

A Layered History of Art: From Semitransparent to Opaque

A Layered History of Art: From Semitransparent to Opaque is a continuation of a number of past projects in which I have altered various kinds of commercially produced paper and printed texts. Over the years, my work has moved from deconstructing one of the most widely read religious texts, to manipulating contemporary art magazines, to examining blank sheets of white and colored paper, and now, to tearing apart and re-composing one of the most widely used art history survey textbooks written in the last fifty years. My interests have ranged from the necessity of taking personal responsibility for the interpretation of a holy text to issues that revolve around the circulation of information about the contemporary art world and its relationship to the market place. In each of these projects the source material was transformed—systematically copied, reproduced, and re-presented to the viewers—yet to some extent, these transformations merely held a mirror to the thing itself, as many photographs do. However, on another level, while the re-presentation of books and magazines in my work reveal less information than what the originals contain, they simultaneously open up the originals to more interpretations and varied meanings. *A Layered History of Art: From Semitransparent to Opaque* takes a seminal art history survey textbook, *Janson's History of Art*, as its subject and source material. In this project this text has become a singular work of art in which every page has been relocated and positioned on the same picture plane; it too retells the history of art, albeit in a way that requires viewers to interpret its meaning via the visual language of art instead of a linear, text-based narrative.

To create this piece, *Janson's History of Art* was literally deconstructed by removing every single page from the binding, individually scanning them on a high-resolution scanner that passes light through them, and then re-combining the files into a single, massive digital document. The written and visual narrative has been simultaneously obscured and enhanced by filtering light through the pages, which superimposes both sides onto a single file such that one side of the page becomes a mirror image of itself. The result is a new rendition that further complicates the line between fact and fiction. This visual remix is further reinforced through the overlapping of multiple pages that generates a random juxtaposition of images and texts. Just as there were particular reasons for moving away from the printed page to blank sheets of paper prior to making this work, the time has come to return to pages full of information. While the narrative presented in *Janson's History of Art* will always be imperfect and incomplete—the textbook has had plenty of critics over the years and will continue to have them in the future—it has introduced many students to the discipline in which I am a part. In fact, I read this textbook as an undergraduate student. While I cannot recall the exact moment, this book most likely, at least in part, contributed to my decision to become an artist. In this respect, it is a celebration of this text.

A Layered History of Art: From Semitransparent to Opaque reflects upon the construction of historical and contemporary narratives of art even as it questions the resulting stories and their final form. It is an exact, one-to-one replication of every single page of *Janson's History of Art*, while at the same time, the information contained between the covers has been overlapped and layered in ways not possible with the book in its original format, except perhaps, within the mind's eye. While not an art historian, my practice as an artist often reflects upon the ways in which information about art is disseminated to the public. This project enabled me to widen the span of my research to include the entire history of Art, at least as it is presented in this singular, seminal textbook. As stated above, each page was removed from the binding and scanned by projecting light through it, thus, each page is made to function like a photographic negative, or more accurately, a transparent positive. This engagement with photography corresponds to the recollection and writing of histories. Photography is often uncritically perceived as a medium that produces objective records, yet simultaneously, and perhaps more often, it is a means by which a photographer may produce utterly subjective imagery. Similarly, the written word traverses the continuum from fiction to non-fiction. The contemporary form of digital appropriation used in this project provided a way for me to create a new rendition of *Janson's History of Art*. Thus, this project moves beyond the historical artworks reproduced within the textbook as well as those omitted, all the while remaining in dialogue with them on their own terms, that is, through a multi-layered and non-verbal means of visual communication.

A Layered History of Art: From Semitransparent to Opaque should be considered in relation to more contemporary works of art that strive to critique dominant histories, the ways in which they are constructed, and the means by which they are preserved. Artists continually position their work within broader historical contexts in order to bring to the fore its reliance upon that which has come before, even as it bridges the gap between the past and future. This project is not intended to serve exclusively as a negative critique of this textbook or historical accounts in general. In fact, I believe there is value in textbooks such as *Janson's History of Art*, if only to be used as grand narratives to confront and react against in order to get closer to the truth. This project also functions as another vehicle by which these kinds of narratives are repeated and reinforced. The final piece is composed entirely of images and texts from this popular art history textbook and may be viewed as homage to or a critical reflection of an artistic lineage. The transparency of the images references the act of sorting slides by art historians in preparation for their lectures, which is a practice that is rapidly being replaced by searching for image files stored in digital archives. *A Layered History of Art: From Semitransparent to Opaque* has enabled me to venture into new territory by creating my most ambitious project to date. Yet, when moving forward one should always keep an eye on the rear-view and side-view mirrors, all the while remembering that the reflected objects—in this case, the history of art—are often closer than they appear.