Still Wet: On Painting, Presence, Pleasure, and You

Thesis

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By

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Abstract

I make paintings that appeal to the mind and stick to the eye. The paintings use text that has been borrowed from popular culture, advertising, and film as their subject. My most recent body of work functions as a footbridge between looking at and being seen, painting and life. The footbridge is not derived from any one set of architectural blueprints, but rather generates its form from within. At times the bridge is formless, an evaporating cloud, or bottomless black. The act of painting transforms the text; image and form merge into presence. The subject is no longer simply borrowed text, but somehow the viewers, the artist, the materials, are absorbed like oil into cloth and seduced into subjects. The junction where painting touches without moving its location in space is the junction that I find most remarkable; furthermore, it is the place in time from which my marks and remarks are generated.
Dedication

I dedicate this paper to my loving family who have always supported and encouraged me to grow into the person and artist I have and will become. I couldn’t be more fortunate to have you. I love you up to the sky.

And to you, who I won’t forget.
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Also to my peers, colleagues, and friends. You have made me a better person. I am so fortunate to know you all. Thank you for being there.
Vita

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Fields of Study

Major Field: Art
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1. Introduction

My current obsessions are the group of words that have the ability to levitate both in the mind and off the tongue, the phrase that is between declaration and question, the physicality of a letter, and the punctuation mark that hovers in space apart from its subject. My most recent body of work consists of oil paintings on linen and canvas and drawings on various materials. I utilize text that has been borrowed from various pop culture sources such as film and advertising as a subject.

Both language and painting have the ability to appeal to the cerebral as well as the emotional. The pairing of language and painting opens a space between the two. It is in this space that my current body of work resides. Painting, both a verb and a noun, will always contain embedded within it elements of both. A painting is made as much of looking, touching, and pausing as it is made of pigment and cloth. My work is concerned with the visual and temporal space of the painted word. Like Caravaggio and Eric Fischl (specifically the Krefeld Project series), I am interested in the effect the gaze has on time, space, and perception. Like Jenny Holzer and Mira Schor, my paintings explore what happens when language becomes visable.
I remember the first time I fell in love with painting was when I was assisting my high school art teacher to organize slides from the Baroque period. The Caravaggios particularly enraptured me. His paintings were not restricted to religious narrative, but rather they seemed to me narratives of light capable of inspiring religion. I remember seeing a projected image of The Death of the Virgin, the bold flickering of light and shadow as my eye traversed the image causing me to actually feel in my body the weight and agony of the moment depicted.

It is, perhaps, the act of looking that perpetuates the relevancy and vitality of a painting. Recently I visited the selection of Caravaggio paintings on display at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, NY. There are three figures, (from left to right) a soldier, a woman, and Peter, in The Denial of St Peter. My visit with this painting contained looking on several levels. First, me looking at the painting itself, my eyes tracing the surface of the canvas, stroking the thinly laid veils of oil, pigment, and varnish, the cracks in the painting functioning as hair-thin ruptures in image and space. Most of the light in the painting itself falls on the eyes of the woman, who tensely looks towards the soldier. Three fingers (two belonging to the woman and one to the soldier) point in the opposite direction of the woman’s gaze, towards Peter. The viewer’s gaze is directed at
once in two conflicting directions, heightening the dramatic effect of the work. The passages of extreme lights coupled with extreme darkness, chiaroscuro, both punctuates and enables the activity of looking at this work. The viewer of a Caravaggio is like a voyeur, given information in flashes, yet tempted by what cannot be seen for certain.

My paintings are verbal vignettes, which are made wholly present and visible by the medium of painting. The experience of my paintings is one in which images, light, and marks both submerge and emerge from below the surface of the painting. The words and phrases in my works challenge, rather than conform to, the definition of complete. When words stick together they form impressions in the imagination. These impressions exist outside of the standard guidelines for what constitutes a complete sentence. What is the use of a complete sentence if it does not stimulate movement of some sort?

Words and images can be magnetic and repulsive, turning on and off like a flickering light or a weak phone connection. I am interested in creating paintings that address or subvert the idea of the flicker. The flicker in painting can happen when a green line is at once a blade of grass and a shadow, existing somewhere in between the two. Of Caravaggio’s *Death of the Virgin*, French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy asserts that that we, “See the invisible, not beyond
the visible, not inside, nor outside, but right at it, on the threshold… The painting, then, lights up only one look: that of the closed eyes of the dead woman on whose eyelids all of the light falls” (14).

Figure 1: *Death of the Virgin*  
Figure 2: *The Denial of St. Peter*
2. Where is Presence, Where Presence Is

*Out of Mind* is a painting about the idea of eclipsing, made after a trip to Los Angeles, CA. To paint is to undergo construction with non-structural materials—pigment, liquid binder, light, surface, and touch. The LA landscape is made of color and buttery light. Like an oil painting, the landscape hovers between solid and liquid with its melting shadows and stealthy shifts in color. During my stay in Los Angeles, I assisted Scott Aigner, a performance and video artist, who was doing a project near the Hollywood sign. The project began before sunrise and lasted until mid morning. I was there as the sky changed from purple to pink, orange, and several strengths of blue. I watched as the shadow that the D makes on the last O of the Hollywood sign changed form. Witnessing light transform the landscape, the letters, and their shadows, I felt. The language and the landscape, drenched in light and shadow, were one and wholly present.

In *Out of Mind* I play with the idea of letterforms framing and eclipsing other letterforms. The phrase *you are* resides below the surface of the painting, obscured by an atmosphere of whites and window blind-like palm trees. The phrase *you are* and the landscape elements are also overshadowed and framed by the words *hardly move*. Placing a group of words into the format of a painted image disrupts the sequence and pacing of the language. It is possible that the
two phrases are a part of the same sentence, though it is not necessarily clear how that sentence might read, or if the image gives the complete sentence. In a painting, subject, object, adverb, verb, and punctuation occur simultaneously and may play multiple roles. For instance, the word you refers to the subject of a sentence, but is also the subject of the painting. You also functions as visual punctuation, intersecting the word hardly to soften and periodically obscure its edges.
My painting *You Are (Are You)* and Jenny Holzer’s running scroll piece, *I Feel You I Ask You* as seen at Art Basel, Miami Beach in 2007 are related in ways that extend beyond material constructs (*please refer to Appendix A for the full text that was made visible in Holzer’s work*).

Holzer’s work, as I experienced it, was shown one line at a time on a single running scroll that was hung a couple of feet above eye level. As each phrase exited the screen, the next one entered. Watching this, my body was forced into a rhythm of movement and breath. As each new phrase entered, my eyes, head, and even shoulders would swivel back and forth. My breath became synced with the pace of the running scroll in earnest anticipation of what would come next. Though the words themselves have a deep sense of urgency and suspense, the medium of the running scroll acted as a choreographer so that no matter the language, the pressing quality of the piece would come through.

The text, written by the artist, is a fragmented narrative, which contains at least one character (the *I* who performs the actions). There is nothing to suggest that the *you* in Holzer’s narrative is someone different from the *I*, though it certainly could be. The lines of the poem are like planks of a wood floor that are
spread apart from each other, leaving wide gaps in between. The poem draws the reader/viewer away from solid ground and into a space of uncertain footing. Though the exact storyline never fully reveals itself, the text is nonetheless emotionally provocative. The viewer identifies with the agony of the protagonist, as elusive as its source might be. What the text does not reveal is its power; it is what lies within the gaps of darkness between the floor panels. The work sweeps the viewer up on a rhythmic, emotional gust of heavy air. The viewer is not sure whether s/he is being tempted to jump off the floor and plunge into a dark gap of uncertain depth, or if the work is threatening to push him/her.

My painting entitled, *You Are (Are You)* uses the technology, not of LED lights, but of oil paint to show the inverse associability of the phrase *you are*. The painting is made of graphite and oil paint on canvas. The letterforms, which sit within a black ground, are completely visible from most viewpoints. However, at some viewpoints, letters completely disappear into the black ground so that the viewer might only see the word *are* or *you*, or possibly neither, disrupting the sequential order of linguistic reading and tapping into the non-sequential reading of visual art. What can be read as a statement, *you are*, becomes a question, *are you*, as the text emerges and submerges. As there is no punctuation, the phrase might be complete already or might be completed in any number of ways.
The suspense of my work lies in the editing of the texts and in the way the texts are framed and bound both by the rectangular format of the painting, and by other elements within the painting. The manner in which my works unfold as both images and objects maintain painting’s relationship with the flicker (of light, of image). Borrowing text from popular sources for use in a painting or drawing allows the subject, object, and verb elements to become purposefully ambiguous and subjective. The words you and I appear repeatedly, though the owner of the voice is not ever clear. The viewer could be both you and I, one, or neither. Like a frame of a film, a running scroll, or an advertisement, the phrases are just enough to fill a moment, while evoking a desire for more, the next line, the next scene, or the next thrill.
3. Just a Glance, Nothing More

*Just a Glance, Nothing More, Pleasure With You, and Pleasure (Clawed)* (ch. IV) are paintings based on the notion of building a moment out of a gaze. In *Just a Glance, Nothing More*, the words of Alice Harford (Nicole Kidman’s
character in Stanley Kubrick’s *Eyes Wide Shut* but I could hardly move appear in gold dust against a ground of graphite. The material weight implied by the gold and the reference to visibility and writing by the graphite (form of carbon) underscores the implicit tension of the words as they are uttered, while complimenting the ephemeral quality of the glance the phrase refers to.

The scene in *Eyes Wide Shut* from which the language has been taken occurs approximately 25 minutes into the film. It is night and the two main characters, Dr. Bill Harford and his wife Alice Harford, have been smoking marijuana and talking about the previous evening in the privacy of their home bedroom (*please refer to Appendix B for full dialog of the scene*).

The dialog is completely based on the memory of a glance. Alice’s words are slowly spoken over a period of time caught on film. The slowed speech gives time and space for the memory of the glance to exist. The viewer of the film is captive to whatever happens on screen, as all of the shots in this sequence are still camera shots. As Alice utters the words *but I could hardly move*, the viewer of the film is immobile, hanging on her every syllable until her words form into a recognizable string of sounds (8).

The words roll off Alice’s tongue and stretch out the moment in which they are uttered. The shifting camera angles (frontal shot of Bill, frontal shot of Alice,
close up from side of Alice), together with the pacing of the music and dialog, further contribute to a suspension in time and space. More than a piece of film, this is a meditation on moment. The moment of the glance, the moment of the confession of the memory of the glance, the moment of remembering the glance, the look of her husband as she remembers, the look away.

In fact, this entire section of film is literally built of moment, glance, memory, and looking. There is no affair to be learned of, no one has actually done anything, nor does any event actually take place during this sequence. The entire remainder of the film is built on top of the foundation that this scene constructs. Possessed by his wife’s words, Bill descends into a binge of psychosexual forays that slip in and out of reality, fantasy, imagination, and dreams.

The slowed pace of Alice’s speech reveals a sense of deliberateness; the recollection of a glance could be enough, in fact, It could be all. Enough for what? Enough to make Bill Harford jealous? Enough to occupy time and space on its own? Enough to satisfy the desire to be wanted? How can a glance be measured, quantified, evaluated? How is a glance a thing?

Looking is a basic form of acknowledgement. To be seen is to be made distinct. When I first saw Eyes Wide Shut, I wanted to be wanted again. Alice’s
words speak of the moment caught between the eyes that gaze and the object they gaze upon. But I could hardly move is a direct response to being in such a line of sight. As the young naval officer’s eyes touched Alice, her body was immobile.

Is it possible for Alice’s words to not only characterize a caught moment of seeing and desire between two people, but also function as a metaphor for painting? I remember seeing a projected image of The Death of the Virgin, the bold flickering of light and shadow as my eye traversed the image causing me to actually feel in my body the weight and agony of the moment depicted. The kind of looking that Alice Harford speaks of is, perhaps, the kind of looking that great paintings are made of. Looking is essential to crafting a painting the way air is essential to piecrust. Rather than chunks of butter, it is time that permits the space for looking.
Figure 5: Just a Glance, Nothing More
4. On Pleasure and You

“The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead: his eyes are closed” (2).

"I'm convinced we all are voyeurs… It's part of the detective thing. We want to know secrets and we want to know what goes on behind those windows. And not in a way that we would use to hurt anyone. There's an entertainment value to it, but at the same time we want to know: What do humans do? Do they do the same things as I do?” (6).

Pleasure With You and Pleasure (Clawed) appropriate a slogan from an ad for a Showtime series, Secret Diary of a Call Girl, as seen in Maxim magazine. The phrase is both public and private in that it is mass printed and distributed, but yet its language suggests something more intimate. The text operates on multiple levels as a presence within the physical world. The language at once makes a statement, yet leaves air for speculation. The voice of the paintings does not clearly identify itself, nor is the you a defined identity.

In Pleasure With You, the text appears as broken beams of yellowish light emerging from a blue ground. At several places in the painting, the yellow of the letterforms pierces the blue in a splinter-like fashion that is reminiscent of light forcing its way through window blinds or through the slits of the eyes. At times
the blue oil melts into the yellow, like flesh into flesh. The text itself functions visually as slits or punctures, possibly suggestive of peep holes. The work is consequently indicative of voyeurism, though neither the voyeur nor the subject have been slated.

Figure 6: *Pleasure With You*
Figure 7: *Pleasure (Clawed)*

*Pleasure (Clawed)* uses the same phrase, *pleasure with you* as its subject. The work is made of gold ink that has been scratched and “clawed” into the surface of aluminum sign panel. The scratching of the surface conjures a visceral presence in the work, functioning as both a record and an image of physical action. The aluminum substrate was a found material and presents itself in the work “as is.” The nicks and dents are subtle and few, just enough to allow the work, which barely protrudes from the wall, to at times operate
somewhere between surface and object. At other times, *Pleasure (Clawed)* seems to recede into the wall itself, leaving the near razor thin gold letters to hang freely in illusionary space.

As the text *pleasure with you* has been lifted from mass printed culture, the work on some level engages with a dialog and narrative already in motion. However, as evidenced in above descriptions, the work is not merely a text. Rather, the work is a text which has become physically manifest, been given a *body*, through the act and medium of painting. Perhaps it is through the merging of text, image, and painting, that the work assumes presence. I am interested in the possibility of provoking a viewer to become a player within such a presence. It is my ambition that the commercial dialog of the text together with the undeniably physical language of painting opens a space that establishes its own notion of the real.

“Realism itself has no interest for me at all. I mean the physical world, simply recorded, has no interest for me. But the minute you try to make the physical world be a place in which you are present, then it’s about being alive. It’s about always being aware of yourself being there in the moment. It seems natural to want that” (5).

single intense moment, compel the viewer to participate... In Fischl’s engaging and distinctly American canvases, narrative, morality, sexuality, and psychology are preeminent” (5).

Eric Fischl’s *Krefeld Project* is a series of paintings based on a four-day photo shoot organized by the artist at the Haus Esters, in Krefelder Kunstmuseen, Germany. The Haus Esters was once a residential house, but is used today as a gallery. Exhibitions at the Haus Esters must address the architecture in some way. Of the plan for the project, Fischl explains,

“I’d furnish the house, hire some actors, and take a bunch of photographs as if they lived in the house. I’d make up a bunch of narrative fictions about who they were and what they were doing. Then we could put the paintings back in the empty rooms, as if they were a memory of what happened there” (5). The photographs and subsequent paintings depict the man and woman mid-action in various private activities such as showering, shaving, making love, lounging around the house naked, and arguing. It is not ever clear what their relationship is to each other, whether they are married, lovers, both, or neither. Fischl remarks, “The painting was a way of trying to figure out what was going on. Instead of closing things down, a new painting would open things up again” (5).
All of the works in this series take on an extremely cinematic quality. Crucial to achieving this effect is Fischl’s use of strong cast shadows in bold, striating patterns created by window blinds, wrapping the figures and forms in rich light and shadow. The paintings are at once an image of intimacy and foreignness. The man and woman slip in and out of being lovers and actors; the story line wavering between fact and fiction. Each image is a vignette, each vignette unraveling a new thread to the narrative that descends further and further out of grasp.

_Bathroom Scene #2_ is divided vertically by a black and white line, most likely a windowpane. The right side of the painting shows the woman sitting wet and naked in a bathtub, while the left side of the painting shows the man in the process of applying shaving cream to his face. The section with the woman shows the white tiled architecture of the bathroom; crisp daylight showering the enamel walls. The man is clearly in the same room with the woman as suggested by his elbow, which pokes past what may be the edge of a sliding window. However, the edge functions as a rupture in space as the bathroom’s architecture disintegrates into sky and landscape. The view of the man is one as observed through a window, the space behind the viewer reflected in the glass. _Bathroom Scene #2_ muddles interior with exterior, architecture with landscape,
public with private. It is a moment caught by an unnamed voyeur, perhaps the artist, the viewer, or both. It is an image that only exists for the eye and in the eye, the complex space created from light itself. Furthermore, once the painting is placed back into the emptied Haus Ester, the image becomes a farce, the story maybe nothing but a figment of the mind.

Figure 8: Bathroom Scene #2
5. Mira

Mira Schor claims,

“The pleasure of painting comes from the fact that it continues to offer sustenance and information through the use of painterly language but painterly language has been reduced over the years. So a thing as simple as wet into wet or repainting a painting doesn’t get taught and doesn’t get enacted in the paintings that people see. Painting can be a very meaningful space. My hope for painting is that it can connect to contemporary culture. But if there are problems with painting there are also problems with the culture itself... a pervasive fear of profundity, of metaphor, of layering, a fear of time, and of anything difficult. People feel that things have to be spelled out, fast and accessible” (13).

For several decades now, Mira Schor has been a visionary practitioner and critic in the field of Painting and Drawing. Schor has especially been visible and vocal on the subject of the painted word. In a recent (2006) interview with The University of Virginia Art Museum, Mira Schor discussed her paintings Suddenly and Nu-koo-lar (both 2005), which were included in UVA MA’s show Complicit, among other topics. The paintings share the same color palette of sky blue and brassy yellow and each represents the word indicated by its title. Schor explains in the interview that the word suddenly was taken from an earlier work of hers from the 1970s (though she does not specify which earlier work, she points out that the earlier work must have been about sex or a romantic
relationship). She characterizes the type of blue used in *Suddenly* as the same sort of blue of the sky just before the infamous attacks of September 11, 2001. Regarding *Nu-koo-lar*, Schor states that the language is “phonetic” and was inspired by the way former President G. W. Bush mispronounces the word *nuclear*.

![Figure 9: Suddenly](image1)
![Figure 10: Nu-koo-lar](image2)

The pairing of the two paintings allows for any number of political narratives to arise. She talks about how this, and other recent work of hers, is characterized by a shift in her way of thinking about art making. She explains that as a younger woman in her 20’s and 30’s, she was more interested in her own sexuality and relationships as they related to the female body and mind. Schor asserts, “I think after a while… women… the world loses interest in their
bodies after a certain point and I think in a way if you’re lucky so do you, so you move on to your mind… after graduate school…my agenda was to bring into high art in as intact a form as possible my experience of living inside of a female body with a mind” (4).
6. Conclusion

As long as we are mortal human beings we will be bound by flesh. How can an art movement be based on gender in the 21st century? Or maybe the question better stated, how is it plausible to exclude an individual or group from art and the art world based on gender, in the 21st century? I am a female artist in my twenties in the year 2009 and I don’t know how to be anything else. Everything I make, from my grocery list, to my dinner, my art, and certainly this paper inevitably comes from that perspective. This is not something to be ashamed of, and nor should it be overlooked. You cannot discount a body. To me, discounting a body is the antithesis, and quite possibly the end, of art.

I do not mean to suggest that Mira Schor aims to or does discount the body. I do question whether Schor aims to elevate the mind to the status of the body, neutralize the body so that the mind becomes more visible, or if her aims operate outside of this hierarchical structure. What impresses me about my generation is that, generally speaking, we have a common understanding that the condition of being human transcends all notions of gender, sexuality, religion, race, ethnicity, and age. This understanding is freeing, yet simultaneously presents difficulties. Human rights need to become independent from human identity. That is the only way we can truly be free.
I do not believe that because I am a young female artist that my work or my purpose is to make a political statement about my gender, nor do I think that it is a good reason to make art. However, to paint a painting is for a body to engage a body, to engage in an act of intimacy. As I am bound by my flesh, so my art is bound by its physical materialization. These are inescapable truths.

Is Schor’s *painterly language* something that can or should be taught? And how, if this were the task, would one proceed in teaching such a thing? I do believe that *painterly language* that Schor speaks of is something that can be understood, and I am almost certain it can be learned. I realize that it may be daring and rather ironic for me to suggest that the first, and possibly most crucial, lessons of art are not learned in art school, but begin the moment we start to negotiate our way, as human beings of a (or any) particular identity, through the world. It happens the moment we realize that we are finite bodies, visible, and of consequence within the physical world. Schor is correct in her assessment that a problem with painting is also a problem with culture. If culture refuses to, or is unable to look with regard, life as we know it is truly endangered. If, as I suggested in the introduction to this paper, the act of looking is what sustains the relevancy and vitality of a work of art, then it is also
the pleasure that accompanies it. Looking and being seen are the pleasures and, perhaps even, the sustenance of life itself.
Works Cited


Appendix A: Jenny Holzer’s *I Feel You, I Ask You* (full text) (1).

I WALK IN
I SEE YOU
I WATCH YOU
I SCAN YOU
I WAIT FOR YOU
I TICKLE YOU
I TEASE YOU
I SEARCH YOU
I BREATHE YOU
I TALK

I SMILE
I TOUCH YOUR HAIR
YOU ARE THE ONE
YOU ARE THE ONE
WHO DID THIS TO ME
YOU ARE MY ONE
I SHOW YOU
I FEEL YOU
I ASK YOU
I DON’T ASK
I DON’T WAIT
I WON’T ASK YOU
I CAN’T TELL YOU
I LIE
I AM CRYING HARD
THERE WAS BLOOD
NO ONE TOLD ME
NO ONE KNEW
MY MOTHER KNOWS
I FORGET YOUR NAME

I DON’T THINK
I BURY MY HEAD
I BURY YOUR HEAD
I BURY YOU
MY FEVER
MY SKIN
I CANNOT BREATHE
I CANNOT EAT
I CANNOT WALK
I AM LOSING TIME

I AM LOSING GROUND
I CANNOT STAND IT
I CRY
I CRY OUT
I BITE
I BITE YOUR LIP
I BREATHE YOUR BREATH
I PULSE
I PRAY
I PRAY ALOUD
I SMELL YOU ON MY SKIN
I SAY THE WORD
I SAY YOUR NAME
I COVER YOU
I SHELTER YOU
I RUN FROM YOU
I SLEEP BESIDE YOU
I SMELL YOU
ON MY CLOTHES
I KEEP YOUR CLOTHES

I AM LOSING GROUND
I CANNOT STAND IT
I CRY
I CRY OUT
I BITE
I BITE YOUR LIP
Appendix B (8).

Alice: And why haven’t you ever been jealous about me?

Bill: Well I don’t know, Alice, maybe because you’re my wife. Maybe because you’re the mother of my child and I know you would never be unfaithful to me.

Alice: You are very, very sure of yourself aren’t you?

Bill: No. I’m sure of you.

Alice: (laughing hysterically, falls to the floor)

Bill: Do you think that’s funny? Now we get a fucking laughing fit right?

Alice: (gathering herself together, stops laughing, voice becomes quieter and speech begins to slow) Do you remember last summer in cape cod?

Bill: Yes.

Alice: Do you remember one night in the dining room there was this young naval officer and he was sitting near our table with two other officers?

Bill: No.

Alice: The waiter brought him a message at which point he left. Nothing rings a bell?

Bill: No.

Alice: Well. I first saw him that morning in the lobby. He was, he was checking into the hotel and he was following the bellboy with his luggage – to the elevator.
He- he glanced at me as he walked past, just a glance, nothing more. But I could hardly move. That afternoon Helena went to the movies with her friend and, you and I made love. And we made plans about our future and we talked about Helena. And yet at no time was he ever out of my mind. And I thought if he wanted me, even if it was only for one night, I was ready to give up everything. You, Helena, my whole fucking future. Everything. And yet it was weird because at the same time you were dearer to me than ever. And at that moment my love for you was both tender and sad. I- I barely slept that night. And I woke up the next morning in a panic. I didn’t know whether I was afraid he had already left or that he might still be there. But by dinner I realized he was gone and I WAS RELIEVED.