Contextualizing Epiphanies and Theories on a Surface of a Painting

THESIS

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Abstract

In this thesis I intend to explore the complex, confusing and often paradoxical nature of my painting practice and the way I see it being influenced by historical, socio-political and ideological underpinnings of my reality. During the course of my thesis, I hope to establish a conceptual and contextual basis for my usage of allover pattern-like configurations, rejection of linear perspective, and the manipulation of competing forms and colors in my abstract paintings. I will focus on to the often-elliptical nature of my paintings through variety of ideas and theories and I hope to demonstrate how cultural theory has helped me to contextualize the essential features of my practice.

I will first map out the mostly intuitive epiphanies that are rooted in the observations of my reality, which in turn informs the constructions and orientations of my paintings. I will study these in relation to the notions of artist Bridget Riley. I find her writing especially useful in terms of articulating the dichotomy and paradox between active and passive viewership and how these binaries function and appear within abstract painting. I will then examine the circular and expanding theory of *liminality* by cultural anthropologist Victor Turner, and centers and margins as well as cultural dirt by anthropologist Mary Douglas. I will study how they relate to the specificities of my paintings such as my rejection of linear perspective as well as the surface-sides binary. Through Douglas’s notions I also examine my usage of pattern and distorted grids and
further contrast them to the concepts of artist, cultural critic and art historian Amy Goldin. I will also delve into the paradoxical and complicated relationship between the specifics of my paintings and the very abstract and hard to locate character of the discourse. I will do this by juxtaposing my practice to the writings of philosopher Michel Foucault and cultural critic Rey Chow. I will focus especially on the highly complex and interchangeable concepts of power and exclusion, truth and will to truth and lastly, identity in the globalized, postmodern world. I will suggest how these concepts internally influence and externally manifest in the visual, physical and visceral materializations of my paintings.
Dedication

This document is dedicated to my magnificent sons Onni and Usko Harris, who always keep me firmly connected to the daily realities of life. Also to the memory of my extraordinary grandmother, Märtta Miettinen, who persistently followed her intellectual aspirations during the time a very few women were able to do so, and whose example continuously encourages me to pursue my dreams.
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Fields of Study

Major Field: Art

Minor Field: Comparative Cultural Studies
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Chapter 1. Introduction

a. About Nothing And About Everything

For many years in my painting practice I felt an ambiguous conflict. I was driven by a grandiose desire to express something specific, and even significant about the world around me, while always feeling very dissatisfied and powerless to do so. The societal, cultural and historical structures and conditions of my life as well as the world around me always seemed so complex and abstract. They repeatedly seemed to escape my attempts to find a clear and concise form and only ended up appearing as vague illustrations of an idea. Early on I also realized that I did not want to make nice or agreeable paintings because the world hardly ever appeared very nice or agreeable, or especially very comprehensible and succinct. My attempts to make representational paintings seemed like a surface image or a veneer, almost like a mockery of the real. The world that I tried to express felt so much more corporeal and visceral, imbued with the fleeting manifestations of spiritual, ideological and psychological dimensions that ambiguously appear and emerge in the material. In the process of finding a direction for my painting practice I went through periods of exploring the possibilities of a representational approach combined with abstraction. I then abandoned the direct depictions and began experimenting with more expressionistic abstract style. All along I experienced dissatisfaction because the more I consciously tried to express something specific, the more far off I felt I was
from achieving it and the more self-conscious I became in the process. Slowly by relinquishing all of those approaches, I came to reject complex color because I realized my need to understand the very basic components of my paintings. In the process of my pursuit and exploration even color had started to signify my self-conscious desires and therefore I decided to limit the variables and I focused only on the tones of black, white and grey. After reducing my usage of color, I narrowed the forms in my paintings to simple circles and lines. I had discovered these elements years before and always found them intriguing but somehow I felt like they were not enough to express what I was looking for. When I made the first paintings with the simplified color palette of black, white and grey, utilizing only pattern-like, repeating forms of circles and lines, paradoxically I felt a genuine sense of satisfaction. For the first time making a painting with these elements, with removed hand gesture using a stencil to create the circles, and specific way of repetition and reaction to the imperfections of the hand, I felt that the painting was freed. When the painting was *about nothing*, it transformed into the things I was searching for. While I felt liberated and the painting seemed to be freed, I was left to ask how was this possible? Only by abandoning my desire to express specifics in my paintings, I could achieve my impulse to articulate something exact about the world. How could that be?

b. Riley, Kelley and Some Painting Epiphanies

While feeling exhilarated by my discovery, I also felt very confused. Since my teenage years I had always had many concerns for environmental and social justice,
and I always felt like a humanist in my core. I felt reluctant to resolve into being another abstract painter whose work is interpreted through the limited scope of postmodern formalism. At the same time I couldn’t ignore the many paradoxes of the contemporary abstract painting, even though all of it appeared quite difficult to comprehend. The dominant art historical narrative that I learned in art history lectures seems to suggest that a lot of the early 20th century abstract art was responding to the rapid societal and cultural changes of industrialization, urbanization, colonialism, and imperialism and ultimately to the ideological clashes between Marxism and global capitalism\(^1\). Movements such as Russian Constructivism and Suprematism, Italian Futurism, De Stijl Movement of The Netherlands, Bauhaus and even Dada are considered to have been reactions to these global developments\(^2\). I was taught how the Second World War divided the world to the Communist East and Capitalist West and this was reflected in the arts as well. The dominant view emerging from this binary within abstract art in the West seemed to be the rather formalist approach championed by art critics such as Clement Greenberg. He focused on medium specificity suggesting, in my view, a very stark separation from the earlier ideas of abstract art. Greenberg seems to deny a possibility for an abstract painting to embody some socio-political dimension. Instead he proposes how the performance of an individual artist is materialized on the surface of an abstract painting.\(^3\) The gradual move from modernism to postmodernism following the destruction of the utopian ideals of communism and especially the collapse of the Soviet Union, further cautioned against and even rejected the notion that art can be a vehicle for a positive, large scale social or

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\(^1\) Kleiner, Fred S. and Mamiya, Christin J. *Gardner’s Art Through the Ages*, pg. 961  
\(^2\) Kleiner, Fred S. and Mamiya, Christin J., pg. 970-972  
\(^3\) Greenberg, Clement. *Modernist Painting*
cultural change. As I understand Postmodernism, in the core of it is a notion that postmodern art needs to recognize and express the messiness and multiplicities of contemporary reality. At the same time the questions revolving around abstract art, and especially painting seems very unresolved and confusing. Perhaps the artist intentions are accepted to ambiguously appear within a painting, at the same time I have continuously sensed that I have no right to suggest or claim what my paintings are about. I find intriguing how in current, contemporary art theory abstract art when read through socio-political, cultural paradigm appears as a potentially dangerous force of destruction. At the same time, the currently popular art form, the so-called social practice is not considered menacing even though it is based on the notion of art’s social and cultural involvement and even its ability to influence. From this standpoint I was asking if there could be more to my paintings than just the material and my performance? I started to speculate if it is possible to make paintings that are influenced by socio-political realities while also embodying my subjective experience? Is it possible that those factors can infiltrate the act, material and form while they also remain free from the ambiguous ideological constraints they are emerging from? Where is the fine line between the subjective and objective and can those concerns appear simultaneously on the surface of a painting? Lastly, what is the relationship between the intangible and corporeal, the idea and its material manifestations and how does one negotiate this dichotomy?

Soon after I made some of my first primarily white paintings, I walked past a gallery space daily and saw two of my paintings hanging on the wall in different light
conditions. I was fascinated how they always appeared visually and viscerally different. I loved the way they were constantly shifting and changing and was left to wonder about my observation. Since the paintings are always the same, am I then different? What does that reveal about my paintings? What does that disclose about painting in general? Around the same time I came across British painter Bridget Riley’s writings and abstract paintings. I found her notions very compelling and especially in relation to those paintings.

More than anything else I want my paintings to exist on their own terms. That is to say they must stealthily engage and disarm you. There the paintings hang, deceptively simple-telling no tales as it were-resisting, in a well-behaved way, all attempts to be questioned, probed or stared at and then, for those with open eyes, serenely disclosing some intimations of the splendors to which pure sight has the key.⁴

Riley, in this paragraph is elegantly expressing the almost mystical paradox that was plaguing me, and for the first time I felt a little relief from it. Just as my paintings changed day-to-day and appeared so divergent, is exactly what Riley seemed to be examining in relation to her own paintings. Riley is well known for her early career optical art and later stripe paintings but interestingly her work is mostly interpreted through formalism. At the same time, when reading her writing such as the excerpt above, it becomes clear that her process is much more complex and the intentions more profound. When I was trying to discern how could my paintings enclose and embody such a steady, daily transformation, I came to agree with the way Riley reflects on the whole experience. According to her, the paintings are independent agents in

the world, manifesting a passive existence but through visual agency they equally have a way to “engage and disarm”. Paradoxically and inexplicably they are simultaneously passive and active - just as I had observed. What Riley seems to be suggesting is how the painting is performing nothing in its fixed and predetermined materially, but because of its possible visual impact through the viewer’s experience, it ends up connecting to its surrounding reality. She seems to be saying that through this paradox the painting connects to the broader reality of the world. Riley explores this further when she writes:

I have always tried to realize visual and emotional energies simultaneously from
the medium. My paintings are, of course, concerned with generating visual sensations, but certainly not to the exclusion of emotions. One of my aims is that these two responses shall be experienced as *one and the same*.\(^5\)

From this point I started to ask if all paintings enclose this affect or is it only abstract/non-representational paintings? If so, are there ways I can emphasize this further or make it even more visible or palpable? I was asking myself if Riley’s notion, “I discovered that I was painting in order to “make visible”, \(^6\) is also applicable to my painting practice? When I was following Riley’s thinking, color started to come back to my paintings slowly and I begin to question if it can be emotional and how to approach something seemingly so subjective. Color connecting to emotional responses appears rather obvious, but I wanted to challenge myself beyond the cliché that red expresses anger/passion and blue is sad/calm and so forth. As I begin to accept the inherently paradoxical nature of my paintings, I started to recognize another incongruity. Only through very subjective (such as emotional) experience I can approach elements like color. It is most often interpreted through imprecise stereotypes and clichés but in the end always seems to escape some exact and intelligible meaning. As I had earlier decided to focus on a simplified color palette of black, white and grey, I began to approach color by adding one at the time. Because I felt tension over my own incomprehension of color and perhaps its *meaning*, I deliberately chose to use colors that to me personally seemed the most difficult and complex. I strived to construct a tension between color and forms and make it as visible and visceral as possible. In addition to Bridget

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\(^6\) Riley, pg. 34
Riley’s works, I was closely studying paintings and other works of artists such as Eva Hesse, Blinky Palermo, Polly Apfelbaum, Ellsworth Kelly, Agnes Martin, Mary Heilmann and Frank Stella. I discerned how some of Bridget Riley and Ellsworth Kelly’s works appear too tight and perfect in their execution while Mary Heilmann’s paintings are very loose and gestural. I was the most intrigued by Palermo, Hesse and Martin’s works that have an immediate appearance of clarity and seeming refinement but at the same time there is delicate disarray deriving from the subtle visual gestural marks. On the other hand I noticed that color in these artist’s works functions in an almost
intuitive juxtaposition to the form they occupy. As in Heilmann’s *Rosebuds* (Fig.2) or Palermo’s *Pillow with Black Form* (Fig.3), there seems to exist a hard-to-explain tension between the color and form. At least for me, the dripping red in Heilmann’s painting and the messiness of Palermo’s black, yellow and orange piece seem to be very antithetical to the idea of what the form and color are combined. Furthermore, following Riley’s notion of making visible, I started to go along with my own intuition to determine the color. I started to look for agitation, often times as a subtle visual and visceral response in myself when choosing color. When I felt the most uncomfortable with color - then I was the most satisfied. In addition to the color-form strain, I decided to build into my system of pattern-like configuration failures and mistakes that can conceivably form delicate emotional and bodily tension in the viewer.

I saw a painting *Red Yellow Blue White and Black* (Fig.4) by Ellsworth Kelly when I was visiting the Chicago Art Institute. The simple seven panels of different colors gave me an epiphany! When I first saw Kelly’s painting I dismissed it as one of the works I had seen many times in numerous reproductions. For some reason, I returned to the painting, perhaps because I have always been very curious about the sides of the paintings. I noticed how different colors of Kelly’s panels/ canvases were attached from the back with 2”X4”s. These pieces of lumber were visible and elevated the work from the wall. I then glanced back to the surface and all of a sudden it visually transformed from the static band of varying colors to dynamic visual fluctuation. I suddenly saw the colors no longer as a uniform, flattened row of equal value but as competing with each other for ascendancy. This visual transformation unexpectedly made me keenly aware of
myself viscerally, visually and physically but also my relationship to the space with all of its complexities. This was an important realization because it compelled me to study more closely the relationship between the surface and the sides. I understood that in my quest to ‘make visible’, all the parts of the painting have significance. For the first time I perceived how the sides are the place that can *activate* the surface because the sides elliptically connects the wall behind the painting to the surrounding space and then back again to the surface. I’ve heard it said many times how

![Figure 4: Ellsworth Kelly, Red Yellow Blue White and Black, oil on canvas, 7 joined panels, 1953 (Chicago Art Institute)](image)

*the side is where the painting becomes an object* but I have always felt very unsatisfied with that statement. It is true that the sides reveal the three dimensional nature of a painting, but I would argue that more transpires in that instant than the simple recognition of a painting’s objecthood. Many artists pay little-to-no-attention to the sides and often they seem like the ‘no man’s land’. They are the opposite to the *heroic* place of the surface and often reveal some vulnerability and disregard. Some artists even cover them up with black or white like they are cleaning them up as if to make the surface appear more sovereign. It became clear to me that I didn’t exclusively want to make the surface appear
visible but also the entire painting as an object. As I was trying to create tension on the surface between the colors and forms, I felt like the sides became an additional surface, another dimension where the strain needs to be heightened. As I had to step aside and get closer to see the sides of the Kelly’s painting in Chicago, I also realized how attention paid to the sides would challenge the viewer’s spatial positioning. Customarily paintings are observed rather passively by standing right in front of them. When I invite the viewer to look at the paintings from another perspective, I’d like to think that logically this affects the active/passive viewership. The onlooker cannot no longer remain as a passive spectator but instead have to be more involved in the process of making the painting “visible”. I’d like to think that this invitation for movement challenges the viewer’s overall spatial perception beyond the paintings’ realm.

Soon after my trip to Chicago and the Ellsworth Kelly painting epiphany I was struggling with two paintings (Fig. 5&6). I remade them several times without exactly knowing what to do. I experimented with using several color combinations that appeared to produce the most visual strain, conflict, and discomfort. I had been making paintings with all-over, pattern-like forms but somehow was uncertain how I felt about them and I had experimented with frame-like structure within the composition. I had also become interested in the negative space between the circles; the diamond-like shape and the kind of pattern it produces when multiplied. I felt hesitant and I arrived to a point where I painted two colors with a frame-like edge and a rectangular form in the center. On top of the rectangle I added a layer of the diamond shapes in a grid-like formation. The color on the top rectangle was close to opaque with a very slight
fluctuation of subtle transparency. The response was very excited when I presented the paintings to a studio visitor. At that moment I understood how it was exactly what I did not want! When looking at the painting, the visitor, through visual illusion created by linear perspective with a very slight fluctuation of color, started to talk about spatial memories and associations. In that moment I came to realize how the spatial illusion is a device to situate us in a comfortable relationship mentally and temporally within the painting’s sphere but also outside its realm. I would argue that this spatial placement, that is so much based on our bodily understanding of the space around us but also on our memories, actual or imaginary, has an inseparable time component. The rejection of perspective and pictorial depth goes back to Cubism where the traditional, academic
method of representing reality through the use of linear perspective was abandoned. Unlike Cubism, my rejection of spatial illusion is embedded in a search for visual and bodily discomfort instead of some intellectual and/or academic rebellion. Immediately upon recognizing the painting’s linear perspective the visitor appeared happier because its recognizable and therefore perhaps inherently comforting character. It seemed to provide a way for the viewer to alternate spatially, visually and emotionally between the painting and its surroundings and adhere to the comforts of linear time continuum as well. In that moment I registered how I absolutely do not want and reject linear perspective and pictorial depth in my paintings because I want to challenge the customarily perceived logic between time and space. With this refusal I fundamentally aim to question and challenge the viewer’s sense of temporal and spatial reality.

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7 Kleiner, Fred S. and Mamiya, Christin J. *Gardner’s Art Through the Ages*, pg.970-972
Chapter 2. Theory As Context

a. Turner and Douglas And About In-Betweeness

Even though I was making these exciting discoveries and having happy epiphanies, I was struggling to think about them in some more comprehensive and clear way. I was questioning my justification for these seemingly subjective notions with broad and complex implications. My paintings started to appear progressively stranger while I was feeling increasingly satisfied with them. Essentially I was still struggling to find a good reason to make these daring claims between the surface and the sides, the interdependence of linear perspective and time continuum, as well as the usage of complex pattern based systems and bold and confusing color combinations. While the paintings appeared to come viscerally closer to my perceptions of the abstract and complex cultural and societal structures, at the same time my need for order and logic was making me question it all. When I came across the theories of liminality by British cultural anthropologist Victor Turner⁸ (term and theory first established by French ethnographer and folklorist Arnold van Gennep) for the first time I found a way to start examining my paintings outside my subjective, intuitive experience and thinking. I comprehended how my paintings are enclosing paradoxes and contradictions, essentially being *betwixt and between*. Interestingly, the theories of liminality suggest that the

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in-between space has a cultural and societal significance. I started to perceive how my paintings were expressing and expanding the visual push-and-pull through the allover pattern and therefore they seemed to be inviting the viewer to go around them. Turner’s statements resonates with it: “Liminal entities are neither here of there; they are betwixt and between positions assigned and arrayed by law, customs, conventions and ceremonial.”

As I strive for my paintings to fluctuate in a binary plane of active and passive viewership as Bridget Riley also suggests, Turner’s theory about liminal existence similarly proposes oscillating conditions of existence and “offer of lowliness and sacredness, of homogeneity and comradeship. We are presented, in such rites, with a “moment in and out of time.” As my paintings are increasingly void of any specific markers pertaining to the traditions of painting, such as coherent linear perspective, I see them simulating liminal existence. This is especially intriguing because Turner suggests that in the liminal state, the cultural and societal boundaries and hierarchies such as sacred and secular collapse. According to Turner, liminality is like a mirroring effect without which the societal structures cannot be defined and become visible. This is conceptually very compelling because I also wish my paintings to function like a subtle mirror through which the viewer can become more aware of themselves and the world around them.

While Turner helps me to make sense of the painting-viewer-space elliptic, another British anthropologist, Mary Douglas, offers additional conceptual tools to examine my practice and process and especially an aspect of my paintings I have explored only briefly.

10 Turner, pg.96
so far. I mentioned earlier how the subtle imperfections of the performance are important to me. I have been asked why I don’t want to make the paintings more *perfect* or the patterns *correct* and why do I insist the gestures of my hand to be visible and the systems to fall apart? When I started to use repetition and pattern, I realized the importance of setting up systems, or procedures that have visible built-in failures of the hand and body. While executing the repeating, pattern-like construction, I always anticipate “mistakes” where the pattern appears to start correctly but then falls apart and eventually disintegrates. Turner and Douglas are examining different things but I also see a lot of points of convergence in relation to this aspect of my painting process. Somewhere in me is always a resistance against total order and perfection. I perceive my opposition to make *nice* or *agreeable* paintings (which of course are very subjective concepts) resting in my social justice and environmental concerns, as well as in the complex, often anxiety and confusion producing nature of my experiences and thoughts, feelings and attitudes that I daily carry with me to my studio. As Turner suggests, liminality is needed to reveal the societal structures. According to Douglas, the imperfections, the illogical, the (historical, societal, cultural etc.) *dirt* is needed to create order.

Dirt then, is never a unique, isolated event. Where there is dirt there is system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements. 11

Essentially Douglas’s thinking gave me another permission to think the seemingly paradoxical nature of life but also what I wish my paintings to do and to be. If according

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11 Douglas, Mary. *Purity and Danger*, pg.36
to Turner and Douglas, the abstract concepts of liminality and dirt are needed to reveal order, I’d like to think that on the surface of my paintings these concepts are finding an obscure visible form. As liminality and dirt are needed so that some very subtle societal and cultural systems can be divulged, I want to think that my paintings can optimally reveal something delicate within the viewer that otherwise would remain hidden.

b. Goldin and the Dizzying Pattern

Granted that disorder spoils pattern, it also provides material of pattern. Order implies restriction; from all possible materials, a limited selection has been made and from all possible relations a limited set has been used. So disorder by implication is unlimited, no pattern has been realized in it, but its potential for patterning is indefinite.  

At this point it seems most sensible to examine one of the most prominent visual features of my paintings - the pattern. As I have analyzed aspects of my paintings, practice and its evolution, throughout the process the usage of pattern has been a very central question. I don’t think additional examination is needed if I state that pattern has a quite non-existent status within the Western fine art tradition. Pattern is historically considered to be part of the craft and domestic women’s work, and in the contemporary culture it mostly appears in the market driven consumer items. Usually pattern is not considered to be able to gain the critical status of fine art. A fairly little known Pattern and Decoration (P&D) Movement of the late 1970’s and early 80’s caught my attention and especially some articles of an artist, writer and art historian Amy Goldin. Goldin is considered to have been the theoretical and conceptual grounding force and a mentor

12 Douglas, Mary. *Purity and Danger*, pg.95
behind this shortly lived and mostly forgotten movement. Her notions still have much to offer to the contemporary art discourse and I see my painting practice continuing the conceptual and theoretical trajectory of the P&D Movement. In this regard, one of the Goldin’s most valuable articles Patterns, Grids and Painting appeared in Artforum in September 1975. As I have tracked the reoccurring theme of the paradox of active and passive viewership, and the literal, allegorical and symbolic movement in relation to my paintings, Goldin offers yet another way for me to critically and conceptually approach and examine my originally very intuitive usage of pattern. In the core of the Western painting tradition is the spatial illusion created through linear perspective, which was first challenged in the early 20th century. I’d like to suggest that it is still a very radical gesture to reject it in contemporary painting practice. In addition, I don’t only challenge the use of the spatial illusion as in Cubism, Futurism or other forms of abstract art, but as Goldin expresses the pattern is the ultimate opposite and the clash. “Pattern is basically antithetical to the iconic image, for the nature of pattern implicitly denies the importance of singularity, purity, and absolute precision”.\textsuperscript{14} While according to Goldin any pattern can be reduced to a grid, which ambiguously appears in my paintings as well, it is very intriguing when she says:

The grid offers nothing more (or less) than a seamless experience of measured space, the experience of visual order itself. A grid is an isolated, specified, unlocalized field, as close as we can come to perceive pure being, free from any added rationale or emotional activity.\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{14} Goldin, Amy. \textit{Art In a Hairshirt. Art Criticism 1964-1978}, pg.168
\textsuperscript{15} Goldin, pg.172
This leads me to examine how the grids in my paintings are always- more or less compromised and falling apart. Goldin seems to suggest that a (perfect) grid is void of both “rationale and emotional activity”. My paintings have a resemblance of grid but the grid is always imperfect, warped and misshapen. If the grid is free from rational and emotional activity, can I conclude that the distorted grid in my paintings can actually imbue them? When Goldin quite logically proposes how the grid instills order, it is not hard to argue that my paintings express disarray and confusion, sometimes more overt and other times covert. The lack of center, focal point and the inherent allover quality of pattern forces the viewer to a visually circular motion. As Goldin suggest, “scanning is much more specialized, anxious kind of looking. It contains an element of search, an unsatisfied refusal to focus and attempt to grasp the nature of the whole.”\textsuperscript{16} Here lies another intriguing paradox. While the painting itself is an object with clear boundaries, and the grid provides stabilized, unemotional visual experience, at the same time the allover pattern, perfect or flawed, will force the viewer to a perpetual cyclical “anxious kind of looking.” If it is as anxious as Goldin suggests, can it ever be free from the emotional or rational? I would argue that probably not. In other words, if the grid and pattern causes conflicting and anxious emotional response, I see my paintings taking it a step further. I perceive them containing the elements described earlier, but they also have subtle warping and imperfections within the grid based pattern. Therefore I am left to hope that my quest to “make visible” is even further actualized and materialized.

\textsuperscript{16} Goldin, Amy. \textit{Art In a Hairshirt. Art Criticism 1964-1978}, pg.170
I had a studio visit with an artist and curator, Michelle Grabner, whose work deals with patterns and limits. Intriguingly she immediately paid attention to the painted sides of my paintings. According to her it appeared as if the sides were another painting. For her the surface was one painting, while the sides were like another monochrome painting. I hadn’t thought of them as two separate entities but since her visit I have entertained that idea. Up to that point I had searched for strain between the surface and the sides, but fundamentally I had thought of them as one and the same. After Grabner’s comment I started to look at them differently. I asked myself if the sides were another painting, how would I approach it? To me, every painting is its own entity and I always look for fleeting, ambiguous notion of intensity. Now consciously becoming aware of this particularly narrow and long space, I tried to orient toward it with the same attitude as I would with any other painted surface. Fortunately Goldin provides yet another way for me to think about it.

While a single pattern may be boring, traditionally offering nothing beyond its own sensible identity, the confrontation of related patterns inevitably teases the mind, evoking the presence of hidden laws and an infinity of legitimate, unexpressed possibilities.  

This statement intrigued me and reaffirmed my belief in the importance of the sides, especially when it comes to my pattern based paintings. In addition, this also offered me a way to consider the series of paintings that I had been making and trying to comprehend. For a long time my impulse was to make diptychs because with two, the comparison is inevitable. The similarities and the differences become the observable questions, similarly to what Goldin is suggesting. When trying to expand the amount of

17 Goldin, Amy. Art In a Hairshirt. Art Criticism 1964-1978, pg.167
paintings in a series, I found it much more complicated. When thinking about Goldin’s notion of how related patterns “teases the mind, evoking the presence of hidden laws and an infinity of legitimate, unexpressed possibilities”, I’m left to ask a rhetorical question: where do the boundaries of that tease lie? With the pattern based paintings such as mine, question ensue as to how similar the individual paintings can be and how different so that the series can still maintain coherence without becoming redundant?

Figure 7: *Straight Eclipse series*, installation view, 2015

I believe pattern inherently contains rhythm or “the hidden laws”, so I am inquiring myself how to maintain rhythm without it becoming chaotic? If each individual painting contains two distinct surfaces, the surface and the sides, I’m also challenged to maintain rhythm between larger quantities of elements.
c. Foucault and Chow-Abstract Paintings and The Abstract Discourse

When looking back to the beginning of my painting practice almost fifteen years ago, and especially since I moved to the US from Finland, I have conceptually and contextually tried to express my immigrant reality and my sense of in-betweeness and disconnect, and how I often feel culturally and socially divided and disjointed. In addition to coming from another country and culture and living in America, my marriage to an African-American man and my two sons results in an experience where I see myself living in a perhaps culturally and socially unusual place. My intimate, internal cultural encounter of the everyday American life and who I experience myself to be is continuously conflicted with, and in opposition to the external assumption of who I am perceived to be. I continuously find myself asking from this position; how can I paint what I experience, what kind of exact forms can I find to convey these incompatible experiences, how can I find justification for painting in this world of seemingly increasing and confusing polarization and conflict but perhaps above all, how can I speak about my abstract paintings in some exact terms and especially their relationship to their ambiguous and complex origins?

The process of moving away from representational works of art into abstract painting hasn’t been easy. I have often felt perplexed and sometimes even discouraged. Earlier I attempted to make a more straightforward connection to my cultural heritage and the complexity of negotiating the new cultural and social conditions of my every day life, but I found it hard to locate the discourse and felt intimidated by its apparent intricacy. When I was trying to discover language to express my painting’s relationship to
the subjective notions that seem to expand to common visual and visceral experiences, I was warned against using a Universalist rhetoric. I was informed about the problematic nature of Universalism because of its connotations to the oppressive modernist utopias of the 20th century that contributed to large-scale destruction and human suffering. The way I understand it, in our current postmodern discourse this approach is easily considered to be too naïve of a claim or even perhaps dangerous. At the same time I have often felt frustrated because I never tried to make claims about any absolute truths or all embracing ideology or *message*. I now recognize how very difficult it is to initiate the conversation about the relationship between my paintings and subjective and objective notions because the paintings are so void of clearly recognizable contextual or conceptual markers of our reality. The way I use material, color and form together makes it debatable if the paintings can embody or express anything specific of the world outside themselves. Simultaneously it is hard to ignore their connection to the every day reality because the paintings always perform *something*- even if it’s different to different people at different times. In addition, I always sense how my experiences are intertwined with internal thoughts, feelings and attitudes that together are directly impacting and influencing the forms of my practice. From this standpoint I keep questioning how my paintings could ever be independent of the world they emerge from? Should they be? Since I perceive them being influenced by the complexities of my reality, how can I possibly even begin to instigate this elaborate discourse? In the beginning of his essay, *The Order of Discourse*, the French philosopher, social theorist, philologist and literary critic Michel Foucault suggests how much easier is it to start a conversation, to initiate the discourse
once it’s already established. In this regard, it seems that this discourse that I’m trying to instigate, is a very difficult one.

Figure 8: *Straight Eclipse III*, spray paint, enamel, acrylic and oil on canvas, 2015
As I have described before, within the evolution of my painting practice I slowly started to embrace a non-representational direction, came to reject the linear perspective and illusionistic space, and started to utilize allover, grid resembling, and pattern based constructions. The paintings I make are large with bold color combinations and there isn’t any focal point because I don’t want the viewer to have an easy visual exit from the painting’s sphere. According to Foucault, in the West, the discourse exists in the smallest possible space between thought and speech and this notion helped me to examine conceptually aspects of my paintings and it also assisted me in my most recent painting series *Straight Eclipse* (Fig 8). Reading Foucault helped me to fundamentally accept the fluctuating paper-thin opening within the paintings. I perceive a thin spatial split mirror Foucault’s notion of spatial dimensions of discourse and how this “smallest possible space”- enables us to continuously to be in a position of “eliding the reality of discourse.” With this in mind, I hope to further heighten the anxious kind of looking that accompanies pattern. The paintings in the *Straight Eclipse* series have a very little spatial illusion and they continuously visually push the viewer in-and-out of their sphere. I’d like to argue that the paintings invite us to situate ourselves mentally within that space, like the very thin in-between space where the discourse exists as suggested by Foucault, while never offering a stable place and space to locate ourselves. As I described earlier, I understood through one of my epiphanies how pictorial perspective creates a possibility for a narrative and a time continuum. This is intriguing because when following Foucault’s logic of discourse existing between the very thin space of thought and speech, the ambiguous spatial dimension is perhaps the reason why it is so difficult

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18 Foucault, Michel. *The Order of Discourse*, pg. 65

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for me to speak about my abstract paintings. I’d like to suggest that the less we can imagine ourselves within the realm of the painting, the less clear it becomes about how we can relate to it, and therefore speak about it.

Foucault challenges us to rethink the linear history-time-master-narrative in order to free the discourse and fundamentally liberate ourselves from the hidden powers of exclusion. When I reject spatial illusion, am I opening up the other possibilities for different approaches and confrontations, or am I doing the opposite? When Foucault calls for the avoidance of naming and labeling things and therefore put an end to the search for some evasive idea of “founding subject”,¹⁹ I find one way to examine this dilemma. I’m left to speculate if the best thing I can do to start the discourse is to avoid the idea “founding subject.” Maybe I need to evade the notion of essence or root cause because there is none, or at least not a singular as the founding subject suggest. Having said all this, this still leaves me in a difficult position. Perhaps some further conceptual direction can be found in Foucault’s statement: “rule is that of exteriority: we must not go from discourse toward its interior, hidden nucleus, toward the heart of thought or a signification supposed to be manifested in it.”²⁰ As I have rejected spatial illusion of linear perspective and come to embrace the dizzying effects of pattern that together throw me around visually and viscerally and offers nothing clear and concise, maybe I need to accept the same when speaking about the paintings as well. Perhaps there is no one answer, or one-way to speak about them which is exactly the point Foucault is making. Foucault suggests that we create the conditions for exclusion when insisting on some

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¹⁹ Foucault, Michel. The Order of Discourse, pg. 65
²⁰ Foucault, pg. 67
linear logic but when we abandon that approach, we open up the other possibilities. Perhaps the whole point is in the paradox itself. My paintings have an appearance of exclusion because they don’t provide anything immediately recognizable but instead they offer a complete freedom for the viewer to approach and interpret them in any way they like.

Foucault’s notion of the “materialism of the incorporeal”\textsuperscript{21} is where it gets especially complex when it comes to abstract painting and the accompanying discourse. When thinking about the things we encounter in life, nothing else exists for its own sake as art does, while also constantly reflecting back to the world. Therefore, in the simplest of terms I would suggest that art could be seen to fully embody this paradoxical notion of “materialism of the incorporeal”. It is suggested that art has no practical purpose in the way everything else does and it always functions from a distance while continuously decreasing and sometimes increasing the gap between the interior and exterior. When it comes to abstract art, the way it refers back to Foucault’s notion of “materialism of the incorporeal”, to me it appears as a material manifestation of philosophy. As I understand Foucault suggesting, this is where we must refer back to the discourse. The difficulty is to distinguish the difference between the discourse and what we are talking about. This resonates especially well with so many aspects of my painting practice. If the most demanding place is the object-subject binary in every discourse, it is even more complicated when it comes to art, and further complicated with non-representational/abstract works because the object encloses the discourse but yet it is also the signifier. I see my own practice as an intricate give-and-take and action-and-reaction.

\textsuperscript{21} Foucault, Michel. \textit{The Order of Discourse}, pg. 69
On the one hand, I grab and utilize the specific forms from my own cultural heritage and colors from my environment, while I also conceptualize and filter those same forms and colors through the intangible abstracted notions of my reality. Through this multifaceted process they finally find an ambiguous visual logic on the surface of my paintings. The perhaps obvious question is how much the culturally specific forms once removed from their context can express anything culturally specific? My usage of color leaves me to question if they have any cultural specific to express? In addition, can I make any claims about the forms and colors and do I have a right for ownership because of my immigrant status? Can colors and forms once removed from their cultural context express anything culturally or socially specific anymore? Lastly, where does the condemned modernist Universalist utopian boundary lie so that the works cannot be dismissed in those grounds?

As an artist, this is a very frustrating and confusing position to occupy and I doubt I can ever find exact answers to my questions. There appears to be a mythical idea of an artist being able to reveal something essential about the current state of the humanity and the world and being able to tap into the zeitgeist. I see this tied into the same notion of truth that Foucault explores and how he exemplifies the very abstract nature of truth and especially the problematic nature of our cultural and social will to truth. According to Foucault this will to truth exists everywhere in the Western culture but when examining it through the field of contemporary art and especially abstract painting it takes another dimension. Foucault questions the nature of the notion of truth, how problematically it is

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22 Foucault, Michel. *The Order of Discourse*
presented as linear progression of history and science and how through the notions of logic it gains its power to persuade and functions as a powerful force of exclusion.

It is always possible that one might speak the truth in the space of a wild exterior, but one is ‘in the true’ only by obeying the rules of a discursive ‘policing’ which one has to reactivate in each of one’s discourses. The discipline is a principle of control over the production of discourse.23

When it comes to my abstract paintings, I have been contemplating this. I recognize that someone without prior knowledge or experience of abstract art would probably have some difficulty interpreting or understanding my paintings, therefore the notion of linearity is hardly applicable. This can be seen as paradoxical because while my paintings doesn’t depict any recognizable linear perspective or identifiable cultural markers, which could indicate inclusiveness in Foucaultian sense, but at the same time, it appears that they do just the opposite. I’m aware of the elitist flair of my paintings because of their confusing and even overwhelming qualities and therefore they can be considered exclusive. At the same time I have come to believe that the most radical thing I can do as an artist is to make these paintings that fluctuate between recognizable elements and indiscernible constructions. I understand that they can appear visually exclusive and even overwhelming, but they also contain another dimension that, within a discourse, would be much harder to perceive and locate. For a viewer there is a freedom to look at them and interpret them in any kind of way. While they might suggest different things to different people, they also can be approached by anyone, and anyone can say anything to them or about them. According to Foucault there exists an insidious duality between truth and will to truth which I see manifesting itself on the surface of my paintings. The discourse

23 Foucault, Michel. The Order of Discourse, pg. 61
and dichotomy between *truth* and *will to truth* as well as subject/object binary, start to emerge and is situated somewhere between my impulses to use the chosen forms, materials and colors, and my need to conceptualize my experiences (which all could be interpreted as *will to truth*). It is also the complex chain of action and reactions for the viewer and myself as a maker, as well as the linear/non-linear, logical/illogical binaries that the paintings simultaneously reveal and enclose (that could be considered to contain the idea of *truth* in Foucaultian sense of the word).

I’m excited when the cultural critic, Rey Chow, in her book *Protestant Ethnic and the Spirit of Capitalism* uses the term abstract to describe our globalized world. This is the way I perceive contemporary reality and one of the reasons why I make abstract paintings. According to her in our postmodern world the politics of cultural legitimation are played out and that the “knowledge itself is not given but rather an outcome of shifting historical relations of representation.”

I’m questioning why I repeatedly sense the powers of exclusion in the contemporary art discourse. It is almost as if Chow is responding to Foucault when she states “you should not be afraid of the beginnings.” I agree with Chow’s thinking when she states that the “knowledge itself is not given.” Through my paintings I’m continuously making new and exciting discoveries but find it difficult to locate the correct language to express these revelations. They seem to primarily emerge from some vague visual and bodily sensations but at the same time I’m aware how “there is anxiety about what discourse is in its material reality.”

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24 Chow, Rey. *The Protestant Ethnic And the Spirit of Capitalism*, pg. 1
25 Chow, pg. 51
26 Foucault, Michel. *The Order of Discourse*, pg. 52
maintaining or modifying the appropriation of discourses, along with the knowledge and powers which they carry."²⁷ If I understand correctly, this tendency, according to Foucault is to control, to exclude the larger discourse that is the most unstable and unpredictable that carries with it a dimension of chance. The danger is that there is an opportunity for new ideas, which would possibly break us free from the bondage.

It is always possible that one might speak the truth in the space of a wild exterior, but one is ‘in the true’ only by obeying the rules of a discursive ‘policing’ which one has to reactivate in each of one’s discourses. The discipline is a principle of control over the production of discourse.²⁸

Where does that lead me as a maker and a scholar? How can I locate those political powers that are underlying the contemporary art discourse, especially in relation to my works without any clear and recognizable message and narrative? Where exactly is the material reality of the discourse surrounding my non-representational paintings beyond the very obvious formalist reading? As I stated earlier, I have come believe that the most radical gesture for me to do is to make abstract paintings. I believe how in the revisionist way they exists, expands and contracts between the recognizable and non-recognizable features of our daily reality. I have come to believe that the profound gestures of rejecting linear perspective, strong and bold colors that create visual and mental tension can hopefully provide an opening for the discourse that I wish to instigate. The social, cultural, institutional and political powers can be found in the place that I’m exploring because this precisely seems to be the most restricted place. This elliptically brings me back to my belief that the most politically radical thing for me to do is to make these

²⁷ Foucault, Michel. The Order of Discourse, pg. 64
²⁸ Foucault, pg. 61
abstract paintings because they are visually and viscerally, as well on the level of discourse, as challenging as it can be.

In the core of Chow’s description of the abstract structures of our contemporary world, appears to be a notion of (ethnic) identity- a question I perceive affecting my painting practice as well. According to her, in our current world, everything measured up against is the Western white male as the standard ”white man as the original”29 and on the other end of this historically unequal paradigm is the ethnic. I have often found it confusing and frustrating the way my paintings and myself have been coopted into the all embracing Western whiteness, when at the same time I’m also continuously experiencing cultural and social otherness. It might not be the direct case with me, whereas the “ethnic person is expected to come to resemble what is recognizably ethnic.”30 At the same time I have experienced how the stereotyped image persist even in regards to the so-called Westerners. If you resemble what is recognizably Western, you are assumed to be a part of its cultural hegemony and therefore you are expected to perform this Western identity. This makes me relate to Chow’s idea of “out-focuseness”31, which I sense is influencing how both my paintings and myself are received and perceived. Daily in my studio as well as in my life I feel “out- focused”. I have contemplated Chow’s statement: “marginalized existence is a relation of visuality, that is, a relation of the coded manners in which one is being imagined.”32 I’m constantly on the lookout for what I can say and how I may speak about the origins of my paintings, including my intimate African-

29 Chow, Rey. *The Protestant Ethnic And the Spirit of Capitalism*, pg. 106
30 Chow, pg. 107
31 Chow, pg. 97
32 Chow, pg. 96
American cultural and social experience. I have not explicitly been denied the usage of the forms from my cultural background but I feel I always have to walk a fine line. My background and heritage is sometimes recognized as belonging to a constructed notion of the non-American, but Western culture, at the same time it is also coopted to the all-embracing “coded manners” of the Western cultural heritage. My subjective, private experience ambiguously resembles the Western cultural allegory while simultaneously being equivocally dissimilar. I have often been frustrated, perhaps in similar ways as the ethnics, by the complex, restricted admission to my subjective cultural background. Because I sense that I don’t have access or a right to fully claim it, instead I have decided try to embrace and even mimic the out-focusness in my painting practice. This ongoing experience has made me want to intentionally reproduce it as a subtle affect in my paintings. As I use warping grids, color-form strain and overall expansive, boundary challenging nature of my paintings, I wish to make detectable and visible the active-passive viewership.

The question of artist’s identity appearing and emerging within the works of art seems to be very relevant when it comes to Chow’s notion of “self-mimicry” in the postmodern world. She describes "the overwhelming tendency toward self-representation.” When it comes to my abstract paintings I find it to be applicable question as well. Early on in my practice I explored the notions of solitude, separation, uprootedness and detachment deriving directly from my own experiences, which could be seen to represent the notion of “self-representation”. I have come to think that while

33 Chow, Rey. The Protestant Ethnic And the Spirit of Capitalism, pg. 112
34 Chow, pg. 112
being influenced by my subjective experiences, I’m happy not to have my paintings express my biography per se. One-way to look at this is when Chow states:

There are at least two different ways of thinking about cultural identity. The first way reminds us of the prepoststructuralist sign, dedicated as it is to the production of a unified oneness anchored in specific locations and histories; the second way takes as its point of departure the ineluctable of difference.  

I think this exemplifies the very difficult and complex place we all probably occupy in the contemporary global world. According to Chow, yet again another contradiction becomes visible. One’s identity is simultaneously looked through single and multiples, through similarities and differences. Maybe it would be easiest to draw a conclusion here and leave it to that. At the same time, my Finnish-American with African American flavor- identity isn’t that important but it is more interesting to examine further how my paintings relate to this notion. As I have described earlier, in my paintings I am using specific colors and forms and repeating elements. Through repetition and the way I set up the system that creates the internal logic, an unexpected warping starts to happen within the pattern formation. There is a visual appearance of order, but through subtle means the system starts falling apart and creates visual tension. A viewer does not know and cannot fully understand how and where the warping happens and how to relate to and how to approach it. At the same time I perceive Chow’s notion of cultural identity resembling the grid in my paintings where things don’t quite line up perfectly and as expected, the hand becomes visible and the vulnerability is revealed. Fundamentally, it is the idea of humanity versus machines, the old question of nature versus culture. I want my paintings to emerge from that place of seeming imperfection and vulnerability that simulates our

35 Chow, Rey. The Protestant Ethnic And the Spirit of Capitalism, pg. 129
very blurred and continuously out-focused identity. I want them to make the viewer to feel uncomfortable and uncertain while simultaneously remaining silent about their specific meaning. I have spoken in length about the difficulty of discourse and especially the beginning of it, but at the same time I also feel quite comfortable with the way I now see my paintings and what I can say about them. As Foucault suggests, we should abandon any specific place and focus on alloverness, I believe my paintings expand from the multitude of experience to the world beyond their realm. They contain the moment of the action, the material and its reaction while also connecting to the place and time they are encountered in.
Chapter 3. Conclusion

Above all else, on a surface of a painting I aim to infinitely renew the moment of encounter. I perceive the rejection of linear perspective as creating a perpetual experience of *here and now*, where the access to the time construct of past, present and future is obstructed. I accomplish this through the usage of forms originating from my cultural heritage and bold, yet subtle color variations from my immediate environment. Together with manipulation of allover, warping pattern-like configurations I want my paintings to strike the viewer visually as well as viscerally. Where the configurations start falling apart and the imperfection of the hand become visible, I see vulnerability but also delicate tension and confusion. I strive to challenge the viewers’ perception of the expanding surfaces and boundaries of a painting. The painted sides are distinct from the surface, because I invite the viewer to look at the painting from different points of view, drawing attention to its objecthood. Ultimately I wish the painting to expand to the space it occupies and to the viewers themselves.

During the course of this thesis I have demonstrated how my paintings embody multiple levels of paradoxes that originate and emerge from the abundance of experience- and theory-based places, and the way they contract and expand conceptually and contextually within the process of their making. At the same time I have also established my desire for them to offer a strong visual and visceral affect for the viewer that
functions independently of their specific origin and influences. Even though it appears difficult to instigate the discourse around these paintings, I believe that my questions and even some answers are not only significant and central to my practice but can potentially provide new ways to examine abstract painting in general.
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