

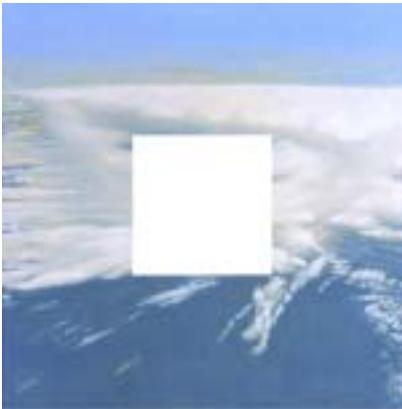
Matthew Girson • Scott Short • Scott Stack

Situational Painting:

Matthew Girson, Scott Short, Scott Stack

Whether defending its ability to relate to an increasingly mediated and technologized world, or exploring its innovative potential given the relative stasis of its structure and practice, painting exists in a "justify your existence" position. It's an absurd position for painting since its one great virtue IS the fact that it sustains a strong connection to tradition and, as such, provides an enduring template through which shifts and movements in culture and society as a whole are reflected and transformed. Since the early 1990s, it has gone from struggling to find its place in the spectrum of artistic production, to its current predicament of nearing an exhaustion of overabundant options. Postmodernist criticism's debunking of the authenticity of expressive gesture, of the privileged claim staked by reductive abstraction to an ascetic spirituality, of the complicated nature of representing ANYTHING has led to an extended backlash that has reopened the door to a pluralistic range of stylistic and thematic approaches. Representational painting now happily coexists alongside abstraction, the two no longer functioning as the intensely either/or propositions.

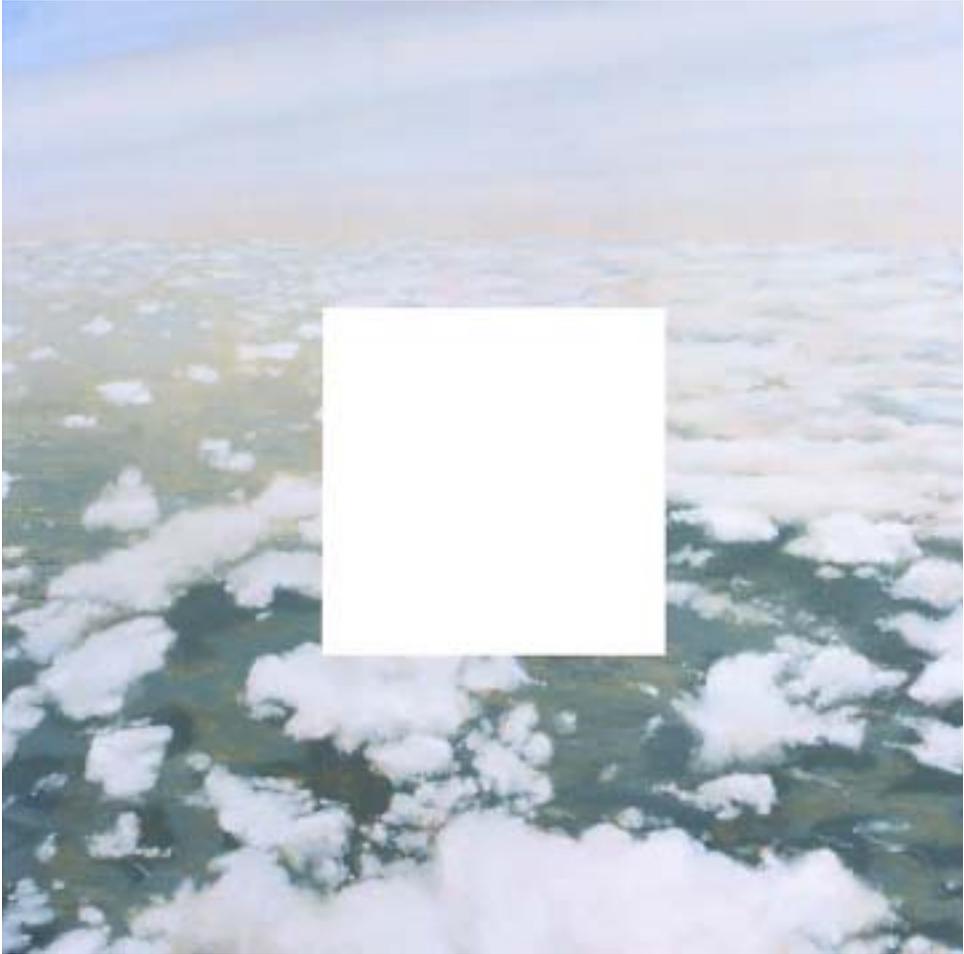
Somewhere in between representation and abstraction an approach to painting has developed that one might describe as "situational," a conceptually based attitude toward the application of paint to a surface motivated by a given situation instigated by the artist. Seeking to reinvent the use of the medium and reposition themselves in relationship to its broad history, many of today's painters deliberately frustrate their practice, engaging either specific subjects or abstract content in such a way as to question preconceived notions of representation and expression through the act of painting. Matthew Girson, Scott Short, and Scott Stack each make paintings of worldly things or experiences — skylscapes, colors and screen images — yet avail themselves of the situation of painting to suspend the viewer's understanding of these phenomena as they exist in the world. Accepting the heightened degree of mediation in contemporary culture as more or less given, these three artists seek to represent and reproduce these currently complicated notions of visuality and interpretation through the painterly situations that they devise.



**Matthew Girson, *Untitled*, 2004,
oil on canvas, 63" x 63"**

Right top:
**Matthew Girson, *Untitled detail*,
2004, oil on canvas, 63" x 63"**

Much of Matthew Girson's work features a white void that obliterates the central focal point that typically establishes a compositional sense of proportion and structure. This recurring element at first appears to serve a concealing function, yet its strategically central and repetitive placement reveal it to be more integral to the overall concept of the project. The void is intended as a "scotoma" — in medical terms, an area of diminished sight or a blockage in the visual field — and extends from previous investigations of landscapes from concentration camp sites from the Holocaust that dealt with the notion of representing the unrepresentable sense of loss and complexity those sites inspire. In Girson's recent paintings, this device has become a tactile, built-up presence, adding a textural dimension to the work that resonates with the intense orange underpainting that gives his depictions of skyscapes a strange glow. However, these opaque accretions also deny the viewer access to the field of vision, complicating any appreciation of the sublime beauty of nature that his scenes seem to offer. In doing so, Girson's latest paintings suggest that the sense of transcendental or transsubstantial longing typically associated with the contemplation of such celestial forms is ultimately overcome by the frustrating urgencies and necessities of everyday reality.



Matthew Girson, *Untitled*, 2004, oil on canvas, 60" x 60"



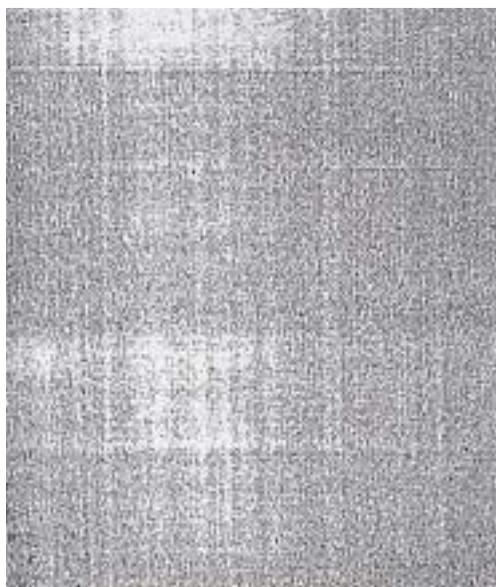
Scott Short, *Untitled (Yellow)*, 2004, oil on canvas, 51" x 66"

Scott Short's ongoing project involves a radically different problematic of the visual field in its ingenuous meditation on the arbitrary qualities of form and color. His paintings faithfully and painstakingly reproduce repeatedly photocopied sheets of colored construction paper. This color-based displacement exaggerates other formal values of the paper such as the typically unseen patterns that exist on its surface. Short's project reveals the hitherto hidden and unknown variety of textures and inherent designs of material that to the casual eye looks uniform and identical.

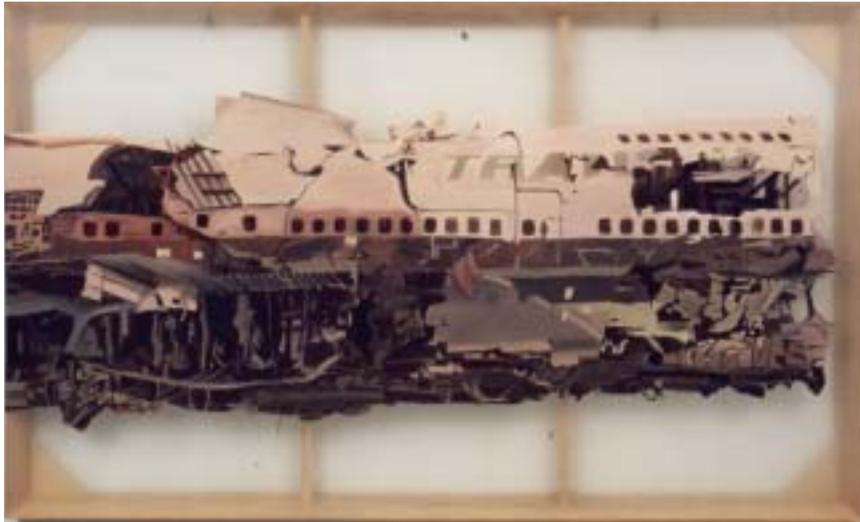
His paintings thus engage an intriguingly phenomenological contemplation on the presence of color — does it have its own state of existence or is it only ever part of our subjective visual interpretation of the world? Short's work demonstrates the effect of having our preordained understandings of a given experience reconceptualized and represented in a jarringly different fashion. In doing so, he creates a situation within which to paint that allusively prompts consideration of the multiplicity and complexity that lies just beneath the surface of contemporary existence.



Top: Scott Short, *Untitled (Yellow)* detail, 2004, oil on canvas, 19" x 19"



Left: Scott Short, *Untitled (Yellow)*, 2004, oil on canvas, 30" x 26"



Scott Stack, *Anatomy*, 2005, oil on silk, 28" x 47"



Scott Stack, *Khumbutse*, 2004, oil and enamel on polyester, 18" x 18"

The skewed view of the world presented to us through electronic mediation is examined in the paintings of Scott Stack. In large works that replicate the effect of seeing the world on or through a screen, he represents the tension between the implied visual space that television, the cinema, or, increasingly, computers provide to our eyes while establishing the contradictory flatness that define those communicative forms' very existence. His work touches on the very frightening and real consequences of a world that is increasingly read and considered, not through actual experiences, but through the information transmitted through various instruments and devices that have been constructed for our entertainment and edification. Stack's depiction of scenes comprising shadowy forms often seen through some type of electronic distortion makes the more sinister implications of a life lived through televised, filmed or computer-based mediation (such as the use of media as a form of social control) visually manifest in his paintings.



Scott Stack, *Untitled*, 2005, oil on canvas, 61" x 118"

It becomes increasingly difficult, if not impossible, to visually absorb and accept the world on its own terms, without having to accept a certain degree of interference from preconceived notions and representations of reality. Matthew Girson, Scott Short and Scott Stack make paintings that seem diametrically opposed to this current state of affairs. By creating situations that subsequently require translation into painting, they prompt the viewer to address and receive their work on its own terms, having set those terms to begin with. Their "situational painting" exists as a form of resistance to the passive reception of the world through pre-digested and constructed images by engaging the viewer in a sense of active participation in the very process of visualization and comprehension. Their individual projects considered as a whole thus point to painting's current condition of reinventing itself once again in relationship both to the dizzying complexity of the postmodern world and to the more traditional understandings of painting's purpose and value throughout the long and continuing history of art.

Dominic Molon

Pamela Alper Associate Curator

Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago

Matthew Girson, Scott Short, Scott Stack
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