

INFORMED SOURCE

Performing Without a Performer: Vincent Tiley's Rope Paintings

by matt lambert

Despite the broad embrace of interdisciplinary practice, which abandons silos and strict definitions, there are moments when framing work through specificity is crucial. It summons specific histories and canons, contextualizing but also pushing against and interrogating these ideas. In this vein, **Vincent Tiley** is very conscious of calling part of his oeuvre of work *Rope Paintings*. Painting allows the work to engage with concerns of composition, lines and frames. Coming from a performance practice that involves making garments and devices ("There's No Winning With Me") Tiley's bound and tied paintings are a way to summon a bodily presence without being a representation of a particular body. They question if an object can do the work of performing without a human performer present.

For Tiley, garment textiles offer more in terms of surface than conventional canvas, allowing for the condensing and remixing of a body. Tiley uses clothing as a language, which started with the artist's own clothing in works such as "Teen" and branched out to secondhand garments, donated personal items from acquaintances such as in "Black Ant" and new leather hides and bolts of fabric in "Sea of Vapor" and "Crushed Orchid." The work uses garment and garment references as a way to show the body as much as possible without it being there. Tiley bundles the garments and restrains them, cueing the viewer that somebody may lie underneath. As Renate Lorenze in *Queer Art: A Freak Theory* says, "The bundle is reminiscent of a human form; but that cannot be said with any certainty."¹ She continues:

If meanings nonetheless become attached and linked with the "bundle," they may indeed potentially alter this body, or produce subjectivities. But these meanings are not created through the body. They function much more as a set of power practices, of possibilities or the lack thereof, of privileges or the lack thereof.²



Vincent Tiley, *Black Ant*, 2019. Leather shirt with rope and horse bits over foam, 18 x 14 inches. Photo: Nick Marabella.



Vincent Tiley, *Sea of Vapor*, 2019. Vinyl rubber, rope and silk over foam, 14 x 14 inches. Photo: Nick Marabella.



Vincent Tiley, *Sea of Nectar*, 2021. Leather and cotton with acrylic paint, rope and hardware over foam, 48 x 96 inches. Photo: Peter Clough.

The first of the series started as a collaboration with performer and bondage master **Darek Da Silva**. Da Silva was an unofficial outside mentor to Tiley during his time in graduate school at **School of the Art Institute of Chicago**. After seeing a screening of *LA Plays Itself*, Tiley approached Freitas to tie rope around a wet painting.

For Tiley, the tying of rope references geometric abstraction in western modernism. In his view geometric modernism has promoted a removal of the body, seeing it as a form of violence. The tying of rope also references an act of bondage and the forcing of an order onto a disorganized body or a body that is ordered differently. In Tiley's words:

In the paintings it is also about a kind of order placed on the body or canvas: the logic of lines and rope conflicting with the "body." There's a strict kind of math at play about what kind of knots and how many ropes will work to create a regular ordered pattern. I try to cut the rope as little as possible. It's usually all one snaking line around the canvas. Sometimes I have to redo the knots over and over when I'm trying to get a specific geometry.³

The binding in Tiley's work metaphorically ties together his concepts and references, creating portraits that allow the viewer to project themselves. As **Sally O'Reilly** states in *The Body in Contemporary Art*, "Contemporary artists tend to



Vincent Tiley, *Crushed Orchid II*, 2017. Neoprene with foil film, acrylic gloss gel, rope and nail polish over foam 38 x 30 inches. Photo: Fred Attenborough.

shun the idealizing nature, completeness and singularity of traditional portraiture in favor of vulnerability, inconstancy and multiplicity.”⁴ I see Tiley here: using the language of power play to speak to the vulnerability of the human body while not assigning the body specificity.

¹ Renate Lorenz, *Queer Art: A Freak Theory* (Bielefeld, Germany: Transcript, 2012), 53.

² Ibid. 55.

³ Vincent Tiley, email interview with the author, March 8, 2024.

⁴ Sally O’Reilly, “The Body in Time and Space,” *The Body in Contemporary Art*, 2nd ed. (London: Thames & Hudson, 2015), 48–77, 49.

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—Vincent Tiley (he/him) Born in West Virginia, New York based artist Vincent Tiley received a MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and a BFA from the Maryland Institute College of Art. His garment-based durational performances explore how clothing is used as language.

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Vincent Tiley, *Halsted*, 2016. Neoprene with acrylic paint and rope over foam, 14 x 12 inches (with rope to floor). Photo: Fred Attenborough.

