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[Culture Club](#)

In the Studio with Painter Peter Halley

by [Alexandre Stipanovich](#)

Since the early 80s, New York artist Peter Halley has been painting the same subject—a jail window from a prison cell. As an essayist, Halley has also written about the prison cell as a metaphor for modern isolation. But his originality also lies in his use of color and texture. Along with [The Hole's KATHY GRAYSON, JEREMY](#) and I visited the artist in his studio as he was preparing for his upcoming show at Mary Boone Gallery, which opens on May 2nd, 2013.

Kathy Grayson: Do you feel like you connect with a lot of young artists?

Peter Halley: Well, yes. I just stepped down as the director of the Graduate Painting program at Yale School of Art two years ago, and I keep up with a lot of former students. It was just amazing to connect with artists in that stage of their development. They were so gifted and doing such interesting things.

Alexandre Stipanovich: In your first show, at International with Monument in 1985, were you already using your prison cell motif?

PH: Yes, the way I work developed in 1981 or 1982. People sometimes complain that my work doesn't change. I think it has changed a lot, but the basic iconography remains very static.

AS: At the time, were you already thinking of painting this way for the rest of your life?

PH: Well, no. It started with the prisons. And then I began to think about prisons being connected to each other. And then I began to think that prisons were maybe a bit 19th century, and that I should get rid of the windows... so they became cells. And so it's been prisons and cells, connected by conduits, ever since then. I do feel that each painting is both autobiographical and a view of the external world; each painting is both a self-portrait and a landscape at the same time.

KG: How has your technique changed in terms of paint materials and approach? It looks like the paintings start mummified with tape, which comes off at different times.

PH: I started using Roll-a-Text® in 1981. You don't need any special virtuosity to make my paintings. Roll-a-Text® and Day-Glo are commercial techniques. In the early 80s, artists had returned to using oil painting and brushes, making romantic figurative paintings. I wanted to emphasize the physical signifiers in my paintings. When I wanted to show the ground plane, I put two canvases together. When I wanted to make the geometry feel architectural, I put stucco on it. So the signifiers in my paintings are physical rather than illusionistic. Traditionally, artists are celebrated because of their virtuosity. To me, virtuosity is a little anti-democratic.

KG: Like, the lone genius who's the only one able to make the specific thing?

PH: It's not all bad, but it's not a good model. It's terribly exclusive.

KG: How many layers of acrylic do you use in your works? It's almost half a centimeter!

PH: Yeah, it's about fifty. You have to re-tape it every five coats. I was lucky to find the Roll-a-Text® powder because it mixed so well with acrylic medium. So I could make this texture and it wouldn't fall apart.

Jeremy Liebman: I grew up in Texas, and there was Roll-a-Text® on the ceiling in my bedroom. I'd just lay there and look for patterns for hours.

PH: Actually, David Rimanelli wrote an essay about that! Throughout the 90s, I used a lot of metallic and pearlescent paint. It was everywhere – they made pearlescent cars, nail polish. Shampoo bottles are still pearlescent. I was totally fascinated, like, why is this pearlescent stuff everywhere? It actually reflected something the critic Frederic Jameson wrote a decade before: that modernist technology was exposed and visible – like the gears of a locomotive or the workings of a typewriter, but post-modern technology is always hidden underneath a smooth biomorphic shell. And it's almost always pearlescent.

KG: Did you have any interest in visiting and experiencing prisons?

PH: I grew up in New York, and when I came back to live here in New York in 1980 after finishing my MFA at the University of New Orleans, I moved into a loft on East 7th street. Living alone in New York, I felt like I was in some kind of prison; it was an isolating experience. I didn't know many people and it was difficult psychologically. So I began to think of the prison cell as an analogy for urban life. The breakthrough was discovering how I was connected electronically – like when I picked up the phone or turned on the radio or something.

I've been saying this for a long time, but I think sitting in front of a computer is a prison. You're really tied to this thing. And I do think it isolates people – you're stuck looking at Facebook or some financial application or whatever your obsession is. The story behind my work is that I believe that people have become more and more physically isolated, and more and more dependent on electronic communication to connect.

AS: I saw this interview of Derrida in which he was saying that whenever he records his voice or image or both, he's leaving his ghost on tape.

PH: That's interesting, and it's a nice way of putting it. In the popular press, especially before September 11th, there was so much naïve millennial enthusiasm about digital culture. Foucault said that it's a writer's role to be skeptical, to challenge things, to point our problems. It's especially important with all of the power behind digital culture and things like Facebook and other new forms of marketing.

KG: Do you feel an urge to update your materials? Do you look to technological fields for materials?

PH: I do think I was innovator in terms of using digital prints, starting in the 1990s.

KG: Did people challenge its validity as an artistic strategy?

PH: No, but collectors usually aren't interested in things that are completely reproducible. I use digital print-making to make mural-size works. I'm not very hi-tech. I'm interested in the idea that digital prints allow us to make really big images for a cost that would have been inconceivable ten years ago.

KG: Your art doesn't seem to be didactic or illustrate your thoughts in a literal way. It still seems poetic and subtle.

PH: Thanks. I'm kind of analytic, and I'm certainly interested in other people's ideas. But my visual brain is very child-like. In my early prison paintings, I took the ideal form of the square and made it into something confining – a prison – by putting bars on it. That's a very child-like way of doing things. [Laughs] The part of the brain that artists use to make music, art, or poetry is different than the one they use to walk around with. That's pretty fascinating. Actually, working with students, part of the goal was to help them figure out who that creative person was.

JL: Do you think that cellularizing or structuring society is a negative development?

PH: Well, kind of. You know, with the rapid development of capitalism and digitalization, I think there's a lot to worry about. The idea that it is reductivist and that it can limit human potential is valid. And I think it's true that wealth is getting more polarized. But I've gotta say that, at the same time – with the exception of Foucault – Baudrillard, Roland Barthes, Virilio and all of those French writers were quirky and funny, as opposed to the Germans and the Frankfurt school. You could actually enjoy reading about all of these dangerous things happening; there is a pleasure in all of these texts.

JL: Have you found your work to be fetishized?

PH: That's an interesting question. The condition of the established artist is almost always to be fetishized. When I was younger I used to think, "Oh, poor Richard Serra. Nobody talks about his work any more. They just say, 'how beautiful.'" It's practically impossible to get people to focus on the issues once you've been on stage for a while. It's amazing.

AS: Is that even more true with the painting?

Ever since I became an artist, I've asked myself, why does painting still exist? I've lived through the death of

painting and all arguments about paintings. My theory is that paintings are unique because they stimulate the brain both as images and as tactile experiences. A great painting is one whose texture interests you, like in Van Gogh or De Kooning. Even if you don't touch the painting, it appeals to the tactile part of the brain. That's what my paintings are based on. Texture doesn't have to be hand-made. Perhaps painting is popular because, by stimulating two pleasure centers at the same time, painting yields a unique intense pleasure.