


Byrne



Allegory of the Cave

Osman

# Allegory of the Cave

Jim Byrne and Jim Osman

November 5 - December 10, 2015

Essay by Lilly Wei

Curated by Matthew Neil Gehring

Flecker Gallery

Suffolk County Community College

Ammerman Campus, Selden, NY

## Director's Foreword:

"Painting is an existential act." – Thornton Willis

Plato's Allegory of the Cave is a dialogue between Socrates and Glaucon, in which Socrates describes some of his major philosophical positions, including the limits of vision and consciousness, the difficulty of expanding, transcending our human predicaments, and suggests a path to do so. The characters in the cave are imprisoned, and have always been thus. They are chained and unable to move their heads, and so their perception of reality is quite limited to mere shadows of existence. He discusses the path of expanding consciousness as one that necessarily recognizes the fundamental limiting nature of perception and vision in particular, in favor of intellect. In fact, he states our limited vision is itself our chief prison. Plato suggests that the reality we perceive through our senses is a poor copy, a limited distortion of the truth of existence: an abstraction. For many artists, our perceptual reality is also highly malleable, especially the visual experience. It is in this terrain where the work of Jim Byrne and Jim Osman meets and together suggest a path to a higher consciousness by manipulating and observing the subjective nature of our very perceived reality.

While there is a formal similarity in the work of these two artists, I find fascinating inverse structural relationships between Byrne's painted, abstract, almost psychedelic contexts and Osman's altered, painted, stacked, constructed, and balanced objects. Each artist has a kind of architectural, yet painterly way of relating to the figure. The relationships of figure to context (Byrne) and object to viewer (Osman) embody the subject matter in both artists' work. The audience has a similar relationship with Osman's sculpture to the relationship Byrne's figures have to their painted spaces. By extension, someone observing a viewer in proximity to Osman's work occupies the same removed position as someone viewing Byrne's painting directly. This suggests an awareness that there is always a larger context, a bigger picture, to our existence than what we perceive in the moment. Byrne gives his figurative subjects abstracted contexts, while the viewer and perceptual reality become the context for Osman's abstracted subjects. This contextual expansion and reversal, this revelry in the subjective in order to heighten awareness seems to echo Socratic enlightenment through expanded consciousness, albeit via an embrace of the limits of vision.

Both artists are clearly also engaged in the sensory, subjective experience of color, which becomes another existential door for the sensitive viewer. Through learning to experience color across time, and by becoming aware of how human color perception changes over time, we can use the very pleasure of slow looking to illuminate both the wonder and the shortcomings of human vision, and therefore our limited apprehension of reality; an awareness of the universe that eludes us, just beyond our perception. Flecker Gallery is delighted to host this exhibition.

Matthew Neil Gehring, Director

## Ordinary Miracles

by Lilly Wei

While Jim Byrne and Jim Osman might not seem to have much in common at first glance—one, after all, is a painter and the other is a sculptor—it quickly becomes clear that they occupy similar terrain. To see them exhibited together in this exhibition cannily curated by Matthew Neil Gehring is felicitous, since, in addition to regarding their works as individual endeavors, there is also the great satisfaction of an invigorating and illuminating conversation.

Osman is a sculptor for whom paint and color are crucial, his palette extensive, inclusive. His preference, it seems, is for rich, muted colors, his schema sophisticated. Byrne is a painter whose figures are weighty, sculptural, his color choices remarkably similar to that of Osman, if more modulated. Both combine the planar and the volumetric, the expressive and the geometric, abstraction and representation, their scale variable, but human, even when pumped up. Both have called themselves puzzle makers, and both are willing to wing it, without an overly determined plan, discovering the work as they proceed. Exploring the commonplace with elegant clarity, they share a taste for the poetics of ordinary life.

Osman says his work is all about structure. He is a craftsman for whom it is instinctive to make things, to see relationships between the unlikely. He has always worked with wood, with his hands. A keen-eyed hunter/gatherer of wood, you might say, he acquires it in many ways, often from friends familiar with his love for it. He particularly appreciates the hand-me-downs, the heirlooms, because they come with a narrative and a provenance. Osman also retrieves remnants from construction sites, discards from the street and elsewhere, which he repurposes. He is a connoisseur of found wood, partial to pieces with grit, tooth and granulation, with slivers of color lingering in its crevices.

In his recent projects, Osman applies the pigment directly to the wood instead of his usual method of painting on paper and attaching it afterward. He is also investigating other techniques, as always, and insinuating older works into new ones, reclamation and recycling his instinctive impulse; he throws little away. Osman exhales ideas as easily as exhaling breath. Tinkering within his self-imposed limits, he varies colors and tones, contrasts grains and textures, trying out different formulations. Osman has played—and it indeed seems like play—with wood, paint and paper for decades to



Jim Osman, "Walnut Blue", 2014, wood, paint, paper, 13 x 8 x 6 inches

make his architectonic paintings in space. In addition to puzzle maker, he also thinks of himself as a three-dimensional collagist, assembling his constructions like an architect, his resolutions whimsical, charming, his scale from the small, such as cast, actual-size walnuts to "Walnut Blue", 2014, at around a foot high and half a foot round to the site-specific, almost eight-foot-tall "Counter on an H-Beam", 2015 and larger.

He recounts how he arrived at some of his recent work. He had gone to Santiago, Chile last year and was intrigued by the wonderfully designed, often very beautiful window bars of many of the buildings he passed. He made numerous drawings based on them, later fixing that transient impression into wonderful pastel colored sculptures such as "Yard", 2015, and "Court", 2015, imaginative translations of the barred windows. He had also found some paint congealed in metal cans and realized that he could push them out if he removed the ends. These "cylindrical castings" appealed to him, too interesting to throw away. Eventually, they became another series of objects, each enclosed by a wooden frame, which he will include in future constructions, as he did in "Court", placing one in the upper left corner. And perhaps the most curious experiment of all was a pencil he found in his son's room, the kind that is sold in museum stores with a wavering shaft resembling a miniature tree branch (that adults love to buy and kids seldom use.) He cut it open and the cross-section revealed an encircled slice of colored crayon. This inspired him to cut holes into pieces of wood, filling them with melted crayon. Incessantly curious, he just wants to see what something might look like, what he might be able to do with it; "eventually it all finds its way into the sculpture."

He lets these experiments percolate, setting them on shelves in his studio, arranging them and re-arranging them into possible resolutions that he will, at some point, put together for an exhibition. However, if the work returns to the studio, he no doubt would discover yet other possible configurations for it. Osman never seems blocked, the trajectory between concept and realization enviably fluid, if also endlessly considered.

What is most alluring about these works, ultimately, is their physical aplomb. Osman builds them up, bit by bit, adding, subtracting, adding again, adjusting all the disparate parts until they are visually satisfying and structurally taut, structurally sound, with the push-pull thrill of a precarious balancing act that reassuringly holds its ground, a reassurance that is both literal and metaphoric.

Byrne made sculpture when he was an art student, which might be one reason for the distinctively three-dimensional appearance of his figures. His themes are not epic, focusing instead on the gratifications of ordinary life, which yields their own epiphanies. The "ordinary is the miracle," as poet Derek Walcott noted, no less valuable, no less valiant than the heroic. It is what most of us have, what matters most to us.

These paintings are usually in a classic 40 x 30 inch format, or nearly so, the vertical orientation repeating the stance of the human figure that is their subject. The works are realistic, yet countered by an equally strong abstract impulse, the two modes seesawing to see which, if any, will take precedence. In previous work, the abstract and the representational co-existed, separate but more or less equal. In his recent ventures, the figurative and formal are more integrated, the bodies depicted naturally but also partitioned into planes, patterns, meandering lines and gestures, as is their context, the divisions of foreground, middle ground and background evident, but slipping into each other, difficult to distinguish, some

of the latest work increasingly abstract.

The images are those found around him or whatever seems appropriate that attracts him. Sometimes the figures are taken from art history, consciously and unconsciously, but most often the paintings are sourced from his own life, the scenes a journal of sorts, an autobiography, with an extraordinarily intimate presence. The paintings that are shown in the exhibition are from the past two years and many portray the artist, his wife and son, alone or in varying pairings, often engaged in some common activity, such as boating or flying a kite. Their faces might be shadowed, their gaze averted, avoiding eye contact with the viewer, their backs sometimes turned to us, like method actors enclosed, engrossed in their own roles and thoughts, in their own private world, oblivious of their audience. These are not exactly portraits, the faces hard to make out, or if they are, it is the entirety of the painting that is the portrait, capturing a moment, a feeling of family, of a relationship, underscored by the poignant ways Byrne finds to formally bind the figures together.

His colors are less somber than before, he says, with bright magentas, lemony yellows, ceruleans, bold oranges, and more, both on the surface and lurking beneath, to break through here and there. He adds color wherever he can, at times without discernible mimetic reason, such as the patchwork of teal and orange on the back of the male figure's head in "Overlook", 2015, a kind of enlarged, part pointillist, part pixel-like gesture. Freer in this body of work, he is deftly exploring, testing alternatives to the purely logical, which he says he tends to be. Byrne applies irregular, almost calligraphic patterns onto clothing with a flourish, such as on the shorts of the same figure cited above, or on the towel of "Bather", 2015. There are areas of beautifully diaphanous blurred paint opposed by opaque planes and dense, clouded brushwork. His marks are descriptive and formal, lyrical and blunt, even abrupt, a kind of dialectic that creates a tense equilibrium. One sequence consist of angular strokes like brackets that then curve into loops placed throughout the surface, as in "Paddle", 2015, often bright, whitened. They parallel the movements of the figures, drawing them even more closely together visually and psychologically. The more you look, the more multifaceted and nuanced the paintings become, as Byrne's compelling, idiosyncratic resolutions transform the matter-of-fact and fleeting into something much more encompassing and substantive.



Jim Byrne, "Bather", 2015 oil on canvas, 40 x 30 inches

Lilly Wei is a New York-based critic and independent curator whose focus is global contemporary art.

"Mother's Day", 2015, oil on canvas, 45 x 37 inches





"Yard", 2015, wood, paint, log section, 11 x 14 x 9 inches



"Riverrun", 2015, wood, paint, 10 x 5 x 4 inches



"Reader in Shadows", 2015, oil on linen on board, 24 x 18 inches

"Court", 2015, wood, paint, log section, 51 x 2 x 3 inches





"Overlook", 2015, oil on canvas, 40 x 30 inches





"Figures in Landscape", 2015, oil on canvas, 40 x 30 inches



"RG Elevation", 2015, wood, paint, 22 x 12 x 6 inches

"Boy with Dead Bird", 2015, oil on canvas, 36 x 28 inches



"Venn", 2015, wood, paint, 15 x 8 x 9 3/8 inches

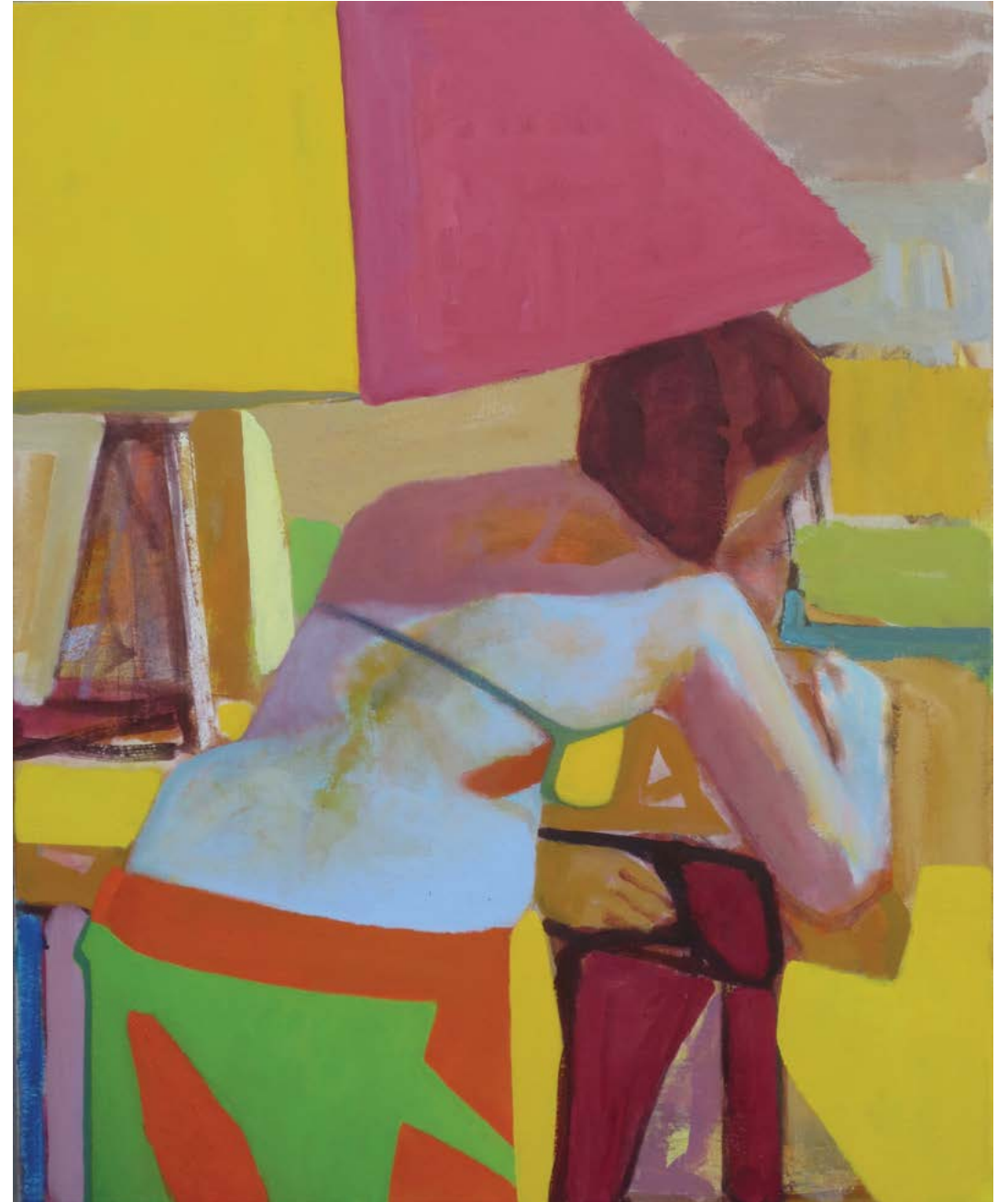




"Counter on an H-Beam", 2015, wood, paint, stump, 90 x 52 x 32 inches (at right, with detail above)



"Wrap", 2015, oil on canvas, 32 x 26 inches





Jim Byrne received his BFA in Painting from the University of Illinois at Champaign/Urbana; and his MFA in Studio Art from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He has actively exhibited his work in New York and throughout the country, presenting fourteen solo exhibitions of his paintings and participating in over forty group exhibitions in museum and galleries. Most recently he exhibited work at Tew Galleries in Atlanta, Georgia in 2013, a major exhibition of fifteen paintings completed over the previous four years. In addition, he has had solos shows at Forum Gallery in New York City; the Mint Museum of Art in Charlotte, North Carolina; and the Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art in Colorado. His work has been reviewed in *Art in America*, *ArtPapers*, *The New York Times*, and *The Atlanta Constitution and Journal*, and has appeared in the *Gettysburg Review* and the *Painters Table* blog. He has received a New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowship in Painting, a Pollock - Krasner Foundation grant, a North Carolina Arts Council

Fellowship, and a State University of New York Chancellor's Award for Excellence in Creative Activities. He has been a member of the faculty at Suffolk County Community College since 1995. Before teaching at SCCC, he taught at Parsons School the New School for Design, The University of North Carolina, and Central Piedmont Community College in Charlotte, North Carolina. Byrne lives and works on the South Shore of Long Island, NY.



Jim Osman is a sculptor who was born, lives and works in New York City. He received his BFA and MFA from Queens College, where he studied with Tom Doyle, Lawrence Fane, and Mary Miss. His longtime interest in combining painting and sculpture has driven his work: large installations, wall drawings, and freestanding sculptures that explore perception and personal space using a range of media and methods. His recent work is based on the notions of gravity, weight, and friction. A series called "Stack" was shown at Lesley Heller Workspace in March of 2013. He is an Assistant Professor at Parsons The New School For Design where he is the Associate Director of the First Year Program. He has had residencies at MacDowell Colony and Yaddo and received grants from Parsons The New School For Design and the Brooklyn Arts Council. Osman lives and works in Red Hook, Brooklyn, NY.

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Essay by Lilly Wei

Gallery Director and Curator: Matthew Neil Gehring

Images for Jim Osman appear courtesy of Lesley Heller Gallery.

Images for Jim Byrne appear courtesy of the artist.

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