ALL TOGETHER PAINTING
MY WORK IN HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVE

A Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the degree Master of Fine Arts in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By

Daniel James Clemens, Jr., B. A.

* * * * *

The Ohio State University
2008

Master's Examination Committee:
Pheoris West, Advisor
Laura Lisbon, Advisor
Terry Barrett, Advisor

Approved by

[Signature]
Adviser
Graduate Program in Art
Copyright by
Daniel James Clemens, Jr.
2008
ABSTRACT

This paper is presented in conjunction with selected paintings created from 2006—2008. It suggests a context for contemporary painting, considers the work of four contemporary painters in relation to my own work and discusses specific concerns and works I made. Moving beyond the commonly held assumption of a dialectical wedge between of Cézanne and Duchamp, I locate instances in the work of Francesco Clemente, Simon Hantaï, Gerhard Richter and Philip Guston as a way of discussing my own concerns in regards to painting. This discussion channels into a specific analysis of *The Same Different*, a group of five paintings I exhibited at The Ohio State University’s Urban Arts Space.
This thesis is dedicated to my late grandfather, Peter J. Clemens.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many people contributed to the completion of this thesis. My graduate committee includes Pheorus West, Laura Lisbon, Terry Barrett and Michael Mercil. I am indebted to each of their thoughtful discussions that produced a wealth of insights over the past two years for both my work and writing.

My dialogue with my fellow graduate painters Kumasi Barnett, Ian Magargee, Scott Olson and Robert Thompson has also been rich and challenging.

Outside the confines of the university, my family, friends and girlfriend have all been constantly and immensely supportive in a myriad of ways. I am grateful to my mother and father, brother, James and Charissa Richter, Andrew Spayde and, especially, Annalisa Stefaniuk for their care and help.
VITA

April 11, 1981 .......................................................... Born – Dover, OH
2003 ................................................................. B.A. History, Milligan College
2006-2008 .............................. Instructor of Record, Beginning Drawing, The Ohio State University

FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: Art
## Table of Contents

Abstract ......................................................... ii
Dedication ....................................................... iv
Acknowledgments .............................................. v
Vita ...................................................................... vi
List of Illustrations ........................................... vii

Chapters:

1. A Tradition of Painting ........................................ 1
2. Neither/Nor: The Work of Francesco Clemente ............ 3
3. Within The Visible: The Work of Simon Hantai ............ 7
5. About Tragicomedy: The Work of Philip Guston ........... 16
6. Generally Speaking ........................................... 19
7. The Same Different ........................................... 21

Bibliography ...................................................... 26
### LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Franseco Clemente, <em>Self-Portrait</em></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Simon Hantaï, <em>Laissée (Leaving)</em></td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Gerhard Richter, <em>S.mit Kind (S. with Child)</em></td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Gerhard Richter, <em>4096 Farben (4096 Colors)</em></td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Gerhard Richter, <em>Grau (Gray)</em></td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Gerhard Richter, <em>Abstraktes Bild (Abstract Picture)</em></td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Philip Guston, <em>Zone</em></td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Philip Guston, <em>Flame</em></td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Daniel Clemens, <em>The Same Different</em></td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1

A TRADITION OF PAINTING

...he [the artist] hopes to reintegrate, on a more or less long-term basis, a tradition that has been broadened in order to include him.1

—Thierry de Duve

The writing that follows is connected to work I made from 2006—2008 during my time at The Ohio State University's Fine Arts graduate program. After analyzing relevant aspects of the work of Francesco Clemente, Simon Hantaï, Gerhard Richter and Philip Guston. I will discuss my own work in light of the observations made about their work.

The artists I write about were chosen partly because they have captivated my attention for almost as long as I have been painting. To varying degrees each is well established in the contemporary imagination. My interest in considering them stems from a desire to bring to light something particular in their work that I feel is generally important to painting as well as especially prescient in relation to my own work. Thus, the conclusions I reach in regards to these artists should be equally available in my work. However, the way in which they appear in my work obviously differs from their manifestations in the work of the other artists.

Treating each artist separately via chapter divisions is a method of organization that attempts to avoid sweeping generalizations about contemporary painting and art. It also honors the differences between the works of the artists themselves. I hope this organization will not suggest that I see my work as a kind of inevitable summa of that which comes before it, but rather one possible route taken from the points that I identify throughout the writing.

The primary similarity between the readings of the artists below is that each one seems essential to the way I organize my own work. I emphasize the way in which their approaches
yielded a form and how that form structures experience. This emphasis may tempt some readers to classify both my writing and work as formalist, structuralist and theoretical. I understand formalism and structuralism to be theories that can aid in the making and reading of work. Each theory, as well as the word "theory" itself, appear to have mounting historical baggage that I believe undermines the efficacy of their use. Nevertheless, formalism and structuralism emphasize what is being put together, the way in which things are put together and what meaning is generated as a result. On their face I have no objections to these classifications unless they are used pejoratively or overlook aspects of the work that are central to the work's meaning.²

The context and viability of contemporary painting is a hotly debated subject. As a contemporary painter I have an obvious stake in this conversation. The conversation about painting is generally framed as a historical choice between the legacies of the Cézanne and Duchamp. The most extreme positions taken in this conversation either declare painting dead or uncritically accept painting as indefinitely viable. In opposition to both these positions, French painter and theorist Christian Bonnefoi rightly argues in *The Objection That the Obscure Makes to Painting*:

> In general, different analyses of collage focus on its "extensions," on the manner in which an innovative technique (touching not only on the elaboration of the image but on its very presentation) leaves the terrain of its initial proposition (painting and, more precisely, cubism) in order to extend into extension—space—itself. Collage becomes montage (Eisenstein), construction (Tatlin, Lissitzky, Moholy-Nagy), the readymade (Duchamp). If this development through extension turns out to be correct logically, it ought to allow us to state that conceptual art and installation, via Duchamp, proceed form collage, and thus form painting; and that which has been announced at different times at the overcoming of the art of painting is only in fact a way of its continuing.³

By positing Duchamp's readymade as an extension of painting rather than a break with it, Bonnefoi presents a distinctly different framework in which Duchamp and Cezanne are no longer seen as antithetical. I consider myself, as well as the artists I write about below, a painter who works out of this narrative.
CHAPTER 2

NEITHER/NOR: THE WORK OF FRANCESCO CLEMENTE

...a radical negativity (which is no longer a negation)⁴

— Roland Barthes

There is a tradition of speech within Christianity known as the apophatic. One of the foremost features of apophatic speech, and the reason it so frequently makes orthodoxy suspicious, is the unusual syntax it employs. Apophatic speech insists on sentences that attempt to account for the limitations of our lingual and conceptual understanding. One such sentence might read "God is not good." The intention here is not so much to suggest "God is bad," as to point to the inadequacy of language and our tendency to downplay God's otherness. In other words, we cannot call God "good" because any conception of goodness we understand falls short of the actuality and absoluteness of God's goodness. Therefore, better to say "not good," if for no other reason than to remind us of these limitations in light of God's transcendence.⁵

While this might seem an unusual detour in an introduction of Francesco Clemente, I want to suggest a basic analogy between the role of the apophatic speaker and Clemente's activity as a painter. This analogy essentially rests on the assertion that the work of the apophatic speaker and Clemente assert both an understanding of the limitations inherent to human understanding. As a result, both employ a form of negation that reinforces the ultimate subject of their interest at the expense of ready understanding. Following this analogy one step further, Clemente's reliance on what many critics suspected as retrograde strategies for art making (painting, the handmade, the figure, iconography) dressed up in postmodern costume served actually to clarify painting through their anachronism and excess. The work is anachronistic in its
subject matter and excessive in its overwhelming volume of imagery. What is less commonly concluded is that the anachronistic subject matter and nearly infinite cycling of images obliquely direct our attention elsewhere.

Historical awareness of the circumstances under which Clemente first received attention deserves consideration because those circumstances did as much to obscure his intentions as they did to make him famous. His work became popular in the 1980's and was most commonly associated with Neo Expressionism, a label that suffers primarily from being overbroad insofar as it appears to apply to anyone who engaged an emotive, handmade figuration in traditional media during this time. The primary shortcoming of Neo Expressionism when considered as a category is that it assimilated the intentions, approaches and products of the many and very different artists grouped underneath its umbrella. Clemente’s association with Neo Expressionism obscured his commitment to painting insofar as it confused that commitment with his ever-evolving, and ever-revolving, vocabulary of iconographies. In an interview Clemente insists, “I don’t see my paintings as figurative.”⁶ Taken at his word,⁷ then, it becomes important to locate his use of such imagery outside a narrative of figurative painting.

Consideration of Clemente’s imagery opens to its function. The imagery that animates Clemente’s work frequently and fluidly appears within and between the multiple series that follow an ideational development rather than chronological linearity. (The organization of his 1999 retrospective at the Guggenheim confirms this.) Where some critics suggest this is merely personal iconography, Clemente offers a more complicated reflection:

...there’s no contradiction between figure and background. This is where European art gets stuck, I think: [Francis] Bacon said... I’ve never known what to put behind my figures.’ And American art has always painted figures and objects on a material. The background for American painters is the material: Warhol’s silk-screen, Schnabel’s velvet and broken dishes, the sculpture within the painting behind the images of Jasper Johns.⁸

This statement confirms what Clemente’s continual outpouring of images already suggests. Namely, that the figure is consistently and variously employed in a way that denies traditional readings. As Thomas Mc Celivy observes, “There are hints of narrative but they are never
resolved.\textsuperscript{9} In essence, the figure undermines itself. Thus, the imagery in Cimente's work is neither representational nor symbolic in any traditional sense of either of those words.

The self portrait below (Figure 1) cannot be reduced to a naturalistic depiction of a head meant to be read as just that or a symbolic depiction of a head meant to stand in for a notion such as the self. Nor, by virtue of the blotches inherent to the structuring of the self-portrait, can we readily deduce a background or foreground relationship, nor determinative relationships by which forms are ordered. The red blotches as sores imply that they come up from underneath the skin but outside the face they appear to arrive moving down into the white paint, disrupting its surface. Rather than illusionistic space, this painting offers physical thickness\textsuperscript{10}—the red blotches that both appear to rise to its surface and lay in its depths. The red blotches, which appear to be sores on the face but appear to be something different as they extend beyond it, create the confusion of this self-portrait.

![Figure 1](image)

\textit{Figure 1}

\textit{Self Portrait.} 1980. Oil on linen, 19 3/4 x 15 3/4 inches.\textsuperscript{11}
The physical thickness of this self-portrait disrupts the usual terms by which we traditionally consider painting, especially a painting so seemingly traditional. In doing so, the painting disrupts its own representation via its materiality. The intentional multiplication and ambivalence of meanings to a seemingly unclear infinity begins to appear as a refusal to mean but an acceptance to paint. This muteness is repeated with such thoroughgoing consistency throughout Clemente's body of work that it is legitimate to recognize a quiet but radical recontextualization of painting itself taking place. Such a recontextualization has at its center a persistent refusal of iconographic meaning in exchange for an acceptance and visibility of painting as a dynamic material that will never wholly conform to the representational, symbolic or expressive capacities with which it is traditionally associated.

The evasion of meaning through the conflation of figure and background is supplemented by Clemente's avoidance of any attempt to legitimize painting through appeals to art history, conceptual programmatic, modern technology, personal ability, personal effort, or theoretical consistency. These many refusals enacted in his work constitute an ongoing withholding that enables him to pseudo-naively assume painting and its baggage, making it possible to continue painting at a time and place where such preoccupations are no longer useful or necessary. Painting's ongoing existential preoccupations and anxieties running throughout the 20th Century make this freedom as unprecedented as it is salutary. Furthermore, this frees him from constraints imposed by the fear that the first task of painting must be its own conceptual, formal, personal, ontological, socio-political, or theoretical relevance in light of its history or in relation to other media.\textsuperscript{12}
CHAPTER 3

WITHIN THE VISIBLE: THE WORK OF SIMON HANTAÏ

They ought to put out the eyes of painters as they do goldfinches in order that they can sing better. — Pablo Picasso

Don't forget this is about folding. Setting in motion of a process that takes charge at a certain moment: 1960, a limit reached in painting and nothing else than that... — Simon Hantaï

Of the artists considered within this thesis Hantaï is by far the least well known in the United States. His obscurity is partly of his own devising. Hantaï withdrew from efforts to maintain a public visibility or exhibit for almost twenty years. It is tempting to view it in direct proportion to the radical posture of his work, which, for a variety of reasons, proves difficult. Its difficulty, which Hantaï appears to prefer to any alternative, relates to its propensity for questioning received wisdom about the relative value of artistic intentionality and the visible in painting. His practice of "this folding," a practice that now stretches over forty years, is the primary method through which he generates questions regarding painting's need for artistic intentionality and the visible in painting. In Hantaï's own words, "Not for or in the folding, that is precisely the question."¹⁵

In spite of the variety of folding methods Hantaï utilizes, the folds generally create two critiques of painting even as these critiques are posed within the paintings themselves. The first circumstance the fold allows in Hantaï's painting is automatism. Hantaï encountered automatism prior to his own folding methods as a result of his foray into early surrealist painting and as a friend of the surrealist painter and theorist André Breton.¹⁶ Automatism, valued among the surrealists as a way of mining the then recently discovered unconscious, introduces chance and minimizes authorial choice through methods such as automatic writing. This automatism would be pushed to a limit in the work of
Jackson Pollock. On encountering Pollock's work, Hantai perceived this achievement, causing an end to his relationship with Breton who disavowed Pollock's work.

Figure 2
*Laissée (Leaving)*, 1981-89. Acrylic on canvas, 109 1/8 x 95 1/4 inches.  

Hantai's process stresses a certain blind indifference to the final form the canvas takes that is at the heart of automatism, an indifference linked to the automatist production of the uncontrolled drift of elements within surrealist works. This indifference affects both the painting and storage of the canvas. In regards to painting, Hantai insists, "...I put my eyes out...even the spreading of colored matter is done with little direct attention, but rather with my gaze wandering outside through the window.— where it snows and rains." Thus, Hantai introduces blindness, an unusual and generally unwelcome term in the context of painting. This blindness allows him to exercise as little control as possible over the application of paint to the canvas. In turn, this leads to surface irregularities of the consistency and texture of the paint. On at least one occasion Hantai's indifference allowed him to store his work outdoors, abandoning it to the elements. Hantai calls the destruction and disappearance of this work, "The background of what remains."
The second circumstance the fold generates in Hantai’s painting is the condition and exposure of the invisible. This notion of an invisible “background” interlocking with and inseparable from the visible plays out most obviously in the opened folds of the canvas. These opened folds expose reserves of unpainted canvas that remain invisible during the painting process. Hantai’s stretched canvas, which, although stretched, continue to bear the creases of the original folds, expose the large patches of white canvas untouched by color due to the folding. In a surprising and provocative conflation, these white areas, absences and retractions in the formal and visual senses, appear as integral and correlative with the painted areas of the canvas—the invisible merged with the visible.

Hantai’s position of indifference emphasizes the simultaneous manifestation of the invisible with the visible and offers provocative exceptions to the commonly asserted importance of authorial control and the necessity of sight. Implicit in Hantai’s process is a critique of commonly valued assumptions about method. Namely, that the structuring of painting should be subservient to the choice and vision of its author. In place of authorial choice and willed vision, Hantai offers chance and the blindness. Here, at last, we see his “concern for the consequences of an ateleological choice.” This ateleological choice is one that insists above all else on the invisible as a component of the visible.
CHAPTER 4

PAINTING'S LIMITS: THE WORK OF GERHARD RICHTER

Abstract paintings are like fictitious models because they visualize a reality which we can neither see nor describe but which we nevertheless conclude exists. We attract negative names to this reality: the un-known, the un-graspable, the infinite and for thousands of years we have depicted it in terms of absolute images like heaven and hell. With abstract painting we create a better means of approaching what can neither be seen nor understood because abstract painting illustrates with the greatest clarity...with all the means at the disposal of art, 'nothing.'...This is not at artful game, it is a necessity; since everything unknown frightens us and fills us with hope at the same time, we make these images as a possible explanation of the inexplicable or, at least, as a way of dealing with it.\textsuperscript{21}

--- Gerhard Richter

Richter’s oeuvre is extensive in terms of breadth, complexity and nuance. Considering it as a whole also allows us a unique kind of realization that is not available from a single painting, or even a single genre within the oeuvre. This kind of consideration suggests that Richter stands out among his peers. It is difficult to name anyone who has developed such individually distinctive paintings while at the same time maintaining strikingly coherent relationships within his or her catalog. As Stephen Melville notes, a consideration of Richter’s oeuvre would have to include at least one photo painting, gray monochrome, color chart, mirror structure, Abstract Picture and most likely his ongoing photographic index, \textit{Atlas}.\textsuperscript{22}

The diversity in Richter’s output appears to be animated by his early involvement in German Capitalist Realism, a label the members of the group choose with an irony that was overlooked by the media. His interest in Warhol and Duchamp allowed him to view all available pictorial strategies as “readymade.” The readymade, a strategy credited to Duchamp, generally takes advantage of recognizable preexisting forms by making slight but alarming modifications to them. Most obvious in this regard is Duchamp’s \textit{Fountain}, a urinal turned upside down and signed
R. Mutt. Richter’s *S. mit Kind* (Figure 3) can be read as a similar example in so far as it utilizes the form of Mother/Madonna and child even as it disrupts that form with specificity (it is Richter’s wife and child we are seeing, not a generic stand in for Mary and Christ) and a distorting blur that undercuts the photographic realism of the work. Similarly, *4096 Farben* (figure 4) and *Grau* (figure 5) intersect the tradition of the readymade by evoking industrially manufactured *paint* samples and the monochrome.

![Figure 3](image)

*S. mit Kind* (S. with Child). 1995. Oil on canvas, 14 x 16 inches (approximate).²³

![Figure 4](image)

*4096 Farben* (4096 Colors). 1974. Lacquer on canvas, 103 x 100 inches.
In spite of this breadth, I want to focus on the *Abstract Pictures* because they concisely and thoroughly explore problematics of pictorial structure and choice. Richter began producing *Abstract Pictures* in the mid 1970's and applies this title with his characteristic nuance. The *Abstract Pictures* vary widely in appearance, but Figure 6 offers characteristics that are relevant to the conversation below.

The notion of an abstract picture, as opposed to an abstract painting, takes part in the notion of the readymade. Here Richter takes a major form of the 20th century art (thus, a readymade), the abstract painting, and uses it to subvert common expectations. Richter's statement above suggests that abstraction intersects a kind of absolute. Exactly what this absolute entails is worth more specific consideration.
In the *Abstract Pictures*, Richter makes his most concise and coherent statement about the absolute, a kind of visual limit not just on what can be depicted but on how to depict, by subverting predictable and problematic modernist pictorial structures. As Yve-Alain Bois notes, the monochrome, along with the grid, is one of two basic modernist pictorial strategies. Bois goes on to assert that the positivist nature of these strategies back painting into a corner, structurally speaking, because they must be continually repeated in order to avoid the arbitrary and optical nature of composition. While Richter's work builds on the circumstance of the monochrome, his abstract pictures evade its more problematic characteristics.

The monochrome has a long-standing and varied appearance in modern art. The term generally concerns any painting that employs only one color across its entire surface. Additionally, the surface of a monochrome generally maintains a fairly uniform treatment or at least testifies to an allover application of paint. This allows the monochrome to achieve a unique situation in painting because it simultaneously offers two seemingly mutually exclusive extremes: utter lack and complete totality. Lack because it offers no composition, almost completely erasing choice within the canvas, and no figure, rejecting any claim to advance representational imagery.
totality in regards to the uniform treatment of the surface. Paradoxically, the same realization of color and surface unity makes it easier to project one’s desire and interpretation onto the work and more difficult to justify any specific interpretation. The paradox here turns on the fact that there is no condition in painting which so closely resembles the blank canvas.

Richter’s abstract pictures disrupt the aforementioned shortcomings of the monochrome, primarily via a blurring technique that multiplies chance. The blurring technique, which is not an autographic mark precisely because it offers chance and obscures identity, ensures arbitrary color and allover but uneven surface treatment in the abstract pictures. It builds on the monochrome insofar as the gesture that the blur relies upon covers the entire surface.

The blur is an allover treatment that is significant because the physical motion of the tool-in-hand, and not the eye, is initially determinative in regards to the look of the painting. In this regard, the blur opens the painting to literal and physical chance. At the same time the gestural traces left by the blurring basically subvert the monochrome by their very presence. Nothing is more alien to the pristine surface of a monochrome than the obvious and disruptive appearance of gesture and its residual wake. Richter evades choice and, consequently, hierarchy by denying any one color primacy within his abstract pictures by which the all over treatment the monochrome generates chance combinations.

The end result is that color is not so much placed as much as color happens as a material. Thus, color ultimately refuses to do expressionist, representational and symbolic work, instead signifying itself as a phenomenon.39 Here, perhaps more than anywhere else, we find the clear connection to Richter’s notion of the absolute in his statement above. The lessons learned from the monochrome and extended into his own work allow him to orchestrate a totality of circumstances in which all things have been and continue to appear in flux even though they are violently stilled and arbitrarily halted. It is most accurate and concise to suggest that Richter directs chance. Typical of his characteristic and multivalent ambivalence, Richter welcomes chance but is never wholly subservient to it.30
The use of chance, Duchamp's great ideal that sought to critique the choice in and of painting, alongside a decidedly unDuchampian insistence on directing appearances creates a powerful tension within Richter's painting. This tension is the result of an image that is physically generated and visually concerned. Richter's Duchampian swipe at retinal art and the uneasy, hedonistic visual feast in which his Abstract Pictures partake upset well-behaved monochromatic austerity. This situation is one that emphasizes the physical as much as appearance, but neither one more than the other. It is also a situation in which painting's own structure, which is generally associated with a controlled plastic ordering, is offered up to chance.
CHAPTER 5

ABOUT TRAGICOMEDY: THE WORK OF PHILIP GUSTON

My spirit needs matter—a medium—which resists the peaceful—balanced resolution of forms and spaces.  

— Philip Guston

The difficulty with Guston’s legacy is that specifics and consensus on to why he was important generally seem either sentimental (an old masterish return to the figure or confessional narrative) or lacking altogether. For this reason, it seems worth revisiting the stories we have told about him and that he has told about himself in an attempt to understand precisely what is at stake in his work. Generally, he is seen as the first, or at least the most well known, American painter to break with the high modernism of the New York School in favor of a late, and decidedly more postmodern, figurative style. The anger and shock this break caused when it became fully visible at his 1970 exhibition is well documented. For the next ten years, he single-mindedly pursued confessional painterly narratives with abandon.

The trouble with this particular narrative of Guston’s work, as well as his own words, both written and spoken, is that it tends to frame painting in either/or terms, making it a question of abstraction versus figuration. These were viable and meaningful categories in America from approximately 1945-1970. However, even by the time of his death in 1980, these categories appear to mean much less in America and abroad, as a consideration of the Francesco Clemente’s work demonstrated above. Rather, Guston’s material emphasis, wherein paint gives up its own form, which begins almost contemporaneously with the abstract work he embarks on in 1947 and extends through the figurative work that ceases when he dies in 1980, unites his
abstract and late figurative work. This material emphasis is at least as important, if less unprecedented, as his late shift from abstraction to figuration.

Guston uses paint in a way that encourages chance and makes his own limits as an author visible. Guston emphasizes materials through thick, impasto surfaces and heavy handed painting. He frequently used large brushes loaded with paint. It appears that the brushes were not cleaned between each use. They leave traces of previous color and modulate existing tones. The brushwork is agitated. In addition, he leaves thick deposits of paint on the surface of the canvas. In the abstract works, these marks frequently cohere towards the center of the canvas.

My account of Guston's material emphasis extends beyond concerns of style and painterly virtuosity, frequent preoccupations of modernity that now draw much fire from the postmodern quarter. Guston rules out any interest in style when he pronounces, "To will a new form is unacceptable..." In fact, the material excess of his work devotes itself to introducing chance by deskillling the artist's virtuosic hand and asserting the inherent illusionism (and, thus, falsity) undergirding all naturalistic image making. Unlike many postmodern theorists, however,
he is not simply interested in a deconstruction of his own virtuosity or the history of his medium. For as soon as he undoes his skill as an artist and the historical weight of his medium we see that the kind of material practice he advances spans, unites even, the supposed division of the abstract and late figurative work in a profound tragicomedy.

This tragicomedy surfaces in light of the way in which Guston paints (not merely what he paints), a method that examines his own overexposed and vulnerable hand on view within the painting as a basic condition of being human. While he does not refer to Guston's painting directly, Cornel West surmises:

I understand tragic to refer to the freedom that humans have to explore the possibility of even greater freedom, but against constraints, usually constraints of which they are unaware. The comic is a way of acknowledging those limitations and the incongruity between those high aspirations and where one actually ends up.38

This sense of the tragicomic suffuses his work, and not only in the late imagery. It is instructive to consider Willem De Kooning's declaration during Guston's first showing of the late figurative work in 1970 show. De Kooning, who appears to be one of the few in attendance with enough foresight to understand the late figurative painting almost immediately, exclaimed Guston's subject in a single word: "Freedom."39 The freedom that Guston found in pushing the boundaries of what he, or anyone else at the time, was capable of making is precisely what Cornel West connects to the tragic. In Guston's case this exploration is always shot through with a sense of incongruity, the comic, precisely because the materials act as an anchor to his active mind and hand. His material excess further suggests comic incongruity against the high art aspirations of his medium and its history.

Guston makes the tragicomic visible through his way of painting. This commitment continues to remind us of human fallibility at the same time that it presents a faint glimmer of hope in the human capacity to struggle against the odds. Through its materiality, Guston's work acknowledges human incapacity on a fundamental level and at the same time is always and forever struggling to get beyond it.
CHAPTER 6

GENERALLY SPEAKING

Chapter Five concludes my analysis of the work of other artists. These chapters as well as the introduction introduce several broader issues relevant to my work. My particular combination of these issues will be discussed in Chapter Seven, where I discuss work exhibited during the Master of Fine Arts Thesis Show. Here, I will discuss more generally how I structure my work.

The use and combination of materials factored heavily in my account of each artist. The visibility of the materials as themselves and the way in which they are combined focus our attention on painting as a physical object. My work has a great stake in this kind of material visibility because it does not offer mimetic representations of objects, people or stories. To this extent my painting is abstract. In place of mimetic representations, my painting presents itself as the real and concrete materials of its making.40

The visibility of the materials in my work belongs to a long tradition, a tradition I consider the artists above to be part of, that exposes painting’s elements and process in order to make the invisible seen. While painting is far from historically invisible, its material is generally used only to convey content. In my work the material is the content and keeping track of what has generally been invisible or marginalized is a kind of ethical commitment. There is no distinction between the form of my painting and its meaning because it foregrounds the physical materials and combination process that are crucial to its manifestation and inherent to its condition as a painting. These materials include the wall, the canvas and the paint as well as the way that the
work is hung and the paint is applied. The exposure of materials and the way in which they are exposed is the subject of my painting.

The materials are combined under limitations that account for the appearance of the painting. These limitations are the feature of the series to which the work belongs. I find it necessary to work in multiple series because different sets of limitations arrive more effectively at a specific visual meaning that concerns me at the time. While these limits may appear stringent they actually clarify the role that chance plays in the work both for myself and for the viewer. They also minimize the visibility of my hand in the work. This minimization is crucial in order to avoid confusing any autographic mark or signature move I would be capable of making with the achievement of the painting itself.

Working within limitations of which I am aware while at the same time finding myself in a situation I did not expect imbues my work with the sense of the tragicomic. This sense derives from the struggle between my desire for the painting (my freedom) and the constraints placed upon the painting that are inherited from the limitations of the series. The resulting incongruity between my desire and these constraints is the space of the work itself.
CHAPTER 7

THE SAME DIFFERENT

I understood that things are real and all of them different from each other.
I understood this with my eyes, never with my mind.
To understand it with my mind would be to find them all alike.41

—Fernando Pessoa

I will now turn from a more general discussion of my work to a specific discussion of the work exhibited during the MFA Thesis Exhibition at the Urban Arts Space (Figure 9). This discussion will reveal how the more general considerations are given specific form within The Same Different, the title of a selection from a series of paintings.

Figure 9
The Same Different. 2008. Oil on canvas. 96 x 192 inches.
I chose five paintings from a series whose primary constant is a low fidelity printing method that transfers red, yellow and blue pigment to the canvas. I have repeatedly used this method of transferring pigment to canvas as a limitation on my own hand that engages both chance and blindness. Though the canvas is visible before and after the transfers of pigment, I cannot see or touch it while the painting occurs. This invisibility, a generative force, is inseparable from the visible, giving rise to concrete difference. I will return to this difference in a moment; it is of primary importance to my work.

Several other elements, in addition to the low fidelity printing method, account for the appearance of the painting. I use a number eight weave of canvas. This grade of canvas has a thick weave and is much coarser than the canvas that is normally used in painting. The paint becomes embedded in the groves of the canvas as well as simply sitting on top of it, drawing attention to the binding activity between the elements and the thickness of the paint. These material elements emphasize the construction of the painting in a way that does not attempt to deceive the viewer. I prime the canvas with a clear gesso to preserve the fact of the canvas. Taken together, these steps assure the visibility of the canvas as a material and constitutive part of the final painting. This assurance runs counter to those who obliterate the canvas by treating it as a ground on which to project their pictures.

For this series I cut canvases as close to square as possible without the aid of a ruler. Forgoing the ruler's straight edge and measurement assure variations between each of the canvases and further multiply chance in my work. Because of this variation and because they are not mounted on wooden stretcher bars but rather attached flat to the wall with Velcro, any two or more works makes the wall a part of the work itself by invoking the irregular gap between the paintings. In this regard, my painting treats the wall itself as a support but not a secondary or hidden element the way wood stretcher bars frequently are. Again, the design is to make the viewer aware of the constitutive elements of the painting and its surroundings.

Tape is used to mask four edges within the canvas. This masking helps me to know where to place the canvases I use to press pigment on the surface of the painting as well as
suggest a limit that is later overcome through the pressing—the paint extends beyond the edge of the tape. The edges the tape forms are both similar to the edge of the canvas itself and dissimilar in so far as I do not use a ruler to align or measure the tape. These features, along with the low fidelity print making technique I employ, make the structural features of the paintings visible and consistent.

The process of combining these elements through a particular method, in this case the low fidelity print making, generates difference between both the works within the series and the multiple series. This is a difference in both the surface of each painting, from one painting to another and from one series to the next. At the place where the painting as well as the series, which ought to yield sameness indefinitely, it offers instead color, language and material as perpetually fluid and unfixed. This happens at the point that the pigment (material) that you and I perceive as a certain hue (color) and identify as red (language) dissolves into a situation in which it becomes hard to separate these three elements.

This conflation happens most successfully in regards to the ground of the painting. Traditionally understood, the ground is a thin layer of preparatory sealant and paint in order to protect the canvas and prepare it as the site that would receive an image. In my work, the ground is not obliterated by the image, but remains perpetually visible wherever paint does not adhere during the printing process. The last printing process restates the color of the ground, a frosty beige generated by the combination of the canvas and clear gesso. This creates ambiguity regarding the ground’s physical location—is it on the top or the bottom—of the painting as well as generating the transference discussed above between color, language and material. Here, the writing ends where it began: the lines of Fernando Pessoa’s untitled poem of 1915 do not speak of pure vision as much as they do the beginning of seeing.
1 Thierry de Duve, Marthe Wéry (Bruxelles: Lettre volée, 1999), 70.
2 Yve-Alain Bois' essay Resisting Blackmail is further explores the issues of formalism, structuralism and theory: Yve-
Alain Bois, Painting As Model (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1990), xi-xxiv.
3 Christian Bonnefoi, The Objection That The Obscure Makes to Painting in As Painting, ed. Philip Armstrong, Laura
5 I am indebted to my brother, a seminarian, for clarifying my understanding of the apostatic and its role in the Christian
thought. The allusion is not meant to suggest that Clemente, who frequently shows interest in a variety of religious
traditions, owes any special debt to this one.
6 Francesco Clemente and Giancarlo Politi, Francesco Clemente (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1990), 120.
7 Clemente suffers from what is at best academic disinterest and at worst academic bias against painters associated with
Neo Expressionism (even if such an association was never entirely justifiable) and a surplus of well-intentioned but ill-
formed critics. For this reason, his interviews frequently provide the most concise and cogent explanations of his work.
8 Clemente, 118.
9 Thomas McEvilley, The Exile's Return: Toward a Redefinition of Painting for the Post-modern Era (Cambridge [England]:
Cambridge University Press 1993), 98.
10 Regarding thickness see Bonnefoi, 205-208. Further consideration, which space does not permit here, of Clemente and
Bonnefoi would have to account for the similarities and differences of their notions regarding thickness.
12 Painting's presumed irrelevance in light of other media, most notably photography and film, has been the preoccupation
of many prominent artists and critics. Perhaps the most cogent statement remains Walter Benjamin's Art in the Age of
Mechanical Reproduction. I hope it is by now obvious that Clemente, in addition to the three other artists who round this
writing out, poss a challenge to such arguments no matter how compelling they continue to appear and how frequently
they are advanced.
14 Simon Hantai, Letters to Georges Didi-Huberman, in As Painting, ed. Philip Armstrong, Laura Lisbon, and Stephen
15 Hantai, 224.
16 For an analysis of Breton's view of automatism see Rosalind Krauss, The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism in The
17 Armstrong, Philip, Laura Lisbon, and Stephen Melville, As Painting: Division and Displacement (Cambridge, Mass: MIT
Press, 2001), Color Plates.
18 Hantai, 216.
19 Hantai, 217.
20 Hantai, 214.
22 Armstrong, Lisbon and Melville, 142.
27 Thierry Raspail, et al., La Couleur seule, l'expérience du monochrome (Lyon: Ville de Lyon, 1988), 222-227. I am
 indebted to the arrangement of Richter's work within the catalog for this suggestion. The exhibition this catalog
 accompanied included not only his gray monochromes but a photo painting, color chart and abstract picture as well.
28 See, for instance, Barbara Rose, et al., Monochromes: From Malevich to the Present, ed. Valerie Varas and
Raul Rispa (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).
29 A different but complementary analysis of Richter's work appears in Armstrong, Lisbon and Melville, 41-44. This
analysis focuses on the linguistic dimension. I emphasize the material dimension for reasons that will become clear in
Chapter Six of this thesis.
30 Storr, Gerhard Richter, 296.
31 For Richter's concerns regarding appearance, the visual, and their relative importance see Storr, Gerhard Richter, 291-
293.
34 Storr, Guston, 71.
35 See, for example: Rosalind Krauss, The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism in The Originality of the Avant Garde
and Other Modernist Myths (Cambridge, MIT Press, 1986).
37 As Guston remarks, "POTS OF PAINT WITH RED PAINT DRIPPING DOWN INTO POOLS OF BLOOD. BUT IT'S ONLY RED PAINT—LIKE MOVIE CATSUP—SO WHEN ALL'S SAID AND DONE—IT'S ONLY A MOVIE—ONLY A PAINTING!" Feld, 81.
38 Cornel West, Chekhov, Coltrane and Democracy in The Cornel West Reader, ed. Tim Burtett (NY: Basic Civitas Books, 1999), 557.
39 Storr, Philip Guston, 64.
40 I am indebted to Barnett Newman's description of his own work for the phrase, "real and concrete": Karola Grässlin, Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue? (Köln: König 2007), 98.
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY


