Layering Constructs

Maiza Hixson, Gretchen Hupfel Curator of Contemporary Art,Delaware Center for the Contemporary Arts (DCCA)
Essay for the exhibition *Layering Constructs: Margo Allman, Charles Burwell, Antonio Puri*, 2015.

The abstract paintings of Margo Allman, Charles Burwell, and Antonio Puri reflect the impact of the natural and built environment on individual experience and memory. Allman explores subtle monochromatic permutations of asymmetrical forms inspired by nature, and Burwell depicts boldly colorful variations of intricate anthropomorphic and geometric shapes. Puri presents a modern architectural plan as a layered, interconnected grid. Through line, color, pattern, and form, each artist visualizes the profound influence of the physical world in diversely complex compositions.

Margo Allman's acrylic paintings, on display in the DCCA gallery, are intuitive investigations of form that deviate from the vivid ovoid paintings for which she is best known. The spare black and white compositions included in *Layering Constructs* date from 1997 and 1998 and are born from a consistent search for natural pattern, intricacy, and design. She uses photography as a tool to document her observations of nature, which often become source material for her paintings. Allman's influences include the American artist Georgia O'Keefe (1887-1986) and the Spanish Surrealist Joan Miro (1893-1983) who drew upon the landscape and subconscious mind to create otherworldly works.

Incandescent visions miraculously suspended in space, Allman's shapes seemingly pulsate with internal energy. Although nonrepresentational, her paintings evoke moon lit canyons, volcanoes, and monoliths under a night sky. The artist's filmy white washes and faint gradations of pigment create the illusion of strata and eroded layers of time. In *Heirloom VII*, Allman produces a mass of bubbles out of paint, generating what looks like sea foam. In other works, the textured white paint virtually obscures the matte blackness. Some of these images resonate as distant topographies and others as microscopic views. *Tribute to Georgia,* for example, reveals a cellular pattern embedded in its translucent glaze.

Like emergent structures in nature, such as the growth of crystals into a singular arrangement, Allman's smaller, disparate compositions contribute to a larger sublime system. Seeing them collectively installed, we discover her broad visual lexicon. Evocative titles such as *Tense Silence*, *The Abode of Emptiness*, *Toward the Possible*, and *The Blind Grinding of Subterranean Force* also reveal the verbal imagination of the artist and provide yet another opening into her work.

Charles Burwell's large-scale triptych, on view in the DCCA Beckler Members' Gallery, is a heavily layered field of vertical stripes and competing oval patterns. Like Allman, Burwell is interested in biological forms. However, Burwell draws connections between the categories of nature and technology. The artist is also influenced by Abstract Expressionism and the sense of "overallness" found in the work of Jackson Pollock (1912-1956), for example, whose drip paintings reveal ordered chaos. A similar sense of organized pandemonium occurs in Burwell's paintings through his methodical repetition of vibrant colors, animated shapes, and curvilinear forms. Often, the artist introduces graphic clashes in his designs, opening up new visual planes, multiple dimensions, or disjointed dialogue. Certain motifs recur, such as circles, polyhedrons,

diamond patterns, vertical stripes, and grids. However different each painting, the persistent forms give the impression of having come from a genealogy a computerized sequence of operations generated by an algorithm.

Over the course of many years, Burwell has amassed a digital image archive, which he draws upon as source material. He manipulates images in Photoshop to create hundreds of different templates and digital layers for his large compositions. The result is wild variation within a set group of visual data and an image that relates to our information-rich, screen-based society. While not quite as distracting as watching information scroll across the TV or computer screen, Burwell's paintings require attention to multiple temporalities. As viewers, we cannot digest the plethora of Burwell's signs and symbols all at once.

Encompassed by his large paintings, we may find ourselves overwhelmed by the optical feast of visual elements. Instability arises in looking at such elaborate works that do not allow us to settle on a fixed position. It is interesting to consider Burwell's art in relation to the recent assertion by art critic Peter Schjeldahl that, "painting has lost symbolic force and function in a culture of promiscuous knowledge and glutting information." If anything, Burwell's paintings are a relevant embodiment of data saturation. The nonspecific imagery and disorienting figure/ground relationships seduce us while compelling us to consider the larger cultural context of Burwell's virtual spaces.

Antonio Puri's multipaneled, nearly monochromatic and expressionistic painting introduces ideas of city, space, and home into *Layering Constructs*. An international artist, Puri travels widely and is currently based in Philadelphia. Entitled *Birthplace* (2014), his work is an abstract map of his hometown, Chandigarh, India, the first planned city in 1947 post-independence in Northern India. The Modern French architect Le Corbusier designed the utopian city and, according to Puri, the painting's grey palette reflects the ubiquitous concrete employed to build the city. A total of three long rows of six individual canvases each, this monumental grid functions as one work of art. The significance of such an amalgamation of parts cannot be underestimated. As Puri queries, "Constructs of different aspects of the self are limited; is my existence a microcosm within the universe or do I make art that transcends individuality to connect with Oneness?"

Puri introduces numerous textural elements into the work, including soil from Chandigarh mixed with acrylic paint. He also applies string to the canvas, which serves as a circuitous graphic line throughout the painting. String appears in other works by the artist, such as large-scale installations and a series of photographic portraits, in which Puri wraps the faces of his sitters in a performative gesture that underscores metaphorical connection and intertwined lives. In his painting, the string, along with sinewy paint drips over cavernous shadows, lends a visceral quality to *Birthplace* that borders on the surreal.

Other nonobjective painterly embellishments appear across the surface of Puri's work, including trails of white dots and triangular fuschia clusters that lead the eye across the painting's textured topography. A mandala-like formation emerges from the bottom of the painting, suggesting an enigmatic symbol that unifies the composition. The abbreviated word "CHAND," looks like a passport stamp. We apprehend small surface details, such as subtly drawn graphite numbers via an aerial view of the entire city. In this way, Puri emphasizes constant shifts in perspective, from being extremely close to very far away.

The distance from "home" in Puri's painting can be perceived as physical and emotional. Given

the title, we are invited to consider our own relationship to birthplaces and more broadly, ideas of origin. Who do we think we are as both citizens confronting the concrete walls of this city and as individuals approaching identity and consciousness in a more universal or global sense? Such questions point to one interpretation of *Birthplace* as a philosophical dialogue exploring the individual's and humanity's quest for meaning and place. The idea that one's origins do not necessarily dictate one's identity seems to be a significant feature of Puri's ethereal cartography.

Given that it is also a Western European and Indian city, the idea of Chandigarh as a hybrid urban space mirrors Puri's identity as traveling between seemingly disparate worlds. Layers of time, embedded in the materiality of paint and process, relate to ideas of coming and going home. In an increasingly globalized society, people move more freely than ever before, forcing us to shed our constructs of home as being only one place.

Viewed together, artists Margo Allman, Charles Burwell, and Antonio Puri present diverse approaches to the abstract visualization of nature and the built environment. While Allman paints delicate organic forms in thin layers of white acrylic paint, Burwell applies thick layers to produce intricate geometric shapes, and Puri creates a complex, interconnected grid. Collectively, the *Layering Constructs* exhibition showcases the work of three compelling artists whose processes and production generate a dialogue surrounding our relationship to the visible world.