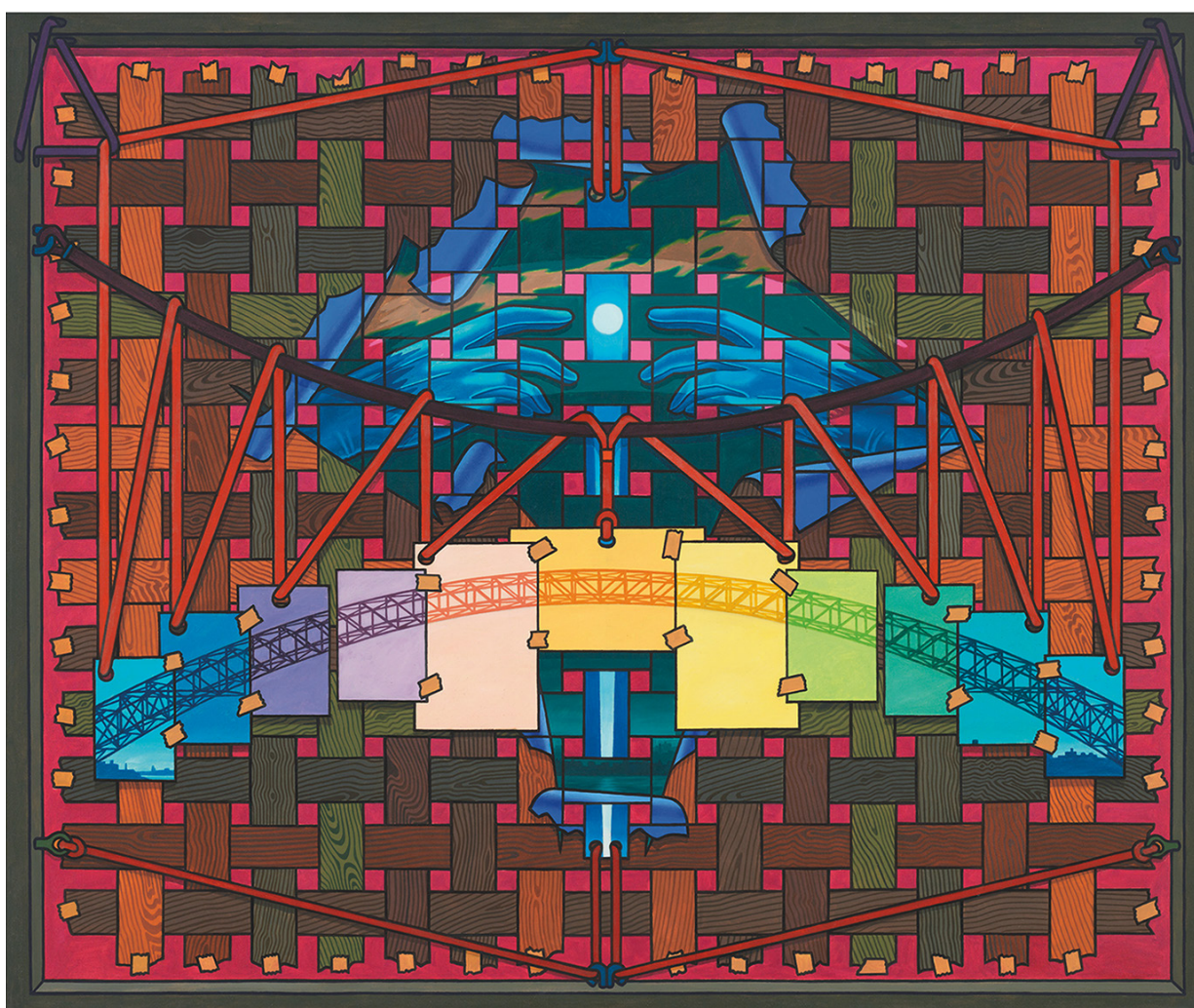


Layer by Layer: Art Green's Complex Paintings

by Paul Maziar June 21, 2015



Art Green, *Allowable Deduction*, 1976. Oil on canvas, 45 x 54 inches.

It isn't touch that best helps us know the characteristics of space and its intervening forms, as some might suppose. A look at the immensely surprising paintings in *Art Green: Certain Subjects* gives us occasion to explore in surprising ways. With Green's book, we do this layer by layer, as if seeing a play in fast forward, through a part in the curtains, or paused mid-action through aperture. Which is to intimate the kind of sight that disorients, magnetizes, and remains ever-escaping. In one sense, it's the spaces themselves — in their layered confluences, and simultaneously classic and futuristic qualities — that occupy us as we peer into vortices of colorful images.

It's not the other way around as touching or entering would demand. One can't avoid the desire to touch the paintings. In reproduction, each appears on the right-hand page and resembles a pop-up book construction or a 3D digital rendering put to print. It makes no sense at all that these are paintings. "Are we looking at a painting, a painting of a sculpture, or a sculpture that has been painted?" asks John Yau in his marvelous introductory essay, "Art Green's Second Sight." This trait of Green's work — its power to bewilder — sets him on a trail right out of the 20th century, and into something more like a continuum, where one finds worlds within worlds, and every occasion to see in startlingly new ways.

If time is the dimension for which Green's classic subjects align and are re-imagined, the sense of space fixes their complex relationships; each seems to expand toward limitlessness in terms of possible meaning and sensation. His paintings appear as if we're watching someone have a vision, while in turn for us, "seeing becomes a process of sorting and reconfiguring," because "our engagement with reality isn't passive, no matter how complacent we might have become, because we still have to stitch it together" (Yau, 10).

The book's first painting, *United Opposition* (1975), encapsulates Green's visionary tricks, with complex layers. We see a corseted picture window with its pane replaced by multicolored chain-link run through with riveted straps. Behind this is a sheet of stylized flames being pulled asunder by bungee cords to reveal their ice-cream-cone underside. That, too, opens further to reveal a shining purple interior, behind which waits a fragmented, otherworldly, green and yellow sunset landscape.

All kinds of diverse images are taken out of their settings to literally link up (in black outline like comic strips, or with stylized looking cuts of "tape") as vignettes on canvases, directing another midst to us. And Green's work doesn't give us a narrative — not even one scene tied up in a neat little bow. Instead, we have the painted result of enthusiasms and their reconfigurations, causing works that contain nothing either positive or negative. The painted objects remain for the eye and mind to be presences.

Take the appearance of a bridge, which recurs throughout *Certain Subjects*, as in *Allowable Deduction* (1976) and *Second Sight* a decade later (1986). This motif comes from what was once real (in that Green's father was a designer of bridges), but their new places on these canvases tell us something different altogether, and do so inexplicably each new time they're looked at. None of the rendered objects, once signifiers of story and information, have anything to do with their original meanings. This means that we can look at his paintings for what they are: correspondences between analogs, juxtapositions, and baffling trompe-l'oeil illusions smoothly painted to look flattened, which never get old. Green's dissimilar images, in their strange placements and painted dreamscapes, engender imagination, and come from a personal iconography without any key whatever. They pleasantly appear, guided by hypnagogically rearranged latitudes.

At first, Green's work could be compared to certain works from the Modernist past like those of De Chirico, wherein we're jostled into perplexity by puzzling over the juxtaposition of seemingly significant objects or images. But this is something of a false impression, for although this kind of "surreal" or "metaphysical" imagery tends to be a facet of Green's work, they are only smaller parts of it. To decrypt the symbol of, say, "fatality" from one of Art Green's vanilla soft-serve fragments — as seen in *United Opposition* (1975) or in the composition for *Fat Chance* (1980) which takes on this ice-cream-cone shape — however funny that may be, would be a waste of time. With *Certain Subjects*, we're not in for pictorial riddles, and instead get to take an entirely new path where nothing is being stated, to simply have an experience. This isn't to say Green's work lacks depth. From his tour de force of hues to silhouettes of acrobats and noir figures, Green's *Certain Subjects* are as entertaining as any entertainment his great many allusions might summon.

Many of the works in *Certain Subjects* employ a kind of visual overlay, depicting otherwise-ordinary items in ways that don't make logical sense. What are flames anyway; what's a yellow-green sunrise behind colored straps wrapped up in rainbow-hued chain-link look like? Again, look to *United Opposition* (1975). One of the final spreads in *Certain Subjects* shows a picture of seven of Green's paintings set against a house for scale. These paintings are, true enough, as big as a house. After having stared wholesale at glossy book pages, it amazes one to see how Green's paintings might look "in real life"; standing-up to something already large, this photograph is an indication that what we've seen thus far may not be what's really there. And in this publication, Green's work celebrates the conundrum of sense and perception, articulated keenly by Yau, "seeing is both mediated by and prone to illusions." It seems, above all, the imagistic enigmas and spatial illusions that are Green's emblems, which steadily remain and subtly change throughout his catalogue, which begin in the '60s and take us to 2013.