

500 Days of Solitude

It is difficult to describe the predicament accurately. I would simply say that the lines that denote the political and the criminal had been erased but regardless of such issues I faced 500 days in solitary confinement. I was given one choice within this situation, either I could watch TV for a couple of hours each day or have a minimal amount of painting materials. In the first case I would have access to the world and in the second case the potential of making my own realm. I had stopped painting years ago, in fact in my first year at college but the idea of opening out the space of imagination that seemed possible with the act of painting appeared to offer a counterpoint to the reality of confinement. I also thought that painting would offer me a cipher for memory but both imagination and memory appeared inadequate when having to deal with the day-to-day. Instead I discovered that painting functioned much more as a form of counting. I found myself painting in groups of ten, repeating motifs, emblems, signs and gestures in the process, so instead of functioning as my own reduced realm of freedom the process of painting had assumed a task like character. Likewise my memory appeared to confine me to the recollection of passing moments such as the recollection of designs of textiles on shirts, fragments of posters, emblems on T-shirts, reproductions of modernist paintings. All of this was certainly unlike the sense of the other world that I initially thought I was capable of entering. Nevertheless time passed and in passing came an acceptance of my own relationship to the limits within the process of painting. In a way they had all the signs of prison paintings in that they appeared mute, slight, moderate and thus on the side of forgetting.

Repetition

The strange thing about leaving prison is that it is difficult to understand the freedom that is announced as part of the release. Of course I had imagined that when I had left the daily reality of confinement that painting would itself be the focus of all kinds of new possibilities but again this proved to be illusory. What happened instead was that I repeated the gesture of making one painting a day for 500 days. Even more depressing than the act of repetition was the fact that the paintings themselves appeared to simply circle around themselves as if imprisoned by the compulsion to repeat. Nevertheless I completed the cycle and in doing so felt that I might have freed myself from the impact of prison. The paintings had just become a pile in the corner of my room. The thought of being able to look at them in any way never occurred to me. If my prison paintings were mute, slight and moderate then these paintings were just so many blanks.

Grids

I must admit that I was desperate to go beyond the feeling of ritual that I had established for myself. I knew that I wanted to continue but I also needed to get some work. For a whole period I drifted from one job to the next so when I painted I wanted to invest my work with a sense of purpose. After the piles of paintings I thought that painting in a series of grid structures would signal an intention to create something that might be viewed as a whole. I had started to make doodles on the way to work because it might have been a way of avoiding eye contact on the underground. It was also a way of filling in time, thus closing a gap that appeared to follow me around and so lend a superficial feeling of continuity. I also noticed that as part of the process of doodling, I had started to pay more attention to the nature of time.

All the Paintings I Never Painted

Strange things start to happen when you concentrate on them long enough. When I went to art school it was a period of giving up. I call them the years of refusal. Over the years I think that paintings might have collected inside of me or at the very least I had gathered a melancholic reserve relating to the possibility of painting. Anyway after all the piles and grids I started to paint all the paintings that I had never painted. This was a strange period. I did not really know what time I was in. When I was in prison I was bereft of any type of instrumental connection to time but now I was attempting to find a way of entering another time that on the surface was already passed. At times it felt as if I was simply a medium through which these paintings passed and that as part of this condition I had nothing to express within the present.

Sunday Painting

Eventually I secured a regular job which left me with one day in which to paint. A friend asked me what kind of paintings I made and all I could think of saying was that I was a Sunday painter. He then asked me to tell him about the characteristics of Sunday painting and the only consistent thing I could come up with was the attempt to paint without the intrusion of systematic thinking. I painted on my kitchen floor, which explains the shape of my paintings, but the paintings themselves started to be pre-occupied with the idea of removing thought from painting. The first painting consisted of red and yellow stripes with a floating element that looked like a tool or even ritual weapon. I called it “Tool for Removing Thought from Painting.” I had the idea that thought might be an enemy of painting or at least I would give up painting if I thought too much about it. Prison had given me the capacity to spend time on my own and in a strange way given me the sense of empty or blank time that painting seems to require in order that it might release itself as an event. Someone said to me that they thought that I might be wasting my time painting but painting doesn’t occupy the same type of time that is ordinarily wasted. Painting starts once all the wasting of time has already occurred.