Like Weather

By Kevin Moore

“Console yourself, you would not be looking for me unless you had already found me.” Blaise Pascal

Imagine an art that is more like nature, art you walk through, feel in your nostrils, get doused by. But imagine this art—as so many temporal moments and sensations—objectified, contained, whole. Such is the affect of Robert Buck’s iPaintings, works that exist, as the name suggests, as paintings, yet behave more like mirages: as surfaces approaching and receding, darkening and lightening, containing images—of lightning, eclipses, and smoke—images of ephemeral natural phenomena, by turns revealed and obscured. The iPaintings are also mirage-like in their ambulation: based on stock photographs from the iStock website, selected, cropped, translated to a screen, screened onto a canvas using acrylic and Alert reflective paint, and hung on the gallery wall, they are further subjected to being photographed by viewers and summarily put back into circulation through posting on the web, Instagram, and other social media channels, to be downloaded, cropped, and any number of actions, including made into iPaintings, ad infinitum, again.

The Internet is not nature but it has, of course, natural laws all its own. Sovereign of these is the law of interest-dissemination: items of interest are liked, reposted, and sometimes “go viral.” Whether the iPaintings can properly be understood as entities within the context of the Internet is the open question, for on the one hand they are “of the web,” taken from the web as they might be put back into it, to be consumed backlit on a computer screen, or momentarily “activated” and captured by the flash of an iPhone camera; one aspect of their realism, on the functionary side, is the web and its technologies. Yet let’s not forget that the iPaintings—the actual paintings—are also registers for the laws of physics, performing their optical feats as they do in real time and space, for human eyes (perhaps even canine eyes) within bodily proximity—remembering both the “I” and the “eye” in iPainting. For their other realism, more on the phenomenological side, is strictly subjective and perceptual. Trying to get at the intended iPainting experience, between these two realisms, is, of course, the entire point, because the truth is you don’t really get there, you are toggling around a void. Which posits a greater truth, being Robert Buck’s career-long interest in latency, the unsettling notion that meaning is not only buried but multiple, shifting, unstable, there to be revealed, but just for an instant, only to recede and, if returning, appearing next as altered, something else and incomplete. While the cyber version of the iPaintings would seem to contain their meaning and define their place in the world, the other version, relying on the physical encounter and all the myriad coincidences of light, humidity, and mood of the viewer, comes with greater mystery and uncertainty. It is a bit like contemplating the disparity between the dictionary definition of love (“an intense feeling of deep affection”) and experiencing the actual emotion in any of its myriad and nuanced forms.

Just what kind of meaning or experience are we talking about here? Starting with the paint surface itself, Alert is a paint with various applications—in the military, aviation, and Emergency Medical Services—that contains glass beads that “light up” when struck by light. Used ubiquitously for road signs, this reflective, utilitarian material holds undeniable poetic properties, such that one might envision, if somewhat fancifully, a sign painter applying lines from Shakespeare—“light, seeking light, doth light of light beguile”—just as easily as the common STOP or YIELD. As for the subjects depicted, barring sunsets and flowers, lightning, eclipses and smoke are about as corny as it gets, not because these subjects are inherently kitsch but because so often the sentiments attached to them, striving to stir emotion, read more like visual cues in a B movie mystery: lightning, a fearful revelation; eclipse, a dark secret; smoke, danger or sex on the horizon. Rescuing these symbols from such media conventions and overexposure, restoring their ephemerality, fragility, and intimation of the sublime, requires something like being in the physical presence of nature itself, or the iPaintings, which in turn requires an openness of spirit, if not a mystic’s bent for divining. For the challenge, thus proposed, is to recognize the signs and assign them meaning—to bear the strike of the lightning bolt and to absorb its significance.

The nature of the message, to the modest degree we are able to make it out, is tantalizingly cryptic, like weather-drawn patterns on glass. Where there is seemingly a figure, there is a non-figure, where there might be a body, an occultation. Circularities of presences and absences, the melancholy of messages glimpsed yet gone, not completely understood. Here we enter the terrain of the vanitas, calling attention to the “emptiness” of earthly objects and experience, all the while fixating on them as glimpsed yet vanished, once held yet lost. The jpeg renditions of the iPaintings behave like the tawny skulls and cracked books and half-burnt candles of those seventeenth-century paintings, reminders of the vanity of our increasing belief in technology, the Cloud, as a means to permanence. Such symbols are but the hollow shells, the mementos mori (“remember that you have to die”) of the act of living and the constant searching that living entails. Yet the paintings themselves are, too, only vestiges, serving as mere stand-ins for the fleeting, lived encounter they attempt to trigger: absences conjuring a blissful fantasy of crystalline revelation, accumulated wisdom, and everlasting physicality. Their presence serves as a reminder that the essential meaning of our existence is of the body and the moment, nothing more.

Written in response to the exhibition “Exposure”, Angela Meleca Gallery, Columbus, OH, November 4 – December 23, 2016