

and surprisingly together version of *Third*, one that provides conclusive evidence that during the Big Star era, Chilton was among the most affecting vocalists rock ever produced. Many of the songs were inspired by his tempestuous romance with Lesa Aldridge, a well-heeled beauty whose charming vocals can be heard on several outtakes. Dickinson later characterized the project as being about “deteriorating relationships”—between Chilton and Aldridge; the band’s record label and its parent company, Stax; the band and their mentor and producer, John Fry.

In rock-historical terms, *Third* recalls the Beach Boys’ unfinished *SMILE*, another Icarus-like attempt at artistic transcendence by a drugged-out genius at the end of his rope, belatedly released to the public. But it has also been compared to psych-ward diaries like Syd Barrett’s *The Madcap Laughs* and Alexander “Skip” Spence’s *Oar*. These are all imperfect analogies. *Complete Third*’s reputation as an anarchic, barely salvageable mess has been overly mythologized. “Blue Moon,” “Nighttime,” and “Stroke It Noel” are as conventionally pretty as anything Chilton ever wrote; the up-tempo “Thank You Friends,” “Jesus Christ,” and “O, Dana” would not have sounded out of place on *Radio City*; and the tracks “Holocaust” and “Kanga Roo,” which were likely the reason label head Jerry Wexler called the test pressing “disturbing,” are chillingly beautiful masterworks of late-night melancholy. Among the finished tracks, the studio chaos is only really evident in the deconstructed Beefheartian nonsense of “Downs” and an unhinged, high-octane cover of Jerry Lee Lewis’s “Whole Lotta Shakin’ Goin’ On.” Compared to the art-damaged, lo-fi madness of Chilton’s first full-length solo LP, *Like Flies on Sherbert*, the final masters of *Third* sound as Apollonian as *Pet Sounds*.

All in all, *Complete Third* simultaneously fleshes out the mystique of the 1974 project—the drunken mayhem of “Pre-Downs,” the pivotal presence of Aldridge—while dispelling received views of it as a scrapbook of aural Rorschach blots illustrating the emotional desolation of its creator. In *Nothing Can Hurt Me*, a 2013 documentary about Big Star, Memphis peer Ross Johnson recalled the cultural ferment that produced *Third*: “The standard artistic equation for that scene was horror equals beauty, beauty equals horror...if something was somehow just *wrong*, it could become a thing of beauty.” Between the grooves of *Third*, one can sense the horrors Chilton faced—substance abuse, fraying relationships, commercial rejection—but he transmuted them into a work of rare and fragile beauty, one that has served as a lodestar for countless musicians ever since.

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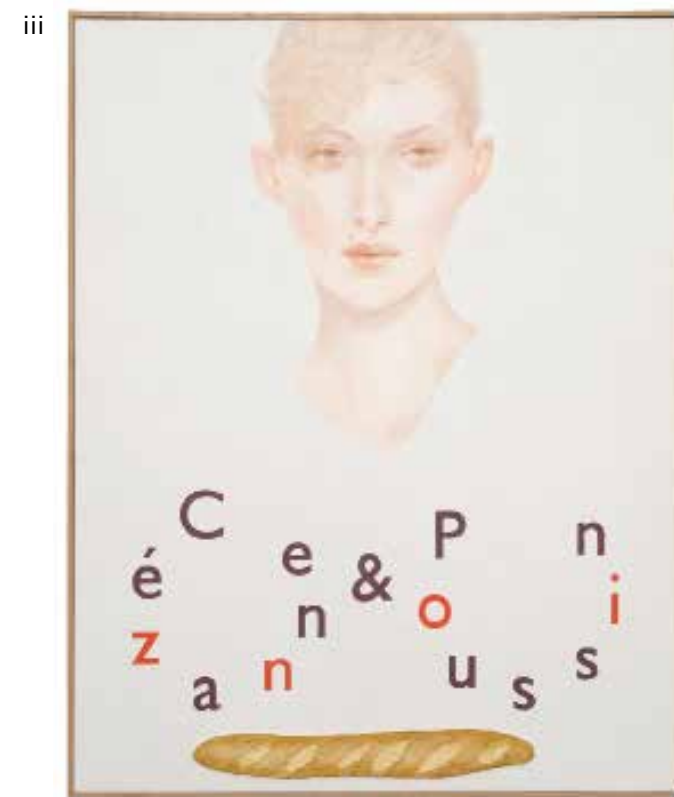
ALAN REID’S *WARM EQUATIONS*  
(Edition Patrick Frey, 2016)

by Ted Dodson

The basic conceit of *Warm Equations* is that a book can abstract the space of conversation typically delimited in front of paintings, that the thematics of a painter’s practice, in this case Alan Reid’s, can be constellated through a chorus of related texts. There are some small subversions this premise provokes—a revision of what might constitute an artist’s monograph or an artist’s statement and an affront to pithy art dialogue—but what elevates this book beyond its conceit is that editor Rachel Valinsky allows for this conversation space to be decisively literary without falling into dialectical trappings like response pieces, topical essays, description, and criticism. This book is not exegetical, instead it asserts itself as singular as any of Reid’s paintings.

To read the paintings of Alan Reid in person is to encounter radical superficiality. The aesthetic signifiers—the ethereal pastel tones, the ever-present ingénue, the tasteful assemblage, the Francophile points of reference—are seductive enough on surface alone. These paintings do what many newer figurative works do best and deploy signifiers with utter efficiency. In *Warm Equations*, though, Reid’s paintings are flattened to the page, the assemblage and textures matted. This is by necessity but also affects these paintings with the artifice of the page, an artifice that is selfsame with the included texts. The result is not the paintings being cast as literary—just as the texts are not made paint—but it sees the book’s writings and images on the same plane. This flattening democratizes and negates the critical dialectic that would see the literary playing arbiter to visual art.

The texts of this book are somewhat mysterious. None of them directly address Reid’s work though many intersect in ideas or, as in the case of Kristen Kosmas’s “Surveillance,” point to allegories that discursively indicate a meaning and conversation endemic to *Warm Equations* itself. Some pieces are likely commissions while others are excerpts of existing texts or even predate Reid’s included paintings, namely Lisa Robertson’s standout poem, “A Cuff,” borrowed from her 2010 collection *R’s Boat*. “A Cuff” in context reads at first as indicative of influence, but the poem doesn’t lend its value toward entirely hermeneutic ends. As Robertson writes, “We manipulate memory / To make things free [...]” Painters and poets are, after all, equally invested in the freedom of inscription and mark-making, the joy and fetish of blankness occupied. Despite this bonhomie and this book’s work though, poets and painters occupy vastly different marketplaces—poets visit the painting market to reify in writing the careers of artists, often providing the critical labor needed to amplify context, canonize, and



(i) Alan Reid, *Havana Poison*, 2014. (ii) *Garçon*, 2014. (iii) *Church Bells*, 2013. (iv) *Parthenon*, 2014. All paintings Caran d’Ache and acrylic on canvas. Images courtesy of Patrick Frey Editions.



ultimately sell an artist's work. The inherent refusal of *Warm Equations* to do this, instead opting to reassert the literary as a praxis of meaning, breaks the chief rule of art conversation: whatever you do, do not touch the art.

*Ted Dodson is BOMB's managing director of circulation and distribution. He is the author of At The National Monument / Always Today (Pioneer Works, 2016).*

TERENCE DAVIES'S *A QUIET PASSION*  
(Music Box Films, 2016)

by Tan Lin

*A Quiet Passion*, Terence Davies's biopic about the poet Emily Dickinson, faces a problem typical of movies seeking to recreate the life of a literary figure: how to accommodate film to language, and, in particular, to Dickinson's dense, elliptical, and unconventionally punctuated and often abstract poetry. Davies's film mines the hermetic elements of Dickinson's life and poetry. The film is a virtuosic chamber piece, shot mainly indoors under somber lighting, in Antwerp and at the Dickinson Homestead in Amherst, Massachusetts, where Emily lived with her sister, Lavinia, her brother, Austin, and her mother and father. The poet, as is well known, cared for her chronically ill mother and left Amherst only rarely. Beginning around

1867 Dickinson dressed herself in white and retreated to her bedroom at the top of the stairs. From there, she would greet her guests sight unseen, or behind a door, present in voice only.

Davies's *A Quiet Passion* stars Cynthia Nixon as the older "Belle of Amherst," and Nixon captures Dickinson's petulance, fiery rebellion, and anger at the constraining mores of the time. As for the poems, they are recited in voice-over by Nixon, and are cued to personal events, as well as to the abolitionist movement and the Civil War years, during which Dickinson wrote around half of her nearly 2,000 poems. The events the film dwells on have mainly to do with loss—her mother and father to death, and her friend Vryling Buffam to marriage. Dickinson's family was prominent: her grandfather founded Amherst College, and her father served as a congressman, and the poet's friends included literary critic Thomas Wentworth Higginson, as well as Samuel Bowles, the editor of the *Springfield Republican* who first published Dickinson's poems.

Dickinson's secluded life would not seem, initially, a promising subject for a movie, so Davies invokes another medium to transmute her life and work into film. That medium, no less magical than poetry, is the daguerreotype, whose notoriously long exposure times necessitated protracted sittings and reinforced the slow transmission and the immobility of emotions floating through the "Houses—Sealed so stately tight." The dour lugubriousness of life captured

in a daguerreotype's mercury vapors is translated into unhurried, and deliberate camera pans that reveal the film's action within a domestic setting. Characters are often neatly framed by doors or by other architectural elements. In one excruciating scene, we look through a doorway into a bedroom with low ceilings as Emily's mother suffers a stroke and collapses on a bed. Because the moving camera eventually finds a character, this technique embalms people as object-like and corpse-like emblems in a still life, the domestic obverse to Eternity. Or, as Dickinson noted, "The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs—"

Davies's film is a period piece portraying Dickinson's adult life, beginning with her year at the Mount Holyoke Female Seminary in 1847 and ending on her deathbed. Although it communicates the suffering inherent in her poetry, oddly, the film's methods reinforce the studied chamber-drama elements of Dickinson's life. The most egregious are the fastidious scenes of witty repartee between Dickinson and her sister or her friend Vryling. These starched episodes contrast sharply with the subdued voice-over of the poems, whose austerity would be hard to unpack even if recited more than once.

*A Quiet Passion* revives previous interpretations of Dickinson as the solitary and isolated poet, and seeks to set her poetry and life events in correspondence. This fussiness is disappointing; it foregrounds the studied theatricality of the relationship between art and life and ignores the more complicated parts of an existence that make Dickinson's poetry what it is and also what it is not. She was not just a recluse or a proto-advocate for women's rights. In spite of her seclusion, Dickinson could scarcely be said to lack a social life—one that was as thorny and perplexing to herself as it was to her acquaintances. It would have been a pleasure to hear of the friendships that Dickinson cultivated in her correspondence, particularly her late letters to Otis Lord, which are couched in a voice that receives scant attention in the film. No less interesting would be her engagement with the works of Emerson, prompted by an early mentor named Benjamin Newton, or her interest in botany, starting in her childhood. Of her relations to other family members, her niece Mattie remarked, "Aunt Emily stood for *indulgence*." In place of the film's set pieces of repartee *dans le jardin*, it might have been an indulgent pleasure to unearth the garden that Dickinson so assiduously tended until her death or the nosegays that Dickinson sent, often accompanied by poems, to the frequent visitors of the Homestead.

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EDMUNDO PAZ SOLDÁN'S *NORTE*  
Translated by Valerie Miles  
(University of Chicago Press, 2016)

by Jacqueline Loss

Set in what translator Valerie Miles calls a "space of the imagination," Edmundo Paz Soldán's new novel, *Norte*, uncovers its characters' complicated relationships to expression and the trappings of readymade discourses. While some search for their *norte*, or direction, others are directionless and detached.

In the opening pages, we meet Jesús, an adolescent whose attraction to his sister appears to lead him to brutally rape and murder a prostitute in northern Mexico. Based on the story of real-life serial killer Ángel Maturino Reséndiz, his is just one of the loosely interconnected narratives that make up Paz Soldán's latest work, which together reveal a spectrum of alienation from identity struggles to extreme madness. Paz Soldán, a Bolivian novelist, short-story writer, and critic, thus takes the theme of Latin American perspectives on the United States explored in the anthology he coedited, *Se Habla Español* (2000), to new and even more obscure places.

As the singular place of possibility, *norte* has become nearly obsolete for everyone in the novel. We meet Michelle, for example, a young Bolivian who works at Taco Hut in Texas, having recently abandoned a doctoral program to pursue her passion for drawing comics. Hers are the only sections conveyed in the first person. In picking up the thread where other creators in the novel (among them Juan Rulfo) leave off, she adopts a self-aware position analogous to Paz Soldán's own. She is obsessed with Fabián, a once-promising Argentine professor on the verge—delusional, drug-addicted, and unable to set pen to paper. He is imprisoned by romantic failure, by the theories of Homi Bhabha, Jacques Derrida, and Beatriz Sarlo, and by the Borgesian dream of writing a "unified theory capable of explaining the totality of Latin American literature."

Martín Ramírez, *Untitled (Horse and Rider)*, ca. 1948–63, crayon and pencil on pieced paper, 14 × 23 inches. Courtesy of the American Folk Art Museum, New York. Copyright The Estate of Martín Ramírez.