UNDERSOND: AN INVESTIGATION OF PAINTING AS A FORM OF EXPRESSION

A thesis submitted to the College of the Arts of Kent State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

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The painter Sean Scully said, "Painting is... an activity where the hand and the spirit and the mind combine together in this gesture, and it's compressed into a movement, the making of something... what you are doing is trying to make a subjective, poetic reality by simply putting paint on a surface."\(^1\) In the act of painting, the external experience becomes internalized and then translated through action into an art object. I make paintings as an act of translating my experiences. The colors, shapes, and marking all come into being in order to express what I cannot in any other way communicate. My moment-to-moment existence is informed by the layers of experience leading up to what I perceive as the present. I feel the past as memory and emotion. The accumulated information contained within each of the works, the compositional tension and the suggested activity and image, assist in a transference of meaning to the viewer. Through the practice of an intuitive process, with the interaction of material, touch, and gesture, and an allowance for spontaneity, an image is brought into being. Within that image is an inherent tension and it is through that tension that meaning may be expressed. Through painting I am translating the layers of emotional experience that are contained within the imaginary vessel I think of as my self. Painting is thinking, thinking through action: thought with the hand. Considering my painting *Bloom* (fig. 1) in this context: *I am caught in a vastness akin to the ocean, thrown together as an ill-conceived vessel and in the process of coming undone.*

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I am an expressionist, specifically a mindful expressionist. By mindful I mean that I am conscious of the layers of meaning in my work. I understand the interconnectivity of the language of painting in relation to its history as well as the action of marking as an act of personal codification. Manet is present in that he showed that paint was paint and poetic reality. Cezanne is there as well, in that he considered how a thing is looked at and observed. But he was looking at reality, where I am looking into the internal, and therefore imaginary. Richter is present from the perspective that he forces a reconsideration of painting’s vitality and the role of touch in the use of the medium. There is also his use of the language of abstraction but from the vantage of illusion and association. And of course Ryman is there too, in that he asked the question "Painting?" and answered "Painting."

In my paintings, the jumble of information that is happening together all at once is a reflection of my internal emotional experience. Our underlying emotional experience is perpetual and informed, or at least affected by our interpretation of the past, present and future. It is a thing in constant flux, changing even as we identify it. In a sense we exist always moving between any number of juxtaposing emotional states, albeit the most identifiable being the dominant. Still it is the combined influence of our underlying emotions and situational outside influences that frame our perspective at any given moment. The layers of marking, building with fragments that contain their own information, the interaction of the layers, and the information framed by the layering all correspond as a reflection of my internal experience. The titles of the work refer to phenomenological forces or occurrences but also are descriptive of an underlying emotional state. Bluster, Howler, and Squally all refer to descriptions of the wind during
a storm, such descriptive turbulence also addresses a state of being.

Color is significant in the work in that it is an activator of response, it directs the viewer’s gaze and assists in the overall reading of the work. The relationship colors have to each other when placed together in a work enhance the clarity of that state which is being expressed. Pink is predominant in the paintings, it draws the viewer into and around the compositions. I use a gestural swipe with Payne’s gray and titanium white to gather and direct the sense of movement or energy the accumulation of fragments and shapes suggest. My choice of colors and color relationships has to do with memory and associations, but I believe this is a given and allow for its occurrence through intuition.

I paint to understand the internal, to understand myself in a way that word-based thought, at least my own particular form of word-based thought, does not allow. The specifics of language overwhelm the meaning I am attempting to convey. A specific representation, an image that is clearly recognizable acts the same. I know this because I have tried to include imagery in my work. The inclusion of specific imagery leads to a specific reading. For instance a painting of a child and a tree reads as just that. I am painting to express how my overwhelming longing for the child and the tree are part of the layers that make up my being during the moments of the paintings creation. The illusiveness of ambiguity allows for suggestion without the distraction of the specific. What makes up me? Am I this imaginary vessel of layers of emotion that I experience from moment to moment? Am I the accumulation of all my experiences up to the present or am I only what I am in the present moment?

When I began my graduate work, I was exploring the juxtaposition of the graphic and the gestural. The compositions could be simultaneously read as measured graphic
stripes of gaudy color framing widows into gestural marking or an arrangement of flat top elevations or plateaus. I was interested in pursuing the tension between a reading of the paintings in terms of how the material was being presented and a reading of the painting in terms of its illusionistic quality. As my work developed past the formulaic compositions I had been exploring I began to incorporate the inclusion of representational imagery as a way of furthering the tension between materiality and illusion. When I began my thesis work I had determined that the use of the clearly recognizable imagery in my paintings overwhelmed the compositions, making the reading of the painting about that which was recognizable. I found a balance in ambiguous images, referencing possible readings through compositions built around the indexical evidence of material application.

The paintings that exist as my thesis are directly influenced by emotions associated with the overwhelming experiences of my last four years: Living with and caring for my late father-in-law during his severe decline into Alzheimer’s disease and the grief in losing him a little bit each day; the pride in being able to provide a home for him to find comfort during his last months of awareness; sharing the joy of our first pregnancy with my wife, followed by the grief of a miscarriage during the second trimester; the joy of playing guitar in an improvisational band, recording an album and playing a live show, and the pride in following through on a dream regardless of how insignificant it might seem to those not involved; the fear of the blood clot in my leg breaking off and traveling to my heart or lungs, and the anger at my body for turning against me; the peace in traveling to Icaria, an island in Greece and spending weeks with my senses overwhelmed by that reality; completing my first semester of graduate school
after all the years of intending to go back; my brother’s unexpected death from a heart attack at forty; the awe of the Musée d'Orsay; the bliss in expecting the birth of my first son after seven years of a wonderful marriage. These are the obvious things, the most significant to be sure. But I cannot underestimate the importance of a smile from my wife, a shared moment of understanding between a friend, a wave from an acquaintance, the sparkle in a stranger’s eye, or even just a good song on the car radio at the right moment. Such experiences also have their opposites.

I do not know that painting can be seen as an absolute. It’s a reference for an experience of action made under the influence of the moments in which it was made. I do not necessarily know why I do a specific thing as I am painting. As an afterthought I can speculate, I can find reasonable associations of meaning but not certainty. The marks in my paintings do not have a one to one relationship to a specific. It is through the repeated doing of a thing where meaning is created. It is akin to poetic language, it is about evoking something.

The touch of a paint-loaded tool to a surface leaves a mark that is essentially arbitrary. The commercial or industrial application of the medium, the brushing of paint onto a wall, or applying plaster with a knife, both actions I have spent countless hours doing, leaves behind the evidence of tool and hand, but such evidential marking is arbitrary to the process. The same action or motion, the same tool in hand in the act of art making reads as information imbued with meaning. But what meaning and how is that meaning accessible?

Marking is representative of a codification created by the artist, but not one necessarily translatable into verbal articulation. Rather, it is perhaps akin to the act of
speaking in tongues. I do not say this out of turn. I spent my childhood as a member of a Charismatic Catholic group and spoke in tongues regularly for ten years. I consider the reading of the accumulation of marking in my painting as evidence of my underlying emotional state. I desire to transform my emotional experience into something tangible.

The marks are mine in that I made them but I do not own them, rather they are the evidence of a movement and a tool. I enacted their occurrence but it is how they work together, the choices made in creating the compositions and the state of being that lead to such choices that I own if indeed I own anything.

In my studio practice I work on a number of works at a given time. This allows for the paintings to inform each other and for a kind of underlying dialog to exist. A painting might occur all at once in one sitting or it might be worked on over a period of days or weeks. Sometimes in order to complete a painting I have to work on a number of others first, I have to learn how to finish it. I work on wood panel as its rigid surface is similar to the surface to that of a wall and certain material application processes that I use share the tools, action and movement associated with wall finishing. I also prefer the hardiness of the surface to other materials. I do on occasion work directly onto paper, but inevitably I adhere it to wood at some point in the process. I vary the size of my work, but keep most of it intimate in scale, the smallest being 9” x 9” and the largest being 47” x 59”. I find that the viewing of intimately sized works provokes a close inspection. Such inspection influences the viewing of larger works shown in the same space.

When I began my thesis I was using acrylic oil paint, creating fragmented compositions through a layering process using painter’s tape for repeated masking. In an act of covering the underlying information, I would pull over these masked openings with
a drywall knife, putty knife or palette knife depending on the size of the exposed area. When the masking was removed the underlying information was revealed as cropped shapes, windows opening into a previous action.

I turned to collage in order to work through these compositions more quickly, as well as to open up the possibilities of marking and material. I use paper and vellum with a combination of drawn marks and paint applied using a brayer or knife. I cut shapes from this material so that the shapes themselves contain a gestural or evidential mark. The collaged shapes include monoprinted areas, Xerox-transfers of digitally altered photographic material, and a subtle dimensional use of paper. Through this process I have generated fragments of indexical information and material to draw from as I work on each painting. A finished work will include painted and drawn areas as well as collaged information, all juxtaposed and brought together to reveal a suggested image. The final image of a work suggests a reading representative of the emotional state I am attempting to convey.

The painting *Threshold* (fig. 2) is the keystone of my thesis study. It suggests both an organized construction as well as an unfurling of energy. Heavy-handed graphite gestural marks, clustered collaged shapes with evidential marking and diagonal bands of muted pastels create an underlying vertical structure in the upper two-thirds of the composition, while the underlying area of the lower portion is made by a horizontal drag of raw umber. A large tilted transparent yellow oval sits over the majority of the horizontal break with a black gestural mark, but also hard-edged and rounded cutting across it vertically. A triangular yellow shape with one rounded side in the upper left points down toward the lower right corner and is made up both of transparent acrylic as
well as translucent mulberry paper with measured graphite diagonal lines spaced as the underlying diagonal bands they cross over. In the lower portion, set at the same diagonal as the graphite lines is a splattering swipe of fluid white paint, evidence of a single violent action, but simultaneously interacting with the swirling of gestural and structural elements that make up the whole of the work.

*Threshold* evokes an occurrence of turbulent change. It is an instance of happening that is suggested by the fragmented parts, the underlying structure, and the gestural marking. But it is not a sporadic free for all of activity. Though action is evident, it is not an action painting, but rather a choreographed suggestion of turbulence. It is spatial, structural and organized. It is as finding the oncoming of an emotion, such as grief or elation, or something equal in its traumatic insertion in the mood of everyday normalcy.

I create compositions, as with *Threshold*, through the combination of an organized ordering of shapes through striping or horizontal bands and a destructive scrawling or swiping which oppose such organization. I often use a horizontal break, the suggestion of a horizon line to orientate the viewer to take a spatial reading of the finished work. I wish to evoke an action that occurs in a space as vast as the ocean, a space that reflects my own smallness. My own turbulence is contained, held within the context of something much greater. The vastness that is greater then myself, the place in which I am contained is *time*. When an image overwhelms the space of the painting it is to bring that particular accumulation into focus. While it is contained, it also goes beyond the edge of what is perceivable.
Time is both the absolute and the measurable duration. The layers of experience that inform my present existence and that act as influence on the layers of emotion that form my moment-to-moment state of being are in fact a direct outcome of my existence in time. Film, poetry and music all act as expressive vehicles that relate directly to time. Each of these mediums are experienced within an obvious measurable duration. Paintings are presented in their final state as being seemingly frozen, an absolute. But their temporal nature is present in the evidence that reveals their creation. The fragmented nature of my compositions, the stark juxtaposition of shape, form and gesture, and the marking as evidential of an action that took place with tool, hand, body and mind, reveals that a measurable duration existed for the information presented to exist as it is now. The accumulation of gestural marking and collaged shapes create windows opening into a previous action revealing the temporal nature of the act of painting, but the layers of collaged information includes actions that happened previous to the actions they are overlaying, so the past is literally brought into the foreground. My paintings are time capsules referencing my state of being during the moments of their creation, they address the particular arrangement of swirling layers of memory and emotion that I was experiencing at that time. I am a complete person now in my present, as much as my paintings reach a state of completion. But I am also in a state of perpetual becoming. To acknowledge such a state of perpetual becoming is to acknowledge time as a threshold experience. By this I mean time as liminality, the in-between state.

Liminality is in its very nature transitional; it is a threshold experience, a state of moving through. Such a state eludes precise definition; it is under the influence of what has been and what will be. To consider the idea of the self in the context of such an
understanding of time is to consider the self as a provisional being. My paintings refer to the provisional in that I am provisional, but suggest the completeness of the state of being they correspond to. To illustrate the beginnings of such a thought process: I spent most of my childhood living on a peninsula. My memories were framed by the experiences that happened there. When I left the peninsula I moved to an island across the bay and from there I could look back to where I had been. Looking, I found the place from where I had come enshrouded in thick fog, the land itself had become uncertain, its image ambiguous in the overwhelming atmosphere. So in looking at the actual I found a poetic relationship to my own past, the layers that make up myself exist in an illusive state of becoming.

We experience emotion as a kind of passage, moving from one combination of emotions to the next. An emotional state is most perceptible at its time of change. We acknowledge joy, sadness, longing, awe, as the feeling approaches. So it is at the threshold where awareness begins. As my experiences accumulate, so often I feel caught in the apparent disruption of order, and I am made passive to the forces beyond my control. Even in the calm moments there is a contained energy. Always the state of being is a state of becoming. No experience is singular, but rather our understanding is informed by all that which we have experienced prior. In my painting I am exploring the idea of how in our experiences we incorporate the many layered underlying reality that make us who we are. My paintings are reflections of such an understanding of experience.
Figure 1 *Bloom*, acrylic, collage & graphite on panel, 21" x 23.25", 2012
Figure 2 *Threshold*, acrylic, collage & graphite on panel, 20" x 26", 2012
Figure 3 Installation Shot from Undersound Thesis Exhibition

Figure 4 Installation Shot from Undersound Thesis Exhibition
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