4 b. ALTERNATIVE MATERIAL/FORMAT PROJECT, version 2

Generally, we think of painting oil paintings on canvases or panels. This is such common practice that we accept the format as being relatively neutral and as reading as a window onto a scene or as an object.

One of the ways to learn about painting, and how paintings operate, is to shift away from that given format. Much in the way moving away from home often makes you focus on yourself and your own qualities, creating a painting within a new context often makes one aware of choices in color, light, scale texture, imagery, etc that you may be taking for granted.

For this project, you are going to work with found material and create a painting with the found material/object that responds to the qualities of the material and transforms the “information” inherent in the material.

Your project may manifest itself as a more “literal” response to the physical structure of the material. For example, you find corrugated metal; you are intrigued by the play of light and shadow over the ridges and valleys of the metal. Therefore, you create an abstract painting with stripes of different values that try to visually flatten the ridges in some places and exaggerate the ridges in other places. This, then, is not just a rippled piece of metal with paint on it. Now, it is transformed into a breathtakingly beautiful abstract painting that deals with issues of optics.

Or, you may respond to the material in a more metaphorical way. William Crow worked with old pieces of rusted metal, playing off the references to “the past” inherent in the rusted parts. He also played off the notion of parts creating a whole. For his project, he worked with paint and wax to paint portraits based on old family photos on the rusted parts. The rusted metal acted as a “framing” device and looked like a collection of old, framed family portraits. The paintings resonated with the found material and read as a personal “archeology”—a looking back to understand the present.

Note: if your alternative material is a found object, you will need to interact with the “image” presented by this object in a metaphorical and/or conceptual way.

For example, Vernon Fisher’s work employs objects in a wonderful, metaphorical way. Using an old wooden column, Fisher scraped away some of the paint and painted an ocean scene so that the found object and the painted illusion resonate poetically together.

Vija Celmins did a piece where she found rocks and made and painted an exact replica of each individual rock. This is a wonderful conceptual piece that inspires awe, while raising questions of authenticity and uniqueness.

Some other recent student projects include:
- Squeegeeing plaster through different found mesh screens. This created a variable and very intriguing surface that the student enhanced with layers of paint, thereby creating a shimmering and highly tactile abstraction.
-Painting a portrait of the family matriarch on a rusted old clothes iron, thereby creating a highly metaphorical and poetic piece.
-Erica Grace painted on layers of glass to create a painting that could be seen from 360 degree points of view. The layered effect combined the transparency of glass and the opacity of paint to dramatic effect.
-Sara Kuseske, for example, used pieces of stripped down corrugated cardboard on which she painted images of sheep as a metaphorical and personal expression of her religious beliefs. These were atmospheric paintings where the corrugations blurred the images in a beautiful way. The paintings spoke of the transformation from mundane to divine, from refuse material to precious art object.
-Molly Hughes combined appropriated images and alternative format. She created a large black and white, mixed media piece that combined a top layer of B&W transparencies of nude female images from art history superimposed over a B&W painted self-portrait. The transparencies both revealed and distorted the painting underneath, an interesting comment on the image of women.

Finding your material requires sensitivity, creativity and initiative.

Once you have your material, you will have to experiment with it. You will need to learn what information is imbedded in the surface/ structure/ form of your alternative material. How are you going to employ this information?

Then you need to adjust your painting to work with, and enhance, the reading you want to generate with this new format. Do you need to get small brushes and work in a very tight and refined style on your alternative material? Do you need to work in layers of paint, and sand in between, in order to play off the grain of wood on your found material? Do you need to adjust your colors so that the color of your paint melds into the found object, almost like a mirage? In other words, you cannot just launch into your painting on found material just like you would a painting on a standard canvas. A new, transformational, relationship needs to be established between your painting and the new material. You need to consider surface, light, metaphor, placement, scale, style, etc. in light of this new, found context for your painting.

REMEMBER--Experimentation takes time, persistence, ingenuity, sensitivity and creativity!!

1st Collect possible materials
2nd Brainstorm your visual, visceral, and intellectual responses to these materials
3rd Experiment with how to paint on these materials
4th Focus on a project
5th Execute the project