

UNPATTERN

JACK FEATHERLY

August 7 – 30, 2014



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previous page detail:
Unpattern7, 2014
full view on page 10



A CONVERSATION BETWEEN ARTIST JACK FEATHERLY AND CURATOR JOSEPHINE ZARKOVICH

Jack Featherly's work incorporates lush, vibrant colors, layering compositions that oscillate between flat geometry and painterly abstraction. Each large-scale canvas is rendered painstakingly by hand, layer by layer, but the eye is moved between the meticulous flatness of found images and the rougher texture of gestural color fields. Each work feels like a negotiation between multiple visual inputs, suspended in a momentary and sometimes precarious balance that is not easily unraveled.

In his exhibition *Unpattern*, Featherly gathers from a number of sources, most notably ASCII text art, an image-making technique that became popular on the internet in the early 90s before digital photographs were easily exchanged. From the first bulletin boards, to early AOL chat rooms, web users made use of a limited range of text characters to create ambitious, intricate images that were shared, collected and reposted. Using these digital artifacts, Featherly crops and embeds the text art within the paintings, further pushing them to the limits of legibility. Once placed, the images take on new meaning, becoming part of a greater landscape.

I had an opportunity to discuss the work further with Featherly in the following interview.

JZ: Looking at this series, the first thing that jumps out to me is the incorporation of ASCII text art into the work. What interested you in using that style of imagery?

JF: Well, my interest evolved over a few years. I had a few friends who were exchanging images and I realized that they were something that could be turned into pictures on paintings. Conceptually, I was attracted to the amount of stylistic remove the images and process possessed. There are multiple personal and cultural filters at work that I can unravel and tamper with. The natural, if unintentional, fusing of process and image was very painting-like.

As an image-making process it feels rooted in a very specific time, the early days of AOL, when sending photographic images over the internet was typically not feasible. Faster internet speeds essentially made the art form obsolete.

JZ: How do you see your work intersecting with that history?

JF: For this body of work I focused on early images sourced from historical internet collection bins. Basically all the images date from before 1992. They're ping [.png]

images! I wanted to see if I could take raw material like that and make it feel fresh without having to completely obliterate its history. Also, preserving its place set up a framework for talking about how we interact with technology without things spinning out of control. Its very analog nature sustains the pace of conversation. In addition, I wanted to talk about the human part of the images' existence, as they are real things that people went to the trouble to create.

JZ: What are some of the parameters you set in this series? Were there initial questions that you wanted to explore?

JF: I came to see the *Unpattern* series in particular as a resistance to the tyranny of algorithms. There are basically two types of algorithms: the human type which we call behavior patterns and which we are all familiar with the difficulties of managing, and the digital type which we encounter daily through electronic mediums. Ignoring television for the moment, which is rather rudimentary, we mostly deal with them through the various forms of internet connectivity. A recent example that caught my attention was when a friend said he posted a photo to his Instagram account of a specific image he created which related to a body of work he has been developing. As soon as he posted his

image, Instagram showed him four images that were very similar to his, which I considered an insultingly stupid gesture of lowest common denominator. Why, I wondered, wasn't the default to show him four completely random images? (We won't discuss what 'random' actually 'can' mean.) A similar color or composition or some other relatively benign marker that would promote creative thought? As Instagram isn't really set up as a profit-making device as of yet, there was no reason to make such a decision except to promote a sense of community in order to further participation, or set the groundwork for more direct advertising based on established interactive models. Just because participation is assured, must the intrusion of advertising be necessary? In more everyday use, algorithms are well documented as having an extremely limiting effect on a user's ability to effectively hunt and gather information freely.

I realized that the ASCII images were free of most of these constraints. They functioned (read) as patterns but were actually simple and relatively productive algorithms that had real potential to do good and were free of capitalist motivation except for the limits of the original creators of the image, whose training I could easily undo.

In answer to your original question, my parameters were relatively simple: make interesting things that hopefully incorporated ASCII images. I began by making simple studies to see if I could replicate the ASCII effect as a painting.

JZ: So you are using an image that is generated digitally, cropping it and then stenciling and hand painting it onto the canvas, a very laborious and time consuming process. How does that process change the original image?

JF: I underestimated the amount of development that process would encompass, but as I've been able to realize them they've become easier. A lot of the images start with the generic qualities of a stock photo. It's my job to focus them into malleable social situations that imply narrative and social construct. That is then complicated by the inclusion of the qualities of painting. Local color issues impede easy recognition. Scale can turn them into physical encounters that require close and distant viewing. Which in turn creates a sort of after image or mapped version that the viewer carries in their memory that will constantly be at odds with the real.

JZ: The layered quality of the work suggests multiple overlapping drafts, with some content covered over or

obscured. Is the final image fairly set at the beginning of the process or do the works evolve from layer to layer?

JF: Each painting develops organically through its individual history. There is constant revision between distinct steps, where the goal is a totality. One or two step conversion painting has been done to death and at this point yields overly familiar response patterns. I rely on optical relationships that physically engage the viewers' senses, rather than attempt to fool or lull them. The goal is to, in a Buddhist sense, be in the moment with each painting as I work on it, allowing whatever is pushing me to dictate what I do. Then when a group is finished, they should possess a larger language that speaks to a way of viewing or addressing the world.

JZ: How does this body of work connect to your earlier work, particularly in respect to the use of appropriation?

JF: Even when I graduated in 1990, we were talking about post postmodern work. Relatively speaking, that means nothing, but it talks about positioning. Appropriation is a tool, and as I have severe doubts about the veracity of various art histories, it's one that I see as having been used for as long as humans

have existed. Appropriation is an output of need: sometimes one can create something out of whole cloth, sometimes one needs to have fixed points of reference. The politicization of appropriation is a form of self-regulation that is debatable, but those conversations can of course be useful. I have been using appropriation unconsciously since I began painting.

JZ: You talked about limiting the number of experiments in a work to control the potential of failures. Can you expand on what you mean by that?

JF: Knowns and unknowns! Scientists call them constants and variables. For the snarky, we can talk about known unknowns, which is really what I'm talking about. They are slippery because they are ever-shifting. Unknowns become known as a painting progresses, which allows for secondary questions to be asked. The general principle is to have a couple of things that you don't know or understand what the output will be in a given work. They are couched within a familiar environment where you have a level of mastery so you can focus the work on the exciting part of discovery. It's a bit esoteric, but it is a general framework to work from. When you start to compound the number of risks (unknowns), you can quickly lose control of the situation

where the output is accepted to be a successful work of art.

JZ: I hear you've already stretched a new set of canvases. Where are you going next?

JF: *Unpattern* is from a body of work created over last year or so where my goals were to move back to oil paint and to expand my visual language. So there are a lot first or second takes on ideas that I want to further explore. I was focusing on historical antecedents within the ASCII and am looking forward to pushing into more contemporary uses, which are more abstract. I want to continue my pursuit of representations of humans through representations of humans.

Josephine Zarkovich is an arts writer and curator based in Portland, Oregon. She received an Masters in Curatorial Practice from California College of the Arts and has staged exhibitions in numerous organizations, including Disjecta Contemporary Art Center, The Worth Rider Gallery, and the Wattis Institute. Her curatorial work focuses on engaging audiences and fostering critical discussions around popular culture.



Unpattern7, 2014
oil paint and enamel on canvas
66 x 54 inches

right:
Positive Trend (detail), 2014
full view on page 12

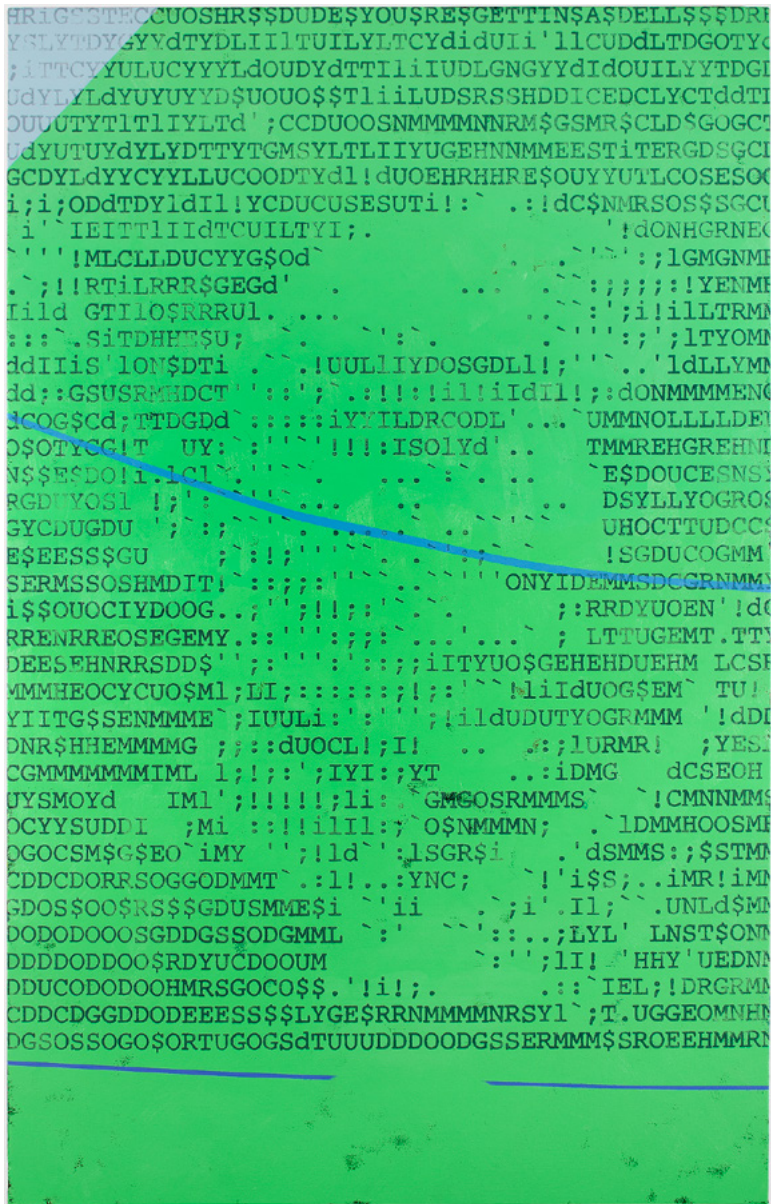




Positive Trend, 2014
oil paint enamel and ink on canvas
78 x 54.5 inches



4126, 2014
oil paint and ink on canvas
66 x 42 inches



Unpattern6, 2014
oil paint and enamel on canvas
67 x 42 inches

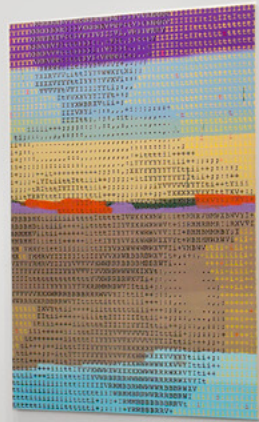
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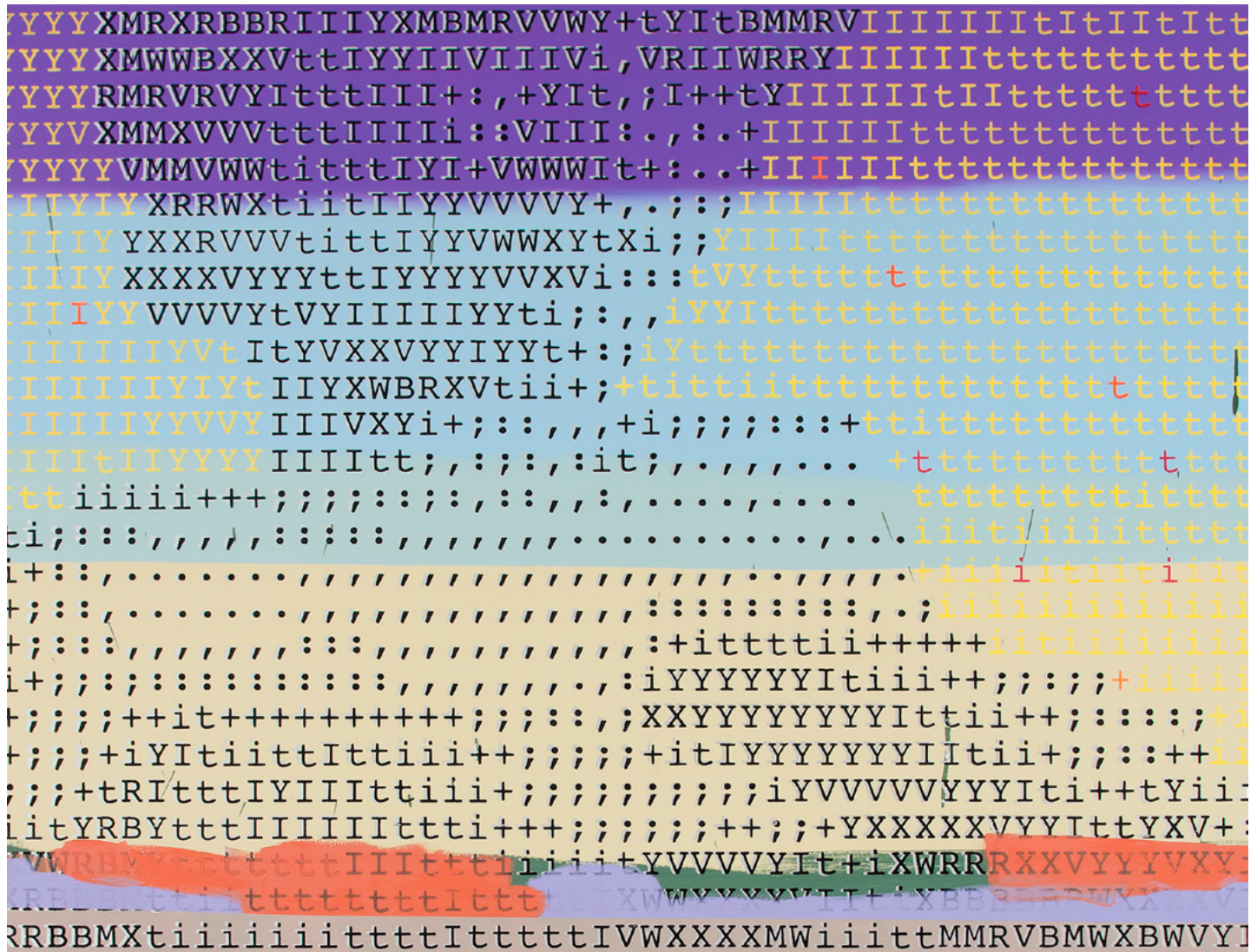
Unpattern5, 2014
oil paint, enamel and ink on canvas
72 x 60 inches



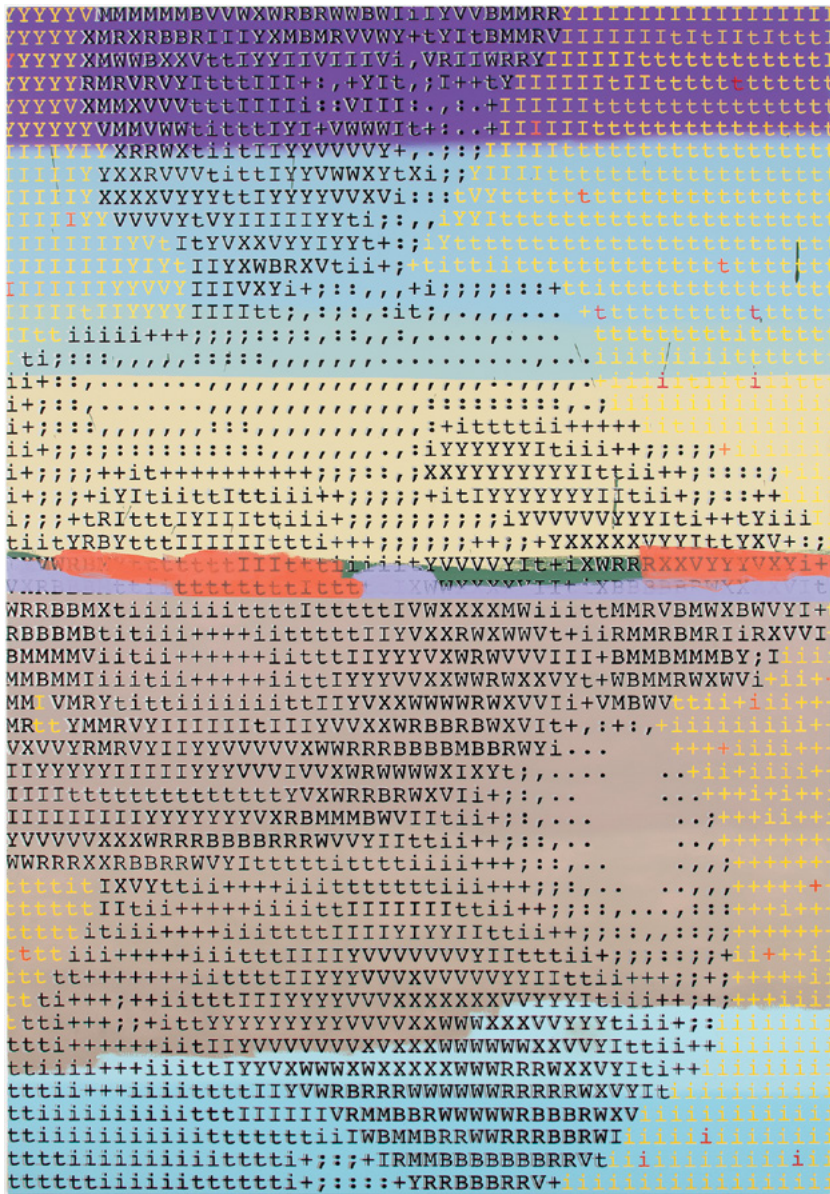


Cocktails, 2014
oil paint and ink on canvas
37.5 x 27.5 inches





Unpattern4 (detail), 2014
oil paint and enamel on canvas
full view on page 22



Unpattern4, 2014
oil paint and enamel on canvas
78 x 54 inches

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Unpattern2, 2013
oil paint and enamel on canvas
48 x 35 inches



Inez, 2012
oil paint and enamel on panel
56 x 80 inches



Fracking2, 2013
oil paint on canvas
60 x 45 inches



Fracking1, 2012
oil paint on canvas
53 x 42 inches

Unpattern7, 2014
oil paint and enamel on canvas
66 x 54 inches

Positive Trend, 2014
oil paint, enamel and ink on canvas
78 x 54.5 inches

4126, 2014
oil paint and ink on canvas
66 x 42 inches

Unpattern6, 2014
oil paint and enamel on canvas
67 x 42 inches

Unpattern5, 2014
oil paint, enamel and ink on canvas
72 x 60 inches

Cocktails, 2014
oil paint and ink on canvas
37.5 x 27.5 inches

Unpattern4, 2014
oil paint and enamel on canvas
78 x 54 inches

Unpattern3, 2014
oil paint and enamel on canvas
47 x 32 inches

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oil paint and enamel on canvas
48 x 35 inches

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oil paint and enamel on panel
56 x 80 inches

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oil paint on canvas
60 x 45 inches

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oil paint on canvas
53 x 42 inches

Jack Featherly (b. 1966, Rolla, MO) makes paintings that begin in traditions of gestural abstraction, product packaging, TV graphics and ukiyo-e, but end somewhere completely new. His work is stylistically diverse and avoids presenting an “easy read,” but is nevertheless magnetic due to the meticulous craft and lack of obvious conceptual basis. The current body of work uses common visual references such as ASCII text and Garry Trudeau's *Doonesbury* as a starting point from which to explore color, form and meaning. Featherly's solo exhibitions include Team Gallery, Jose Freire and Christopher Henry (New York) and Rena Bransten (San Francisco), and he has shown throughout the United States and in France, Germany, South Korea and Japan in two-artist and group exhibitions. His work is in the corporate collections of Progressive and Chase Bank and in various private collections. Featherly completed a BFA at Pacific Northwest College of Art in Portland, OR (1990).



This catalog was created for *Unpattern*, a solo exhibition of work by Jack Featherly, on view at Upfor in Portland, Oregon from August 7 through August 30, 2014.

Photographs of artwork and details by Evan La Londe.
Installation photographs by Jim Lommasson.

Typeset in Berthold Akzidenz Grotesque.

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