as distraction, illustration or entertainment. A circle can be vicious, a target, a zero, it can enact a contradiction that can neutralize art's meanings. But in the end, it is always about painting. What I'm dealing with is just that: painting's contradictions. As you may know, I don't really like to talk about my work. I cannot defend my paintings. They are indefensible.

HM: What are your thoughts on the work's identity? We were talking earlier about my work having a presence, and I'm guessing that you prefer the other.

OM: I try to give the object an identity that is nothing and I try to cut the relationship I have with the object itself. I did a circle, then I did a second one, and I thought there was something interesting happening there. In a subtle way they were all different because they were hand painted. Even if they all looked similar they were not because they have a individual relationship to the way they are shown and the space itself, and as objects you move them around over time. They were assessing the value that is given to a painting because it was unique and because it is signed.

HM: You seem to have a very personal, in some ways, very private relationship to painting, and yet you are collapsing it with this larger system of economy which is the antithesis of the personal. I sense we are both interested in how our contemporary language of capitalism has become a language of an individual's inter-relationship with a

larger structure.

OM: Yes, in the end I was criticizing the whole system of the market, which is not what painting is, painting is something else. I am interested in both of these aspects. The early paintings were not signed and the question of repetition didn't fall from the sky, you had the discourse around Warhol's work. I'm at the end of the trail, I'm still interested in a couple of things, but I don't even want to talk about it. It's totally selfish.

HM: I think our similarities percolate there, the work is what it is, and in part it

is invested in origin. The moment your white circle, or my painting of a rag is photographed, it disappears, it reverts back to its origin, for you it disappears in the surrounding wall since both are white. For me, it becomes the original object I painted, in this case a painting rag, which in turn points to other paintings. Oddly enough, someone was in the studio the other day and they said, "I know that is a good painting because it looks good on my iphone."

OM: Yes, today, the situation has changed. It is not the game I used to know, which is another good reason to shut up, and yes, it is all on the Internet. **!**

INSTALLATION





















GRAN BOMBAZO MUSICAL
**HERMANOS
FLORES**
**EDDIE
SANTIAGO**
y su orquesta
GRUPO

WORKS

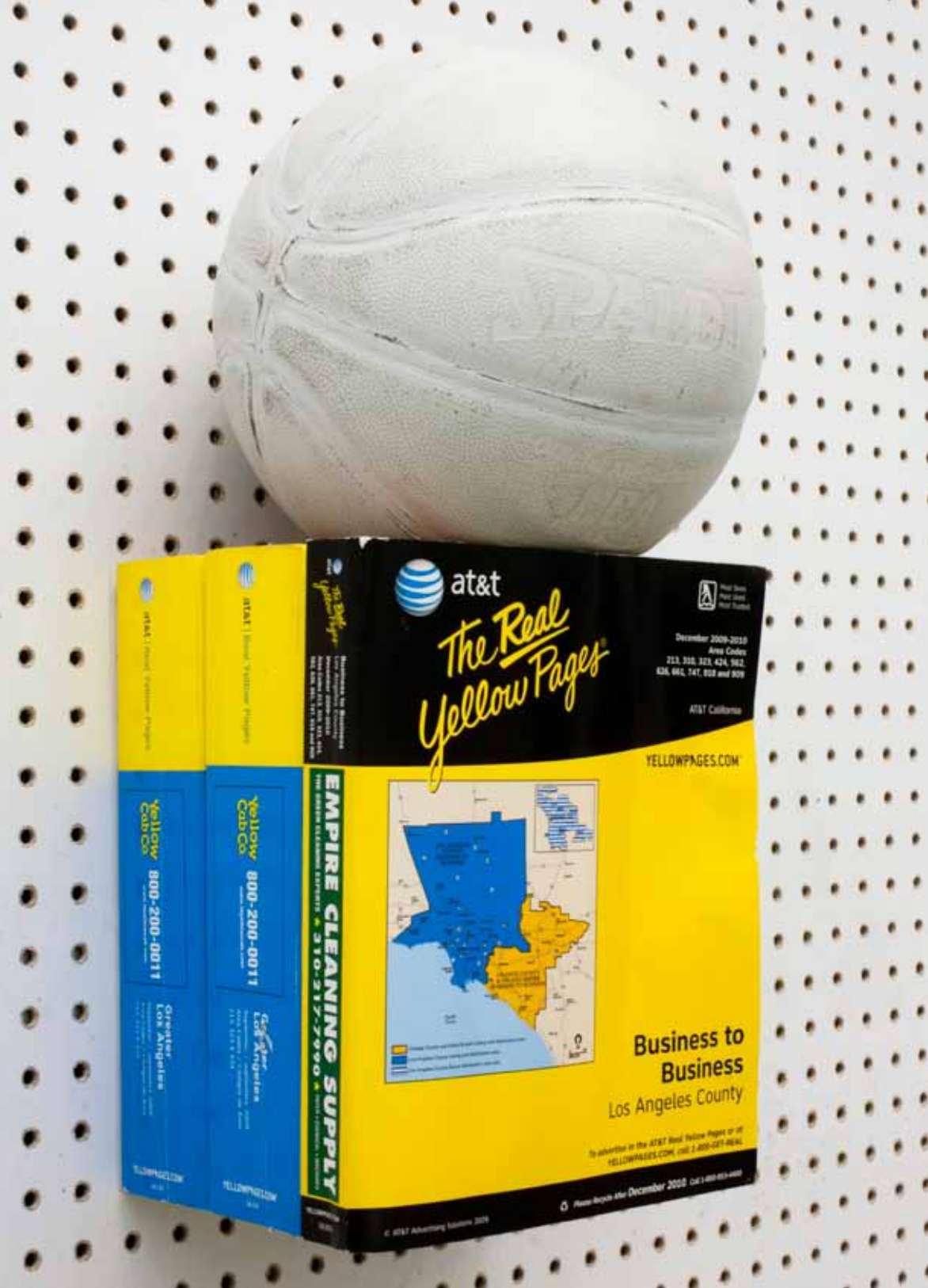
Soft Furnishings 2010

Mixed media 48 x 60 inches 121.9 x 152.4 cm





Made in Indonesia 2010
Mixed media 126 x 48 x 18 inches 320 x 121.9 x 45.7 cm



Business to Business 2010
Mixed media 60 x 48 x 10.5 inches 152.4 x 121.9 x 26.7 cm



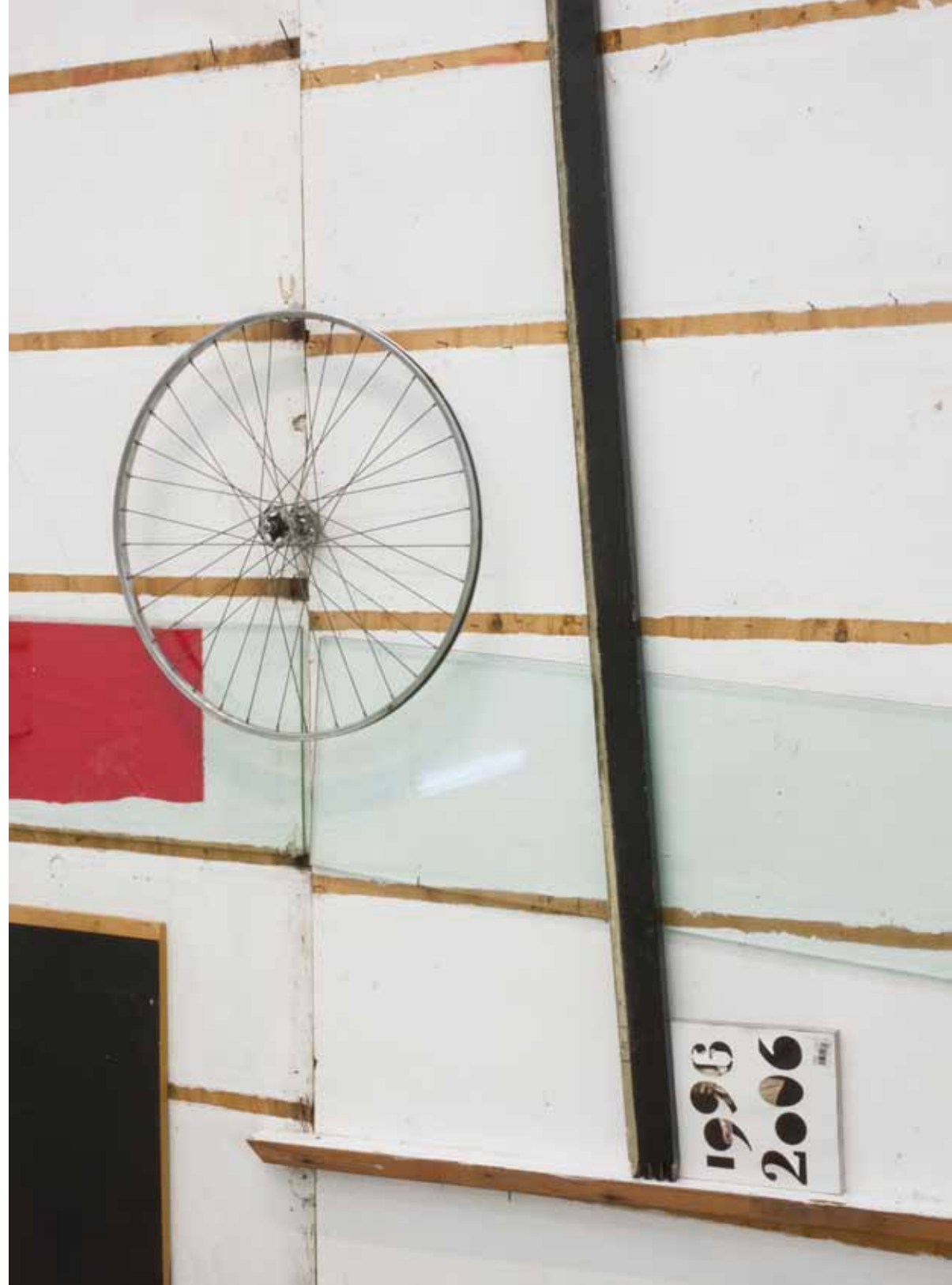
Los Angeles County Museum of Art 2010
Mixed media 101 x 51 x 7 inches 256.5 x 129.5 x 17.8 cm



Untitled (Podium) 2010
Mixed media 46.5 x 25 x 19.5 inches 118.1 x 63.5 x 49.5 cm



Gran Bombazo 2010
Mixed media 49 x 47 x 10.5 inches 124.5 x 119.4 x 26.7 cm

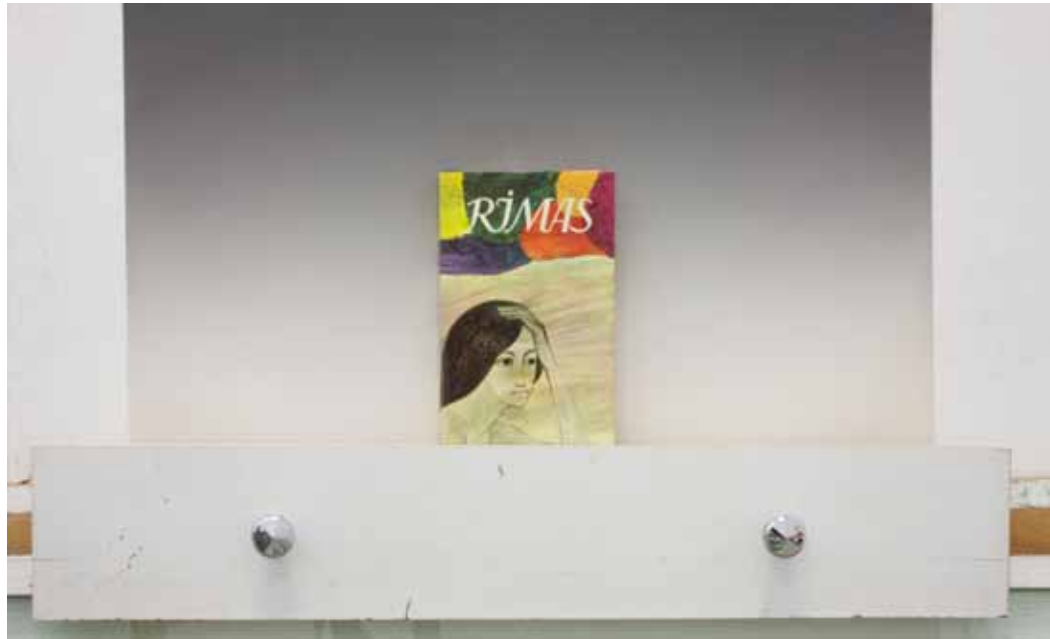


1996-2006 2010
Mixed media 101 x 104.5 x 5.5 inches 256.5 x 265.4 x 14 cm





Warning Aviso Avertissement 2010
Mixed media 60 x 48 x 14 inches 152.4 x 121.9 x 35.6 cm



Rimas 2010
Mixed media 48 x 60 inches 121.9 x 152.4 cm



Making Eyes 2010
Mixed media 102 x 84 inches 259.1 x 213.4 cm

C.V.

PHIL WAGNER

Born 1974, East Moline, IL
Lives and works in Los Angeles, CA

Education

MFA San Francisco Art Institute, 2007

Solo and two-person exhibitions

- 2011 Parker Jones Gallery, Los Angeles, CA
Gracias, UNTITLED, New York, NY
- 2010 *Henry Taylor / Phil Wagner*, Rental Gallery, New York, NY
- 2007 Black Dragon Society, Los Angeles, CA

Selected group exhibitions

- 2010 *David Adamo, Heather Cook, Brendan Fowler, Rashid Johnson, Phil Wagner*, UNTITLED, New York, NY
- 2009 *Fantastic LA*, University Galleries at Illinois State University, Normal, IL
PRUESSPRESS, Ritter/Zamet, London, UK
- 2008 *PRUESSPRESS*, Rental Gallery, New York, NY
- 2007 *Atomations*, Black Dragon Society, Los Angeles, CA
Oliver Twist, Rental Gallery, New York, NY
- 2006 *Then & Now & Again*, Black Dragon Society, Los Angeles, CA
- 2001 *New Angeles*, University Galleries at Illinois State University, Normal, IL

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