

America Reflected

Using mirrored glass as her canvas, Nicole Chesney creates abstract paintings activated by light and animated by the viewer's own visage.

BY LEAH TRIPLETT



OPPOSITE PAGE: *Transpire*, 2010. Oil painting on acid-etched and mirrored glass. H 44, W 48, D 1 in.
PHOTO: SCOTT LAPHAM



Kairos (permanent artwork at the Massachusetts College of Art and Design, Boston), 2013. Unique digital image, laminated plate glass and mirror. H 11, W 85 ft.
PHOTO: PETER VANDERWARKER

One could argue that only two distinctly American schools of painting have been embraced by the international art world: the 19th-century Luminists, who emerged from the Hudson River painting style and prefigured European Impressionism, and the 20th-century Abstract Expressionists, whose work involved the intensely physical manipulation of paint. The Luminists were chiefly concerned with light's effect on nature, while the latter pushed to externalize their own inner nature through an expressive language distinct from the material qualities of paint. Though widely divergent, the Luminists and Abstract Expressionists shared a zeal for the painting's surface, and artists of both movements instilled an expressive meaning in how they painted surfaces, be it hyper-realistically, or in a purely formal way.

Capturing an ephemeral moment through which we can view our culture and ourselves, the surface treatments of the Luminists and Abstract Expressionists are similarly vulnerable in that they bear the particular markings of individual artists. Both the Luminists and the Abstract Expressionists sought to express a reflection, be it their place, or of their inner selves, on the painting's surface.

Building on both of these uniquely American approaches to painting, Rhode Island-based artist Nicole Chesney probes reflection, perception, and light in her paintings on glass, fusing a Luminist interest in light with an Abstract Expressionist focus on the psychology of an individual.

Born in 1971 in New Jersey, Chesney studied at the California College of Arts and Crafts and the Massachusetts College of Art before obtaining an M.F.A. in visual arts from Canberra School of Art at Australian National University. While studying metalsmithing at CCA, Chesney discovered glass and began using the material not pragmatically but aesthetically. This year, her work will be exhibited at the Korean International Art Fair in Seoul as well as in "Glass Today: 21st-Century Innovations" at the New Britain Museum of American Art in New Britain, Connecticut. Last year, Chesney completed her installation *Kairos* (2013) at MassArt, and three of her paintings, *Verity (magenta blue)* (2011), *Repose* (2011), and *Verity (blue green gray)* (2011) were acquired by the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Eschewing designation as either a public artist or a glass artist, Chesney identifies first and foremost as a painter.



THIS PAGE, LEFT: *Verity (magenta blue)*, 2011. Oil painting on acid-etched and mirrored glass. H 48, W 48, D 1 in.

PHOTO: SCOTT LAPHAM
COLLECTION: MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON

THIS PAGE, RIGHT: *Repose*, 2011. Oil painting on acid-etched and mirrored glass. H 48, W 32, D 1 in.

PHOTO: SCOTT LAPHAM

Verity (blue green gray), 2011. Oil painting on acid-etched and mirrored glass. H 48, W 48, D 1 in.

PHOTO: SCOTT LAPHAM
COLLECTION: MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON

"I didn't study painting," says Chesney. "Like jewelry, my love affair with glass has to do with [its] precious, desirous qualities that really boil down to light." Her work divides into two approaches to the medium—small-scale "studio works" and large-scale architectural commissions. Her glass works are gesture-driven tableaus that explore the parameters of perception as well as the relationship of light and darkness to the human eye. She expands this concentration by playing with the psychology of desire as it is manifested in materials, be they diamonds or cut glass. "I'm very conscious of my material choices and the language and power that is inherent in any given material," Chesney says.

Discernable throughout Chesney's oeuvre is a deep consideration of material as well as sensitivity toward the viewer. *Verity (magenta blue)*, *Repose*, and *Verity (blue green gray)* are installed in the most sunlit corridor of the Linde Family Wing for Contemporary Art at the MFA in Boston, and can be viewed at both eye level as well as from below. Similarly, blocks away at MassArt, *Kairos* is visible to all who traverse busy Huntington Avenue. In each of these works, viewers are able to see their reflections (or a fragment of a reflection) within the painting's surface.

"In my work, I've deliberately chosen mirrors that have etched surfaces," explains Chesney. "There's a lot of metaphor in that, to me, about introspection, about not really being able to be objective about who we are." The "we"

that constitutes Chesney's audience is cut from a wide swath of the public and includes schoolchildren, bankers, construction crews, and elite collectors. No matter their background, the visages of Chesney's viewers shift with changes in light and perspective, which universalizes her audience as much as it particularizes the individual. These works betray the artist's hand in their heavily worked surfaces, but beckon the viewer past Chesney's gesture and into a reflective plane in which the viewer sees themselves as mediated by the gaze of another.

Chesney works slowly and deliberately in her studio, making an average of 12 to 15 paintings a year. Describing her process as "inspired by printmaking," she usually doesn't use brushes to apply her "thick, sticky" paint. Instead, she covers her support in oil paints before beginning the methodical process of removing the paint with a wadded tarlatan cloth. Through this act of pouring and then wiping the etched glass surface, Chesney's expressive gesture is revealed as one that harmonizes the physical relationship of material and gesture. At times swirling or sinewy, this gesture is nuanced and layered, replete with process-born textures as much as markings characteristic of the support material. Her approach recalls that of Jackson Pollock in that her technique synchronizes the nature of the paint and glass with her bodily action. Further, in her application of paint directly onto the glass surface, Chesney evokes Helen Frankenthaler's

method of pouring paint onto an untreated canvas to allow the cloth to absorb the wet paint. As she often creates planes of paint within her composition, Chesney conjures Mark Rothko's reductive, minimalist color planes. She also cites Agnes Martin's minute, careful mark making as an influence. Perhaps the most vital aspect of her studio process, however, is her observation of the work after she's started wiping paint away from the glass. "My pieces have a physicality that a work on canvas does not have; there's an actual optical occurrence happening because of the material choices and the depth of the material," Chesney explains. As she sits still, watching the evolving light change the colors of her paint, her studio works come to life.

Though acutely related in aesthetic as well as concept, Chesney's architectural commissions are created in concert with the client, construction workers, and her team of fabricators. Often required to balance the politics of urban development with her concerns as an artist, each of her commissions translates the conceit of her studio works into installations that are responsive toward their environment. For example, in *Clarus* (2013), an installation at 7 World Trade Center in New York, the sheen of the subtly textured surface is akin to her treatment of her studio works, yet it delicately corresponds with the corporate polish of the adjoining elevator suite. Moreover, by blending into its context, *Clarus* disarms the viewer,



Clarus (permanent artwork at 7 World Trade Center, New York), 2013. Unique digital image, laminated plate glass and mirror. H 18, W 6 ft.
PHOTO: JOE WOOLHEAD

Ever Farther (white and blue), 2012. Oil painting on acid-etched and mirrored glass. H 29, W 40, D 1 in.
PHOTO: SCOTT LAPHAM



allowing the audience to approach and fully access the work. An awareness of her audience as not just spectators but participants in these architectural projects is mimicked in her consideration of the viewer in her small-scale works. "My studio practice has been enriched by my architectural projects," says Chesney.

Thematically, Chesney's works, whether large or small, investigate the power of desire as it relates to observation, authenticity, and reality. Desire is often a phenomenon relegated to our imaginations, but it takes physical form in precious stones or beautiful objects, which in turn are deemed to possess beauty by the beholder. Culturally, Americans value expensive jewelry and shiny substances, and use those materials to convey affection and love to others. Consequently, these materials are imbued with meaning and are vehicles for individuals to communicate with each other in an expressive, unspoken way. Chesney's paintings operate in a similar manner. However, the individuals involved in this exchange are the artist and the viewer. Harnessing our human desire to see ourselves as others see us, these paintings physically reflect a vision of ourselves that's entirely arbitrated by Chesney's gesture, conceit, and process. When we see our reflections in these paintings, we see a true mirrored likeness, yet we also must distinguish that likeness by way of Chesney's expressive formalism. Our "self" is joined, but not fully blended, to another in a melding of reflection and abstraction.

"Reflections are visible but vulnerable to the slightest touch, and to the degree we can destroy them, they empower us," writes art historian Barbara Novak in

Voyages of the Self: Pairs, Parallels and Patterns in American Art and Literature, her 2007 study on American art and literature. "In the mathematics of desire, they inversely reproduce a reality that is knowable, while they themselves cannot be fully known." Chesney's paintings offer as much and, like the Luminists, her works are entirely activated by light. Discussing the Luminists, Novak writes that their work "yields up its glow as we retreat, until from the end of the gallery it often seems as if the painting is holding a pocket of light and air." Similarly, in their subtle radiance, Chesney's paintings (whether small or large) are surfaces that allow for a corporeal experience of light as it interacts with the physicality of the work. This physicality is channeled into the creation and experience of the painting, a phenomenon that further bonds artist and audience. Merging process with action painting, Chesney articulates a visual language entirely specific to her material. By using a ubiquitous, democratic material, glass, in her light-filled paintings, Chesney advances the themes of the Luminists and Abstract Expressionists alike, developing each tradition in order to formulate an honest mirror of who we are as a culture. "The notion of something being genuine and authentic is really important to me, and that's another reason why I continue to come back to actual glass mirrors," Chesney says. "These are truly fragile." ■

LEAH TRIPLETT is a Boston-based writer who concentrates on modern and contemporary art. As an editor of the art webzine Big, Red and Shiny, she oversees the publication's award-winning blog.