

Behind and Through: Promiscuous Abstractions in Andrew Holmquist's Recent Figurative Paintings

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Andrew Holmquist's paintings are promiscuous. Take a look at the forms, the facture, and the figures in one of his paintings, and you realize that anything goes. They're all in it together, and it's often difficult to say where an abstract form ends and a figure begins. Brushstrokes, wide and thick, fold over on themselves. The pictorial spaces of his paintings are equally open for play, with their back-and-forth flirtation with both flatness and axonometric projection. Arms and legs poke out from under planes, teasing us with a hand sign or a glimpse of tube sock. Gesture in these paintings is suggestive in two ways. Not only are the represented gestures solicitations, but also the painterly gesture — the handling of the medium — hints at bodies and parts that interlock and explore each other. In this, Holmquist has made those longstanding rivals — figuration and abstraction — bedfellows. He is by no means the first to put them together, but few have so relished the way that they can get on.

Known in recent years for his predominantly abstract paintings in which wide ribbons of paint twisted and torqued on the canvas, Holmquist kept his interest in the figure to the side. Parallel to these years of abstract paintings and broad strokes, he created a series of graphic novels and cartoons that used a tubular handling of form to represent recognizable scenes and bodies. These works let the figure out and ex-

plored the possibilities of narrative and story. He eventually began to more boldly bring these two worlds together, allowing both the figure and narrative to be more recognizable and dominant in his otherwise abstract compositions.

Two important paintings can be seen to punctuate this development: *Big Leap* from 2013 and the following year's *The Boys Are in the Bathroom*. *Big Leap* allowed the wide, striped, and deliberate brushstrokes of Holmquist's signature style to be cast as beach towels wrapped up with each other at a poolside. Two feet are poised on the painting's lower edge ready to take the plunge. This painting explores, as he has said in conversation, a scene of sexual awakening. His longstanding use of wide, striped, and painterly ribbons are revealed by this painting to be bodily and erotic surrogates that hark back to that sunny afternoon at the pool's edge. Even more scenographic is the monumental painting *The Boys Are in the Bathroom*, which extends this space of erotic potential in its depiction of a fantasy of the glory hole. This large triptych draws on the imagery and theme of pulp novels to propose a scenario of possibility, desire, and connection animated by waist-high passages through dividing walls. The figural imagery, however, is far less explicit in its licentiousness than the forms and the paint, which twist and interpenetrate across the divided space of the three panels. It's a grand-scale painting steeped with nostalgia, and it imagines a mythic tableau of chance meeting, excitement, and outlaw connection. This courageous work was a bold display of secret content — that is, a narrative not normally discussed openly nor, for that matter, a common subject for an eleven-foot-wide painting. However, it would be an error to see this pivotal work as merely about the subject matter of homoeroticism and, consequently for some viewers, of limited import or concern. To the contrary, this painting marks the beginnings of an honesty and vulnerability in Holmquist's paintings as well as a challenge to the propriety of painterly abstraction. It does this by taking the glory hole as an allegorical image for painting, using it as a site from which to recast — in a playful but also committed way

— the potential of being happily in the middle between figuration and abstraction.

The glory hole, after all, relies on operations both visual and metaphoric. From one side, it stages looking with intent and the partial view into another's intimate space, and from the other side it projects a desirous synecdoche in which the part is offered as the whole.¹ That is, the glory hole's specific kind of distilled focus relies on both the visual fragmentation of bodies and a concentrated intimacy with those fragments. Historically, these operations were at the heart of the defiance, possibility, and solidarity that the glory hole represented.² It was the anonymity and the promise of connection that made it a site of resistance and salvation in a world where homosexuality was outlawed and where expressing such desire or love was grounds for reprisal and violence. Anonymity was a survival tactic and, at times, the only way allowed for one to express desire or meet others who shared this conviction. Especially from today's perspective, many would disparage or mock the glory hole and other such spaces of connection for their embrace of sexuality and anonymity, but that fails to understand the isolation and oppression that demanded such resistant and outlaw forms of architecture and sociality. Holmquist's paintings look back to the classic scene of the glory hole as a means to embrace the possibility that it allegorizes. That is, it is not (just) an image of raw sexual excitement. Once found, it was also evidence that one was not utterly alone and that there was hope for connection on the other side. As encountered in the mythologized realm of the pulp novel or pornography, the glory hole was framed as architectural evidence of resistance and the excited potential for outlawed contact and community. It is this nostalgic view through the glory hole that Holmquist draws on in paintings such as *The Boys Are in the Bathroom* and others. Arcadian in tone, such paintings are images of possibility and accord. They do not shy away from rejecting the conventions that would deem such scenes improper or unfit for public display. They flout this "common" sense to celebrate the importance of the chance meeting and the anonymous display of solidarity and mutual care.

In the wake of these important grand scale paintings, Holmquist explored these ideas in many directions. The literal glory hole does continue to appear, but not frequently, in subsequent paintings. Instead, he has pursued the thrill of its potential as an allegory for painting's relationship to surface and parts, and its questions infuse much of the recent work. That is, he has built upon its mythic image and extended its thematization of connection and of longing into the formal dynamics of his paintings.

At every turn in the new work, a leg pokes out from under a wide brushstroke. A hand makes an ambiguous but deliberate gesture. We get a glimpse through layers of paint, and peek around corners and edges. Body parts are everywhere suggested, inviting us in. Rarely do we get a full sense of space, and Holmquist as well blocks the easy objectification of the human body by fragmenting it into these little moments of solicitation. Look at *Locker Room* and its array of bodies on its tile floor. Throughout, there are glances at and suggestions of straddling legs, precariously hung towels, pectorals, thighs, and the often-used tube sock. One cannot easily reconstruct the architectural space represented because of the ways it seems to collide different views and angles. In that compacted scene, bodies fold over each other just as much as his brushstrokes do. It is the visual fragmentation of the body into interlocking and overlapping parts that drives the scene, with the possible views (and views through and around) multiplied and condensed into one painting in which brushstrokes and bodies become intermingled and interchangeable. In this way, Holmquist makes paintings that are erotic without necessarily depicting sex or the easily objectified body. Their forms and their figurative elements flirt with the viewer's attempts to follow them in their moments of slippage and visual frottage. They repay lingering and incite one to look further in order to see how one thing leads to another.

Beyond the exploration of visual fragmentation and the focus on extended limbs as signals of reciprocal desire, Holmquist further widens the idea of the glory hole

into pictorial dynamics — that is, as an investigation of planarity and flatness. Quite literally, the glory hole requires a plane and a passage through it. In this way, it is fundamentally in accord with the interdependent relations between painting's flatness and the images of depth and illusions of space that extend beyond that flat plane. That is, both the painting and the glory hole are flat planes that we have the capacity to peer into. Neither a window nor a flatbed canvas, the glory hole partakes of both the flatness of the plane and the ability to enter into it. However unlikely it might seem to some, the glory hole speaks in this way to a central issue for painting — it is a metapictorial image of the flat canvas and its relationship to the depiction of objects and spaces "within" it. Just as he did with the issue of visual fragmentation, Holmquist runs with this to create paintings that thematize what's behind the plane and what can project out of it. This is perhaps why he is so fond of axonometric projection and its forward-thrusting renderings of volume. More directly, we can see evidence of this play with the penetrability of the plane in the ways in which Holmquist has cut out and folded over certain canvases or found ways to suggest layers beneath that poke through cuts and holes made in the paintings and their layers. This is, as well, a central feature of his many collages. Such an investigation of painting as peephole and passage operates throughout this body of work with its dynamic back-and-forth between seeing surfaces and intimating what's just on the other side.

After all, that's one of the most exciting things about the glory hole's architecture — what's behind it. Again and again, Holmquist reminds us of the behind, the unseen, and the offstage. *Hidden Fortress*, for example, is full of elements both bodily and abstract that poke out or invite us in. Disembodied lips and hands are visible points of entry but so are the formal elements like cut-outs and the intersecting planes that give rise to protuberances and fold-overs. A painting like *Grand Entrance* is figurative in some senses, but that figuration is based on the occlusions of the dark overlayer that forces us to see only what we can through

its opening onto the blue. That is, not only does Holmquist repeatedly explore the cut-out as a feature (both literal and depicted) of some canvases, but he also visibly shows layers and occlusions, allowing us to peek through, look for what's behind, and savor synecdoche's emergence.

More than any other element, however, it is his wide, slow brushstroke that does this most effectively. A central feature of his painting for the past few years, it is visible in various ways across the recent works, from *Hidden Fortress* to *Hip Flexor* to *Hips*. In its folding over and twisting, Holmquist reminds us that these brushstrokes have a backside. They show it to us when they turn over and around like ribbons. In their wide flatness that bends back on itself, these deliberate and refined ribbons never let us forget that there is a behind to these painted forms, however abstract. Ultimately, this tactic asserts that the behind is of interest and proposes that we should attend to it. When was the last time you looked at a brushstroke in a painting — whether it's a Willem de Kooning or a Cecily Brown — and wondered what the brushstroke's backside looked like? Holmquist intimates that his wide, striped brushstrokes have (interesting) behinds, and he figures flatness and its receptivity with these extended stripes that undulate across his surfaces, flashing us a glimpse of verso as they stretch and backbend. Important paintings such as *Figure Study Grey (Dandy)* from 2014 play out the possibilities of the painted ribbon's flatness and two-sidedness in a work that evokes but does not fully image the figure. Across his paintings, these wide ribbon-like brushstrokes again and again become bodily in their physical presence, their faciality, and their activation of the other sides. All of this allows these are parts of the painting to imply and stand in for bodies' capacities.

Similarly, in another of his favorite modes of handling paint, Holmquist deploys tubular forms made from a similar kind of brushstroke. Their directional shading gives them a swelling that implies not a backside so much as that they are hollow, have an inside, and can be filled. A painting like *Lifting, Pumping*,

Stretching, for instance, revels in the visual similarities between extended limbs, stretched tubes, and interlocking pistons to offer a pile-up of figures made from these repeated tubular forms. From this more directly figurative painting, we could also look to a work like *Undress* with its peepholes through the paint and its covering of regular painted units that become defined and rounded as they move from bottom to top, from behind to front.

The figurative valences of Holmquist's formal vocabulary are perhaps most evident in his experiments with ceramics. These take his signature elements — the undulating planes and tubes — and make them three-dimensional and physical. The ceramic sculptures show how much these elements taken from the paintings might play with each other in real space. They come from the abstract forms visible throughout Holmquist's practice, and these works materialize those elements in order to reinforce the open syntax of bodies, parts, and their exchanges that both his abstract forms and his glimpses of bodies enjoy.

Holmquist is generous in his recent work, and he provides such clues to how to navigate his paintings. He offers this not only in the ceramics or in the small paintings of discrete forms that take on explicitly figurative traits. He also does this in the clearest way in his film *Magic Hands*. Watching the film with its nostalgic take on early twentieth century modernist animation, one can see his paintings' telltale arms and hands in vivid colors play across the frame, overlapping and being seen through each other. He shows us how their movements, their pointing, and their waving come to mirror the gestures of his brushstrokes, and we watch the hands being replaced and echoed by flapping ribbons midway through the film. When they're back, the hands reach for translucent bubbles across the surface, only to have them burst when touched — giving us a witty comment on longing and fantasy. Children's "silly string" spews across the surface in a globby materiality, also poking fun at the clichés of painting's relation to desire. And, finally, the cutouts return in the film to remind us to look through the

cracks and the openings, performing for us how these are both shapes on the canvas and ways through it. Again, this film is not about the subject matter that Holmquist made central in a painting like *The Boys Are in the Bathroom*, but it does gleefully play with that theme to show how some of its questions can inform such ostensibly formal relations as those one can find in his painterly abstraction and the limbs that reach out to us from it.

By pointing to the glory hole as setting up the questions that Holmquist's paintings pursue, I am not trying to reduce these paintings to the sexual or the homoerotic. They are filled with these things, but they also engage in a headlong exploration of the expansive questions posed by the glory hole as an allegorical image of painting's ability to render desire and its partiality. After all, didn't Marcel Duchamp resort to an analogous metaphor with the peephole in his *Étant donnés*? Holmquist's paintings run with it to explore the two-way penetrability of flatness, the excitement attending the verso, and the migration of figuration to abstraction and back again. These organizing questions encourage his partial figuration to romp with abstraction with each slipping one into the other. It is this promiscuity of formal, material, and representational elements that makes looking at a Holmquist painting so engaging. They build from a narrative of desire to show how painting can perform it. They pile up bodies, parts, brushstrokes, and spaces, leaving the viewer with no option other than diving into the fray.

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¹ "Synecdoche, noun. A figure of speech in which a more inclusive term is used for a less inclusive one or vice versa, as a whole for a part or a part for a whole." OED (Oxford English Dictionary)

² I am thinking in particular of the philosophical and political exploration of the glory hole in the artwork and writing of Simon Leung, as in his essay "TRANSCRIPTS: Some Notes Between Pricks," in Aruna D'Souza and Tom McDonough, eds., *The Invisible Flâneuse: Gender, Public Space and Visual Culture in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), 79-92; or the Deleuzian account of its architectural relations given in Dave Holmes, Patrick O'Byrne, and Stuart Murray, "Faceless Sex: Glory Holes and Sexual Assemblages," *Nursing Philosophy* 11 (2010): 250-59. For more on the politics and poetics of cruising and anonymity as manifested in contemporary art, see David J. Getsy, "Mourning, Yearning, Cruising: Ernesto Pujol's *Memorial Gestures*," *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 90 (2008): 11-24; John Paul Ricco, *The Logic of the Lure* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Mark Turner, *Backward Glances: Cruising the Queer Streets of New York and London* (London: Reaktion Books, 2003); and Joshua Lubin-Levy and Carlos Motta, *Petite Mort: Recollections of a Queer Public* (New York: Forever & Today, Inc., 2011).



Big Leap
2013
oil, acrylic and spray paint on canvas
84 x 72 in



The Boys are in the Bathroom
2014
oil and flashe on canvas
77 x 132 in