

# PAINTING? FILTHY SACKS!<sup>1</sup> TOTES.

The term tote or *tate*, meaning "to carry," can be traced back to the 17th century but was not used to describe bags until 1900. However, the tote bag craze in the United States has its origins in the introduction of the LL Bean "boat and tote" in the 1940s. This simple, durable design quickly became a staple of casual weekend luggage. The bag's crisp cotton-canvas material and bold navy offset-stripping conveyed an aesthetics of ease, simplicity, and sportiveness that defined a burgeoning middle class in the post-war years. The tote bag fell out of fashion during the 80s and 90s until it boomed again in the 2000s. Since then, the tote has morphed into a sort of canvas node between (at times) conflicting notions of sustainability, hyper-mobility, brand building, marketing, and middle-brow pretension. Like a mood on Facebook or a filter on Instagram, one's choice of tote bag becomes one of identity's onion skins: the recycler, the public radio listener, the middle-aged museum member, the gourmand, the globetrotting biennial goer, or the art fair glitterati.

As I write this, a tote bag hangs above my head, its flaccid innards stretched taut across wooden supports to provide a surface for painting. Wide emphatic brush strokes and strategically applied impasto begin to give form to an abstract face. Two semi-crossed pink eyes stare down at me on my couch. Below a pair of violently flared red nostrils, I see the word "Glasgow" bending around the bottom stretcher bar. I don't recognize the logo, but if font can be trusted as any indicator, the bag is likely from one of the city's contemporary art institutions. The functional integrity of the bag is partially retained. If I really wanted to, I could use the straps that dangle from the top and bottom of the canvas to sling the work over my shoulder and physically carry it away. Entitled *Totes* (2015), this is a recent work in a series of oil paintings on recycled tote bag canvas that Paul Branca has been developing over the course of several years.

There are clear historical precedents for the use of materials like found canvas and jute in painting. One need only take a cursory glance at the history of Arte Povera to find traces of these references, in particular the work of Alberto Burri. A painter renowned for "painting without paint," Burri's *Sacchi* combine patched remnants of burlap sacks with other materials, a technique he developed while a prisoner of war in Texas. But while formal and material comparisons can be drawn to Burri's paintings from the 50s and 60s, Branca's attraction to the tote bag reveals a broader interest in both the social connectivity of food and the social function of vernacular, everyday objects in a neo-liberal economy. An avid researcher of food and the cultures that surround it, Branca's works have made references to sausage production, food packaging, and open-air produce stands. The tote bag is no stranger to these contexts. In recent years, shops like Eataly, WholeFoods, BioCompany, and a raft of other specialty, boutique, or organic food purveyors have adopted the tote bag as an integral element of their branding and marketing identity. The convergence of contemporary art and food culture's mutual love affair with the humble tote bag is perhaps best epitomized in Eataly's collaboration with the Guggenheim on the occasion of the museum's Burri retrospective: a gift box containing a Burri tote bag, Eataly products, and a spiral coffee mug echoing the sweeping curvature of Frank Lloyd Wright's iconic building. Branca's totes cannot be understood outside of this context. Although certainly not functional surfaces for advertising like their utilitarian cousins, when considered within an art context, these paintings utilize one of the very materials that propels contemporary art's experience economy. *Filthy Sacks? Painting!*

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<sup>1</sup> Defending his refusal to acquire Burri's work for his collection of modern Italian painting in the early 1950s, a Milanese collector explains his resistance to accepting Burri's work as painting: "Painting? Filthy sacks! Mold! Garbage!"