

The Elusive Presence of Danielle Riede

by Jean Robertson

"I wanted to make a line that ran along the wall at torso height so that a viewer might walk alongside the wall and admire the paint pieces as they might roses on a rosebush."

--Danielle Riede (From an artist's statement, 2005)

Danielle Riede is a connoisseur and collector of different kinds of paint. Her studio provides storage space for boxes filled with the detritus of other painters' work processes—a marbled lump of unused oil or acrylic or tempera paints scraped off a palette; a flat pool of dried paint salvaged from the bottom of a can or bowl or tray; a surface of rejected marks scraped off a canvas, encoded with the trace of another painter's brush or palette knife. The random fragments embody different mixtures of pigments and mediums in varying states of density and translucency. Some chunks of paint are packed together like the thickest impasto imaginable; other pieces are as translucent as an oil glaze. Riede always recognizes that a piece of paint, no matter how thin, is an object: the medium of paint literally gives tangible form to color.

At first Riede systematically labeled each paint relic with the date and place where she collected it, as an archaeologist or forensic scientist might label a specimen. Later she abandoned such archival rigor for an expansive approach to collecting, cheerfully jumbling together her collections in a riot of colors, shapes, textures, and translucencies, assembling a kind of cabinet of curiosities of varieties of hardened paint fragments. More recently she has manufactured her own mixtures to add into the collections of readymade relics. She mixes pigments into heated resins that she pours into viscous puddles and peels when dry into translucent fragments with curling edges.

Trained mainly as a painter, Riede works with the conventions of painting in an unconventional manner. Her signature artistic form is a room-sized installation of paint pieces that she selects from her collections and adheres individually to the walls in intricate configurations. Since she began collecting paint in 2003, she has installed paint in more than two dozen sites, in locations extending from Greece to Mexico. Some installations are as large as 40 rows deep.

Riede arrives at a gallery with her boxes, and spreads out her colored chunks and lumps and veneers of paint, which she sorts by color, shape, size, thickness, and translucency. Studying the interior as a designer might, she imagines lines and rows of colored fragments spreading across the walls and corners. The ground provided by a given wall is pictorially vital for Riede; its eccentricities of surface and dimension are integral to her process of composition. Likewise color relationships, light, and two-dimensional design are central concerns, as they are for many painters.

Riede almost always works alone for the days or even weeks required to produce an installation on site. In *bricoleur* fashion she attends to the physical labor of carefully attaching each fragment into its allotted location. Skillfully she cantilevers fragments so that they bend and jut from the wall in low relief, reflecting light and casting shadows. Riede deploys each piece of paint as an individual element in the overall abstract pattern, just as a stone or tile serves as one mark in a mosaic, or beads combine in beadwork, or brushstrokes knit together in an Impressionist painting. Riede's designs for her earliest paint installations were abstract in a systematic and grid-like manner; increasingly she plays at the margins of the geometric, eroding and bending the systematic in favor of fluidity and improvisation.

The interplay between near and far is integral to the optical and conceptual effects of Riede's paint installations. From a distance, her refined sense of color and design appears to dominate her aesthetic. Pieces of paint coalesce into distinctive arrangements of flowing lines, rows, arcs, and swirls. Riede, who never wields a brush herself, would seem to privilege composition, design, and color over *facture*. Yet up close, when we recognize lumps as paint rather than colored glass or minerals or stones, we see that Riede celebrates the glory of handcrafted paint. She generously offers us the artifacts of other people's paint handling as objects of intense admiration. Like a display of specimens in a science museum, Riede's installations of paint function as a kind of inventory displaying the physical matter of paint in all its mesmerizing physicality, tactility, and variety of colors and shapes.

The gestalt of one of Riede's installations is visually powerful but illusory. Like a theatrical set, the exuberant, convincing semblance of order and pattern is provisional and temporary; at the end of an exhibition Riede removes the individual fragments and returns them to their boxes. The "painting" as a coherent image dissolves while the paint pieces as physical matter by and large survive. Many fragments will be recycled into future installations of paint at another site. (Indeed, followers of

Riede's work may delight in recognizing distinctive chunks reappearing in new positions in subsequent installations, their colors and shape literally seen in a new light next to new neighbors.)

Danielle Riede is an artist of the twenty-first century in her embrace of interdisciplinarity, hybridity, transience, and impurity. At age 13 she was a budding archaeologist. As a university undergraduate she started out in the school of architecture before switching to painting. She loves mathematics. In her work process, she freely borrows from architecture, interior design, handicrafts, and sculpture. She is unabashed in her appreciation for beauty and her love for humor and playfulness. And she is well read in art history and theory: conversant, for instance, with the vocabulary and ideas of minimalism, post-minimalism, and process art.

Art historical influences and affinities for Riede's work are wide-ranging. For example, her installations resonate with the history of wall painting, where figure-ground relationships play out at large scale on the walls of rooms. One might think of the great fresco paintings of ancient Rome or the Renaissance, although those generally tried to hide the wall with illusionistic images. Riede's installations of paint better evoke wall mosaics and stained glass windows, where the wall (the support), its architectural features (the frame or structure), and the materials used to make images (the surface) are all assertively concrete. Riede's interest in walls as supports also reflects the influence of her mentor Daniel Buren, with whom she studied in Dusseldorf in 2003-04. In his work, the French conceptual artist rigorously considers the implications of painting in the space of architecture.

Other artists whose works Riede cites as inspirations are the Impressionists, for their broken bits of color, and Jackson Pollock, for his organic process. She also admires Louise Bourgeois and Eva Hesse, two women invested in the conceptual and psychological implications of their materials and processes. One could argue on behalf of a feminist inflection to Riede's work, found in the lightness of her touch, her engagement with fragility and time-based work, and her evanescent materials that have a feeling of use and mortality.

In her process Riede at first appears systematic, sorting her collections and initially designing an installation within parameters that seem driven by geometric logic. She borrows from the vocabulary and tactics of minimalism and postminimalism—repetition, geometric arrangements, rows, grids. But her approach is not at all calculated. As she works she allows herself to improvise and be intuitive, without totally abandoning a sense of order. No installation is entirely systematic or entirely impulsive.

Digging deeper one also sees a sense of humor and even irony as a subterranean vein. Riede's displays of paint are not as purely factual and archaeological as they might seem. Instead, they are hybrids of the historical, the manufactured, and the simulated. Besides the "authentic" paint pieces excavated from the remains of other painters' work, Riede uses reproductions. For these, she makes molds of distinctive fragments from her collections, then casts multiples of the original fragments. In an installation she displays reproductions alongside found paint pieces and her own manufactured resin fragments. Sometimes there also is a half hidden tool or other artifact, such as the melted remains of a plastic spoon. Riede's practice echoes that of certain natural history and archaeological museums, where artifacts, casts, and facsimiles of the past intermingle in a confusion of individual identities and real versus fictionalized histories.

Danielle Riede's installations of paint are conceptual, examining the conventions of painting and playing with vocabularies of art. She is among those dedicated emerging artists of the twenty-first century who are carrying on longstanding conversations about painting. For those devoted to painting, certain perennial questions never cease to be interesting, beginning with the most basic: What counts as painting and what doesn't? The answers continue to expand and mutate.

Riede's installations also are sensual and beautiful to behold. To see them is to revel in the pleasures of the senses—color and light, mesmerizing patterns, physical presence, the body inhabiting space—while recognizing that the pleasure is fleeting. For this particular writer, Riede's installations ultimately are about time—repetition and change, the inexorable passage of time, memory, history, nostalgia, loss. In the space of the moment, Riede's installations are vividly and pleasurably alive and materially present. Then they vanish, leaving behind pieces of paint and photographic documentation as relics. Don't despair, Riede urges. The relics are beautiful and poetic. Celebrate them as the remains of past artworks. Add to them. Return to them again and again.

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