

500 WORDS

David Ratcliff

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Left: **David Ratcliff**, *Untitled Ghost Painting (titanic)*, 2010, spray paint on canvas, 64 x 48". Right: **David Ratcliff**, *Untitled Ghost Painting (void if detached)*, 2010, spray paint on canvas, 64 x 58".

David Ratcliff is an artist based in Los Angeles, who is known for using appropriated digital imagery in his large-scale paintings. His solo show at Galerie Rodolphe Janssen closes on December 23. Here, he discusses the new works in the exhibition.

THE "GHOST PAINTINGS" began as accidental tears and cuts in the masks of my previous paintings, places where the blade slipped or the paper caught on something and tore. My process involves making digital collages and detailed paper masks that I attach to the surface of the canvas, which are spray-painted. Sometimes these small cuts weren't visible until they were "found" by the paint, and so I began to see them as free from the light-and-shadow of the photographic forms, and as welcome aberrations.

The first ghost paintings were made on black grounds, and the cuts appear as light shining through the canvas. When rendering photographic forms in paper, the X-Acto knife puts its own resolution on certain forms: A circle can only be so small before the tip breaks. However cut lines are free, without resolution, continuous. They contain no light or shadow. When sprayed through the paper mask, the paint renders forms, but it's almost like sunlight on dust, like something in the air. There is a completely different light in the "Ghost Paintings" than in my previous work.

I'm using standard office paper, and spray-can paint is relatively blunt, so a great deal of the painting has always been the result of accidental bleeding. In contrast to my other work, where areas of the canvas are left open and exposed to the paint, the masks in these works cover the surface almost entirely, leaving just about nothing visible beneath the paper. What I had previously held together with a degree of certainty has slipped into loss of control. I can't see the paintings until after they are complete.

The ghost paintings are the closest I've come to using my own drawings, my own hand—but they're really just tracings. The paintings resemble a kind of anemic Cubism, something seen through water, fading afterimages. My earlier works started out as painterly versions of photo(copy) collages. The ghost paintings employ line in a way that defines them more clearly as paintings, as opposed to referencing photo-based print media, but they remain the result of a process that keeps my hand apart from the work. I can't put my finger on exactly why yet, but I've got this sense that if I were to start using my own drawings the work would cease to be history painting. Not only because the content would no longer be supplied by the public. It could have something to do with the feeling that our recording of events has not kept up with the increasingly faster pace at which events seem to be unfolding.

Right now I don't think that painting can be anything but history painting. My work does not support the idea of originality, so repetition is what's left. All of the images are found, mainly from online sources. The earlier works were almost catalogues of types: types of gesture, expression, design, and identity. Groups. Examples.

I have a two-year-old daughter and have been reading about childhood development. Imagination is believed to be helpful in interpersonal relationships because it's used in understanding and imagining the feelings of others. It is also essential in the construction of historical events. Included in the source-images of the recent ghost paintings are children's coloring-book pages, specifically ones of the Titanic, a Native American, and a Bible story. There are also political cartoons dealing with migrant labor and aging, and soldier snapshots from the Vietnam War; however, like events unfolding around us, or specters from the past, the images in the paintings contain an inherent illegibility, multiple gravestone rubbings on the same sheet of paper.

The ghost paintings acknowledge the past as being immediate, one second ago, like the afterimage of a flash, washed out, frozen. In the past year I have been focusing on two bodies of work, the "ghosts" and portraits. Both involve drawings found online, though the ghosts begin with tracings of drawings, while the portraits use the drawings themselves, or digital copies. The portraits are very aggressive combinations of the private/personal and the public/political. There hasn't been a time in American history where the private life of the average American has been offered up, been made so visible and with such political potential. It reminds me of stories you read about life under Mao, where marriages, likes and dislikes, and living arrangements were known, and therefore necessarily approved by the government. It is the subtle difference, and overlap, between the warmth and sorrow of biography, and the cold detachment of history. The portraits are very hard, the face, the mask, the edited "reality," the infinite-resolution drawing. The ghost paintings are soft, the recession, the uncertainty, the copy, the fading echo.

— *As told to Lauren O'Neill-Butler*