AMBER BOARDMAN
DECISION FATIGUE

JAN 28 - FEB 27, 2021

Interview with Amber Boardman
By Stuart Horodner

Stuart Horodner
In 2019, you did a series of crowd paintings of exuberant sports and music fans jammed together. *Massive Touch Network*, in particular, reminded me of the countless masked celebrants in James Ensor's *Christ's Entry into Brussels in 1889*. Your new paintings seem fixated on questions of choice. What do we want and why? How much do we participate and is resistance possible? Works like *Dizzying Array* and *Style or Comfort*, for example.

Amber Boardman
I think a lot about the number of decisions we make in a day. These tiny decisions—many of them screen-based—gradually deplete us as our behaviours are continually nudged by algorithms.

SH:
Let's face it, we are exhausted by countless offerings to be considered, clicked on, and liked. Do you know Sherry Turkle's writings? In her book *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age* she argues that we live in a universe of constant connection but no real conversation.

AB:
How do you solve the problem of the increasing speed of life? How do you catch the internet and pin it down? For me, painting is a way of understanding, a way of organizing and putting things away in neat containers. But I also rebel against too much structure and want to break out of it. You can see evidence of this in the grid-based works *Dating App Algorithm* and *Porn Categories*. They are an overview map of part of the internet. They're the structure we've imposed on ourselves by our reliance on tech to help us decide what might titillate us.

SH:
Painting is a good form of titillation. A slow and considered one where the visual and material vocabulary can do its thing. Scene, details, ooze, stroke, smudge.

AB:
The differences between my working materials are stark. I spend a lot of time on my computer (clean grids and right angles), and I work with paint (oily, smelly, and unruly). But all of us are simultaneously dealing with neat and tidy binary code, and the messy human elements of people, bodies, and personalities.

SH:
I appreciate the childlike vision that mixes the real and the imaginary. Dreaming up personal desires and civic ones. Constructing a stage and moving everyday action figures around.

AB:
I am definitely playing in that space. In *Movie Night*, it's the perspective of a viewer who can see beyond the normal visible light spectrum, into the range of algorithms, Wi-Fi, or broadcasted information moving out into the room. In *Dream Home Renovation*, someone's vision of home being renovated to suit a luxury beachfront fantasy was made from referencing both a 3-D model and my imagination. I had several maquettes made of these paintings in order to turn them around and see them from all angles.

CHALK HORSE

SH:
You create depth and then flatten it. You weave simultaneous time and overlap different codes.

AB:
An invisible system running things in the background is what I was thinking about in *Civil Planning*. This work concerns decisions around plans for a city, its underworkings and the structures that keep it functioning. The pipes on the building were made to resemble the interconnected circuitry of a microprocessor. I've loosely referenced Google Street View images of buildings and city dwellers on their morning commutes. My imagined interpretation of their screen-based mental states ripples out into the space around them.

SH:
Our internal anxieties and frustrations are so available, right?

AB:
Absolutely. In addition to the macro concept of decision fatigue in everyday life, these works are also about the process of painting and the thousands of tiny decisions I have to make as an artist. One of my rules is that my workday in the studio is only finished when I've run out of paint on my palette. *Paint Shelves* is a record of this part of my process, in which remaining bits of paint are used up or 'put away' on these shelves before the day is over.

--

Stuart Horodner is Director of the University of Kentucky Art Museum. His art writing has appeared in publications including *Art Issues, Art on Paper, Bomb, Dazed & Confused, and Surface.*

Civil Planning, 2020, oil on linen, 182.9 x 182.9 cm

Dating App Algorithm, 2020, oil on canvas, 213.4 x 182.9 cm

Dizzying Array, 2020, oil on canvas, 91.4 x 142.2 cm

Dream Home Renovation, 2020, oil on canvas, 213.4 x 182.9 cm

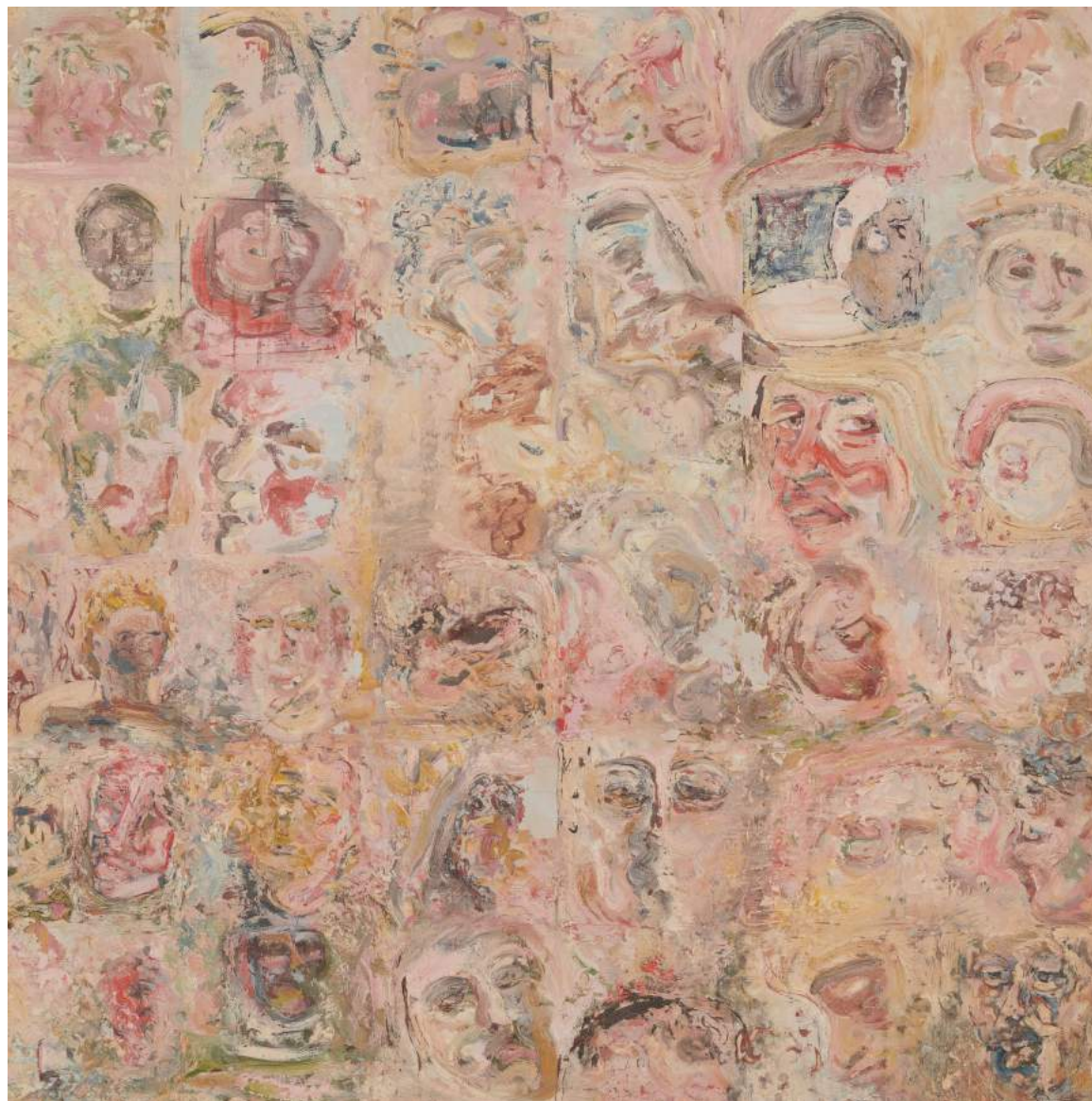*Movie Night,* 2020, oil on canvas, 182.9 x 182.9 cm

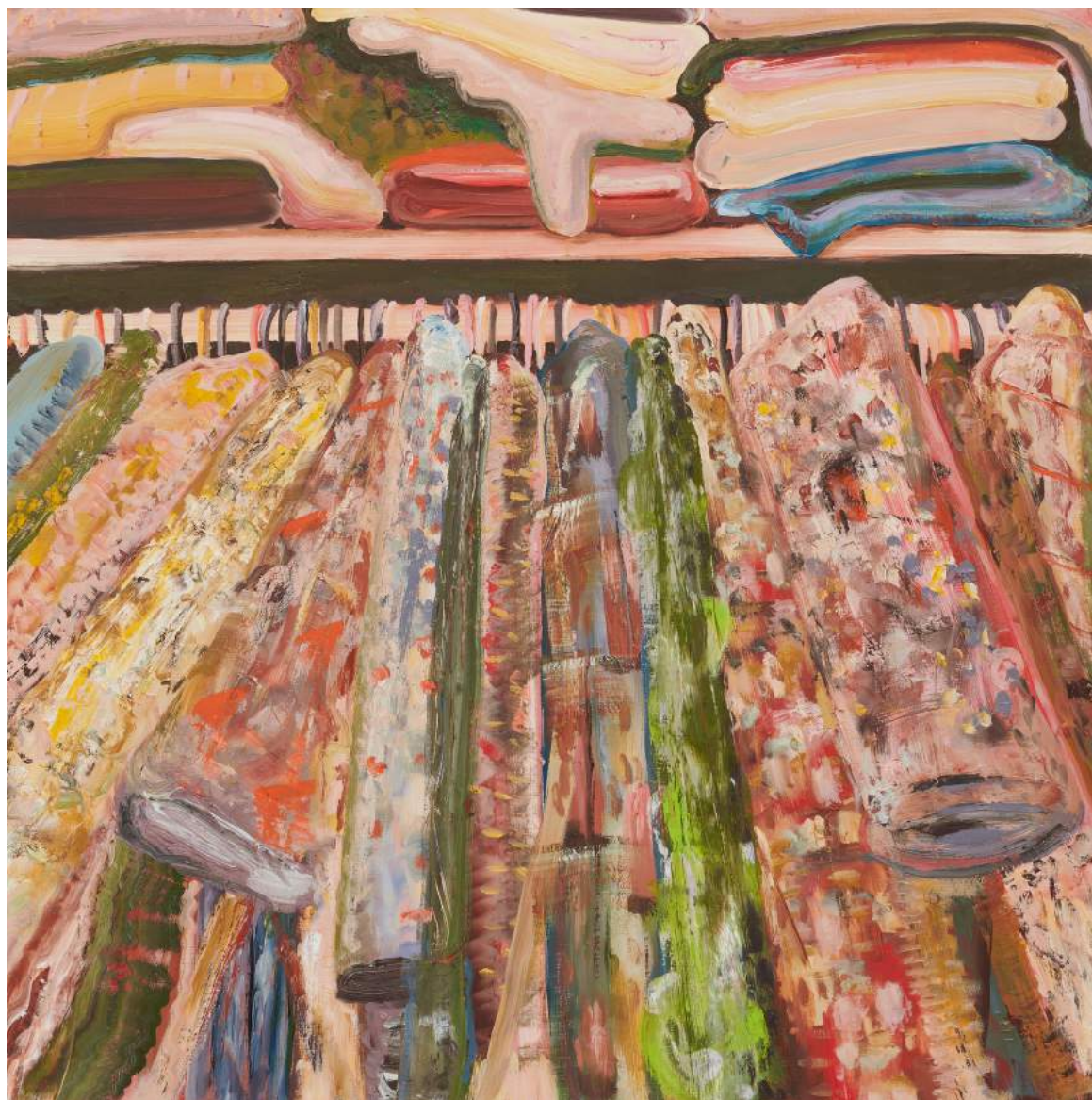*Paint Shelves,* 2020, oil on canvas, 152.4 x 254 cm

Porn Categories, 2020, oil on canvas, 152.4 x 121.9 cm

Classroom, 2020, oil on panel, 60 x 60 cm

Style or Comfort, 2020, oil on panel, 60 x 60 cm

AMBER BOARDMAN
DECISION FATIGUE

One of the country's most consistently interesting and ambitious young painters, Amber Boardman's work is always a satisfying blend of adult-witty and laugh out loud funny. Her new body of work extends these qualities into a thoughtful direction, one that sums up much of our contemporary situation. Specifically, it explores the phenomenon of decision fatigue – the innumerable and exhausting mundanity of decisions requisite to navigating daily life. Decision-making is a foundational component of contemporary living, paralysing when manifested in the endless sea of products and options that are available to a consumer, and producing effects like ego depletion. Within this infinite web of confusing commerce, it is impossible to imagine breaking free; decision-making as ensnarement. However, this freedom to choose can also be used to resist this drawdown on our attention – we are free to want what we want to want, to be who we want to be. It is here, from within our complex technological economy, that Boardman not only takes a stand but runs a kind of poetic diagnostics over our unspeakably ideologically granular troubles. Her paintings plot and project the series of small decisions – many of them screen-based – which slowly erode our energy and willpower throughout the day.

In many ways, the internet has expanded our vision of the world, creating new possibilities and modes of living that might not be constrained by social phenomena and its spatial components. As we encounter Boardman's wildly colourful artistic productions – in the flesh or through the screen - we enter a veritable dreamscape; a gamescape of unbounded pleasure, and conversely, comforting familiarity. The works Dizzying Array, Dream Home Renovation and Movie Night are composed of splintered forms, fractured movements and impossible perspectives, and while overladen to the point of near-duplicity, the realities they depict are anything but deceitful. Boardman, with her playful command of colour and a loose, light hand has carefully constructed her environments – be it an infinite supermarket shelf or a luxury villa illogically upheld by a thin blue scaffold – in a manner reminiscent of both her background in commercial animation, studies in fine art and recent investigations into 3D modelling. Effectively transforming these cartoon and painterly tropes into her own aesthetic framework, or visual grammar for establishing the veracity of simulated space. Much like the world we inhabit physically, Boardman's is a world whose rules might also be operating behind the scenes; algorithms, civil planners, cloud computing, are represented with an array of wipes, ripples, dots and dashes that all coalesce on the canvas to create an environment of unlimited optimism. By visualising the systems and structures that underpin our information age, Boardman holds space for contentment amidst the content cacophony.

Pulling further at the edges of space and time, in Boardman's Civil Planning, a stream of pedestrians bisect the painting in their passage along an urban sidewalk. Behind them, the schematically composed background of high-rise-come skyline-come gridline-come elevation becomes entangled with a turbulent mass of pipes and circuitry rising from below. Frontally composed yet choosing to directly work against the linear perspective of the landscape, there is no clear way into the picture, no path through which to move through and join the passers-by. The viewer is left indeterminate and undecided as each component of the work demands the viewer's attention; the image becoming almost realist in the manner through which it reflects the real-life traversal of the city, and the manner in which the senses are overloaded with constant stimuli.

---

1. Outlined by social psychologist Roy F. Baum following his reading of Freud's energy model of the self, ego depletion proposes that there is a finite
store of mental energy for exerting self-control, such that will power and decision-making are inversely related to choice. Seeking convenience and fuelled by instant gratification, we tend towards impulsivity, rash decisions or nothing, so as to avoid choice itself.

Rawly painted and crammed into the composition so that they impose directly on the viewer, Dating App Algorithm presents a grid of mercurial but relatable characters and cropped body parts. In a crowded bar would we pick-up any of these individuals? Yet within this stack of profiles, our decision is quickly made for us by the algorithm as we inflect ourselves into this world of hot hook-ups and romantic potentiality. The painting's ambiguous depiction of faces, limbs and sexual organs taps into our barely supressed discomfit of the algorithm and online dating, while, at the same time its fleshy vitality and oozing vulnerability creates space for libidinous boredom, or idle curiosity, or lust, or perhaps even love?

Through this series of works, Boardman exaggerates the problematic aspects of having agency to make decisions, demonstrating the capacity for this freedom to both transfix and paralyse. However, by narrowing her scope at times, so as to focus our attention on a series of small decisions – What to eat? What to wear, and who to take it off for? – Boardman reasserts the autonomy of the individual and the significance of our capacity to make choices. As we see in Boardman's dizzying, fleshed-out scenes of overspreading films, flesh and faces, there is an artist making a spectacle of decision-making, choosing to lean into our overloaded, hyper-stimulating environment of Netflix and Tinder, dream homes and wish lists. This flagrant display of commodification and commerce is manipulated by Boardman, becoming a poignant reflection on how valuable the capacity to choose is; a valuable reminder of what it means to be human.

If Boardman's works reveal the particular fractures and challenges, and the painful exhilaration of living through a massive technological and social transformation, then the question becomes one of becoming and potential, the possibilities of us adapting and evolving beyond our increasingly interconnected lives? To quote Simone Weil, 'Attention is what creates necessary connections. (Those which do not depend upon attention are not necessary.)' By refusing to fasten our attention to a single phenomenon, we weaken our dependency to the conditions and categorisations of the crowd, and with it, strengthen our capacity to be open to the world, and to receive it as it comes. By leaving the painting (the attention) open to all decisions, to desire all ways of being, Boardman releases herself from all decision-making for the satisfaction of her desire is not absolute. Like Boardman's paintings, we too hold space for indecision and understanding; aware in our bodies and spirit of our ability to reflect, self-actualise, creatively and otherwise intelligently engage with the demands and decisions that may at time fatigue us all.

Rachel Ciesla, 2020

2.Simone Weil, First and Last Notebooks, trans. Richard Rees (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), 90.