Modern Painting

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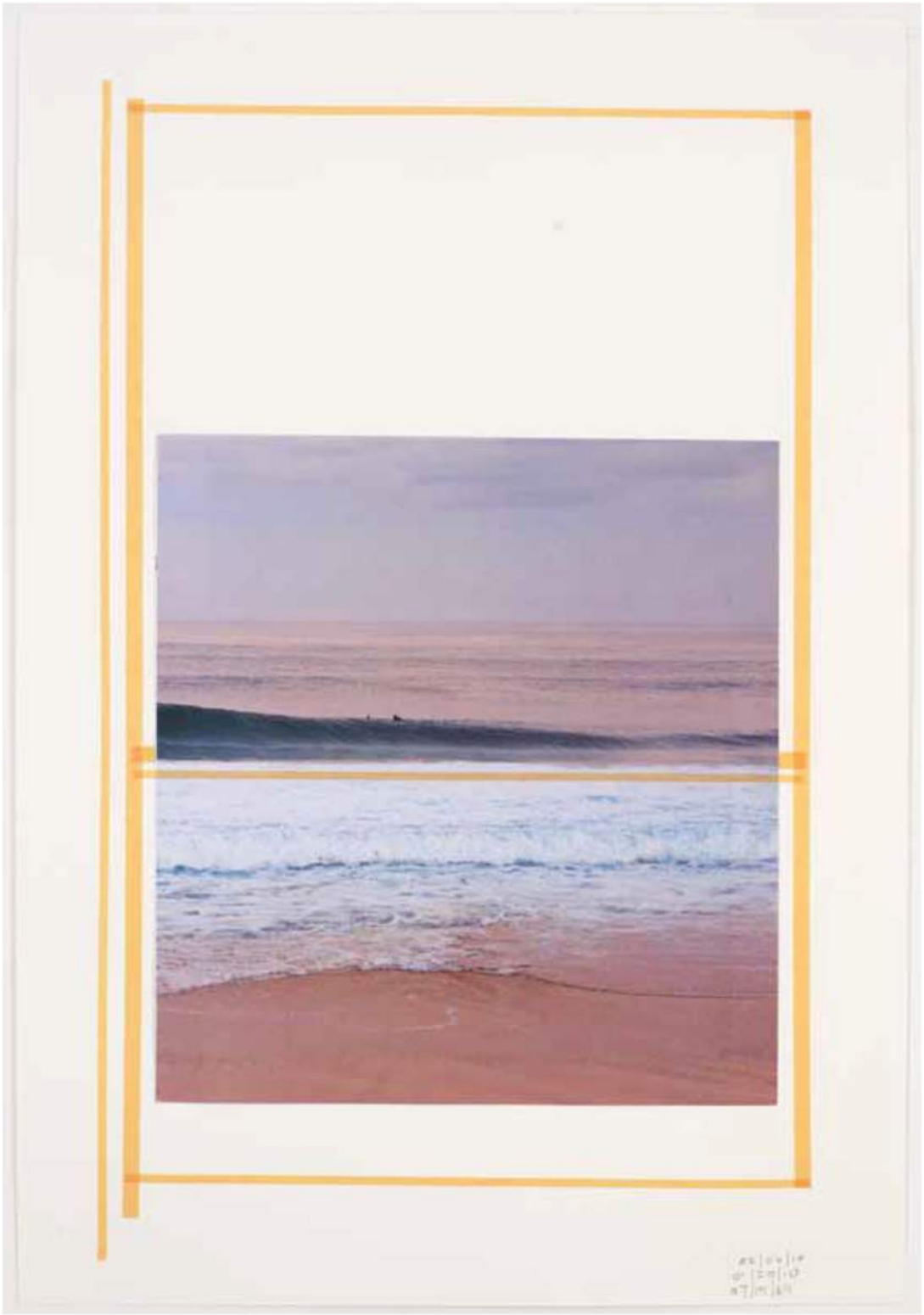
Modern Surfing

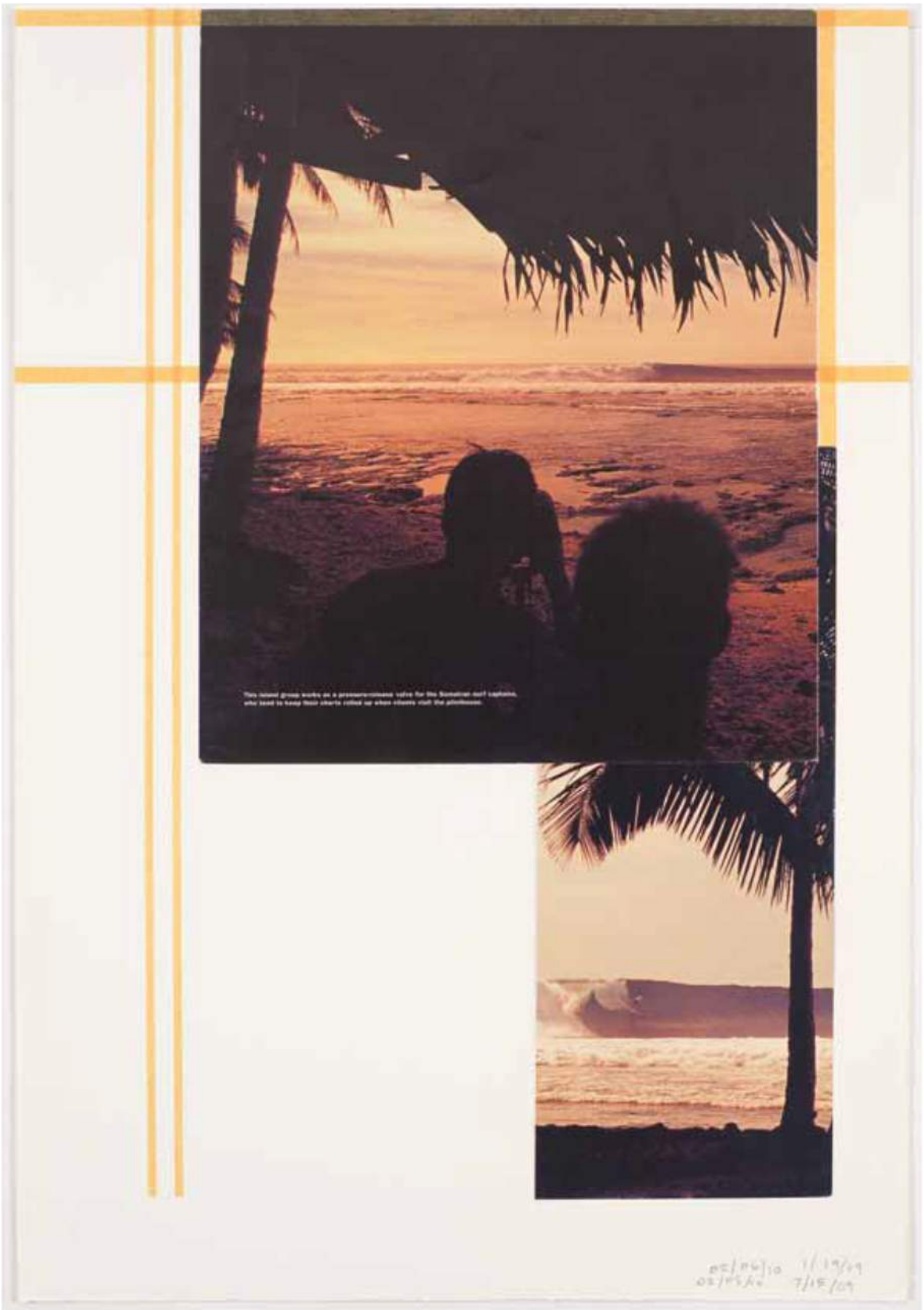
Ann Pibal



Untitled (Surf Drawing, Dawn), 13″ × 19″ 2010
All images courtesy of the artist.

Untitled (Surf Drawing, Dusk), 13″ × 19″ 2010.

Untitled (Surf Drawing, Windy), 19″ × 13″ 2010.



Untitled (Surf Drawing, Profile), 13″ × 20″ 2010.

Untitled (surf Drawing, Pipe), 13″ × 20″ 2009.

My husband, Colin Brant, and I spend a couple of months each winter in Southern Baja. The first time was in 2009, when we packed up our three-year-old, our art supplies, our deadlines and some peanut butter and headed south. We'd made previous trips to Baja; youthful outdoor wanderings complete with sleeping bags, new friends and pipes carved from apples. But this time we weren't looking for adventure as much as to flat-out escape New York. We rented a house with a garden and studio space in Todos Santos, a small coastal town favored by retired ex-pats and creative types, which on our previous trips we'd considered a great place to do laundry and take a shower but not much else. This time, with its genius collision of gritty details and luxury amenities including a Montessori school for our daughter—it ended up being the perfect far-away place, and we now think of it as home away from home.

Todos Santos attracts a lot of surfers. These tanned, bleached, athletic types are easy to spot around town, especially in the afternoons or on days when the surf is small. That first winter we learned that most of them, in other guises, are artists, landscapers, web designers, seasonally flexible freelancers. A few are year-round residents, making a go of small-town Mexican life. In every case they're people who, in one way or another, are going to great lengths to be in the water, for whom a morning without surfing is not satisfactory. All of them, it seemed to me, were also unusually relaxed. I envied them, but it was disorienting at first to be surrounded by people who were actually competitive about how much time they were able to spend not working. To me, habitually high strung, this was a welcome and yet annoying reversal of the New York art world's stress-equals-success lifestyle.

Frustrated watching the action from the beach and supremely inspired by the handful of accomplished women surfers in Todos Santos, I started taking lessons from the go-to instructor-about-town, Mario. In the beginning, I learned simply that surfing is a lot harder than it looks—getting smashed as I did repeatedly in the whitewater, and at first only catching bigger waves when Mario pushed me onto them with a super-powered shove.

I was also curious about the aesthetics and history of surfing; it all immediately seemed like fertile territory for the studio. I was thrilled when I found, in a café give-and-take library, a generous pile of vintage issues of *The Surfer's Journal*. I poured over them on my daily visits for juice and Internet access, and gradually pilfered every last one, bringing them to my studio to study and read, and eventually to dismantle and cut to pieces for use in my drawings.

Within these pages I discovered the prophetic story of Laird Hamilton finding Bill Hamilton, I learned about Mavericks, about the spectacle of tow-in surfing and the legendary death of Mark Foo. I read about long-ago adventures in mainland Mexico and Honduras, countless stories about groups of young men—who were now probably the age of my father—braving the elements and "local" politics, eating out of cans and out of the sea. I studied one photo after another of surfing as spectacle: images taken by men of men watching men surfing at sunrise, sunset, and in all weather conditions. There were also pieces highlighting the aesthetics of surfing old and new, profiles of famed surfboard artisans in pristine sea towns who must have died with lungs full of fiberglass, epoxy, and the tar of so much THC. Many issues of *The Surfers' Journal* profiled surfers who also made art, painters of a beautifully virtuosic *plein air* variety—"Eucalyptus School", as Philip Guston put it. Perhaps ultimately and foremost, those pages held the majesty of the ocean, expert photographers having captured repeatedly and in every imaginable variation, the beauty of the water itself.

Never did I see, in that very tall and heavy stack, a story that profiled a woman. There was the wife of the man who had built the amazing house in Costa Rica, who was surrounded by her husband's handmade furnishings as she sat nonchalantly for the camera alongside two beautiful blonde daughters. There were the occasional, and totally delectable, girlfriend shots, and a story about "girls" surfing on a small day alongside some local children from a remote island somewhere. There was also the glaring absence of non-white protagonists on these pages, except for an enormously compelling story about a black surfer who rose to prominence in the 70's.

So, what was I so interested in here—aside from the romanticized portrayal of mostly handsome, privileged young men adventuring without shirts and dressing up like sea mammals? It wasn't just the scruffy coifs and sparkly eyes looking out from those pages, but the overall dreamy effect and fantasy of it, and—ultimately for me –a palpable desire to transcend a regular way of living on land, in a house, burdened with things like earth-bound gravity and employment.

These traveling surfers, essentially dropping out to drop in, were otherwise ordinary guys

(really, I'm not overstating it—pretty much just guys) enthusiastically interacting with the formidable power of nature, and not afraid to talk about the experience with romantic language. These guys, the ones in the magazines, and many I met in Todos Santos, were dedicating vital chunks of their lives to an activity with little value beyond the intrinsic. In unusual cases, fame is possible, but it's a kind of recognition, however, that really only amounts to a fleeting notoriety among this small and specialized group. Surfers and the surfing lifestyle began to seem a lot like artists and the artists' lifestyle to me, complete with the social cache and coded language of the insider, and dominated by intensely patriarchal energy.

I wrote to a friend, "Surfing is the ultimate Modernist sport, perhaps even more so than poetry." I was intending to provoke a laugh, but I meant it; I wasn't sure exactly what it meant in the literal sense, but intuitively, I meant it.

It's easy to draw comparisons, of course: image-making and surfing are ancient activities—surfing surely as old as swimming in any ocean, and creating an image as old as picking charcoal from a fire. When I considered the specifics however, the surf movement as popularized cultural phenomenon really only gained momentum in Hawaii and California in the mid-50s through the 60s, just at the time Americans were also taking pride in a new group of abstract painters to emerge in New York. Both played an enormous role in the shaping of the cultural demeanor of the post-war United States and both presented an iconic image of optimism and bravado, projecting the potential and power of the individual, evoking the sublime, the mysterious, nothing less (truly) than the conditions of life and death. All of this was accomplished, in both cases, while side-stepping the expectations of mainstream lifestyle, and apparently having a terrifically good time.

One could argue the two also followed tandem trajectories as cultural barometers through the 70s and 80s. As Andy Warhol turned a mirror on popular fascination with the superficial and the horrific, Francis Ford Coppola wielded surfing as evidence of unfettered American Imperialism and a naive, prideful, monocular vision. The surf scenes in *Apocalypse Now* present an orgiastic conflation of surf reverie with unfathomable violence—apple pie-faced, Californian optimism now forever translated as a driving desire for conquest, and ultimately innocence lost to irony and collective guilt.

And, in the 90s and onward, artists and surfers went pro in numbers never before imagined—to me a contradiction in terms in the most basic sense. For the professional surfer or artist, the core of the impulse or inquiry is easily subsumed by a desire to please an eager marketplace.

At present, both surfing and the art world have hopefully reached their dark energy spectacle pinnacles, with media encrusted helicopter tow-in surfing perhaps not that different from the extremely priced art object, both fabricated primarily in service to wealth and notoriety, and not necessarily that of the individual artist or surfer. For the art collector on the international circuit or the elite luxury traveler contracting with an airborne surf guide combing offshore breaks in New Zealand, the rarefied and hard-won readily turns banal commodity.

The painter David Reed once told me his theory that swimming is the experience in life that's closest to abstraction; that when the body is submerged in water the perception of its boundaries, literally its physical limits, necessarily becomes altered. In order to contend with abstract images, it follows, one must likewise suspend an understanding of the limits of language, similarly allowing for knowledge to be forged in alternate zones. And finally, that both the experiences of abstraction and of submersion in water are akin to sex: the ultimate "losing" of one's self to the other, losing an awareness of the edge of the self in the interest of expanded experience.

For my part, these analogies are amplified when applied to surfing. I've found the anticipation that builds while waiting for a wave and the subsequent satisfaction of actually catching one is an enormous physical release. The thrill of a ride's intensity coming and then going, the distortion of time and space, and inability to truly collect into perception what precisely happened. These sensations may only partly explain the addictive habits of dedicated surfers, whose skill is gradually earned through the notorious, ultimate-strength reinforcement of intermittent conditioning continually provided by fickle waves, crowded breaks, and the intense physical challenge of it all.

Even now as a relative beginner, I can feel this desire driving me forward—an unreasonable craving to experience the rush all over again—perhaps much less complicated, but definitely not unlike the desire with which I return day after day, to my studio.