Painting as Becoming

Thesis

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By

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Abstract

My practice is concerned with the effects of painting and drawing on perceptual systems. The purpose of this research is to examine our material relationship to the world and to consider how we might shift our views in order to broaden our perceptual experiences. In this thesis I will examine the collaborative role of materials in our daily lives and provide examples of how these interactions might affect the ways in which we engage with life, art, and artistic practice.
Dedication

This document is dedicated to my family.
I would like to thank Laura Lisbon, Suzanne Silver and Philip Armstrong for their generosity and support. The amount of knowledge imparted by each has undoubtedly expanded my research and continues to inspire both my personal and artistic practices.
Vita

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Fields of Study

Major Field: Art
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Chapter 1: Experience

“If we define art as part of the realm of experience, we can assume that after a viewer looks at a piece, he “leaves” with the art, because the “art” has been experienced. We are dealing with the limits of an experience- not, for instance, with the limits of painting. We have chosen that experience out of the realm of experience to be defined as “art” because having this label it is given special attention. Perhaps this is all “Art” means- this Frame of Mind.”

-Robert Irwin, Seeing is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees

“To perceive the world is to coperceive oneself…the awareness of the world and of one’s complementary relations to the world are not separable.”

-James J. Gibson, The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception

Painting often feels like a recalibration of my senses. It’s a way of re-engaging the body in order to reshape my consciousness. With a consistent artistic practice my perception of the world is significantly enhanced. My bodily awareness is increased and the manner in which I experience space, color, light, darkness, movement, sound and touch is radically altered. I have experienced states of consciousness which have shaken my understanding of reality and have found it necessary to analyze the conditions of such experiences in order to distinguish the parameters of decay and growth. Drugs,
depression, lack of sleep, loss of weight, illness, and changes in diet have all contributed to an awareness of the malleability of my own perception. These conditions, if carried out repeatedly, result in the decay of physical and mental health. Meditation, exercise, diet, sleep, painting, and mindful practices also have the capacity to alter and in some ways enhance perception. These are sustainable techniques which improve both physical and mental health and can be considered practices of growth.

My practice today encompasses all of the aforementioned sustainable techniques. Each one aims to increase consciousness and physical stability. I did not set out to develop a practice that could do this. Instead, I arrived at these conclusions through much trial and error. Failure has been an essential tool for development, as it has the capacity to both distinguish the boundaries and offer a counterpoint to what might be called achievement in both painting and life outside the studio.

My interest in non-representational painting began in 2006. At that time I experienced much confusion in confronting the term abstraction. It was often used in place of “nonrepresentational” or “non-referential” painting. In my estimation the notion of assembling a person’s face with sticks and colorful blotches of paint was quite abstract. Still, I was curious what the term could offer me. I thought of abstraction as an impossible depth with no discernible shape. It was for me a dimension that recalled the depths of the ocean and the far reaches of outer space. It was a threshold between everything known and unknown, visible and invisible, audible and inaudible, tangible and intangible. It was a plane of existence that was also placeless. I knew I had experienced it and I knew it was inside of me but I could not explain how it could come into being. I
was simply aware that it required enough of my attention that I might become immersed in it. I believed it to be the depths of my mind and soul.

The spiritual aspect of my practice grew as I realized that painting had begun to change my appreciation of the external world. My use of the term “spiritual”, however, seemed to be contained within the boundaries of science and the unknown. I became fascinated by the phenomena of everyday existence and began carrying a jeweler’s lens with me at all times so I could observe the detailed, and often geometric, patterns woven through nature. I became more and more interested in pattern and repetition and began to sense that there was an interconnectedness of all things. I felt there was so much in front of me that I had failed to see or experience. The philosopher and cognitive scientist, Alva Noe states in *Action in Perception*, “The process of perceiving, of finding out how things are, is a process of meeting the world; it is an activity of skillful exploration.” In order to understand these phenomenal experiences more clearly I would need to be more active in my explorations.

In 2007 I decided to sit outside for several hours each day observing and taking notes on the phenomena all around me. I wrote about the wind and the changing daylight. I watched the frozen blades of grass rise as they thawed in the morning sun. I sat high up in my favorite pine tree until dark and listened as hundreds of nocturnal insects awoke and animated the space with their rhythmic chirping. I held on tightly to that same tree as it swayed wildly in the wind before a storm. I touched every surface so that I could recall more complex details in my lucid dream states. I walked with friends for hours without opening my eyes. I spent time in sensory deprivation. I painted water
and reflected on reflections. I became interested in the spaces that were dismissed as illusion. I could no longer see the reflection of the stars on the pond as a flat image. Instead it was a real space. It lacked certain attributes of the actual stars and sky but then so did my experience. My interest was not vested in its visual mimesis but rather in its ability to deform the space represented within its physical body. It became a new ground of experience that seemed to have infinite capacity for distorting form, and yet, there was a limit to its movement inherent in its molecular structure. I realized that my experience of the stars and the sky was flattened and that my perception was always contingent on the limits of a given materiality. This reflected space in the pond became for me simply another form of physical reality.

One day as I held my hand out over the pond I began to wonder about the space that existed between my reflected hand and the now occluded reflection of the star. I had displaced it from my view but not that of another vantage. The space of the star’s absence was the same as a shadow that represents the occlusion of light. The point of the shadow was essentially my own place of absent perception. I began to wonder about the void moments of perception that render the worlds of our experience in such specific ways. This was perhaps the first real breakthrough in considering the conditionality of our perceptual experiences.

I was inspired by the idea that our entire existence was contingent upon varying levels of reception and response. I began to question the real, and being quite solitary, became momentarily inspired by the idea of a solipsistic existence. Ultimately, my connection to the natural world, and the amount gained from those interactions, helped
dissolve such notions. I was left with a certainty that the natural world had exhibited a
type of agency that was affecting my body and the manner in which I had been acting and
thinking. It seemed that if I rendered myself available to various natural phenomena I
would almost always receive a transformative experience. Avoiding the tendency to
anthropomorphize the natural world, I felt comfortable in the uncertainty of its form
relative to mine. And just as one is most aware of a sense in its absence, I felt that I was
facing an unknown space that called to the center of my being as though I had some
answers.
Chapter 2: Becoming

“To become bamboo and to forget that you are one with it while drawing it – this is the Zen of the bamboo, this is the moving with the “rhythmic movement of the spirit” which resides in the bamboo as well as in the artist himself.”
-D. T. Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture*

“Note that it is the retina that moves relative to the image projected on it, not the other way around, as we have been taught. The retina moves relative to its image and relative to the pattern occupied by excited receptors.”
-James Gibson, *Senses Considered As Perceptual Systems*

The transformation in Zen often corresponds with the shifting of consciousness in order to become aware of the rhythm and unity already present in and around our bodies. But there is another kind of awareness that is inherently cultivated through our non-mental physiological interactions with the surrounding space. It is an experience in which we witness the body, submitting to outside stimuli in a way similar to the artist painting bamboo. It is the bamboo that establishes parameters specific to the experience of bamboo, not the artist. We can observe similarly how various kinds of external stimuli, tangible or otherwise, can also set the parameters of our experience. Take sound
for example. A sound enters my body and my body changes to accommodate the space of that sound. It aligns according to the frequencies, or structural patterns, and rhythms of that sound. My body is physically altered by the sound. But it’s not so simple as to suggest that sound has changed me, (though it has). Another, and potentially more useful way of thinking about it, is to consider sound as a living agent that also elicits the participation of my body. It actively seeks the areas of the body that are receptive to its varied forms. It is the union of body and sound that produces the experience, each affecting the other.
Chapter 3: Materiality

Pulling from the philosophers, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s essay, “Treatise on Nomadology,” political theorist Jane Bennett explores the concept of “material vitalism,” “according to which vitality is immanent in matter-energy.” Bennett’s book *Vibrant Matter*, discusses in great detail the ways in which matter can be a “potentially forceful agent(s),” focusing largely on the tendencies of materials to behave in specific ways. She uses the term “material vibrancy” to equate affect with materiality, suggesting a separate force which animates physical bodies – a force that does not rely on notions of spirit. Though at times it appears Bennett is demystifying these events by evaluating and explicating the processes of material interaction, she is in fact opening up an even larger discussion as to how mankind might interact with matter if he begins to view it as a potentially active and living force. Far from expert in these matters, I will not attempt an explanation of the ecological aspects of my practice in relation to Bennett’s writing. It seems relevant however, to mention the ideas of material vitality in relation to my material practice.

My practice is two-fold. It involves an examination of both the phenomenal world and its effects on my perception and the material effects of painting on perception. By familiarizing myself with diverse mediums and studying their interactions, I can more readily intuit the materials necessary for drawing connections to past and present experiences. Colored pigments, cut paper, wood, cloth, dirt and water are the materials
with which I most often work, and through countless interactions I have come to know their attributes quite well. It is because of an active relationship with these and other diverse materials that I have been able to provoke new ways of seeing and responding to my surroundings.
Chapter 4: Gesture

“The body we observe in the act of writing may indeed be communicating a message or completing a task, but it is simultaneously measuring the space, monitoring pressure and friction, accommodating shifts of weight. These kinesthetic experiences that exceed communicative or instrumental projects affect the gestures that are made and the meanings they convey. As a motor phenomenon, gesturing not only sculpts the moving body, transforming it into a technical prosthesis…or a type of sign. Gesturing also affords an opportunity for interoceptive or kinesthetic awareness, the intensity of which may cause subjects to alter the very ways they move.”

-Carrie Noland *Agency and Embodiment: Performing Gestures/Producing Culture*

I have found it to be the case that certain gestures recur within my practice even as I directly challenge or resist them. It is as though I have not yet found the full range of expression for a given gesture until it has been tested across several types of materials or systematic processes. Resistance is a sign that you are reaching some threshold of the materials. It is a way in which the material delineates the boundaries thus affecting the range of my bodily technique. I work in systems because my practice is based in repetitive observation. I learn the ways in which materials behave. I’m interested in the ways in which they resist, absorb, spread and pool. I consider these attributes to be gestures in their own right.
By familiarizing myself with the patterns of my materials I have become aware of certain physical attributes that draw clear connections to harmonious perceptual experiences. Speed, timing, texture, stillness and flow all relate to the rhythms of both painting and living. I have often felt that the transformative experiences in nature were similar to those in studio practice. Both are highly physical and highly musical. Often when I am working I experience auditory imagery, which is the phenomenon of hearing in the absence of auditory stimuli. I find it hard to believe that these types of experiences are inaccessible to others and have made it part of my research to understand more about those boundaries.
Chapter 5: Painting Space

“The human imagination is spatial and it is constantly constructing an architectonic whole from landscapes remembered or imagined; it progresses from what is closest to what is farther away, winding layers or strands around a single axis, which begins where the feet touch the ground.”

-Czeslaw Milosz, *To Begin Where I Am*

Repetition becomes a provocation of expectancy. A pattern (a limited set of rules for creating multiples of forms), with a designated border, alerts us to the existence of its counterpoint, infinite repetition, and therefore, boundless space. Within the weave of the canvas we become conscious of the infinite. Painting is just this for me, an infinite space for rethinking, restructuring, and refining the manner in which I observe and interact with my surroundings.
In the painting “Body,” I have stained an unprimed and unstretched canvas with fluid acrylics creating an environment in which the only spatial component is the color and the inconsistency of its saturation. While still wet, I placed the painting facedown on tarps and stretched it onto a frame. The non-porous body of the plastic tarp acted to displace the wet paint from the canvas at each point of contact. Through the mild, but sustained pressure of gravity the surface of the wrinkled plastic was imprinted on and in the surface of the canvas. The result was an interaction of two material bodies pressing into one another- one body present and the other a mere trace of history. This simple gesture seemed to effectively portray the uncertainty of the physical body’s relationship to space. The emptiness of imagery challenges notions of emptiness and seems, in fact,
to render the space quite full.

“In Into Being” 2012, Flashe paint on canvas

In the painting “Into Being,” the ground again becomes a zone of potential. It amazes me how readily my body transforms the blank canvas into a fully spatial scene with the application of one simple stroke or mark. The first stain, scratch, wrinkle or even shadow to visually breach the surface initiates a psychically spatial dialogue that endures at varying lengths and levels of intensity. A spontaneous eruption of forms might spread out over the surface, or a single vertical line that establishes the space’s still point. Though the first mark is at times directly willed, it is rare that any premeditated moves will issue forth unobstructed. The act of painting, for me, is one of constant confrontation and reciprocation. Each mark that is laid down changes the context of the
painting in some way, creating more opportunities for unpredictable relationships to take place across materials and forms. This way of working forces me to exist in the present and though I may see a series of moves ahead of me I am always met with some material resistance.

I approached the painting “After Yellow,” with no concept at all. The only thing I had was sense in my stomach that this particular fluorescent yellow I had been working with would pierce my vision and directly inspire my body to move in ways reflective of that interaction.
The painting “Reflection,” is directly linked my initial experience at the pond mentioned in Chapter One. This piece re-presents the idea of occluding the stars, but here the paint is functioning in place of my body’s reflection. The painting was created on printed unstretched cotton, allowing me to manipulate and distort its physical body similar to the way in which the water of the pond distorted the reflection of the sky. I use the term “re-present” as opposed to represent here, because I am not interested in capturing the likeness of the pond, the sky, or my bodily reflection. I am simply
observing the conditions of that memory in relation to material functions in order to understand the event in new way.
Chapter 6: Corners

“Consciousness of being at peace in ones corner produces a sense of immobility, and this, in turn radiates immobility. An imaginary room rises up around our bodies, which think that they are well hidden when we take refuge in a corner. Already, the shadows are walls, a piece of furniture constitutes a barrier, hangings are a roof. But all of these images are over-imagined. So we have to designate the space of our immobility by making it the space of our being. In L’etat d’ebauche, Noel Arnaud writes:

Je suis l’espace ou je suis - (I am the space where I am.)”

-Gaston Bachelard, The Poetics of Space

I did not set out to make so many paintings and drawings of corners. It was only after looking back at a year’s work that realized this pattern. It’s not uncommon for significant elements to make their way into the work initially unnoticed. I don’t think of this as coincidence or luck, but rather the inevitable surfacing of the effects of my research on my body and consciousness. I remember once hearing Dona Nelson say. “There is no greater mystery than the corner of the room.” It was one of those sentences that stays with you for years and in my case over a decade.
I did not know this place before or after painting it, only during. The fleeting forms, which almost suggested furniture, false walls, hallways, and limbs, simultaneously challenged the verisimilitude of such formations. The shifting perspective both welcomes and disorients me as I try to imagine what lies beneath, above, or beyond this subtle ground. The limited palette acts to unify the ground and transform it into a field to be navigated by lines. The lines not only describe the shape of the environment but also its emptiness. Areas that appear to be unfinished create a tension, which serves to animate the lines further. An incomplete form both draws and undraws itself. This ability
to shift between the two creates a sense of movement that is necessary in describing a
“living space.”

"I work differently from a lot of conceptual artists who begin their process with an idea: I begin with the idea of an experience I want to give myself. The meaning reveals itself to me through the experience, through the process."

–Janine Antoni interview on lacan.com

“Shift” 2011, Acrylic & Tempera on Canvas
A much slower painting, “Shift” took several months to complete. It is composed of three overlapping fields of color and three sessions of contour work. This piece sat for several months as a blue field, apparently resisting any visual projection from my body. To this day I can only guess what it was that kept this painting open for so long. Perhaps it just needed more time to be. After a period of rain, and several days of gray, I came back to this painting and watched as scrawling, text-like forms spread out over the surface in all directions. Barely visible shapes grew and decayed like afterimages. It was like seeing music. And though visually this experience has passed, and the painting itself is static, the materials continue to provoke a sense of the tactile, the kinetic, and the spatial as they once appeared to me.
References


