As I write this essay, I have watched two places I love torn apart: Baltimore and Nepal. In the aftermath of riots and earthquakes, I am left with feelings of ambivalence about what “I can do” as an art historian to effect meaningful social change. Compounding this disaffection and doubt, my own president has publicly stated that my profession is of little use to America as it climbs out of economic collapse. Moreover, one of the objects I engage with as a scholar, abstract painting, has been recently dismissed as something to be instantly suspicious of, a “zombie formalist” commodity of no real significance outside of market potential. What is an artworker, let alone a human being, to do under such circumstances? Harris Johnson’s paintings interpolate traces of anxiety and uncertainty, and seem to presciently anticipate such indecision about what an individual “can do” in a moment of global turmoil. His works ask urgent questions about art’s political functions in the contemporary world, and use humor, irony, and, ultimately, sensitivity to cope with ambivalent attitudes toward art in the twenty-first century.

After spending several years working in Cleveland, Johnson moved to Richmond in 2013. Finding himself in close proximity to the epicenter of the American government during heated partisan debates over the federal deficit, one of Johnson’s first actions in Richmond was to create over one hundred paintings of the American flag, drive to Washington D.C., and sell them on the National Mall. With social media feeds flooded with the government shutdown and a bungled War on Terror, Johnson felt disillusioned about his role as a painter. In search of a politic, Johnson recalls: “I actually felt like I was going to watch our country collapse, and I was drinking coffee and pushing paint around in my studio. I thought about how I could help. I was going to D.C. to pay off [America’s] debt.” Along with his clumsy, abstracted flag paintings, Johnson set up shop with a hand-painted sign that contradictorily asked readers to “support the arts” by buying a painting, with the proceeds being donated to the U.S. Treasury. Cheeky, cynical, and absurd, Johnson’s efforts on the Mall raise questions about how painting can meaningfully contribute to society during such watershed moments. In the aftermath of the 2008 economic collapse, when auction prices—particularly for choice paintings—were breaking records, Johnson, in an ironic and humorous form of self-criticism, riffs on the notion that art’s most worthwhile attribute is its ability to perform as a commodity.

Abstract Protest Sign (2013) likewise uses humor to conjure the absurd. And, like Johnson’s actions on the Mall, it does so in order to establish an ambivalent attitude toward painting-as-political, held in tension between doubt and levity. Far too heavy and cumbersome to hold comfortably for an extended period of time, let alone for a multi-day picket, this object asks if the language of abstraction retains the
radical politics from modernism’s halcyon days. What would it mean to introduce the crimson, loopy forms of Abstract Protest Sign to a demonstration in Ferguson or Baltimore? When one begins to imagine such a ridiculous act, the idea of an abstract painting affecting social change becomes implausible, potentially even ludicrous. Abstract Protest Sign suggests its own failure; not as a work of art, but the failure of the work of art to communicate universal meaning. At a more existential level, Abstract Protest Sign asks, “What can painting do?” In a more immanent sense, Johnson proposes that the work, if it protests anything at all, objects to the “dominance of abstract painting,” while also suggesting a deep-seated anxiety about painting as a viable medium in the twenty-first century. During a moment mired with Silicon Valley “innovation,” government relegation of the arts, and STEM educations, how can we begin to characterize this anxiety? How does Johnson’s work navigate such an ethos; what paths out of this condition do these painting trace?

For Johnson’s work, perhaps we can consider anxiety as it is understood by the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek. Summoning the Danish theologian Søren Kierkegaard, Žižek contends anxiety is a response to the knowledge of freedom, to the “abyss of possibilities” that confronts an individual. Anxiety produces an uncertainty, a contrapuntal movement between repulsion and attraction directed at existence itself, and one must work to make meaning out of the vertiginous infinite. Žižek’s interpretation of anxiety provides a useful model for understanding a painter’s plight, as well as Johnson’s creative practice. At a moment of reinvigorated doubt about painting—when art can be anything, instantaneously circulated, and abstraction’s transcendent, universal narratives are replaced with financialized discourse—how can one imbue artistic production with meaning? Rather than succumbing to the fundamentally human experience of anxiety, Johnson’s practice, and its aesthetic diversity, revels in the sense of freedom that causes it.

Previously, Johnson has worked extensively through discrete visual languages. As of late, his paintings demonstrate remarkable range. Recent paintings such as Big To (2015) and Black Hole (2015) are united through their unapologetic aesthetic difference. They are also all palimpsests; surfaces where Johnson cycles through ideas, feelings, and entire paintings to arrive at a singular image replete with multiple histories and interpretations. Big To took over eight months to complete; a landscape, a gestural abstraction, and other works are buried underneath the slick, liquid surface. Big To presents viewers with contradictory visual information. The painting’s text could be read as “To,” with the pinkish lump morphing into the letter “o.” It could also be read as “T.”, or the acid green form could be viewed as devoid of linguistic meaning, and be seen iconographically as a cross, and so on. Whereas earlier works, such as Abstract Protest Sign, internalized and expressed ambivalence about art’s relationship to the political, this type of apprehension is ameliorated in more recent works through the painting process itself. In Big To, anxiety and uncertainty are manifested in terms of how the work encourages ever-shifting, unstable meanings.

Let us momentarily consider some Freudian implications of Johnson’s palimpsestic approach to production; doing so elucidates how Big To’s aesthetic strategies reveal traces of human experience. In Civilization and Its Discontents, the Austrian neurologist Sigmund Freud characterizes Rome, the Eternal City, in relationship to the mind:

Suppose that Rome is not a human habitation but a psychical entity with a similarly long and copious past—an entity... in which nothing that has once come into existence will have passed.
away and all the earlier phases of development continue to exist alongside the latest one.  

Following Freud’s imagination, all that has ever happened to the Eternal City—the battles, the Bacchanals, and cultural memories—never actually ceases to matter, just as all the events, emotions, and relationships one has ever experienced determines how that individual faces Žižek’s “abyss of possibilities.” Rome, as with the psyche, becomes a site of accumulation for history to continually rewrite itself on. Even though the resonances of past events may not be readily observable and understood, like the countless underpaintings of Johnson’s palimpsest-like works, they leave their mark, they are felt on the surface, and undoubtedly shape the reality that will eventually emerge. Johnson’s paintings, such as Big To and Black Hole, have thus become what they presently are because of their past—their layers of literal and conceptual accumulation.

Black Hole, specifically, brazenly confronts the “abyss of possibilities” and its attendant disconcertion. The matter at hand—the centrifugal black hole at the center of the spiraling universe—lends itself to idea of the ultimate unknown. The uncertainty of what lies beyond the event horizon casts the work as an exploration of epistemological limits, thereby inserting it into the trajectory of anxiety, ambivalence, and uncertainty I have tracked in Johnson’s oeuvre. However, it is how Johnson approaches this work, with painterly conviction, that articulates resolve and acquiescence to mystery. The surface of Black Hole, like Big To, a consequence of coat after painted coat, gesture after gesture, creates a reverberating, oscillating aura that draws the viewer’s eye inward to the painting’s point of no return, only to return one’s vision to the galaxy’s sweeping arms. Expressive marks, fragments of texts, and even a lone, distressed stick figure (humor always permeates Johnson’s work) are swept up into the frenzied vortex. Astutely rendered, Black Hole suggests an acceptance of painting’s limits, or, perhaps, an acceptance of the uncertainty about what those limits are. In a manner akin to the Kantian sublime, where the imagination collapses in on itself in its futile attempts to fathom what lies beyond, vertiginous feelings are replaced with sense of serenity. This ability to accept the unknown and the limits of cognition are powerful aspects of the Kantian sublime and Johnson’s work demonstrates sensitivity toward this initial frustration, which is followed by assurances of the mind’s competency.

In the context of the contemporary moment, a precarious one marked by ideological and ecological fissures, Johnson’s paintings present potential resolutions. The works come to terms with uncertainty, doubt, and anxiety through sincere and sustained investigations into how art can function in relationship to such times and how, in turn, it can meaningfully contribute to the world. Given the extensive polarization created by such fissures, this ability to critically think about one’s own position is more crucial and imperative than ever.

1. On January 30, 2014, President Obama commented at a General Electric plant: “I promise you, folks can make a lot more, potentially, with skilled manufacturing or the trades than they might with an art history degree.”


Harris Johnson
Abstract Protest Sign, 2013
Acrylic on panel, wood
40 x 32 inches
Courtesy of the artist