

I'll be your mirror.... : On Craig Drennen's *Merchants*

I'll be your mirror
 Reflect what you are, in case you don't know
 I'll be the wind, the rain and the sunset
 The light on your door to show that you're home¹



Quentin Matsys, *The Money Changer and His Wife*, 1514, Oil on panel, 70.5 cm × 67 cm (27.8 in × 26 in), Louvre, Paris

Like all of the work in *Timon of Athens*, Craig Drennen's *Merchant* paintings image a particular character in the Shakespeare play of the same name. Drennen has advised that the shapes of the *Merchant* paintings are directly related to the images of the COVID 19 virus that has been ubiquitous in media over the past few years. The reiterated circular motifs (monochrome circles, pledge pins, cardboard dollar signs) that follow in logic of the spherical illusion allude to the "spike proteins," perhaps linking infection and virality to the idea of exchange. The tondo form itself directly relates to

¹¹ The Velvet Underground and Nico, "I'll Be Your Mirror." Lou Reed, Songwriter. Recorded April, May & November 1966. Track 3, Side 2. On *The Velvet Underground and Nico*. Verve Records. Vinyl



Detail *The Money Changer and His Wife* showing the image of the “Debtor” and the surrounding environment.

coins. Moreover, there is a profound attention to spherical illusion in these paintings that make them more than simply circular, they appear to be *convex*. This attention to illusion combined with the silvery cool palette brings to mind the *mirror*. And historically, convex mirrors have appeared in Netherlandish paintings that deal specifically with commerce and exchange.

Anthony F. Janson refers to the reasoning for imaging mirrors, “Because of their association with light, mirrors have had numerous mystic connotations throughout history, and reflected images have traditionally been valued for their revelatory power.”² The convex mirror appears in Quentin Matsys’s *The Money Changer and His Wife* and also in Petrus Christus’s *A Goldsmith in His Shop*. Both paintings contain the staggering

attention to detail that is the hallmark of Northern Renaissance painting. They are evidence of technologies—namely lenses and oil paint—that allowed artists to create images of the world that were more than real. These genre paintings demonstrate the skill of the artist, no doubt, but they are also inventories of the lives of the merchant class and the people they served. The paintings contain the tools of the trade, the fashions of the time, the general environment, and the affect of the people. And they do this with an equality of vision—everything is in focus and nothing is left out. As noted by Janson, the mirrors allow the artists to bring even more of the world into the picture. The mystic position of the all seeing (and thus all knowing) sky god is now bestowed upon the viewer.

So pictures of merchants have often contained much more than simple images of commerce and the convex mirror was a way to include additional information. In addition, these paintings were opportunities for the display of a painter’s command of technologies—an opportunity to demonstrate how well they could replicate the world. Jan Van Eyck’s *Arnolfini Wedding Portrait* (painted in 1434 and housed at the National Gallery in London) does all of this and in addition shows the painter as *witness*. All of the attention to detail and relentless focus are present through out the picture but the end here is much more than simple depiction. As Erwin Panofsky and others have posited, the painting of a wedding also doubles as the *contract* for the union³. So the painter here is *witness* to the marriage and *legitimizes* it with the

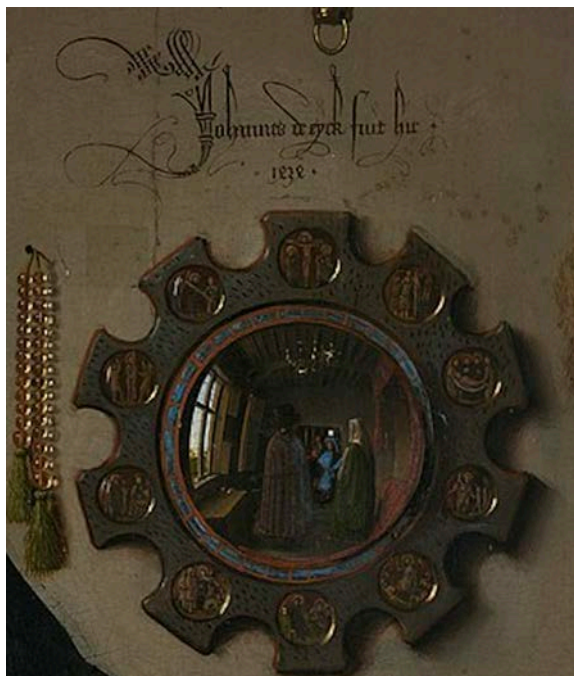


Petrus Christus, *A Goldsmith in his Shop*, 1449, Oil on oak panel, painted surface 38 5/8 x 33 1/2 in. (98 x 85.2 cm)

² Janson, Anthony F. “THE CONVEX MIRROR AS VANITAS SYMBOL.” Source: Notes in the History of Art 4, no. 2/3 (1985): 51–54. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23202426>.

³ Panofsky, Erwin. “Jan van Eyck’s Arnolfini Portrait.” *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* 64, no. 372 (1934): 117–27. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/865802>.

image. Painting is no longer just about observing the world, it attains a documentary function. It is now a record of contractual relationships. Even the signature fittingly placed on the wall above the mirror turns painting into an act of witnessing. *Johannes de eyck fuit hic 1434* (Jan van Eyck was here. 1434): just because you cannot see him, does not mean that he is not there. The text is part signature, part graffiti, part room decoration. (It also must be noted that in the context of this moment, the spikes on the perimeter of Van Eyck's mirror echo those same spike proteins of the COVID 19 virus.)



Detail of Jan Van Eyck, *The Arnolfini Wedding Portrait*, 1434 showing the mirror and signature.

In each of these examples the convex mirror adds additional information to the scene. They enable us to see more but they are illusion of sight, not actual vehicles for seeing because they do not reflect us, the viewer. It could also be suggested that they do not reflect the artists either the presences of whom are suggested by their skill (and in Van Eyck's case his signature *saying* that he was there.) We look to mirrors to present a reflection, a totalizing image of subjectivity. But what happens when the mirror does not reflect the viewer? A kind of terror ensues when you look for your reflection but you are not there. The sculptures of Josiah McElheny make this manifest. His multiple mirrored surfaces that do not reflect the viewer suggest a kind of hermetic world that denies you entry. But these Netherlandish paintings are clear invitations to look and to look deeply. Because they present so much of the world, the paintings recreate us at witnesses-active lookers instead of passive reflections. This affirmation dispels the horror of our absence as an *image* in favor of our presence as a viewer.

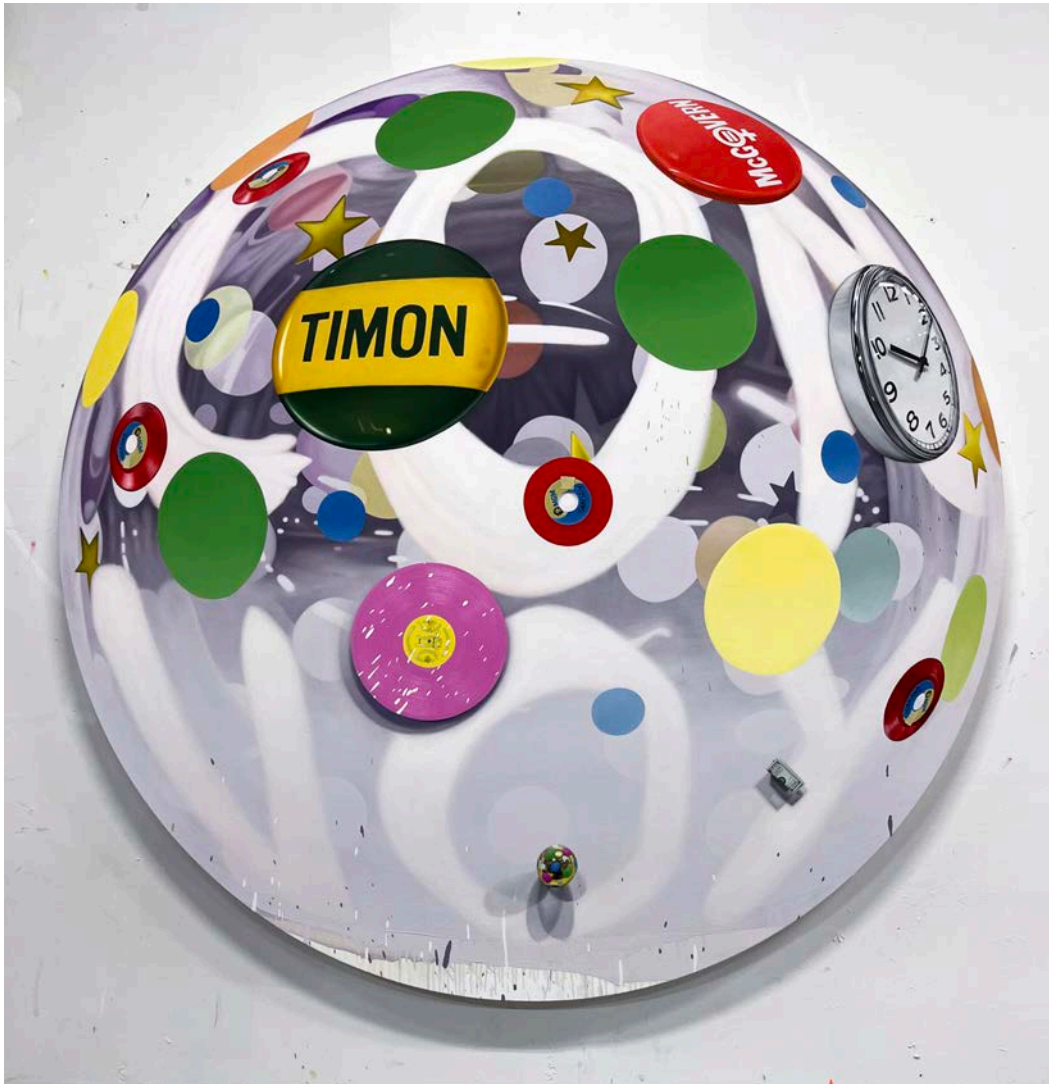
If the convex mirror is often present in paintings of the realm of the merchant and the money lender, then it makes perfect sense that Drennen's *Merchants* present themselves as convex mirrors that deny us intact images of ourselves. The *Merchants* reflect the information of the world as we move through it. The images are at the level immediacy and reality that only oil painting can create. As Drennen has said, "At the scale of the real, with the impact of the real"⁴ but nothing here is real except the substance and materiality of paint manipulated to the point where it assumes and maintains the qualities of a reflective object. Such objects give us the opportunity to see the world anew, or as Virginia Woolf puts it:

Whether this thought or not was in John's mind, the lump of glass had its place upon the mantelpiece, where it stood heavy upon a little pile of bills and letters and served not only as an excellent paper-weight, but also as a natural stopping place for the young man's eyes when they wandered from his book. Looked at again and again half consciously by a mind thinking of something else, any object mixes itself so profoundly with the stuff of thought that it loses its

⁴ Conversation with the artist, 2015.

actual form and recomposes itself a little differently in an ideal shape which haunts the brain when we least expect it.⁵

In the *Merchants* Drennen has given us Woolf's "ideal shape," a form so mixed with the stuff of thought that it contains everything from politics to pop songs and importantly every form of painting known in artistic practice. There is something to be said for using oil paint to replicate known objects in the world. At its core, Drennen's practice contains some of the best still life painting of the current era. But Drennen goes even further and uses painting itself as a still-life object. A close look at one of the *Merchants* bears this out.



Craig Drennen, (*Convoy LeFreak*), oil & alkyd on canvas over panel, 72-inch diameter, 2022

⁵ Woolf, Virginia. "Solid Objects." Project Gutenberg Australia, October 2002. <http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks02/0200781.txt>.

(*Convoy-LeFreak*) is an example of the series. Drennen provides the suggestion of convexity in the painting with a mimetic image of a wall clock positing the illusion of the sphere. The circular monochromes echo the clock in a manner that suggests that they are on a convex surface while at the same time affirming their flatness as painted shapes. The nod to Greenbergian flatness acknowledges the work's relationship to modernist painting. To this Drennen adds paintings of vinyl records that seem to limn the same space, but are painted with shadows and the illusion of volume and texture so that they seem to float in a shallow space just above and/or below the surface. The placement of the circular monochromes and the "clock" and "records" re-presents the dialogue between narrative painting (C.W. McCall's *Convoy* is a narrative about truckers and narrative happens in time) and hard edged abstraction. Painting that suppresses skill and the hand of the artist exists in the same context as painting that affirms the skill and technical acumen of the artist. Painting is *on the surface* and painting *is the surface*.



Drennen pushes the discussion further: forms can carry text and that text can be fully realized in a variety of ways. Meaning can be influenced by methods of representation. By showing painting as a site of verbal communication, Drennen asks us to decipher the ways painterly presentation influences how we think. While the word CONVOY is painted as a convex background in foamy white that references both spray paint and icing, it is *also* painted as if it were written on blue painters tape stuck to a 45. Same word/motif in two different modalities and two different sizes-one married to another object and one as the object, but both in some way acting as a *label*. Where Van Eyck creates the illusion of hand writing on a wall, Drennen paints the illusion of contemporary painterly wall painting-aerosol graffiti-to replicate it. Contrast this with the way the text is painted in other parts of the painting. The label of the *Le Freak* disco single (on deliciously realized 70s colored vinyl) has the quality of machine printing on paper while the button for Timon and McGovern carry the kind of glossy text that is the result of mass production. (It is interesting that the button texts link directly to Timon's journey from hedonism to political failure.) Language appears in a variety of forms that suggest a range of modes of address. A pledge pin addresses a viewer differently than a sign or graffiti.



Then, at the bottom of the painting, a reflective orb casts a suite of shadows on the surface. It is positioned above the kind of gestural mark making and flung paint that are hallmarks of "ab-ex" painters like Jackson Pollock and expressionists in general. It is fitting that the ejaculative mark making of Pollock finds its home on Chic's 70s anthem to hedonism. It is here that Drennen allows the illusion to break apart revealing the process and methodology of layering that is require to execute a painting in this way-a commitment to truth in materials that affected a lot of the painting in the 70s-the formative years of Drennen's emotional and painterly life. And while the painting comes apart at its edges that reflective orb contains all of the weight and presence of one of Woolf's solid objects-becoming a placeholder for vision.

Drennen is not cynically reproducing painterly effects. His work is not *trompe l'oeil* as spectacle but rather *trompe l'oeil* is just one of many modes at his disposal—one of many roles into which he can step. Drennen looks at painting as inhabiting, not just depicting. As we know from Sol LeWitt, “Conceptual Artists are mystics rather than rationalists. They leap to conclusions that logic cannot reach.”⁶ I feel very comfortable saying that no one anywhere conceived of anything like the imagery that Drennen has grafted onto *Timon of Athens*. The entire project is the result of a *singular vision*. Everything about the work comes from Drennen’s painterly imagination and guided by his intuition. Since there is no existing image, he must invent one. To do this, Drennen asks and answers every question about the nature of character—not only the characters in the play, but the character of the painterly expression needed to convey the idea. Then, *he turns himself into that kind of painter* to realize the image through the medium of oil paint. He can be an expressionist, a realist, a photo-realist, a graphic designer, a house painter, a graffiti artist, a sign painter, a medical illustrator, and a process artist. He steps in and out of these characters as needed. He is not quoting styles—he is *embodying* them.

The plural moment he is describing demands that all of these characters are able to be present when they are needed. Like their Netherlandish precedents, Drennen’s *Merchants* image the stuff of contemporary life using oil paint married to the most advanced technology of lenses and observation. For him, contemporary life contains Woolf’s “stuff of thought” that we can access “half consciously by a mind thinking of something else” and it includes the craft and history of painting with all of its varied methods of creating meaning through depiction of form. Drennen lays bare all of the conventions of image making and reveals the ways they create meaning.

When there are so many other ways to make images—ways that are frankly faster and less labor intensive—Drennen’s insistence on using oil paint as the vehicle for these investigations is crucial to the understanding of his project. This *belief* in painting, in its contemporaneity and in its ability to talk about the here and now is at the core of Drennen’s work. This embodied connection to the power of the material is what prevents the work from being cynical. Paintings like the *Arnolfini Wedding* may *image* acts of faith and *image* symbols of fidelity, but Drennen’s faith is not imaged—it is *enacted*. Every painting is a demonstration of his belief that this material—oil paint—can become anything and everything discovered by his intuition.

(*Convoy-LeFreak*) has a variety of modes of painterly expression and each one is realized with wit and technical mastery. And far from being simple inventories of painterly effects, they are evidence of a certain 1970s boy hood where music came to you from 45s and phonographs and jukeboxes. Where time was a *solid, public* thing on the wall of a classroom and badges were beginning to symbol the tribalization of American politics. The *Merchants* reflect this exchange and overlap of culture and ideas; a world where a song about a trucker convoy can share space with a gay Black disco anthem. The *Merchants* connect varied constituencies in one site.

(*The Pill*) reflects a world where the physical relationship to money is in flux (The Nixon Shock—his unlinking of the US dollar to gold—made people and nations start hoarding the latter. US currency essentially became fiat money).⁷ If money isn’t backed by anything except the word, then what is money? Who makes that decision? How do we determine value and what are “American values” as represented by political parties? And the soundtrack for these discussions is Loretta Lynn singing

⁶ Alexander Alberro, Blake Stimson, and Sol LeWitt, “Sentences on Conceptual Art,” in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), pp. 106–108.

⁷ Graetz, Michael J., and Olivia Briffault. “A ‘Barbarous Relic’: The French, Gold, and the Demise of Bretton Woods.” In *Bretton Woods Agreements: Together with Scholarly Commentaries and Essential Historical Documents*, edited by NAOMI LAMOREAUX and IAN SHAPIRO, 121–42. Yale University Press, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvk8vz01.9>.

about the power to make a certain kind of intimate decision-and the economic liberation that goes along with that power. An economic and political power that started to be courted by political actors.



Craig Drennen, (*The Pill*), oil & alkyd on canvas over panel, 72-inch diameter, 2022

Like now, the 70s were fraught financial and political times. Similar issues: liberalism, inflation, gas prices, reproductive choice, state violence, war, and wealth disparity were debated in the public sphere and in the media of the time. There was a vigorous exchange of ideas. Drennen's *Merchants* demand that we reflect on *currencies*. Not just money, but the currency of ideas and dogmas, how they are shared and spread.

The work is urgent and crucial because now we are rethinking our relationship to the past. In an era of "Make America Great Again" and the dismantling of women's bodily autonomy, it is very easy to see how the current moment relates to the 70s in the United States-a time when Drennen was coming of

age and developing a critical consciousness. Like all great still-life painters, he probes and manifests the links between known forms and the emotions they illicit. As the great Jessica Stockholder tells us, “We don’t make anything or think anything outside of a form.”⁸ So Drennen dares to use the form of the Merchant as a site for understanding the form of memory. What is memory anyway? How is it shaped? For Drennen, it is a visual (Jungian) and linguistic (Lacanian) mixture. For example, the word “convoy” conjures up a thing, and perhaps the the song, but the uncanny illusion of a vinyl record conjures up *the time* in a way mere language never could. Vinyl 45s were a staple of the 70s- especially for kids who didn’t have money to buy whole albums or only had access to music through jukeboxes. The 45 speaks of a different kind of musical engagement (Saving money/Going to the store/Sorting through records/Asking if that new 45 by Chic is in/Knowing that as a White kid in West Virginia, that might not be the best thing to ask). Music was something personal you could hold in your hands that was subject to damage and scratches just like your body. Just like the bodies of the women who could finally control their own reproduction.

These are not trivial questions. What does it mean to share or to infect or to intervene? What is virality? For that matter, what is money? Does it have any intrinsic value any more now that actually bills seem to be the stuff of the past? Compare the images of the \$100 bills with the paintings of cardboard “coins” that occupy the lower part of (*The Pill*) and Drennen gives the answer. Anything can become money as long as we agree on its value- fiat money is the fact of most of the lives of people. But imagine having so little that one has to *invent a currency*. And not just money, a currency of ideas or access to a world that is denied you because of the circumstances of your birth.

In the play, Timon uses money because he thinks that it is a way to friendship and connection. Drennen knows that currencies-all currencies-are fungible. And what may grant access one day may be refused by a merchant the next. The only way to survive is to invent and invest in your own value and reiterate it with such force that it has to be accepted as currency. Invention is liberation.



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⁸ art21org. “Jessica Stockholder: Form | art21 ‘Extended Play.’” YouTube. YouTube, March 5, 2010. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XfsqcQThNoc>.