Painting the Liminal

THESIS

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By

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Abstract

My primary concern with the drawn and painted image focuses on its occult power to address multiple or conflicting illusions of space and time in many facets while maintaining a singular presence. This flexibility to simultaneously depict and become, relate and isolate, and start and stop allows my work to explore metaphors for larger philosophical ideas of perception and existence. The purpose of this thesis is to connect these philosophical ideas with my investigations into drawing and painting.
Dedication

This document is dedicated to my brother Israel.
Acknowledgments

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I thank my colleagues in the Painting and Drawing Department at The Ohio State University for their conversation and friendship. Thank you to my mother for her lifelong love and support. Lastly, thank you Israel for drawing with me.
Vita

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Fields of Study

Major Field:  Art
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Chapter One: The In-Between

“The in-between, formed by juxtapositions and experiments, formed by realignments or new arrangements, threatens to open itself up as new, to facilitate transformations in the identities that constitute it. One could say that the in-between is the locus of futurity, movement, speed: it is thoroughly spatial and temporal, the very essence of space and time and their intrication.”

-Elizabeth Grosz, Architecture from the Outside.

Here architectural historian Elizabeth Grosz is commenting largely in relation to the role of architectural space, virtual space and their relationship to cultural identities, yet the attempt to identify the role of the in-between opens up a dialog that can be applied to my painting practice. From the start, my drawings in one way or another have dealt explicitly with the “in-between”. As a boy I competed with Israel, my older brother, to draw the most threatening monster. We illustrated characters that possessed combinations of features from many different plants and animals. These hybrids were created to battle each other. Of course, this battle never occurred. The results were drawings depicting specific multi-faceted identities like planned exquisite corpse drawings. It is impossible to remember exactly, but when beginning one of these drawings, I imagine that we began by putting down one body part followed by a contrasting element to establish difference. This may be considered the origin of my working process and telling of how I see my
paintings. A blank page or canvas is completely harmonious both empty and full. Once, the first move is made, the harmony is disrupted. After I make an initial mark every consecutive mark serves as a push toward or away from a balance in the painting. For instance, an opaque hard edged form could either provoke a similar form or nebulous transparent wash. Although I associate this back and forth with ideas of polarity, the end result is an aggregate of differing visual elements which I mediate to address the in-between.
Chapter Two: Imaginary Landscape

Illusionistic space, at varying degrees, has remained an important component in my work. Although I have shifted at times from an imagined landscape to an interior or psychological space, the conventions of pictorial space are always present in the paintings. By showing diminishing scale, overlapping, and perspective along with more abstract indications of space such as color, transparency, and texture, a tension between abstraction and figuration is achieved. Conceptually, there is continuity between the contrasting approaches to painting space and the aforementioned issues of the in-between or the liminal. These spaces are not painted from observation, but are imagined. Representational symbols and cues, depicting natural phenomena and architecture, are included in these imagined landscapes. Often the image establishes a clear representation of gravity incorporating the horizon. Initially a product of my early influences, i.e. comics and illustration, these symbols act as metaphorical vectors, as well as imbue the work with an air of playfulness. When finding these representations, the viewer can begin to formulate a narrative that is then cut short pushing the image back into ambiguity.
Chapter Three: Spatial Metaphors

In more recent work, there is an omission of this suggested narrative, depicting natural and structural elements. To retain an illusionistic quality, a space the viewers can step into, conflicting planes depicted in and out of perspective contribute to a shifting kinesthetic space. These planes, not unlike those used by Italian Futurist Paintings of the early Twentieth Century, were initially inspired by my research on the Vortographs of British photographer Alvin Langdon Coburn. These fracturing abstract crystalline spaces succeed in doing something completely different to the aims of Vorticism. Of the few that exist, only some of these Vortographs are abstracted fragmented space mirroring out from an axis sometimes centered and at times tilted. This fractioning implies an energy originating from some unknown source. The forms in the work are indicative of space and structure but vibrate and shift showing time unfolding. My shifting planes are coupled with other elements, such as texture and color, to create a tension or flattening out of the space to reinforce liminality, but they also are intended to speak metaphorically. By adjusting perspectives just slightly, the viewer’s relationship to the “interior space”, of the illusion is shifted slightly. I see this as a means to reposition the viewer in relation to the picture plane. This repositioning of the viewer is employed metaphorically, inviting the viewer to wonder: what is “self”? It could also be said that this experienced multiplicity dilutes the idea of a singular self thereby calling attention to issues of experience and the division of time and space.
Chapter Four: Philosophical Questions

“It is as if we have selected how much experience is really to be regarded as me. As if you, focused your attention on certain restricted areas of the whole panorama of things you experience and say I will take sides with that much of it.”

-Alan Watts, *Do You Do It, Or Does It Do You.*

Here Alan Watts asks questions about how we identify “self” in a lecture *Do You Do It, or Does It Do You* given from a ferry boat he lived on in Saulsalito, California. Ostensibly, Watts is discussing practical applications for basic ideas shared in Buddhism. It is not a giant leap, nor an unrelated one, to associate this discussion with my recent readings about perception and memory put forward by Henri Bergson and subsequently revived by Gilles Deleuze. Although Watts’ point of view is often confined within the context of Eastern Philosophy, I connect Watts and Bergson as they both discuss the multiplicity of human consciousness and experience. They both propose similar metaphysical understandings of “being”. Bergson divides human experience into multiple categories two of which are immediate consciousness and reflective consciousness. Immediate consciousness is directly tied to intuition and is how we experience pure time or, using his term, duration. Reflective consciousness refers to how we make sense of time or how we know and think. Bergson exposes the short comings of how we understand time. Since understanding is a function of reflective consciousness and
organizes time through a system of measurement or counting, Bergson claims we falsely confuse time with space. Time is only experienced through what Bergson refers to as confused multiplicity. This multiplicity of self does not concern cognition but is only experienced in intuition. My understanding of Bergson’s propositions is limited at best, however, this division of consciousness and multiplicity of self redefines boundaries of how humans identify self and support Watt’s discussion against a separate self. I digress, while investigating these topics through a continued research of an array of sources, literary and non-literary, a point of clarity is seldom achieved. I wander through texts, poetry, song lyrics, visual art, etc. not in search of facts on which to base an argument but rather to generate a questioning. Found in this questioning, is a sense of wonder which is visually articulated in the paintings.
Chapter Five: Space, Time and the Digital Data Stream

One common thread amongst the philosophers and artists I have referenced is their epistemological questioning spurred by accelerated advancements of science and technology. Bergson challenged the mechanistic-Newtonian model of the world finding it strangely timeless. Time was a central issue for Bergson as well as many other artists during the prewar anxiety of early twentieth century Europe. The Futurist obsession with kinesthesia, the precursory photographic experiments of Etienne Jules-Marey, and Bergson’s temporal flow are partially responses to the technological and scientific revolutions of their era. Today we are in the midst of another technological revolution. The fugitive space of the internet and digital flow of images seen on flat screens present us with a new temporality. The result is a new anxiety and philosophical questions resurface: What is our experience and how do we exist in this world? It is unquestionable that our experience has been affected. How can contemporary painting respond to this? Although, these ideas of technologies contribution to how we understand space and time have not been fleshed out in my work, I believe it will offer future avenues to pursue.
Chapter Six: Individual Works Analysis

These aforementioned philosophical questions are central to my work. Painting offers practical visual applications for these ideas. Multiplicity of experience and a division of space and time exist in an unchanging singular visual presence. Situated between illusion and object, painting is a locus for questions of “being”. Painting’s multivalent ability to suggest a dynamic multiplicity while maintaining the singular directness of its objecthood provides rich areas of investigation for my work.
Chapter Seven: Monuments

Figure 1. Funny Monument, 2009.

Funny Monument marks a significant shift in the way I approach constructing an image. It represents, among other things, my move from a more illustration based painting methodology into concerns over pictorial functions and how they might act as metaphor. In this piece landscape is beginning to disintegrate into layers of transparent brushstrokes. These brush strokes, painted with a casual immediacy, form an active ground plane. Without offering a solid ground, they pass through one another and appear to move in and out of an ambiguous space. In the background an event is occurring.
Eclipsed by a tangle of high intensity color bands and a lumbering gray mass, an explosion or perhaps an implosion is underway. The static image does not allow us to know with certainty the movement of this energy either outward or inward. It is stuck describing both conditions. Diamond shaped signs peak out from the heap and emit white light shapes while layers of blue ink wash spill into each other. In the foreground, a clumsy structural frame sits. Its unevenly stacked boxes and conflicting oblique angles are didactic of perspectival spatial functions however it merely is a symbol of those illusionistic tools and does not create any sensible depth. On the contrary, the uneven heavy black lines flatten out the structure as some kind of signage of flawed spatial system. This form is artifice of an idea of realized space and therefore is a playful attempt to call into question our understanding of perception and experience. Painterly brushstrokes not hidden in this work call attention to the materials and surface. A haptic surface creates literal space which is pitted against the illusionistic spatial functions such as perspective, diminishing scale and transparency. As stated earlier, this painting marked a turning point in my works. I began to use natural elements and symbols less frequently. As I moved away from an illustrative image, my primary concerns were no longer rooted in the use of symbols to depict a story or situation, but rather, an organization of space as a means to address concerns about human perception and existence.
Corner Problem was born out of my experience teaching perspective to beginning drawing students. While explaining the basic concepts of two-point perspective I realized that the multiple diagrams of conflicting perspectives erased and then redrawn were perhaps closer to how human beings experience time and move through space than my actual lecture. This discovery, as well as an investigation into Henri Bergson’s ideas about perception, provoked Corner Problem. Bergson proposed that there is disconnect between true experience or duration and perception which is largely experienced through
immediate memory. How would this idea be conveyed visually? This painting presents a visual polarity to confused space and time while maintaining a single vantage point for the viewer. This idea is best explained as looking into a corner while simultaneously looking from the exterior. The ongoing series of these multiple perspective paintings and drawings are a response to this idea.

In preparation of Corner Problem, I began on a larger square panel to engage peripheral vision immersing myself and the viewer in the work. The square orientation functions as a way to avoid limitations of landscape or portrait format. While working I flipped the painting to further avoid grounding the image. By denying the image gravity there is an emphasis on space rather than place. The color scheme here is expanded to include organic and inorganic hues to reinforce a duality in visual vocabulary. Although the perspective lines are a variety of diagonals, different levels of opacity call into question their concreteness and connote specific ideas of time. As if looking through a scope, the corners of the panel are rounded out with a middle grey tone. This mimics the edges of our vision and is meant to further isolate the viewer. In complete contrast to the dynamic and hard edge diagonal shapes, a white rope-like line floats around the edge of the image adding an eerie slowness to it. This line acts as a net in the composition, lassoing together the two disparate perceptions of this corner.
Chapter Nine: Shift and Whenevered

Shift and Whenevered were painted simultaneously and finished within the same few days. As one was painted the other would be drying and vice versa. The two images show a series of planes tilted suggesting movement, spatial tension and multiple viewpoints. Transparent layers also create space in the image by imply depth. Shift is mostly monochromatic with muted yellow and blue buried beneath intersecting white and gray lines and planes. Whenevered is mostly turquoise, yellow and white with a tilted high-intensity orange plane in the center. Two vertical stripes one yellow and one orange are located to either side of the central plane. These floating vertical stripes reflect
the edge of the support stabilizing the image against the dramatically shifting orange plane. During this time, perspectival space became a primary concern in my work. Increasing scale seemed inevitable. A larger scale would put the conflicting perspectives in the pictorial space into conversation with the surrounding interior of the studio or gallery. These paintings, made on 52”x 50” pieces of paper, are near squares. Like Corner Problem, this format was consciously chosen to abandon predetermined landscape or portrait orientation and grounding the image early on. Although, in the end, they incorporate perspective and horizon, they create a conflicted space and not a particular place. These two works reflect more recent experiments with the materiality of paint. As scale increased familiar methodologies proved inadequate and new possibilities of mark could be explored. These paintings could not be pored over while sitting at a desk. The large sheets of paper are unwieldy and required many different orientations. They were mostly made in a lateral position on the studio floor or large table. Occasionally, the paintings were moved to the wall while drying for observational sketches. As I moved them around the studio the paper edges got rough and torn. Surprisingly, this roughness opened up new avenues of thought for the work. These torn edges and tattered corners also ultimately influenced my unorthodox approach to hanging these paintings. To address a tapestry-like materiality of these pieces they were stamped in the top corners with metal rivets and then hung from nails flapping loosely at the bottom edge. This presentation works in conflict with the image and calls into question the works relationship with the wall and surrounding interior.
In addition to brushes, I began to utilize gestures commonly used in print making. In areas paint is piled on with palette knifes and then pulled across the surface with a squeegee much like pulling a flat while silkscreen printing. Often the paintings are pressed together while still wet and burnished on the backside. This method, carried out like a blind mono-print, unpredictably yields an unconscious mark and reveals an unfamiliar painting. This unplanned way of finding an image in the paintings is countered with a commitment to drawing. An abundance of possible compositions and notes drawn daily in sketchbooks inform how the work evolves. Both of these paintings started with a number of sketches. The sketched compositions are carefully painted onto the support as a starting point. As I paint, scrape, squeegee the original image is destroyed. Then there is a pause. Intuition is interrupted by close consideration and observational sketches of the
paintings. I draw the paintings to consider how they have come along. This is very much like listening. This self-imposed back and forth of varying degrees of control establishes points of tension in the work between consciousness and intuition, rational and irrational and the real and the unreal.
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