

## GROUND: COVER; REVEAL ON SAMMY PETERS' TITLES<sup>1</sup>



L-R: Peters [all 2017]:

*Emergence: natural; beginning • Reference: bounds; incomplete • Consequence: ingenious; reaction • Appearance: controlled; purpose*

*Emergence: natural; beginning*

*Reference: bounds; incomplete*

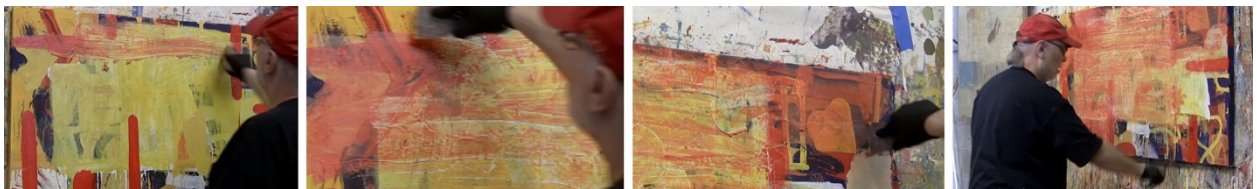
*Consequence: ingenious; reaction*

*Appearance: controlled; purpose*

Peters has a unique naming schema. His exacting titles are composed of three words which provide the viewer with neither a context nor a storyline. And yet Peters has used this schema for over a decade. How do the titles function in his aesthetic?

There is a relationship between Peters' painting process and his naming device. It lies in the way each breaks conventional painterly and linguistic structures to open up new thematic possibilities for the viewer.

Peters' paint pushing is perfect. One only has to immerse oneself into his subtle surface displacements, his lush rich color palette, his painted strokes of ladders and swirls, and his placement of striped fabric collages, to know that it is perfect. It rewards the viewer time and time again by breaking the painterly structure into open-ended visual possibilities for the viewer. This open-ended possibility is apparent from watching Peters work the surface of his paintings, as he moves effortlessly from form to formlessness in seemingly endless permutations.



Frames 00:03:12–00:04:54 from 2004 video

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<sup>1</sup> This is a portion of a larger essay on the art of Sammy Peters that draws upon a 30-minute painting session filmed by Patrick McKelvey in Peters' studio in 2004. The time code begins when Peters moves to the painting and stops when he moves away from the painting.

*SP begins scraping over a yellow form by starting with the upper right red bean shape. This red paint mixes with the yellow. The texture previously created by the underpainting causes the spatula which is loaded with wax medium to dig into the fresh paint and create pockets of opaque color contrasting with a gooey transparency. This glaze-like quality gives what Peters' calls 'body' to the form and 'gives [the surface] a feeling like it's been around for ages rather than minutes.' This is the basic component of Peters' evocation of sublime timelessness within a gesture.*

Peters' painting is about edges that create visual correspondences – a surface filled with tectonic plates and geological striations, archeological sites and Paleolithic digs, concrete abutments and wooden fences, plowed fields and irrigation trenches, meshes, scars and gashes. Structure is reduced to remnants, the surface transformed into frozen ice, translucent and radiant, to reveal strata of saturated hue beneath. The stroke is reduced to edges transformed by scraping and smearing. It is at the edges of his brush and spatula that Peter' narrative structure takes hold and spreads out across the surface of his canvas.



Frame 00:04:59–00:06:37 from 2004 video • *Fragment: Shattered; Imposter*, 1997, oil on canvas, 69 x 90 inches • Bailin photograph

*Using the brush loaded with yellow paint, SP creates two rounded shapes that mix with the wet red paint. After dipping the brush again into the pot of yellow, he creates a series of improvisations on straight and curved lines that establish a loose grid over the more atmospheric underpainting.<sup>2</sup> establishing, he says, an order out of chaos. "Edges and cracks - the way a tree pushes up the concrete and leaves very distinct cracks in the grass along the edges of the concrete - to me that's so much more interesting than a beautiful field of grass." No wonder his own photography focuses on the breaks in concrete or burrows in plowed fields.*

Those edges are critical to the link between image and title. It is not only a visual motif but a literary one as well. What is amazing is that within this complexity is a link to the prosaic. This framework catches us off balance. One moment the process reveals the existential materiality of the medium and the next references a ladder or a worm. But in the end, it is the butting up of the edges that links the visual with the

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<sup>2</sup> By underpainting, I mean any underlying surface area—wet or dry. The drying time is fast, controlled by the amount of medium being used and the cooling time.



literary. After seeing a Peters' painting, the viewer can't help but see the world differently.



Frames 00:07:38–00:09:0 from 2004 video

*SP paints sky a blue V-shape above and into the first black shape created at 00:06:40. He moves to the upper left side of the painting to add another V-shape. Moves to the right side of the canvas and creates his signature 'ladder' drawing down the side of the canvas. "These are repetitive things that I'll throw in anywhere. The ladder shape is something that I use quite a lot. I like the rhythm and repetitive quality of it. I liken it to heartbeat, music, things like that." He then paints two blue vertical strips and then adds a curved line creating a P-shape.*

Peters has already mentioned that the words come while painting or as a result of something he has read. They are not meant to be literal descriptions or the name of the subject of the paintings. The act of writing, separated from its meaning, contains the gesture of drawing and vice versa. When using single stroke lettering technique to paint a giant P or using the window washing movement to paint an S or an 8, Peters unlinks word from image, image from word.



Frames 00:15:08–00:17:22 from 2004 video

*SP scrapes off excess paint on ladder, moves it to middle of the painting and continues to squeegee the surface, cutting into or smearing the paint.*

*SP: [A title] can be something but it's not really related much to the painting as much it is to me. I think things that I read, things that I think about are often what the ...where the titles come from. Right now, I'm using a three-word convention that seems to work well for me, because I don't want the painting itself to have something that names it specifically, so that it must be that and nothing else. So rather than use "untitled" or something else that has very little description, I might write down a word or words that come to me during the act of painting. They more likely come from something I read than from what I'm painting, something I*

*dreamed or something someone else told me or just the sound of the words, how they fit together in some sort of pleasing way. They don't really have a specific meaning. Hopefully there might be words that mean something to the viewer but not necessarily related to that particular painting on that particular day. Hopefully the painting will seem different from day to day.*

Peters naming convention is similar to his painting practice as it comes to him as a result of an action or movement during the painting. The titles follow a set sequence: a word followed by a colon, followed by two more words separated by a semicolon. Those colons (meaning "therefore") and semicolons (meaning "and" or "but") serve not only to chop up the normal linguistic flow but to give the words meanings or hints of meaning that they don't usually have. The titles compress and expand the linguistic structure.

A precondition or baseline is set up in the first word of a title (the ground, i.e., *Emergence, Reference, Consequence, Appearance*<sup>3</sup>), then another word is applied (a cover word, i.e., *natural, bounds, ingenious, controlled*) and with the addition of another conditional word (a reveal word, i.e., *beginning, incomplete, reaction, purpose*) a final modification is made to the initial precondition. The colon and semicolon add a complexity to this rather simple sequence. We expect the words following the colon to modify the meaning of the first word, but instead they usually contradict it or seem totally unrelated to it. This may reflect Peters' view of how man-made environments interrupt natural environments.

We expect meaning to emerge from words, but in Peters' naming device that direction is sometimes reversed as the correspondence between the meanings of the words and the dramatic presence of the paint merge and modify each other. In the end, the title serves as a parallel passage in which words literally run parallel with the picture plane, the punctuation marks reflecting the edges in the painting, and the viewer is left standing on shifting ice.



*Frame detail from 2004 video*

Meaning, then, is unfolding and reflexive just as is the 'reading' of his paintings. The sequence of words acts upon each other in ways that mimic the dialectic of his

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<sup>3</sup> I have select the following titles listed above.

painting process: Peters begins with a ground (a precondition) created almost haphazardly with paint left over from other paintings (sometimes created by studio assistants). Then he undercuts the surface by scraping or cutting, revealing or obscuring previous visual expectations. **Ground: cover; reveal.**

Usually, a title is a labeling device the artist uses to create a context in which the viewer can orient him or herself to the meaning or intention of the work. With Peters, however, the title is ironically mimetic – an integral and active participant in the creation of his extraordinary paintings.

David Bailin, 2017



## David Bailin

Nationally recognized artist whose mammoth works on prepared paper have arguably won more awards than any other Southern artist. His paintings have been shown from California to New York and has work in many Museum and private collections across the nation.

Bailin is a dedicated teacher that has taught in a number of Arkansas colleges and has influenced scores of students to continue with art as their life's work. His website is <https://www.bailinstudio.com>