Better Angels

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There is the question of asserting yourself. For nearly a century, ever since Kazimir Malevich and his comrades staged their "last" painting exhibition in a Petrograd salon, artists in the trenches of abstraction have worked amid doubts of belatedness: the possibility of authentic creation seems past, and you are left with the picked-over bones of critique and quotation. Somehow you must keep going, as every serious artist knows. And yet history bears down, implacable, unfeeling. How do you do it? How do you surmount the insurmountable, and not just survive the encounter but win your challenger's benediction?

The earliest answer rests in the Book of Genesis: you wrestle. Afraid that his aggrieved half-brother will kill him when he returns to Canaan, Jacob comes across a man he has never seen before. An angel, it turns out. That night, alone by the River Jordan, the two of them go at it. The angel breaks Jacob's hip. At daybreak they are still tussling, and when the angel surrenders Jacob will not let go, "except thou bless me." The angel agrees, and gives him a new name for his troubles: *Israel*, etymologists suppose, means "wrestled with God." Yet what counts is not the name but the sanction. A new day dawns. It might have been all a dream, a vision. But the wrestling has paid off, and Jacob has more life.[1]

Is Julia Dault our generation's canniest wrestler, an artist who moves forward by grappling with the past? The athletic designation first comes to mind when you see her precarious, reflective sculptures: bundles of industrial material that she arduously cinches and fashions into totems balanced against the wall. Alone in the white cube, without tools or assistants, Dault plies and crumples sheets of Formica or Plexiglas—sometimes iridescent, sometimes printed with intricate patterning—and the finished sculptures occasionally bear scuffs or bumps on their surfaces, scars from the tussling that Dault directed. Her earliest bundles were tied with string, but lately she has been using a literally pugilistic apparatus: the black heavy-duty cotton wraps that boxers use to bind their hands.

But Dault's grappling is not confined to the gallery, and in not only her sculptures but also her paintings she has evinced a marked, consistent willingness to wrestle with earlier models of non-objective art making. She was trained as an art historian, graduating from McGill University in 2001, and for years before she pursued art full-time she worked as a critic for the *National Post* and other publications. That historical grounding becomes quickly evident when you gaze at the warped surfaces of her crumpled sculptures. If they are sprung with potential energy, bolted as they are into only barely contained contortions, they also are freighted with historical weight. The chance structures of early modernism, whether Hans Arp's torn papers or Ellsworth Kelly's aleatory compositions, are taken on as Dault gropes her media into unplanned loops and curlicues. Or the contingent forms of post-Minimal sculpture, such as Robert Morris's draped felt and Eva Hesse's resin repetitions, are tackled as Dault reshapes her industrial materials without modification or cutting to size. The physical process of making her sculptures—in situ, always, rather than in the studio—is only the last of Dault's grapplings.

History was an angel, so far as Walter Benjamin could tell: a fearsome, destructive, backward-facing seraph that looked something like the gap-toothed god with corkscrew curls in Paul Klee's 1920 monoprint *Angelus Novus*.[2] That is the angel Dault is really wrestling with, whose benediction she really seeks, and the struggle lasts much longer than the time in the gallery recorded in each sculpture's title. Dault's sculptures and paintings are not critiques of the historical avant-garde, and certainly not imitations of them, but something slipperier and more cunning. They're acts of squaring off, in which making art and thinking about art are one and the same enterprise.

"I'll never shake my devotion to the minimal aesthetic", Dault once told an interviewer. "Yet embedded in my practice is a critique of phoned-in fabrication, the notion that the maker and the making can be divorced. I equate my aesthetic to a dirty Minimalism, arguably the exact opposite of Finish Fetish work."[3] A *dirty* Minimalism: it's a redolent phrase, but one should be careful not to misunderstand it as evoking Dan Flavin neons on the fritz or Donald Judd boxes fringed with fingerprints. While she grapples with industrial materials, unheated and unsliced when she brings them into the gallery, Dault is also grappling with postwar sculpture's adoption of industrial methods of fabrication, and the recession of conceptual or anti-illusionistic forms of art making into just another means of commercial production. Yet here's the thing: to reintroduce the hand of the artist into a nonobjective sculptural vocabulary without falling into an antimodern romanticism is no small order. It turns out, as Dault has discovered, that the hand alone is not enough. It requires a full-body effort.[4]

Modernism is our antiquity, as TJ Clark has insisted. Roger M Buergel has gone further, and said modernity itself is our version of the Greek past.[5] The iconoclastic and (unsuccessfully) utopian practices of our grandparents' generation appear to us the way that Attic marbles must have seemed to Winckelmann and the early archaeologists: beautiful but unresponsive proof texts of a fallen society, which we might learn from, aspire to, idolize, but never truly revive. And so we must make our own little neo-Renaissance in the rubble at the feet of the angel of history, even if it exhausts us: even if, hours after you start, you are still struggling to bend and kink the stuff of industry into the stuff of art. Dault's sculptures espouse, in the fact of their making, a commitment to living through history—which is a far rarer dedication than you might suppose among abstract artists. It is difficult, perhaps even painful, but the benediction comes no other way.

Dault makes her sculptures in the gallery. Her studio is for painting. The sculptures are produced in a single outing, while the paintings take months and are constantly revised. The gap between her two practices is narrower than you might suppose, however, for here too she is grappling with absent modern spirits. Most of Dault's paintings are structured according to an underlying grid, which Rosalind Krauss identified as "the form that is ubiquitous in the art of our century" (she meant the twentieth) and that "announces... modern art's will to silence."[6] But the grids get wonky and elastic as Dault overpaints and erases with frequent all-over motions, the product of her only half-apologetic love for more gestural kinds of non-objectivity. Each painting is a scrimmage between rule-based rigor and expressionistic freedom, playing out the history of modern painting even as it seeks something new.

Like Jackson Pollock with his wooden dowel or Gerhard Richter with his two-handed mega-squeegee, Dault favors irregular tools, from a rubber comb to a sea sponge, tree branches, or even door handles. (She is surely the first painter to apply acrylic with a stick of Twizzlers licorice.) Dault maneuvers these strange items over the canvas in discrete, repeated motions. A few paintings, such as *Heavy Metal* (p 62), are created via a careful use of tools in *both* the artist's hands: paint dragged in one direction is buffeted from the other, resulting in streaks that crash into half-moons. The results take countless forms—stripes, waves, zigzags, grids—and are deployed in the same painting, on multiple layers. In the oil-on-leather *Indecent Proposal* (p 42), for instance, repeated black squiggles are overlaid with wide pink stripes that are each painted in a single gesture, the pigment petering out as they progress from top-left to bottom-right. *Cloud Nine* and *Magic Mountain*

cover multicolored backgrounds with energetic whitewashes that are then partially effaced: via soft sinusoidal curves in the former painting, with bold diagonal slashes in the latter. Dault's repeated gestures with unconventional, even resistant painting implements muffle any obvious link between the artist's hand and her purposes. Yet no two are the same, and her rigorous paintings somehow guard a place for fragility, error, slippage, risk, imbalance, bad taste—and, not last, a forthright beauty.

One of Dault's most consistent and surprising tactics is the use of *sgraffito*, the scratching through of one or more superior layers of paint to reveal the primer underneath. Consider her astral painting *Flight of the Navigator* (p 162): a top coat of black is nearly opaque around the edges of the composition, while in the center of the canvas stripes of black have been combed away to reveal a hallucinogenic palette of cyan, Mardi Gras purple, and Harlequin green. *Sgraffito* had a central place in the art of the Renaissance, not only among painters but among architects, and saw something of a revival in the twentieth century—above all in the paintings and works on paper of Jean Dubuffet, who incised his scumbled and haunted figures out of layers of pigment and dirt. Or of Cy Twombly, whose large-scale canvases of the 1950s started as gestural abstractions and began to incorporate excisions and scratchings. It is less fashionable today, and *sgraffito* may now be most familiar as a school lesson; art educators often introduce children to color theory by having them cover a sheet of paper with wild hues, then obscure the colors with a black wax crayon, and finally scratch the crayon away with a nail or a popsicle stick. (In the United States, this elementary *sgraffito* is sometimes called "black magic": a weirdly occult name for such a modest technique.)

But *sgraffito*, an act in which form derives from a productive confrontation with what came before, is an apt metaphor for Dault's larger artistic endeavor, and that endeavor is meant to be read on the surface of each painting. The marks Dault makes are frequently asymmetrical, so that the actions of dragging, scratching, subtracting, and revealing are legible even as the entire surface coheres into a single composition. In *Cosmic Journey* (p 147), for example, a wall of horizontal black striations is overlaid with a dozen circles, evidently painted by rotating an object through a slick of white; the pigment peters out as the object completes its revolution, and so the underlying stripes show through in places. Distinctions between gestural and non-gestural forms of painting, between more conceptual and more expressionistic models of non-objectivity, thus begin to feel overdrawn as one looks longer at Dault's paintings. They are interlocking strategies, and both of them are necessary to pick one's way through the debris of the last century.

The sculptures are all untitled: each bears only a number and the time required for its making. The paintings, on the other hand, are titled with an arbitrariness that can reach a comic sublime, and their pop culture references imbue Dault's deep-thinking painting with welcome levity. (This is a proclivity she shares with another die-hard of abstraction, Frank Stella—who christened both his rigorous black stripes and his baroque aluminum confections with the way-out-of-left-field names of Polish villages, Brazilian birds and Enlightenment sonatas.[7]) Very rarely the titles propose some indexical reference: *Chasing Waterfalls* (p 146), with its bold grid of semicircular waves, unabashedly summons forth the ladies of TLC jiving in a music video oasis. Usually, though, the titles are incongruous. Many of her titles derive from pop music; *Heat Wave* (p 38) takes its name from a Motown banger by Martha and the Vandellas, while *Major Lazer* (p 67) honors a Jamaican dancehall act.

Dault seems to delight in saddling her ambitious paintings with titles that advertise their vacancy. *SkyTrax* (p 159), for one, shares its name with an airline consultancy. *The Freshmaker* (p 42) gets its title, strange to say, from the slogan of a breath mint.

Not every artist would name her first major retrospective in her home country after a Milli Vanilli song, but *Blame It on the Rain* is hardly Dault's only invocation of early 1990s pop. The paintings' titles bristle with allusions to (the first) George Bush-era MTV, or perhaps Brian Mulroney-era MuchMusic, and the earthbound angels of modernism find themselves in the unlikely company of Marky Mark (in the painting *Good Vibrations*, p 74), MC Hammer (*2 Legit*), and the long-forgotten Debbie Gibson (*Electric Youth*). The titles are arbitrary only insofar as they demur from formal description; these are ways of wrestling with history too. Janet Jackson seems a frequent demiurge, whether in the painting *Escapade* (pp 46–47), which features row upon row of scraped triangles interrupted by particoloured stripes, or in a nearly psychedelic composition of white waves that bears the proud name *Rhythm Nation*, after Jackson's 1989 classic of politicized new jack swing. "They said it wouldn't last / We had to prove them wrong," goes the chorus of that album's best song, which is as good a motto as any. Modernity may be our antiquity, but there is still much more life to be won.

1 For more on the relationship between wrestling and "more life," see Harold Bloom and David Rosenberg, *The Book of J*, New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1990, pp 217–218.

2 Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History", *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 4: 1938–1940*, Howard Eiland and Michael W Jennings, eds, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006, p 392. RH Quaytman, whose rule-based and systematic paintings have certain affinities with Dault's art, investigated the history of Klee's *Angelus Novus* and its repercussions for contemporary abstraction in a 2015 exhibition at Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York.

3 Sara Roffino and Benjamin Sutton, "21 Questions for Anti-Finish Fetishist and 'Tacky Fabrics' Redeemer Julia Dault," *Blouin ArtInfo*, 25 February 2013, http://ca.blouinartinfo.com/news/story/871534/21-questions-for-anti-finish-fetishist-and-tacky-fabrics#sthash.rp4uCcdi.dpuf.

4 It's worth insisting that while Dault's sculptures may be processual, they are not performative. She does not document their act of making, and never invites spectators. The final artworks may be infused with labour and with effort, but labour and effort are not themselves aesthetic here; they are means to aesthetic ends.

5 TJ Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999, p 3. Roger M Buergel, "Leitmotifs," *documenta 12*, 2005, http://www.documenta12.de/index.php?id=leitmotive&L=1. Buergel curated the show *documenta 12*, 2007, which featured at its entrance a reproduction of Klee's *Angelus Novus*.

6 Rosalind Krauss, "Grids," *October*, vol 9, summer 1979, pp 50–52.

7 On abstraction and titles, see Jordan Kantor, "Frank Painting," *Frank Stella: A Retrospective*, Michael Auping ed, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015, pp 44–46.