



# Justin Caguiat

## *Triple Solitaire*

September 17–December 8, 2024

Ezra and Cecile Zilkha Gallery | Center for the Arts | Wesleyan University

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In Justin Caguiat's hands, painting is a slow cinema. His work expresses a duration that spans a nostalgia for imagery of the past while speculating on possible futures, folding together multiple temporalities in the present of the gallery. Caguiat's exhibition, *Triple Solitaire*, is composed primarily of three large canvases, densely-layered abstractions that take time to perceive but also index times themselves. The artist uses pigment in these works which oxidizes in response to the chemical composition of the environments in which it's situated, as it moves from studio to gallery. Also in a process of transition is a new mirror-painting. The silverleaf of the mirror was applied over paint and linseed oil, which will in turn oxidize the silverleaf over time, removing its reflective properties. As the images themselves transform, sound works by the artist suspended from the ceiling immerse the viewer in a different rhythm that itself conditions the viewing of the paintings. This exhibition at Wesleyan is the artist's first institutional solo exhibition.

Caguiat's practice extends across painting, sculpture, film, poetry, and sound. Working through different mediums, Caguiat's abstractions resonate with a variety of references and aesthetics. For the artist, it is more interesting how the works accrete or defer meaning rather than how they resolve in fixed or knowable images. These paintings do not assert their objecthood. They are presented on unstretched canvases inside frames, leaving exposed the textiles' edges.

The three new large abstract paintings installed along the three walls of the Main Gallery of the Ezra and Cecile Zilkha Gallery are a triptych, comprising one panoramic work. The panorama, a type of painting popular in Europe and the United States in the 19th century, presented the audience with the possibility of an immersive experience where the distinction between image and reality would be blurred. Caguiat is interested in this state, referred to as "locality paradox," wherein a viewer was no longer aware of their location, and how that experience might be altered with a non-representational panorama. The architecture of the gallery will further interrupt the work's continuous viewing as the limestone buttresses, like the edges of frames on a film strip, intersect the white walls.

## CHECKLIST

### **Justin Caguiat**

*Untitled (black)*

2024

Oil on linen triptych

92½ x 191¼ inches each, unframed

### **Justin Caguiat**

*Untitled (silver)*

2024

Oil, acrylic, paper on linen

92½ x 193½ inches each, unframed

### **Justin Caguiat**

*Untitled (yellow)*

2024

Oil on linen triptych

92½ x 193½ inches each, unframed

### **Justin Caguiat**

*Untitled*

2024

Oil, oil medium, silver leaf on glass

44 x 87 inches

### **Justin Caguiat**

*Untitled*

2024

Umbrella, speaker, hardware, media player, audio file

Dimensions variable

Edition of 3, 2 AP

All works courtesy of the artist and Greene Naftali, New York.

# ***Slow Cinema***

Benjamin Chaffee

In 2001, the Wexner Center for the Arts mounted an exhibition titled, *As Painting: Division and Displacement*. Curated by Philip Armstrong, Laura Lisbon, and Stephen Melville, it was “intended as an exhibition of painting” and concerned itself with what could count as painting.<sup>1</sup>

The curators also recognized the historical specificity of this idea—what counts as painting today is based on what mattered as painting in the past. Regardless of the historical depth, the counting happens in the present.

Justin Caguiat’s practice has leaned deeper into abstraction as a method for his paintings. The artist finds that abstraction reduces the potential for interpretation and he’s interested in putting himself in situations where he can paint freely. This includes separating language, particularly description, from his studio practice, to keep himself from the requirement to explain, propose, or describe a work until its complete. At the same time, the artist is aware that to adopt abstraction as a form today is to self-consciously perform a historicized method. As the curator Hamza Walker described it, “painting’s history is a finite collection of styles readily offering itself up for quotation.”<sup>2</sup>

For the purposes of writing about Justin Caguiat’s *Triple Solitaire*, instead of “as painting,” we’ll use “painting as.” The artist Richard Artschwager self-proclaimed a “lexicon of 6 nouns (table, door, rug, basket, window, mirror)”<sup>3</sup> wherein he situated core mundane forms as key objects within his

sculptural and painting practice. Using three of these nouns for *painting as*: door, window, mirror, and adding another couple “members,” film and the panorama, will frame ways to think of the operations painting performs within *Triple Solitaire*.

### **Painting as window**

This is an old simile for painting. In his canonical text from the Renaissance era, *On Painting*, Leon Battista Alberti writes about the similarities in shape between his rectilinear painting and that of a window. Alberti is also famously known for instructing the depiction of perspective through the literal use of a window. “First of all, on the surface on which I am going to paint, I draw a rectangle of whatever size I want, which I regard as an open window through which the subject to be painted is seen.”<sup>4</sup> As an early text on painting, Alberti also sets expectations for the relationship between painting’s materiality and its image. We don’t look *at* windows (paintings) but rather *through* them to observe something else.

Windows slow down light waves at different rates bending and altering its appearance as it passes through. Windows, and paintings as well with their suspended pigments, refract light, altering its color, and reflect light, creating opacity. Rosalind Krauss addresses this, and painting's relationship to the window, "As a transparent vehicle the window is that which admits light—or spirit—into the initial darkness of the room. But if glass admits, it also reflects."<sup>5</sup> For Krauss, painting relates to the window by means of the adoption of a grid. Within *Triple Solitaire*, this relationship is emphasized by the placement of the paintings—each of the three paintings of the triptych are installed across from the gallery's three large bays of windows facing out onto the landscape. These windows are a key feature of the gallery's design—their large panes were custom-made at their span for the Roche-Dinkeloo design.

### **Painting as panorama**

*Triple Solitaire* is anchored by a triptych of paintings, one for each of the white walls of the gallery. Installed opposite the large north-facing windows of the gallery, these landscape paintings stand as speculative windows, or mirrors of the suburban landscape beyond. The building's architects, Roche Dinkeloo, envisioned the blending of interior and exterior through these large windows. In scale and proportion, Caguiat's triptych is also reminiscent of Claude Monet's *Water Lilies* (1914–26) at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Monet's paintings are three panels of a much larger series—the other twenty-two of which were gifted to the nation of France and were installed on a curvilinear wall, like a panorama.<sup>6</sup>

Like the *Water Lilies*, Caguiat is interested in his triptych to have a relationship to the 19<sup>th</sup> century tradition of panoramic painting, though rather than depicting a landscape within these works as Monet, Caguiat's paintings are abstractions. Panoramic

paintings were typically presented on rotundas or circular walls which immersed the viewer in their image, often confusing the spectator between what was real and what was image. Dubbed 'locality paradox,' Romantic poets, including William Wordsworth, rallied in critique against the panorama. Even the 20<sup>th</sup> century painter Jack Whitten, in his posthumously-published studio notes, *Notes from the Woodshed*, critically addresses this capacity in art, "By being able to locate things in space I am able to locate myself. Frankly, I think that this is what ART IS ALL ABOUT: BEING ABLE TO LOCATE YOURSELF IN SPACE."<sup>7</sup>

Some Romantic poets claimed that panoramic painting was an illusion intent on deceiving the viewing public and others focused on issues that this type of painting created with the sublime.<sup>8</sup> "...What was 'panoramic' was also understood to be 'sublime'—most often by virtue of the given art work's aesthetic power (to move its reader/viewer/listener) or its size (exceptionally large and diminutive alike)."<sup>9</sup> It was Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Charles Lamb who introduced the term, "material sublime," to distinguish the effects of the panorama from those of the sublime. For these poets, our experience of the sublime was distinct from material while our experience of a panorama was necessarily grounded in it.

### **Painting as mirror, as door**

Krauss continues in "Grids," "And so the window is experienced...as a mirror as well—something that freezes and locks the self into the space of its own reduplicated being. Flowing and freezing: glaze in French means glass, mirror and ice; transparency, opacity, and water."<sup>10</sup>

The triptych mirrors the windows and situated flat against the large east wall of the gallery is another new work by Caguiat. Produced like a handmade mirror, this work contains a

painting sandwiched between its reflective silverleaf backing and the glass substrate. Caguaiat applied the paint via a large monoprint technique, by painting on another piece of glass and pressing it onto the back of the work before the silverleaf was laid over the top. Over time the work will turn from a mirror with reflective properties into an oxidized non-reflective painting as the paint and resist (linseed oil) interact with the silverleaf.

Gerhard Richter made his first mirror work in 1981 and later “realized *Six Gray Mirrors* as a site-specific work for Dia Beacon in 2003.”<sup>11</sup> Art Historian Benjamin Buchloh wrote about this later series of works, grappling with their complex presence as mirror, monochrome, glass, and painting. The mirror, while illuminating, also obscures and erases. Richter himself explained the symbol of glass as “to see everything to understand nothing.”<sup>12</sup> As Buchloh put it, the mirror paintings are “...the improbable synthesis of void and transcendence.” He went on to ask, “When does the process of voiding and erasure in painting give access to a higher transcendental experience?”<sup>13</sup>

While Richter’s mirrors were primarily concerned with destabilizing space (and painting), Caguaiat’s mirror interrogates time. In the eighth of Molly Zuckerman-Hartung’s “The 95 Theses on Painting,” she addresses painting’s relationship to time, “Painting is an activity that takes place within quotidian time and has the ability to expand and transform clock time beyond the everyday, toward the eternal.”<sup>14</sup> In this work the “painting” merges with the status of mirror, eventually loses that status, and is consumed by painting. This is one strategy to deal with the monolithic monster of painting – to not deny its appetite but to feed it.

The image actually produced by this mirror painting is both ephemeral and contingent. Not only will the work’s image change over

time as the work itself obsolesces but its reflectivity will also re-produce anything within the gallery as its fugitive composition. The architectural space will be reflected along with cropped images of other works and viewers themselves. This work is also cut in the proportions of a door. Presented against the large east wall of the gallery, the placement of the work emphasizes an architectural relationship and also becomes a threshold. Not truly a door, it has no hinges and will never open but exists as an in-between, between spaces, just as the work itself exists between states.

### **Painting as film, cinema**

There are three transparent umbrellas suspended from the ceiling of the gallery space, each containing a speaker playing an unsynced track. As highly-processed found audio works, each of the three pieces operate as soundtracks for the paintings in the gallery introducing additional affective states. Their presence suggests that the gallery space is also a cinematic space and the paintings are film(s).

It’s a slow cinema – the mirror painting is very gradually oxidizing and the pigments on the large canvases are changing even more slowly through their exposure to light and air. Each of the white gallery walls, where the triptych is installed, are divided by buttresses of large limestone bricks. This segmentation of the continuity of the paintings echoes the black lines dividing individual frames of a film strip and fragments the “image” of the complete triptych. Viewers will never be able to fully see the combined triptych at once within the space. The work exists within this purposeful tension due to its scale and architectural interruptions. Each painting, which the artist envisions ordered from left to right, is both reduced to image within the space of the “cinema” and also grounded in a material object (like film). Esther Leslie in her essay “Painting’s Flat Support, Canvas

and Screen," writes about painting's ability to project, or be projected within space, "to produce the illusion of presence, of something that exceeds the flatness of its support, does not just reach back into the depths of the image's perspective, but leaps out, such that it 'would seem within reach of your hand.'"<sup>15</sup>

### **Painting as painting**

Using the simile of *painting as* or *as painting* reminds us that painting is always situated within language. This semiotic potential, is or is not, as or as not, is forever being negotiated. The artist Charline von Heyl spoke about painting, knowing about painting, and its connection to language, "Thinking about painting, which we all do as painters all the time, obviously, and thinking always coming back to this kernel of stupidity where you cannot name, where you know about something but you cannot name it. And it has something to do with language."<sup>16</sup> Even Stephen Melville questions painting's relationship to language and his own use of "as:" "Why should one see this or that as painting?...Can I see the view out my window as painting?...when I see a painting, that's what I see. What you see is what you see. 'As' just ain't in it."<sup>17</sup>

Rather than accessing painting's language through a theoretical framework, *Triple Solitaire* plays with paintings' operations by working through them. Painting becomes a possibility for accessing or working with ideas akin to the ways popular music can allow us to access deeper ideas and feelings. And we can participate even though we know it is ridiculous, willingly complicit with its own theatricality. Painting, within *Triple Solitaire*, is everything contained within the frame and potentially outside of it as well. Anything, including a door, window, mirror, film, or panorama, has the potential to be "as" painting. Paintings' gravitational forces draw in towards itself the installation, the space, the air, the sounds, the architecture of the gallery, the

performance of the painter's subjectivity, its relation to historical modes, and the language that attempts to give it form. Painting can resist its own naming and our metaphoric knowledge about it *through* something else even as it poses as another.



## Endnotes

- 1 Stephen Melville, "Counting / As / Painting," in Philip Armstrong, Laura Lison, Stephen Melville, eds. *As Painting: Division and Displacement*. Wexner Center for the Arts, Ohio State University, 2001, p. 1.
- 2 <https://renaissancesociety.org/publishing/45/abstract-this/>. Accessed March 19, 2024.
- 3 Richard Artschwager, "Mirror, Revolving Door (Sine of Life), Door," in Dieter Schwarz, ed. *Richard Artschwager: Texts and Interviews*. Kunstmuseum Winterthur and Richter Verlag, Düsseldorf, 2003, p. 53.
- 4 Leon Battista Alberti, Cecil Grayson, trans., *On Painting and On Sculpture: The Latin Texts of "De Pittura" and "De Statua"* Phaidon, London, 1972, p. 55.
- 5 Rosalind Krauss, "Grids," *October*, Vol. 9 (Summer, 1979), p. 58.
- 6 The wall label for this work in MoMA's collection explains, "After Monet's death, twenty-two panels were installed on curved walls in the Musée de l'Orangerie in Paris: a gift from the artist to the nation of France. The remaining canvases stayed in his studios until the late 1940s, when collectors and MoMA curators began to take an interest in them." <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/80220>. Accessed August 26, 2024.
- 7 Jack Whitten in Katy Siegel, ed. *Notes from the Woodshed*. Hauser & Wirth Publishers, 2018, p.132.
- 8 J. Jennifer Jones, "Absorbing Hesitation: Wordsworth and the Theory of the Panorama," *Studies in Romanticism*, Fall, 2006, Vol. 45, No. 3 (Fall, 2006), pp. 357-375.
- 9 *Ibid*, pp. 358-359.
- 10 Krauss, p. 58.
- 11 <https://www.diaart.org/exhibition/exhibitions-projects/gerhard-richter-exhibition>. Accessed September 3, 2024.
- 12 *Ibid*.
- 13 Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, "Gerhard Richter's *Eight Gray: Between Vorschein and Glanz*," in *Gerhard Richter: Eight Gray, 2002*, p. 15.
- 14 Molly Zuckerman-Hartung, "The 95 Theses on Painting," in Molly Zuckerman-Hartung and Tyler Blackwell, eds. *Molly Zuckerman-Hartung: COMIC RELIEF*. Inventory Press and Blaffer Art Museum at the University of Houston, 2021, endpapers. Zuckerman-Hartung's ninth thesis grounds this push towards the eternal: "This movement toward the eternal has been critiqued as Romantic but is as realist and banal as keeping one's hands in warm dishwater on a sunny afternoon. The decision to space out—to get lost in a moment—is an always available decision."
- 15 Esther Leslie, "Painting's Flat Support, Canvas and Screen," in Avigail Moss and Kerstin Stakemeier, eds. *Painting the Implicit Horizon*. Jan van Eyck Academie, Netherlands, 2012, p.60.
- 16 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2D41C\\_onAk8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2D41C_onAk8). Accessed on March 19, 2024.
- 17 Melville, p. 9. "What you see is what you see," is Frank Stella. Melville cites Bruce Glaser, "Questions to Stella and Judd," in Gregory Battcock, ed., *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*. E. P. Dutton, New York, 1968.

# Profile

Justin Caguiat (b. 1989, Tokyo) lives and works between New York and California. Recent solo exhibitions include Greene Naftali, New York (2022); The Warehouse, Dallas (2022); Taka Ishii Gallery, Tokyo (2021); Modern Art, London (2023, 2020); and 15 Orient, New York (2018). Significant group shows include Greene Naftali, New York (2023); Modern Art, London (2023, 2021); Lomex, New York hosted by Arcadia Missa, London (2020); and Clima, Milan (2019). Caguiat is a published poet and has participated in various readings and performances, including in 2017 at the Kunsthalle Zurich, Switzerland. His work is in the collections of the Dallas Museum of Art; the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; Hessel Museum of Art, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York; Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; and San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, among others.

# Related Events

## Opening Reception

Tuesday, September 17, 2024, 4:30pm–6pm

Ezra and Cecile Zilkha Gallery

## Gretchen Lawrence Performance

Sunday, November 3, 2024, 2pm

Ezra and Cecile Zilkha Gallery

## Justin Caguiat Artist Talk

Wednesday, December 4, 2024, 4:30pm

Ezra and Cecile Zilkha Gallery

Curated by Associate Director of Visual Arts Benjamin Chaffee '00 with Exhibitions Manager Rosemary Lennox and Preparator Paul Theriault. Special thanks to past Exhibitions Intern Emmett Levy '24 and current Intern Noah Shacknai '25. Thank you to Justin Caguiat, Blue Marcus, Gretchen Lawrence, Sam Agnew, Cory Nomura, Greene Naftali Gallery, Rani Arbo, Andrew Chatfield, John Elmore, Tony Hernandez, Lynette Vandlik, and Joshua Lubin-Levy. Support for this exhibition and related programs were provided by Greene Naftali Gallery and Wesleyan University's Studio Art Program.

Cover image: Justin Caguiat, *Untitled* (sketch), 2024, pencil on paper, 5¾ x 8¼ inches.

Courtesy the artist, Greene Naftali, New York and Modern Art, London. Photography by the artist.



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