Louis Block, The Brooklyn Rail, January 23, 2024

THE BROOKLYN RAIL

1 x 1

Louis Block on Kern Samuel

Kern Samuel, *A good rain is coming*, 2022. Acrylic on sewn canvas, 27 x 25 inches. Courtesy the artist and Derosia, New York.

In some dictionaries, "coral" has a useless etymology. The English comes from the Old French *coral*, from the Latin *corallium*, from the Greek *korállion*—all sharing the same sense: coral. The word comes from itself, and itself, and itself, and then substance. Someone bent down toward a dried chunk of red on the beach, and, turning it in their fingers, said "this is coral." I would like to have uttered something so significant about a painting.

If I were to say something like "this is coral," I know which painting I would be talking about, and it is crimson and turquoise. But I can't take this lump and name it—I don't need to—because painting already does that; it convinces me that the rest of the world knows something and is ready to say it out loud. It is another form of language, constantly and confidently winnowing down the known into shards that reflect back what they've taken of the world.

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It helps to know that corallium refers specifically to red coral. A small dictionary on my shelf, itself bound in fading red, points to a passage from Lucretius concerning the plumage of doves, and how it shifts under differing light from red to emerald to blue. It is not far off from the painting in my mind, which is gemlike but flexible, glinting under a leathery skin. What I am doing is trying to find words to counteract this painting that has haunted me since I first saw it. The sinister meaning of "haunt" is a Shakespearean turn: the word's original sense had to do with habit, its roots leading to various words for home. This painting has lived on my eyelids for over a year, so I am writing in order to stop seeing its reds and blues when I close my eyes. I am trying to exhaust this past year's language and let it drown out the retinal burn that won't rub away.

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I am starting with the palette and the palate, because even in imagining these colors, my tongue is miming their names across the roof of my mouth. Painting is slough sloughing. I am saying it out loud. Painting is sloo sluffing. The former is a mire, the latter a shedding skin, but one is a noun and one a verb. It would be easy if the mire mired or the skin skinned, but here the mire is skinning, and skins are coming off the mire. Slough (sloo) comes from Old English for muddy place and is cognate with Middle High German for ditch, which is cognate with Lithuanian for drop, spot, and spray. Slough (sluff) is cognate with the Middle High German for snakeskin, Lithuanian for creep and crawl, Latvian for glide and slide, and comes from a root for cast off, shed. This slough makes the same ending *f* sound as trough, which is what animals eat out of, and comes from a root for tree, which is funny, isn't it? It's easy to imagine the painter's palette as mud mixing, fermenting, bulging, and hardening, but for it to cast off its skin requires another action from the painter, or else there would just be a bog, which is related to an Old Breton word for rotten.

This painting is in acrylic, and if that seems more removed from the earth than oil, consider that plastics come from petroleum (Latin *petra* for rock + *oleum* for oil). Or just mix up a bucket of acrylic with too much water and let it stand a few nights, lift up its hardened skin and take a whiff. That is a proper bog.
What I am saying is that, etymologically, mixing paint might have to do with snakes slithering through the mud. The painting I am writing about does look like scales sliding past in ordered momentum, their harsh edges interlocking like gears and behaving like a fluid. What a contradiction in their very being, reptiles, slippery fortresses. But they are so named for their actions, from a Latin verb for crawl and creep, cognate with Old High German for shoot, tendril. And now the etymologies are overlapping like the scales that make up this painting, and there may be some ur-word at the end, but it won't be as clean as coral.

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It is important, for now, that there is a connection between "crawl" and "tendril," which soothes my unease with the picture. I have felt for too long that I was looking at both plant and animal, trying to figure where one ends and the next begins, because the interlocking pieces of this painting are themselves sewn full of interruptions, blue and turquoise flitting across its red field in dimensional strides or flaps of the wing, not unlike an Escher design where one creature's shape and its negative merge and swap places across a patterned field. Sometimes, I feel as if red is actually the foreground, that I am glimpsing through curling foliage, and with each movement of my eye, a breeze has shifted the frame. There is vertical momentum in the small openings of its intersections like sprocket holes in a film reel. There is also the diagonal, mutating movement of the colors themselves, and the incongruous seams that trace across those planes like sutures.

I am still thinking about the snake, the way it sloughs skin from muscle, and how that translucent leftover retains form in its hollow like the opaque trough that is a felled log carved out, lifegiving for animals, and the other slough that is somehow a decay and a creation—mud and spray—how life yields to form and back as it ferments. I have to think of the painting now as skin and architecture. "Paint" has roots in Slavic and Saxon meaning variegated, and derives from a reconstructed proto-Indo-European root, to hew, cut out, stitch, embroider, sting, paint, mark, or color. How do you begin to understand such a root, which involves pain, repair, pattern, shock, designation, and defense? I am interested in *variegate*, which enlists color as an agent of change. This painting is rolled out under glass like a specimen, except that it will not yield a singular name to the viewer. It is hard to describe its structure, its red shoulder leaning on a reciprocal blue, its downward seams and pools, its unfolding arcs that follow the rough symmetry of petals or feathers, the way that it all recalls the dignity of a slug's shoulder moving with a slowness indicating mathematics.

Have you watched the caterpillars that shuffle themselves in waves across stalks of parsley? Those green worms invaded the modest crop of herbs outside my studio this year. I caught one of them escaping across the chipped red paint of the patio, a bracing green spotted in black and yellow. Reaching out with my index finger, I touched its body. Instead of recoiling, that stumbling length reared up and slid an appendage out of its forehead. The orange organ, called an osmeterium, is forked like a snake's tongue and emits an odor to repel predators—but to us, it smells like sweet fruit. The caterpillar, Papilio polyxenes, the black swallowtail, will metamorphose into a butterfly, and its black wings will have blue and orange markings similar to those of another species, *Battus philenor*, which sequesters acid from its food as a deterrent for predators. It is an example of Batesian mimicry, where a harmless species resembles an unpalatable one to reduce its chances of predation. Mimicry is a simile mistaken for a metaphor, but is still a difference.

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At the root of variegate is the drive to diversify, which is both synonymous and at odds with the drive to distinguish. This painting, made through a series of variegations—coloring, cutting, and piecing—resists cohering into any single image precisely because each inflection point that creates a difference is mirrored and superseded by more difference, and its fragmentation throws even the underlying pattern into disarray. This is the crux of the painting: it resists being described as either picture or pattern.

I want to call it a camouflage, the way that blue creeps across its surface like foliage, but I don't know what is hiding, or what it is hiding among. I can try to describe it as a territory or a map, and its toothy curves begin to resemble shredded bits of continents, as if the skin of a globe had been peeled away in swaths and pressed back together, making a puzzle out of oceans and mountain ranges. It is obvious that this was once another painting, with less interruptions, with less difference. What would it mean, in this instance, for a painting to play at being unpalatable? It would—like the butterfly's wing—present itself in blinks between movements, always pushing the eye to its edges.

I want to use words like ventral and dorsal, recto and verso, but I am overwhelmed by the feeling that I am seeing all sides at once, and in that abundance each edge is a fold. I am reminded that a map is not just an image but a piece of the very world that it represents. It is not so much that this painting resists being named by naming so many other things in its formation, but that its mutations continuously swallow what they begin to resemble.

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I am thinking of Louise Bourgeois miming her father's cruel dinner table trick, cutting a figure out of a tangerine and peeling its double-sided picture away from the fruit. On its front, a crudely drawn woman, and on its back a pithy joke, the nub of the citrus's core sticking out of the figure's groin. Between each flat duality is a spongy, thready field. I am also thinking of Bourgeois's *Hanging Janus with jacket* (1968), a bronze sculpture of two winged penises facing each other, or a thumb and forefinger grasping downwards, moments away from contact and recognition. Look at the central blue patch in this painting, the way that it surrounds the middle hole with such ambiguity, its jagged edges a roughness forbidding designation.

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There is a striking image of a headdress found at an archeological site in Peru: the forehead ornament is shaped like a bird in flight, its eyes made of mica, its beak a real specimen from a blackbird, and its wings covered in macaw feathers, which, after over two thousand years still retain their pigment. It is an image dressed in the plucked and rearranged plumage of its own source, a way of breaking apart the world and gathering it back together with intention. Another blackbird from the *Icteridae* family, the Baltimore oriole, is so named because its feathers resemble the yellow and black coat of arms of the Lord Baltimore, George Calvert, a pattern that also features on the Maryland state flag. The design of the Calvert shield, six stripes of alternating gold and sable, is interrupted by a diagonal that reverses each color and creates a checkered pattern. In heraldry, the pattern is said to be counterchanged, which is an alternation but also a variegation. The bird itself is a flash of black and orange flitting between leaves, named for a person representing a place, represented by a pattern disrupting itself. It is a brute lineage of a word.

Perhaps there is a way to look at naming as an associative abstraction from life, not a cold designation from a long-dead specimen. If there is any chance of drawing an axis in this painting, one that can be counterchanged and counter-counterchanged—because some of these colors are murky enough to have passed through each other to get back to the start—I have to finish setting up the poles of its spectrum, which are crimson and turquoise. They are, uncoincidentally, two colors that combine to make black.

If you were to mix this black on a glass palette, you would squeeze out some alizarin crimson with a smaller measure of phthalo turquoise and a much smaller measure of raw umber for body. Once combined, the mixture will appear black almost immediately because of its density, but you will need to fan it out in concentric circles until it is thin enough to show its true color. As the knife runs through the center to the edges, it will flash red, green, and magenta as the pigments mix. You will have to pass light through the mixture to get to black. Adjusting with phthalo when the flashes are too warm and alizarin when they are too cool, those liquid skins will darken against the glass. After the brilliance of pure synthetic pigment, then magenta, then purple, the knife will not be able to scrape any more iridescence out of the pile, and you will be left with ink.

Ink, which comes from the Greek enkaíein, “burn in,” is a word that has been used to describe the sky, but it is something that should instead be measured against the sky. Ink is what is traced against twilight, branches and wires against a fading sun. Outside the window by my desk, there is a massive catalpa tree in my neighbors’ yard, its drooping bean pods like some dried scrawl. In spring, black is the crisp shadow of each catalpa leaf against one another, curving to a point and repeating, overlapping like so many giant ears listening to the wind.

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Where there are gaps in the leaves and the sky shows through, those jagged shapes burn into the eye, so dense is the surrounding foliage—not unlike the gleaming white gaps that run up this painting like road markings rushing by.

The only black in this painting is in its shadows, the thin lines where cut edges along a pattern overlap and allow air and dimension into the picture. They interrupt color so that even if you could say this was a picture of dappled sunlight hitting a slanted roof, you would have to acknowledge the roof itself, the texture of the tiles, the way that they interlock. This painting's disruptions form an integral part of its structure, creating not an effect, but a condition of the material's survival.

If you trace those thin shadows, you will find a multitude of faces: left of the center, there is a red chin rounding up to a parted lip and a stark nose, and just below it, another slanted profile, the same curved chin, open mouth, and defined nose. Towards the corner, the silhouette has been reversed, the ridge of its nose continuing into a brooding forehead. At top right, the figure is doubled, first in red, then in blue. It is a consequence of the painting's facture, its interlocking tabs with tongues and slots designed to fit into each other. But it is almost impossible to focus on the underlying structure because each bit of definition in these edges signals something animated, each merlon in its parapet a Janus-faced apparition, each crenel like the vase in that famous illusion. Why use a castle vocabulary to describe these strips of fabric that fit into each other? Because, increasingly, I feel as if this reptilian fortress is looking back at me and that its anthropomorphic horizontality, its bent toward the profile, is a deflection of its mask. There are several etymologies for merlon, the solid portion of a battlement; one connects to the Latin merula, the blackbirds that, sitting on a wall and facing each other, could create such a pattern. There are two related words in heraldry—the English martlet, a bird that is always in flight, so is represented without feet; and the French merlette, a "blunted" bird having no beak or claws. I'd like to describe these tabs in the painting's pattern as a form of blunting, a word that comes from the Icelandic blunda, to shut the eyes. Is each tongue a dulling or a sharpening of the image? The chiseled profiles that appear over and over do lack obvious eyes, but they also appear as teeth in a multidirectional maw.

Off of the cliffs of Cannon Mountain in Franconia Notch, New Hampshire, there used to be a granite outcropping resembling the profile of a human face, alternately named the Great Stone Face and the Old Man of the Mountain. The rock formation was the center of an Abenaki legend as well as a short story by Nathaniel Hawthorne. Millenia of freezing and thawing cracked the rock, and for decades, the state buttressed the structure with metal rods and cement, even installing gutters above it to divert rain flow.

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But, twenty years ago, the formation finally collapsed into the slanting field of debris below. A legacy fund was established and quickly installed viewfinders at the base of the cliff superimposing an image of the face on its former site, recovering the lost illusion. The granite profile also survives on state license plates and road signs, where it surrounds route numbers in bright white. New Hampshire's is the only state quarter to contain a profile on both sides, Washington and the stone face, recto and verso.

The painting that I am writing about is titled *A good rain is coming* (2022), and I can't stop thinking about the futile gutters that were installed above a mass of granite to keep it from fracturing off a cliff, and the steel rods and chains failing to hold it in place. Look at the threads in this painting—a thick green zigzagging against red, a denser one against turquoise, and thinner, almost invisible seams, like hairline fractures, that form an incidental web across the surface. Imagine the moment where liquid forced open tons of rock. I am trying to count the rotations in this painting, to picture its faces as tumbling icons in the air in the night. Their arcing movements, which are like so many moonrises against the catalpa's skeleton, somersault and interlock in freefall. It is grounding to know that this composition is the cut up and rearranged remains of a tondo. So if its roundness is interrupted, it is only for the sake of multiplicity, of productive confusion.

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Because color has been the context for associating without any limits, I have to describe the tangible, which is inaccessible but does have limits. This description has to do with tectonics, which, beyond geology, is about building, weaving. The painting, which used to be a circle of sewn patches of crimson, turquoise, and blue, and was originally named after an early Mondrian watercolor of an amaryllis, has been cut apart into twenty-four pieces using an unfolded raisin box as a template, then put back together in a six-by-four grid so that each extended tab of the template overlaps with that of its neighbor, mirrored against vertical axes.

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I want to take this raisin-box pattern and make a verb of it, so that I can describe what the painting does. Italian has *rasinate*, where grapes are picked and left to dry for months before being made into wine, concentrating sugar and flavor as they shrivel. Winesellers often discuss two distinct facets of a bottle, its nose and its palate. But for a creature like the snake, they are one and the same. Snakes smell by collecting scent with their forked tongues continuously darting in and out, transferring particles to the vomeronasal organ on the roof of their mouths. So we are back to the palate, and this painting's palette, which is at its most vibrant when it glints in peripheral vision. I am realizing that though these patches are opaque, they act as transparencies, crimson darkening and blues and turquoises taking on a warm tint. There is a short line on one of its tabs that I had assumed was stitching, but up close it is actually a rubbing of the canvas's toothed texture, crimson yielding to turquoise. The way that these colors are infiltrated, impregnated with one another, there is the sense of a cosmic and slow agitation, visible in the sediment.

What does it mean to tend to a palette with care? I know a painter whose accumulating colors, in humble cups, are stirred weekly like so many mother sauces, and I know a teacher who gives the same first lesson to every incoming class of young painters, instructing them on the proper technique for emulsion in a mayonnaise. The metaphors we use for a painter's palette say everything about the paintings themselves because there is a fundamental difference between a prospector, a gardener, and a cook.

The artist, Kern Samuel, told me well before this painting was made that he was interested in what skin looks like from the inside. As a proposition, it satisfies so many of the terms outlined here. It gets at the inexorable drive to see in between things without separating them, and suggests an alchemy that is totally accessible in the kitchen, the cellar, and the studio. Samuel dissected his painting, but he stitched it up, reassembled it, cared for it. Its new skin is a puzzling, a baffling variegation, which is somehow both inside and outside at the same time. Maybe that is why, in front of it, I feel not only that I am the one being looked at, but that this painting is what I am supposed to be looking through, a mask working in both directions. It can be bark on a trunk, or pressed leaves and shattered stone, but its thinness is a condition of reticulation, each diverging mark in its foliate heads a trembling that allows more in. It is a buttressing, just as plants strengthen the soil that they grow in. By warding against any one reading, this network of associations grows more condensed, more interwoven, more structurally sound.

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In early summer, my neighbor's catalpa shed one of its blooms and it landed on my patio. The flower was a frilled white thing, a fraction of my palm, and its tubular petals held a shadowy center, two licks of orange like the caterpillar's osmeterium, and deep purple veins that fractured into a shallow spray. To preserve its image, I tried cutting a slit and spreading its curved radius between pages in the dictionary. A week later it was a brown mess, devoid of any former coloration. Because I had only minimally altered its structure, the whole thing shrunk, trying to retract into its former shape. If I had imagined its form from the inside out, starting with volume before beginning to picture something, I might have preserved an image. "Raisinate" could be a word acknowledging time and form simultaneously, a recognition of the amount of decay necessary to get at an essence.

The more words that this painting digests, the more designations that it shrugs around its shoulders and back into its branching structure, the closer it gets to one word, because etymology is a game played in reverse, and it is possible to follow a delta upstream to its source, to take fodder through trough to get to a trunk. Of coral, my etymological dictionary speculates on two origins, the Hebrew *goral* and the Arabic *jaral*, pebble. But pebble itself has no etymology past the Old English papol. Words, like rocks, are blunted with time. The slanting field of rubble that the Old Man of the Mountain landed in is called a scree, from the Old Icelandic skridha, to glide. It suggests a levity in all the violence of painting's roots, so that variegation can be something lateral. There is one more word that I want to follow to its end, which is tendril. It came here from its cognates with reptile, but the English tendril has another etymology, from the Middle French *tendrillon*, bud, shoot, from *tendron*, *cartilage*, from the Old French tendre, soft. Painting, which Kern Samuel has taken to its limit, is a dimension between things. It is not a deflection pushing my eyes away, but a network replenishing itself with every diversion. What I was missing in preserving the catalpa flower was cartilage, a sense of order connecting tissue across borders.

There is a sort of proto-image clear to me in the painting now, perhaps a product of all this tangled language. In the bottom left quadrant, I see a figure with an outstretched arm and a tool thrust into a receptacle, like a pestle in a mortar. The mortar itself stretches downward like a hollowed trunk stuck in the ground. In that red log, there is a pool of turquoise being ground, being dipped into. It is identical to the holes in the middle of the raisin box pattern, something hewed, cut out, changed with color, a palette. Piled into this trough, it is able to push past recognition to get at something that can't be said or seen, marrow to these bones. It is a softness.