Making Space: Language, Painting, Poem

Thesis

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By
Lauren Ann Whearty
Graduate Program in Art

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Thesis Committee:
Laura Lisbon, Advisor
Sergio Soave
Michael Mercil
Abstract

It may seem contrary to paint when there are so many possibilities to create with technology—but that’s what makes painting so important. Through painting I develop a visual language and filter through it those things about the real world that nobody seems to be paying attention to. In combining perspectives, places, exaggerated colors, and objects, I am pointing out those curious moments in the world that seem normal and banal, but gain significance through a slower read. Through painting I investigate how we move through this world, on ski slopes, at the edge of one’s yard where the fence creates a boundary, the way in which neon lights may (or may not) affect a body of water. The paintings begin with questions. These questions may concern a specific sensation of space, an event, a natural or unnatural phenomena (such as neon lights on the ocean at night)—the painting is a curious and playful investigation of a condition or event that I have seen in reality, which I develop from that original question into a painted reality. It is my goal for the end of the painting to inspire new questions.

Painting is about looking. It is a place where one can think through imagery, gesture, and materiality. The process can reveal itself to the viewer, showing the viewer the order of the painting. Everything is exposed. Even those layers that are hardly visible are still a part of the painted object. Through articulating ways of looking and experiencing my own painting practice as well as the painting and poetry of others, I seek to find a few moments of clarity.
Dedication

This document is dedicated to my friends and family who I love.

Thank you for everything.
Acknowledgments

I couldn’t have gotten this far without the sincerity, honesty and support from my committee. Thank you Laura, Sean, and Michael for challenging and supporting me.

Thank you to my fellow painters, and the art grads for the friendship, love, and community.
Vita

2003................................................................. Haverford Sr High School
2007................................................................. B.F.A. Painting, Art History, Tyler School of
                                      Art, Temple University
2007................................................................. Yale at Norfolk Summer Residency
2011................................................................. M.F.A. Art, The Ohio State University
2009-2011 ......................................................... Graduate Teaching Associate, Department of
                                      Art, The Ohio State University

Fields of Study

Major Field: Art.
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Figure 1: List Poem¹

¹ List Poem is a writing I created as a linguistic arrangement addressing the way in which I approach painting. In a later chapter I will discuss the significance of poetry and prose within my work.
Chapter 1: Brush Stroke and Surface

The first mark changes everything. The brush stroke is the building block, the unit with which I paint. That first move becomes an important presence, which determines the direction and progress of the painting, especially in the creation or disruption of spatial illusion. The linear stroke can simultaneously read as a solid object, negative space, division, transition, gesture, or incision. A series of linear brush strokes becomes a plane, screen, surface, wall, or pattern. By using a limited series of strokes, I am developing my own visual and material language, where verticals signify trees or architecture, and horizontals refer to a planar surface or the reflective quality of water. My intention is for each stroke to have a bilateral purpose; in *Field and Screen*, the vertical linear stroke may look like a tree because of the context of landscape but with a closer look the image disintegrates to material and gesture.

The brush strokes are actions and images - simultaneously forming a picture and dissolving. In my painting there is a desire to both suppress and resist illusionistic depth. The image is to be fused with material to create new meaning and language, rather than remain merely recognizable as a familiar place. For that reason I believe it is difficult to “step into” my painting, as soft ground with sharp verticals and an acidic color palette prevent the viewer from having an easy or complacent experience with the painting. Through painting I continually work to open doors, as paintings lead to more paintings, questions lead to more questions, and uncertainty is always present.

The fence is an object found in one's daily landscape which functions as a formal element in the paintings to create and distort space with perspective. It is simultaneously a filter, transition, screen, plane, division, incision, pattern, and guide. Trees are transformed into fencing by layering strokes with alternating diagonals. Similar to the formal function of
the trees, the crosshatched screen divides the canvas in ways that allow me to create new spaces and environments within a single painting. When painting the fence the image of the landscape is simultaneously constructed and destroyed. The landscape image behind the structure is articulated with each stroke of the fence and also distorted and veiled as the fence weaves itself across the surface.

![Image: Field & Screen](image)

The forms and language within my painting all bring the viewer's attention to the surface. A drip breaks illusion by destroying the continuity of the pictorial space. Drips are frequently the most vertical or straight lines in the painting as well as the ghost of a painted action or result of gravity. Thick strokes over a thin ground create space while the character of the material demands that it have a presence of equal or greater import than the instantaneous read of the image. This battle over material and image is one of temporality. It is about looking. The materiality of the painting is a layer that cannot be read in an instant. Paint is more sensational, visceral, and human than the clean and slick qualities of image.
Painting is temporal in both the act of making, and the act of viewing. The painting is dependent upon the viewer to enliven it, to expose its traps and to guide you through its sequences. The painting remains still on the wall, but it is not static. We use our bodies to move around and within it. It does not expect the viewer to remain politely seated, but to peer at it from skewed perspectives, from straight on, and to glimpse at it over your shoulder as you leave the room. The painting can inform us, and naturally lead us from narrative, to concepts to finding the ideal distance for viewing. The painting has to engage us in the active process of looking. The painting, as an object, is passive and incomplete on the wall, waiting for someone to acknowledge its presence, to engage with it. The painting invites you to come upon it, suggesting, but never demanding that you give it a certain amount of time. Initially one apprehends the image. The viewers must orient and ground themselves within the logic of the painting. Paintings are meant to be experienced from a distance, up close, and from different angles. It may be easy to dismiss a painting upon the initial reading of the image, assuming we have a complete understanding from the reading of our initial apprehension (Lacan, 1998). This is just the invitation, or initial trappings of the painting.

The immersion one feels from the painting is created through an additive process and reflected upon when the viewer recognizes that they are outside of the experience. This experience becomes imbedded within one’s memory as real, allowing the mind to reflect upon or recall it as one would a foreign language when they need to. As memory continues to assemble and crumble throughout time, so does the seemingly static apprehension of the painting. The real world and it’s imagined other (the painting) are folded into our memory, where the materiality of the painting can project onto reality the position of critical distance, read through the visceral language of paint.

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¹ Merleau-Ponty discusses, in *The Battle Over Existentialism*, the individual in nature, where nature is the object and the individual, "senses that he has appeared in a world which was not made for him and which would have been more perfect without him. Of course, this is not strictly true since reflection shows that being is inconceivable without any witnesses". So here the painting is waiting to exist and presence itself for the individual.

² "What does a quality of motion mean? A girl walking down the street looks wonderfully pretty at one moment and average-pretty at another. It is your luck if you can see her at the right moment. At the right moment she has for you her real life and all of that real life from beginning to end is wonderfully pretty. In art that luck is an image, but in art to really have that luck, a flash isn’t enough, it takes some time," (Denby, 1965).
Monet’s Water Lily paintings give us one narrative of looking through spatial and temporal interaction. As one steps closer to the painting, the optical focus shifts from an image of convincing spatial illusion to nothing but the pleasures and effects of visceral material surface. The vacillation between image and material occurs by changing one’s distance by only a few feet. You can also notice this shift from the Japanese footbridge paintings of the 1890s versus those of the 1910s and 1920s. Early in the series, around 1900, Monet was making small to medium sized paintings of the bridge at the pond. These vertically oriented paintings contain layers of marks and a density that creates the sensations of air quality, temperature and time of day. When one sees these paintings from across the room, they desire to get near to them, to see the surface. Once the viewer gets close to the painting, the image breaks down and reveals the paint as paint. With the picturesque image of the scene gone, the dizzying and abstract qualities of the moving reflective water come into the viewer’s perception. In person the earlier paintings have a distinct point at which the image breaks down to brushstroke, color, and paint. The later paintings require much more space to see the image of the footbridge and landscape. The linen is even visible toward the corners and edges of some of the canvases – those liminal areas define the edges of these worlds and passes of time, reminding us that we are looking at a painting (a symbolic exit door to the immersive experience) –functioning as the periphery of our vision where objects and space fade out of focus. Viewers are not expected to remain fixed in one position for the ideal viewing of these paintings as they emphasize a lived experience, moving, and changing in person.
Figure 3: *Bridge Over a Pond of Water Lilies*

Figure 4: *The Japanese Footbridge*  

*The Japanese Footbridge* is among Monet’s last paintings of this subject, made between 1920 and 1922. Twenty-five years earlier, in the late 1890s, the footbridge provided the subject of Monet’s first series of paintings of his pond at Giverny. While the paintings in the earlier series are more naturalistic in style, the later works feature dense swirls and loose strokes of color that almost obscure the form of the bridge. These later paintings also feature a fiery palette of maroons, rusts, and oranges unique within Monet’s body of work.”
Chapter 2: Immersive Space

Immersion has been defined in a number of ways throughout time. It is a dipping or plunging into water or liquid especially to transform into other things, an absorption in some condition, action, or interest. It is also a method or system of teaching or learning a foreign language where all communication is conducted in that language. Immersion is also the administration of Christian baptism by the dipping or plunging of the whole person into water. It can also be the disappearance of a celestial body behind another or its shadow, as in an occultation or an eclipse. Here we see that when one is immersed it has something to do with being in a foreign or unfamiliar atmosphere, a change in one’s perspective or position, and/or a form of concentration or focus that takes over the senses or mind. When discussing immersion in the form of mediated environments, especially painting, I am defining it as a willing state of belief (a suspension of disbelief) or of concentration that eclipses all other visual or sensorial information at the time of absorption. The immersive object can be of any size or media as the location of immersion is not only in the perceptual realm of reality, but also of the imagination. To be immersed is to feel absorbed by the effects of an object or situation through actual sensory or synaesthetic experience.

\textsuperscript{1} “immerse” and “immersion” definitions from the Oxford English Dictionary online.
On the Museum of Modern Art’s website, the captions under the paintings read: “In this triptych Monet depicted his Japanese-style pond covered with water lilies, at center, shimmering with reflections of clouds overhead. The water’s surface fills the expansive composition so that conventional clues to the artist—and the viewer’s—vantage point are eliminated. Monet wished for the paintings to encompass the viewer; in his designs for the Musée de l’Orangerie in Paris, he specified that the Water Lily canvases be displayed on curved walls. “The aim of his large Water Lilies paintings, Monet said, was to supply ‘the illusion of an endless whole, of water without horizon or bank.’ While his garden in Giverny, his water-lily pond, and the sky above are the subjects of this monumental triptych, his representation of them can be seen to verge toward abstraction. In the attempt to capture the constantly changing qualities of natural light and color, spatial cues all but dissolve; above and below, near and far, water and sky all commingle. In his enveloping, large-scale canvases Monet sought to create “the refuge of a peaceful meditation in the center of a flowering aquarium.”
Because immersion has so many definitions that concern being submerged in water or other liquid, Monet’s water lily pond paintings are of perceptual and conceptual import. With the panoramas Monet is working to give the viewer as complete a view as possible, and results in being surrounded by a blue atmosphere on all sides. The paintings themselves are immersive – when standing close, they fill the viewer’s periphery with water and atmosphere. Oliver Grau, a new media artist and art critic, discusses the paintings and viewers reactions to their submersive qualities at length:

“Claude Monet, for example, spent decades searching for ways to fuse the observer and the image. The triptychs, Iris, Saule pleureur, Agapanthus, and Nuages, painted between 1915 and 1917 and each measuring 12.75 m by 2 m, created the illusion of a single continuous canvas: a complete panoramic view of Monet’s water lily lake. To begin with, Monet planned Nymphéas as a proper panorama for a garden rotunda lit only by daylight from the glass roof. However, its first public exhibition in 1927 was as eight series of images displayed in two rooms of an orangery at Giverny, the Musée Claude Monet. Although this mode of display also aroused associations in contemporary visitors of being ‘submerged’ in a lake, Monet’s original concept intended to avail itself of the far more effective illusion medium of the panorama. Monet’s water lilies, floating on the wind-ruffled water that reflects the changing colors of the sky, have lost almost all distinct contours. The artist’s intention was to locate observers within the watery scene, not ‘submerging’ them in water, but immersing them in an image space with an indeterminate perspective: floating above the water’s surface, without distance, confronted on all sides by the 360 degree images,” (Grau, 2003).

While water as a mass is important in discussing the submerging sensations of immersion, it is also important for it’s surface. The water’s surface poetically creates a metaphor for the material surface of the painting as an outer skin. This is not dissimilar from the way that Alberti discusses the painting surface and image as a slice from the visual cone of perspective. Here the water’s surface presents infinite slices with its bumps and ripples. The flickering reflections on the surface of the water act as a moving and fractured mirror; in its impressions of movement we see fragments of time. With the surface of the water Monet can eliminate distance in the landscape by simultaneously painting the ground and the sky through the reflections on the water. One can imagine that they are within this

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7 I feel the room at Giverny with the curved paintings destroys the illusions that Monet creates through the painting, by creating an overwhelmingly white room. The paintings and the gallery interior seem to fight for attention.
landscape, as the painting describes what is in front of the viewer, and the water’s reflection completes the illusion by describing that which is above and behind them.
Chapter 3: Cezanne’s Influence

I grew as a painter through Cezanne. His large bathers (pictured below) live at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. In my memory it is a very large painting, with a great deal of depth, and layers of figures, with solidity that makes it whole and full of energy. In each area of Cezanne’s paintings one can observe his intense concentration on individual areas and details. Each small brush stroke acts as a neurotic and loving gesture concerning the present moment of the painting. We see him studying painting as a material language and a way of seeing and understanding through the very act of painting.

“He needed one hundred working sessions for a still life, one hundred and fifty sittings for a portrait. What we call his work was, for him, only an essay, an approach to painting. In September, 1906, at the age of 67 –one month before his death– he wrote: ‘I was in such a state of mental agitation, in such great confusion that for a time I feared my weak reason would not survive….Now it seems I am better and that I see more clearly the direction my studies are taking. Will I ever arrive at the goal, so intensely sought and so long pursued? I am still learning from nature, and it seems to me I am making slow progress.’ Painting was his world and his way of life,” (Ponty, 1964).

Through the painting we read the decision making process and the lapsing of time. As one's eyes move over a Cezanne painting, his sessions are revealed through different perspectives, layers, trains of thought. We orient ourselves according to the many sessions and perspectives found within the paintings. Because of this kind of concentration on looking, there is a concentration on orientation and positioning of the painter to the painting, as well as the viewer to the painting. “The oriented space that we find is moreover given in relation to our body. When we say that something is ‘too high’ we mean too high for me, my body, to reach. It is in relation to the possibilities of my body that the things that are given in oriented space are given as they are. We can only modify the way this space appears
in the way it is given to us by changing the body through inventions, for instance, the car,” (Wentworth, 2004). In observing perspectival shifts within the painting, we as viewers are enabled to maneuver through the painting in a strange yet natural order. We are not given a picture to read, we are given a space to find our way through.

In my painting, *Bonfire*, I place the horizon line lower than normal, suggesting that the painting be hung higher than usual, or that we are not in a standing position. I have made it difficult to stand inside of this painting because of the lack of ground to stand on. The purple ground of shadows does not make it clear whether this space is somewhere we can safely stand or not. The light appears to come from behind the stack of sticks and trees, suggesting an unnatural source. Sections create sensible light relationships of shadows and highlights, but as a whole, shadows go in all directions, making it unclear whether we are seeing through the pile to the other side, or just deeper into shadow. The mystery of the location is important to me. The bonfire began the idea for the painting, with warm orange and yellows contrasted with the purples suggesting the light and temperature qualities of being in front of a fire, without setting the pile ablaze.

![Figure 7: Bonfire](image)

Figure 7: *Bonfire*
Figure 8: Large Bathers
Chapter 4: Collaged and Stacked Space

How can one painting include more than one space in a way that makes sense? The painted world has to be believable within its own logic. How does the painted world become logical or legible to others? Through repetition? Through consistency? Alberti used linear perspective in order to invent the landscape and architecture in his paintings. In his painted world all elements were idealized from the mathematics of the depiction to the foliage, women. For his time invented spaces had to be framed within the logic of geometry and a specific idea of optics. I feel there are more possibilities for invention within this idea, through combining multiple perspectives, to negating its logic totally. As I will mention in Chapter 7: Language, Painting, Poem, poetry and prose have greatly inspired and freed the ways in which I create space and stack imagery. Georges Perec is someone who uses the page aesthetically, creating new ideas of space on the page. In Perec’s Species of Spaces, there is a poem where the word “space” is stacked on the page, listing words that are linked by their shared space on the page.

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8 Ann Friedberg addresses the way in which Alberti used the geometric system of perspective to create ideal spaces, rather than draw from those in reality, “[he] applied this ‘cold logic of optical geometry’ to painterly representation. The ‘picture’ was a surface, a plane that intersected the visual pyramid of sight at its perpendicular axis. The picture plane was thus imagined as a flat vertical surface between the artist (and viewer) and the scene depicted. The planar surface of the painting formed a material support for the painting’s virtual representation: ‘A painting is the intersection of a visual pyramid at a given distance, with a fixed centre and a defined position of light, represented by art with lines and colors on a given surface. Hence, the artist and the viewer of the painting were in a fixed position in relation to the picture plane - a position that implied the artist’s and the viewer’s upright posture facing a picture plane also in an upright position’ (Friedberg, 2006).
Figure 9: Space
To pinpoint a sensation, condition, or invented sense of place, I play with multiple images, vantage points, and colors. What is the best way to create the sensation of one specific kind of place? How does one arrange a space that shows the viewer a specific sensation or presence? Through image? Material? Narrative? Contemporary painter, Amy Sillman has made these thoughts and questions into believable visual spaces. She employs shapes and lines to divide the canvas where separate worlds collide within the same pictorial space. Her paintings are often related to cubism because of the way she constructs and structures the surface of the canvas. She makes use of the fractured plane, using one object or space to obstruct and create the space that it flanks. Her sense of touch, color and stroke allow her to play between spaces, imagery and abstraction with whimsy and intuition; making the seemingly abrupt shifts appear natural and fluid. Not only does she shift and morph from one space to another, the content that shifts between those spaces makes meaning through an additive and disjunctive process.

Figure 10: *The New Land*

"Reminiscent of cubist painting, Amy Sillman's *The New Land* creates a landscape of fragments, where shapes and colours converge as independent forms, never quite resolving as a whole. Sillman addresses her canvas with a painter’s heart-felt affection, each gesture becomes a consuming sentiment of expressive absorption. Set against the dalliance of a chalky pink ground, elongated stripes of green congregate with animate integrity, vibrating against patches of electric orange, and off set by contradictory suggestions of spindly flowers and figures. As layers overlap and forms collide, Sillman’s painting descends into a wonder of action and associative reference where bodily experience, memory and perception tangle together."
In *Split Screen*, the painting began with the red vertical, which allowed me to immediately create separate spaces in one canvas. The blue space came next, placed because of its ability to further activate the red line with an agitating affect. This activation divides the viewers attention, forcing them to jump back and forth between the landscapes, rather than smoothly move through. Because it is sometimes difficult to transition from one space to another, I am taking the most literal approaches possible. The two separate spaces in the painting allow me to play with the perceived rectangle of the canvas – distorting the reading of the canvas by causing the rectangle to read as more of a square. From there I continued to divide the remaining canvas area into sections of different spaces. More trees act as divisions in space, and floral decorations act as a border, holding us in the picture plane.

To emphasize the separate places in the painting, the speed of brush strokes change throughout. The red and blue verticals have been created with a series of economic brush strokes, while the grassy field is slower, layered, with gentle curves and dips in the ground. Even the area of each mark reads through its temporality –small quick marks, versus large planes of ground. These shifts are important in that they separate the spaces further, and
emphasize the temporal qualities within the space of the painting as a whole. Areas of solidity, created with thick paint read quickly. The areas of layered translucency create a different kind of density through timing, editing, wiping out, and re-painting. This editing process is imperative to the freshness of the painting, one with the initial appearance of ease linked with areas that have been reworked over and over.

The flowers act as a bridge between spaces. The marks transition from one plane to the next with vibrating color combinations like a lush leafy green over an acidic orange. They are also an unapologetic feminine decoration, adding a patterned flourish to the painting, visual activity, and a shift in the scale of marks and strokes. As in many Indian miniature paintings, the foliage framing the bottom edge of the canvas flips the perspective plane, while also orienting the viewer as one who is outside of this ornamental border, looking in.

Decorating is sometimes talked about as a way to cover-up—like cosmetic make-up—to conceal aspects of a structure that is flawed or lacks some basic formal consideration, and therefore needs to be made better by an additive process. If decoration is not being discussed as a covering-up, it is frequently addressed as “too nice”, “feminine”, and “passive” (Faruqee, 2007). Through painting it is possible to call for a new way of seeing the overlooked, the seemingly superfluous as important and functional. Through painting we are able to look with new eyes on those seemingly decadent things, and breathe new life into them. Ornamentation and decoration exemplify ways of paying homage, or honoring, rather than superficially distracting one from a flawed or rudimentary skeleton. To recognize importance and meaning within ornamental art, one must reassess the way that art and objects are perceived.
Each brush stroke in an Indian miniature painting is placed with a purpose, and for both the maker and the viewer, those strokes have a devotional quality, and the density with which those marks have been orchestrated creates, at times, an overwhelming sense of intellectual and visual depth. The viewer is very aware of the sheer patience and control of the artist while in the act of making. The artist is not focusing on pictorial space, yet the spaces that are created are believable within their own constraints. You can see that hills, mountains, buildings, and people, can be stacked in whatever way it takes to include the essential elements of a story into the picture frame. Here you may see multiples of the same character, as they represent a passing of time, or multiple events that occur in different places, but within the same narrative. Because meditating on the narrative is usually the focus, these artists are not concentrating on atmospheric perspective, nor are they focusing on the Renaissance ideals of linear perspective. These mathematical perceptual structures have no purpose here. It is impossible to see – by which I mean understand - every aspect of a painting, sculpture or piece of architecture in one sitting, but you can absorb the visual and intellectual elements over time. When one devotes time to understanding, the material will
reveal itself differently with each session, or within each moment, from observing something as a whole, to an intimate investment in minute details.

Figure 13: *Fenced In*

Understanding a painting happens through experience, where the essence of the object may take time and meditation to reveal itself, with the chance that there is not one answer or opinion, but a multitude of possibilities. When I describe a multiplicity of locations in one painting, one has to reevaluate the way in which they expect the space to appear. What at first in *Fenced In* appears to be a tree is recognized as a void or shadow. The shape overlaps the fence in the foreground, but also interacts with areas that appear to be off in the distance. The Hindu illustrations appear to be on loop in their narrative, cycling through their stories (usually poems or prose) in a rhythmic fashion. I seek to have this kind of temporal loop in my painting, where one cannot easily determine the order of the painting. Highlights in the grass appear to sit back with the plane of the ground, and also jump forward through the soft diamonds of the fence. If the leafy green area appears both on top and behind, questions open up relating to the location of the viewer, the logic of the perceived space and image, as well as in the material and order of the painting itself.
Attempting to create this sense of curiosity creates a nervous tension for me as I am constantly creating, covering, scraping down, and re painting the canvas.

Figure 14: Top Heavy
Chapter 5: Significance of the Mundane

The everyday is where I begin. As I discuss the ways in which I look at painting, and the ways in which I believe painting calls to be looked at, I am also thinking about ways in which to look at the world and our surroundings. I have always tried to begin from direct experience and objects and subjects, which I don’t frequently see in painting, from skis, to air conditioners, to fences etc. These experiences and places are frequently new to me. They are also those that have been present or familiar all along, which I have recently noticed in a new way.

To construct the paintings I have tried to reinvent the conditions that I have observed in reality. I am reluctant to rely on the photograph, as the composition and character of the objects and brush strokes become too reliant on the structure and qualities inherent in the photographic image such as depicting a singular perspective, grounding objects, etc. For this reason I have been working from drawings, working quickly and irreverently with gouache, ink, acrylic, and watercolor. From these drawings I am able to give myself more freedom in the paintings. The ground may disappear, the sky may change colors erratically, and the shadows may go in multiple directions with each new perspectival area. The otherwise static objects develop personality and uneasiness in their architecture that enhances the quickness of observing the thing at hand.

The narrative of each painting develops from somewhere between an instance, a condition, and a story. The objects and images create a situation for potential narrative. I say this because there is no action that has just occurred, or that is about to occur, and the temporal quality of the painting is made up of only a few moments or based on a curious glance. Some of these moments deserve to be elaborated upon and extended through the painting process. Since they occur in the world as a glimpse, of something strange yet every-
day, I strive for that kind of character within the painting itself. Weeds grow along the edge of the fence or between two air conditioners, demonstrating a small haven of wildness in a yard or world that is regularly pruned and arranged. Chain link fences can be looked through: they are flimsy yet effective borders, which are not quite invisible – they block us from passing through, and lead us along a delineated property.

Figure 15: Air Conditioners
Chapter 6: Skis and Trees

The ski series began with my first trip snowboarding. I was thrilled with the people, their vibrant clothing against the white snow, the attitude of sport and competition at this recreational surreal place. I was fascinated by the interjection of man upon nature, including the man made snow, the tree and snow stripes down the slopes. These things all have purposes, and they embody the human experience of the landscape. As humans, we modify the landscape to suit our needs - making it nearly uninhabitable for native animals, yet maintaining the illusion that we are exploring and adventuring in the wild. In these altered landscapes, we use the trails and equipment to ski and snowboard, while viewing the picturesque scenery of the untouched slopes in the distance. As an artist, it is my position to turn the lens to that which we, as a contemporary people, are becoming used to. The subtle absurdities of the altered landscape are all practical in their use for skiing and snowboarding, but from the perspective of an artist’s first time on a mountain, they represent the best and worst of human nature. We have dominated the landscape, and experience it with exciting tools and games, and think that we are getting “back to nature”.

10 Picturesque, Oxford English Dictionary: In the late 18th cent. The picturesque was considered an aesthetic category alongside beauty and sublimity (as established by Burke), associated with the roughness and irregularity of nature harmonized by composition.
The ski paintings sought to play with this desire to be part of an ideal of pure nature while also altering and making a commodity of the experience itself. The skis began as fill-ins for humans, as remnants of their activity. They then reached a point where I wanted the skis and the trees to become integrated, to be confused with one another, so the viewer wouldn’t be sure whether they were looking at red trees or skis, or maybe just sticks. Here color plays an imperative role in heightening the mundane. Color highlights the absurdity of the event or condition with color that deviates from the naturalistic to the fantastic and peculiar.
In sports color is aggressive, and even distracting –demanding that the spectators and opponents understand the seriousness of the activity at hand. The players want to be seen.

In nature color conceals and reveals for survival purposes –distracting enemies from the nest, making themselves a difficult target to see. In painting color is felt. It functions in a way that the image alone cannot. The unnatural colors in *Skis & Trees* mimic the aggressive attitudes and uniforms of the sport, allowing experts to show off and be recognized from afar. The simultaneous contrast of the red and teal give rhythm, agitation and confusion to the landscape, insinuating some kind of movement or flickering.1

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1 In the Oxford English Dictionary “Simultaneous Contrast” is defined as the effect of mutual modification of two contiguous areas of colour.
Chapter 7: Language, Panting, Poem

Poetry activates imagery and sensation through language. Language is abstract in its ability to define and give meaning through verbal expression. I have developed an affinity for poems that surreally describe places and events especially within landscape, and weather conditions to describe emotional or sensational conditions. It is as though these writings that I am most interested in talk around a subject with seemingly unrelated strings of words in order to conjure an intense sensation or feeling that is shared amongst a series of events or conditions. I have not directly made a painting based on a poem, but the ability for words to take the reader from one scale, position, or metaphysical state to another has filtered into my painting process. The freedom that poetry has to create visual experiences through language encourages me to have the freedom to experiment with these ideas in my painting process. Something that I’m interested in through image, material and color is a vivid experience. It is thrilling when words on a page can create such an experience for the reader, so I find it to be a helpful resource.

Polly Apfelbaum brings up the connection between abstraction, imagery and language with her essay, *Varieties of Abstraction: A Partial Taxonomy*. Her lists, titles, and quotations show a way of seeing that is not based on a single image. Polly proposes, “a partial taxonomy of the forms [her] work takes –the concepts which might give them a momentary sense. Much of this is the report of what others have said: hearsay. Concepts neither precede nor follow the work, but nevertheless slip in, out, and through the work. The source is unimportant. The list is necessarily incomplete. [Polly] want[s] to multiply categories; not diminish them, “ (Apfelbaum). Opening possibilities is important within my
work, and language is one resource that provides opportunities for abstraction, and allows me to see things as if for the first time.

Pointillisms
Repeated, singular marks of unmixed colours set up vibrant exchanges across the empty space of the unmarked fabrics. Recently the affinity with pointillism has been pointed out to me: 'The work processes itself with a bombardment of discrete units distributed in layers that articulate themselves on the one or more layers already laid down. It is because texture is constituted by 'relatively homogeneous' distinct elements that the work appears to us as an ordered superimposition of layers. The pigmentary mass "unfolds" itself in a certain number of imbricated strata that, between them, offer sufficient similitude to form a system.' (Jean Clay, Pollock, Mondrian, Seurat: la profondeur plate.)

Wrinkles
What is the water in a lake? A blank page. The ripples are its wrinkles. And every one is a wound. "A lake without ripples is a mirror. A wrinkled lake is a face."
By this I mean to suggest that the pleats in my work are not so much a Baroque 'folding to infinity' but something more diminutive, more personal, less ordered, but also more provisional, more fragile.
The wrinkles of the innocent are ripples a breeze sketches and undoes as it subsides.
Wonder is a twinkle of the skin.
God is in the slightest shiver.' (Edmond Jabes, The Book of Questions)

Figure 18: Varieties of Abstraction: A Partial Taxonomy

The piece of writing, List Poem, was inspired by Padgett Powell's The Interrogative Mood: A Novel? Powell's questioning shifts between serious, critical, and humorous from one sentence to the next. Here there are no conclusions, there are only more questions, and more possibilities. Potatoes and iPhones can be brought up in a single paragraph, floating as the mind does from one topic to another. Despite the disparate subjects, the book is fluid and visual throughout. In my constructions of landscape I work to place those things next to one another that don't seem to fit, and Padgett Powell does that without fussing over transition or a kind of over-worked seamlessness. Because words can create associations through their combinations, I look to poetry and prose to do the same in my painting.

In Ann Hamilton's essay, Making Not Knowing, she discusses words, meaning and art, "What is speaking? What is this orphic machine of the mouth, opening and closing to make
sounds, vowels, and consonants, of letters filling into words, and on down the road into sentences and meanings? And looming even larger, in a haunting sort of way: What is being said? What are the forms and possibilities of saying? I think about the space of someone speaking and someone listening—a situation of response. I begin to think about words: What can words do? How can words be acts of making? And I begin to ask myself: What words need to be said now? What can words say now? Through what process might I find words that are up to the task of all the things that need saying now, when cultures fight cultures, when invention and reciprocity seem on the decline, when listening hasn’t kept pace with speaking? As a maker, more comfortable with a line of thread than a line of writing, I begin to wonder how words might become the material of my making."

It is extremely important to look at things outside my practice. I’m usually initially interested in ideas that overlap with my own practice. I can think about materials outside of painting with a more fresh and objective look. Stepping outside of myself to experience prose, sculpture, film, music, etc. are ways of considering alternative angles to current ideas and methods, and of opening doors to new possibilities within my practice. For the next two pages I will conclude with a series of poems and paintings.
When all our days are numbered marching bands will fill the streets & we will not hear them because we will be upstairs in the clouds.

Sasha Fletcher

“I wanted apples to grow. I wanted flowers to grow. I wanted balloons to grow. I wanted very tall trees to grow & for balloons to grow from them. I wanted something incredible to rise up out of the ground & straight into the clouds & for it to devour us all.”

Figure 19: *Pile*

“I was standing in the middle of a meadow in my yard. I dug a hole very slowly. I filled the hole with birds. They sat there in the hole, flying very still. I pulled planks of wood up from the ground & I built a ship around those birds. I built a fire in my belly & I put my belly in the ship & I drew a new belly so no one would get lonely. When I built it all I built it with a hammer. When I swung the hammer I swung it with my eyes closed.”
“I was up all night drawing pictures of plants on pieces of paper. I cut them out & glued them onto some cardboard. I glued the cardboard to some paint stirrers & planted them in the yard. I tried to make sure that there were some pretty good plants out there.

I am building you a garden the best I can. I built you a steamboat. I built you a window. I built you a river.

I built a ship out of the floorboards & I floated it on down the river.

I built the river out of what rivers have always been built of.

I believed it tradition as much as I could for all the ways it could help me & all the ways that it would.”
References


Apfelbaum, Polly. Varieties of Abstraction: A Partial Taxonomy


Fletcher, Sasha. When All Our Days Are Numbered Marching Bands Will Fill The Streets & We Will Not Hear Them Because We Will Be Upstairs In The Clouds. Mudluscious Press. 2010.


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