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Ambiguous Criteria

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AMBIGUOUS CRITERIA

By

TRAVIS LINDQUIST

Under the Direction of Pam Longobardi

ABSTRACT

Ambiguous Criteria consists of paintings, digital prints, and works on paper including abstract compositions and saturated photographs with swaths of colors and text. The content originates in personal memories: childhood recollections, humorous anecdotes, and images of intimately known places. Alongside this is topical subject matter derived from popular culture, scientific information, and conspiracy theories that have been researched and dismantled by myself.

This combination results in a tension that corresponds with the making of the work. Rather than following a linear method when creating I improvise and disrupt the composition through the addition and redaction of material gestures. The resulting works obscure content and remove context. *Ambiguous Criteria* is an opportunity for these disparate elements to coexist untethered from the restricted plane of reality. Through these abstractions, abstract and tangible concepts can be addressed and

dismantled while accepting and embracing a refusal to explicitly define a precise meaning or position.

INDEX WORDS: Abstract, Contradiction, Conspiracies, Redaction, Painting, Family

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TRAVIS LINDQUIST

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

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In the College of the Art Georgia State University

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this to my wife, Aimee Chan-Lindquist and children, Fin and Rye who push me to be a better person and artist.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A sincere and humble thank you to Anthony Craig Drennen, Joe Peragine, Pam Longobardi, Tim Flowers, Aaron Putt, Uri and Gene Chan and all the others that have made this journey possible.

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INTRODUCTION

My artistic practice has spanned over twenty years. During that time, I have come to realize that the process of absorbing and digesting the world through doing and making is fundamental to my work. I am guided by intuition and an attraction to specific images and gestures. My approach is intuitive, not based on preconceived aesthetic strategies. This fluidity has always been at the core of my art making. Even as a child, the act of creating relied upon personal reflection and thoughtfulness. Now that my practice has matured, I have retained this “blank slate” approach, using my work to respond to the world through artistic introspection. This ethos permeates all aspects of my practice. I find that the right image, information, or idea arrives at the correct moment, precisely when I seem to need it. The gestures in the art -work have to sit correctly both in my head and in the work. This is the ambiguous criteria on which my work is based.

CHILDHOOD AND PERCEIVED REALITIES

I take inspiration from the contentious relationship I have had with my mother and father. Text and imagery representing seemingly innocuous family moments slip into these pieces. Phrases pulled from memories are captured in work titles, such as *Just Like We Did*, an oft-repeated phrase my mother uses to describe her perception of the similarities between my parenting style and the way she raised my brother and I. Her perception of my parenting seems far removed from reality, and it inspires me to marvel at the way people can have such dissimilar readings of the same time and place.

These themes of perception, reality, and truth are woven throughout my work, but are particularly evident in the pieces relating to my mother and father. "*Just Enough*" refers to a specific family Thanksgiving "episode," when my mother insisted she had made "just enough" food, when, in fact, the opposite was true. "*All to the Good*" is a drawing based on one of my Mother's favorite sayings, Typically, things described as "all to the good" are, to my reality, completely wrong or irretrievably damaged. Inscribing these phrases into abstract drawings has provided distance from family frustrations, allowing me understand that my mother was doing the best she could.



Figure 1 Lindquist, Travis, Just Enough, 2018, mixed media on paper, 17x14"



Figure 2 Lindquist, Travis, *Just Like We Did*, 2018, mixed media on paper 14x17"

CONTETIOUS EDUATION

I attended the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, graduating in the mid-nineties. During that time, the curriculum at the SMFA had no prerequisites and little academic structure. The school prized artistic technique and artistic athleticism over process-driven work and the idea of discovering purpose through art making. Conceptual intentionality was not emphasized, nor was it discussed as being an important aspect of being a professional artist. This resulted in an under-developed practice and a lack of clarity as to my artistic intentions, as well as ill-defined notions regarding the underlying content of my work. During my undergraduate studies, I maintained the naïve view that art could solve all of my problems, if not all the world's problems. I persisted in thinking that maybe art could perform the functions of my therapist? My mother? My father? My partner? My income? My job? My purpose in life? Eventually, I realized that my artwork could not perform all these functions but it could allow me to contend with those things I saw as problematic. It provided me with a laboratory and a playground, in which I could organically integrate my inner and outer worlds. It also gave me a means to make sense of my practice and my place in this world. I did not have be restricted. Everything could be included, from deeply personal memories and familial struggles, as well as the content of texts I was reading and absorbing from science, popular culture, and conspiracy theory.

THEORIES TO END ALL THEORIES

My obsession with conspiracy theories began in the late 1990s when I moved from Boston to Austin, Texas. Once in Austin, I discovered a pirate radio station that deeply validated, and confirmed my punk rock “Society is effed up” worldview. One show on the radio station was hosted by a DJ named “Say It Isn’t So Sam,” who used his airtime to discuss historical conspiracy theories, along with convincing research and hard facts. This was my first taste of the world of conspiracy theories, and I was hooked. I never met Sam and the FCC shut down the radio station six months after I became a listener.

During this same time period I was also working as an animator on the film *Waking Life* by Richard Linklater. While at a party for the cast and crew, I met Alex Jones, the founder of the *Infowars* website and a major player in current conspiracy theory circles. He gave me numerous VHS tapes containing his work to expose the “New World Order.” The material on these tapes included subjects such as Bohemian Grove which is an elite retreat located in northern California and the federal government’s militarization of the police in the USA. My obsession with conspiracy theory reached its peak in 2001 after the bombing of the World Trade Center happened. I was primed with “inside information” and was a devout believer that the bombing was an “inside job.” Conspiracy theory became a primary focus of my research and informed much of my artistic practice for years to come.

My inquiries into conspiracy theories led me down many startling rabbit holes. I became fascinated with mind control and the writings of David Icke. Icke documents much of the mind control agenda. He believes that a group of reptilian multi-dimensional

beings control humanity through elite and royal bloodlines. A portion of his research is focused on trauma-based mind control developed by German scientists in World War II concentration camps. According to Icke, the CIA brought these German scientists to the United States after the Allies' victory so they could continue their research in campaigns with benign names like "Project Mockingbird," "Project Artichoke," and "Project Paperclip." Through Icke's writings, I was directed to other authors, such as Nicholas West who has also focused on mind control. He states:

Today, we have entered a perilous phase where mind control has taken on a physical, scientific dimension that threatens to become a permanent state if we do not become aware of the tools at the disposal of the technocratic dictatorship unfolding on a worldwide scale. Modern mind control is both technological and psychological.

During the time that I immersed myself in these readings, I began to paint highly representational images of alleged mind control victims and scientists. One example of my work from this period is a portrait I created of Dr. Ewen Cameron.¹

¹ "Ten Modern Methods of Mind Control," *Global Research*, September 29, 2018, <https://www.globalresearch.ca/10-modern-methods-of-mind-control/5422942>.



Figure 3 Lindquist, Travis, Dr. Ewen Cameron, 2001, mixed media on panel, 36x24"

Cameron was one of the founders of the MK Ultra mind control program run by the CIA, which has been declassified and exposed in white papers released through the

Freedom of Information Act. Cameron's likeness is painted on top of an abstracted under painting layer, much of which is revealed through the painted portrait. I met my wife toward the end of this period. She called me a "born again conspiracy theorist," making me question this obsession and my paintings began to turn away from conspiracy theory, though it still remained in more subtle forms. I toned down the overt conspiracy theory/mind control aspects of my imagery and started making work that was more concerned with personal relationships. Currently, I consume conspiracy theories with a heavy dose of salt. That is to say, I use them more as entertainment, taking from them what is interesting or helpful and ignore the rest.

FREUDIAN CONSPIRACY

Sigmund Freud has become relevant to my work through the concept of the "Freudian Slip." A Freudian slip is when a person misspeaks and accidentally reveals what they are really thinking about, according to Freud. I find this similar to my process, in which I allow my subconscious mind to reveal itself through disruptions in the paintings. My interest in Freud goes beyond the Freudian slip, however, and relates to previously established interests in conspiracy theories. Freud is the basis of a conspiracy theory that has Freud as the creator of a secret society meant to guard the fundamental principles of Freudian analysis. As stated by L.J Rather,

Jones therefore proposed to Freud in 1912 that a small group of the 'Old Guard'--Napoleon, incidentally, was another of Freud's military heroes--be charged with the task of watching over the three fundamental dogmas of Freudian analysis, namely repression, the unconscious, and infantile

sexuality. Jones said that the idea of forming a brotherhood of initiates came to him from his boyhood memories of 'many secret societies from literature.' Freud, who took to the idea with enthusiasm, emphasized that the committee of guardians 'would have to be strictly secret in its existence and actions.'²

Freud's introduction into my art making was spontaneous. It started with a photograph of Freud's study that I extracted from the Sigmund Freud House Catalogue, which came to me, like much of my source material, unintentionally and serendipitously.

Figure 4, Lindquist, Travis, F Study, 2018, mixed media on paper, 10x8"

I discovered it in a pile of books destined for the trash. I obscured the photograph with a drippy spray of fluorescent pink paint. Both the use of the photo and the gesture I applied were random and unprompted. I was interested in the stark visual contrast between the somber black and white picture and the unhinged nature of the intense color blast.

This appropriation of a photo of Freud's studio prompted me to consider my work through a Freudian lens. Through this examination, I realized: a) that much of the work I make is based on childhood memories, and b) that I use painting to dismantle and deal

² L. J. Rather, "Disraeli, Freud, and Jewish Conspiracy Theories," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 47, no. 1 (1986): 111-31 <https://doi.org/10.2307/2709598>. P. 125

with family tensions. Although it is now obvious, this layer of meaning in my work wasn't something I had noticed before. According to Raymond Williams the Welsh Marxist



Figure 5, Lindquist, Travis, Freud's Study, mixed media on print, 2018, 10x8"

theorist, academic, novelist and critic, I am not the first or sole artist to reconceive their work after applying Freudian theory of which I know only the basics:

It aligns the later writers and painters with Freud's discoveries and imputes to them a view of the primacy of the subconscious or unconscious as well as, in both writing and painting, a radical questioning of the process of representation.³

The idea of "radically questioning... the process of representation" relates directly to the photos I have been disrupting with abstract gestures and text. They are tapping into childhood memories that have conflicting emotional tethering. I have been using the camera on my mobile phone to capture photos of the beach I went to as a child. I print these on canvas and am amazed at the level of detail that is retained. I then disrupt these images with abstract gestures of paint, while leaving much of the image intact and legible. This is an act of reconciliation; a way to embrace the pleasurable memories and process the less-pleasurable, difficult aspects of my childhood. The "disruptions" are akin to Freudian slips: I am producing a gesture from my subconscious that reveals inaccessible emotions, even though my feelings remain unclear and I am not able to verbalize them. My mother recently passed away. This has left me with difficult emotions to process. The beach pictures have been therapeutic, giving me an outlet through which I can understand my response to her death.

³ ³ Raymond Williams, "When was Modernism," in *Art in Theory 1900-1990*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 1117.

ADULTING

Becoming a parent in 2012 has forced me to reevaluate my childhood and examine how decisions made by my parents have shaped my life as an adult. It has been startling at times to investigate the past and grapple with issues that were once deeply buried but now resurface as a consequence of my current artistic practice. Text is frequently featured in my work, and my mother's words in particular have infiltrated the texts I use. When I began contextualizing the current body of work, I realized that my relationship with my parents was one of the overarching themes I have explored both now and in the past.

Because I am now a parent, the words of my wife and children have started to populate my work, as well as the music and stories they enjoy. The Raffi song "Baby Beluga" is a prime example. My son Rye was obsessed with this song. He wanted to hear it over and over. Listening to the song repeatedly forced it into my psyche, and from there it found its way into a painting. The only reference to the song in the painting is in the title and as an illegible pencil scrawl of some of the lyrics. The piece is mostly raw canvas with beige and grey abstract shapes. Swaths of black and orange disrupt the surface with hardly legible text and abstract symbols. One of the orange disruptions says "Tut," which refers to the song "King Tut," sung by Steve Martin on one of his comedy albums. I had that album as a child and played it as obsessively as my son played "Baby Beluga".



Figure 6 Lindquist, Travis, Baby Beluga, 2018, mixed media on canvas, 48x36"

MEMORY AS FUEL

I often use latent memories as the conceptual underpinnings for my paintings. For instance, when I was ten years old, there was a flea market at my elementary school. While looking through the secondhand goods I discovered a 78rpm record player and a trunk full of 78 records. I purchased these items and brought them home. Listening to something from the past seemed like a form of magic. The smell, the scratchy sound before the music started. One song particularly captured me, called “Jump Fritz” by Billy Jones and Ernest Hare. In the song, the singer was pretending to talk to a dog, offering liver if the dog was clever. This song, and the whole experience of listening to an antique record on an old record player became an indelible and poignant memory. I listened to this record over and over. So much so that the record finally broke.

“Jump Fritz” has been bouncing around my brain ever since and has found its way into a recent large abstraction titled, “Jump Fritz.” In this work, I wrote that phrase and then crossed it out, rendering it illegible, leaving the only reference to the song in the title and in my mind. While the painting is based on this memory, there is no direct, visible connection the viewer can make, aside from the ambiguous title.



Figure 7 Lindquist, Travis, Jump Fritz, 2018, mixed media on canvas, 60x48"

WHY ABSTRACTION?

I have always been interested in abstraction, but in the past did not have the confidence to allow my paintings to remain completely abstract. I typically begin my paintings with abstract gestures, building up paint over time to create a layered surface. I sensed that these experiments with abstraction held a certain power, but I was never able to permit their existence as finished works. They felt to unresolved. I used these canvases as backgrounds for figurative, narrative works.

My feelings about abstraction derived from a love/hate relationship formed in my early twenties during a visit to a Cy Twombly retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Twombly's semi-bare canvases with scrawled and scribbled nonsense infuriated me. He was cheating the system and getting away with something! His paintings provoked me. As I stared at his work, my reaction changed. I realized that he was disrupting my preconceived ideas about what art should be. As I grew to know more about Twombly, I learned that much of his work is informed by classical paintings and ancient mythology. This new knowledge led me to reassess my ideas about the power of abstraction. An example of this is *The Triumph of Galatea*, painted in 1961. It is based on a fresco masterpiece completed in 1512 by Raphael for the Villa Farnesina in Rome. This picture has a rich and intricate composition. A trident is in the process of abducting a sea nymph while another triton sounds an alarm on a conch shell, and Putti flies above with Cupid's bow and arrows pointed down towards Galatea. That is exactly what was happening in Twombly's *Triumph of Galatea*, but in a very modern way. He had reinvigorated it; it has a similar openness, a vastness. Every figure seems to correspond to some other figure, every movement to answer a counter-movement.

Twombly also displayed many parts of the human body. It also seemed larger than life; it's over nine feet tall and fifteen feet long.



Figure 8 Twombly, Cy, Triumph of Galatea, 1961, oil on canvas, 9x16'

Twombly attached numerous ideas and concepts to his work with no directly identifiable elements. By engaging with Twombly and his work, I realized how abstraction could represent something that is constantly changing, or as he said, "I show things in flux."⁴

⁴ Richard Leeman, Cy Twombly, and Isabelle d'Hauteville, *Cy Twombly : A Monograph* (Paris : Flammarion ; London : Thames & Hudson [distributor], ©2005., 2005),p.35



Figure 9 Lindquist, Travis, Making Satan Smile, 2017 Mixed media on canvas 48x48"

Despite this realization I still was not confident enough to create purely abstract paintings until I entered the MFA program at Georgia State University. The deciding moment occurred during a studio visit with professor Anthony Craig Drennen. I had just started a painting that would become the catalyst for my current body of work. There were only three or four gestures on the rabbit skin glue-primed canvas, as well as a bit of text about children being abducted for satanic rituals. Drennen said he thought the painting was finished, which led me to reassess my entire painting practice. I stopped painting at this stage and titled the piece "Making Satan Smile." I subsequently found

out that Gerhard Richter made a similar leap in his work, stylistically changing from photo-based paintings to pure abstraction. Of this departure he says:

It began in 1976, with small abstract paintings that allowed me to do what I had never let myself do: put something down at random. And then, of course, I realized it could never be random. It was all a way of opening a door for me. If I don't know what's coming-that is, if I have no hard and fast image, as I have with a photographic original-then arbitrary choice and chance play an important role. ⁵

I have embraced Richter's attitude towards art making. As he has said, "a painting can help us to think of something that goes beyond this senseless existence. That is something art can do."⁶ Richter's body of work is widely varied; He constantly challenges the viewer by not sticking to a specific genre of painting.

In my studio, while making connections between abstraction forms, painterly gestures, and personal experiences I am liberated from the mundane and "senseless existence." This physical and mental space is freeing; It is where I feel the most natural. The art I create during this process becomes a reflection of my life's joys and struggles, allowing me to grapple simultaneously with the profound and the absurd.

⁵ ⁵ Gerhard Richter, Hans Ulrich Obrist, and David Britt, *The Daily Practice of Painting : Writings and Interviews, 1962-1993* (Cambridge, Mass. : MIT Press ; London : Anthony d'Offay Gallery, 1995., 1995).p. 215-16

⁶ ⁶ Robert Storr, *Gerhard Richter: Doubt and Belief in Painting* (New York Museum of Modern Art, 2003).p. 183

CURRENT STATE AND BEYOND

My current body of abstract paintings is based primarily upon memory, research into conspiracy and scientific theories, and my family. The paintings contain a series of gestural marks made of oil, acrylic, pencil, spray paint, and other mixed media on canvas primed with rabbit skin glue. Using rabbit skin glue as a primer is both a nod to historical art making practices as well as an aesthetic choice on my part, as it allows the natural color of the canvas to be seen.

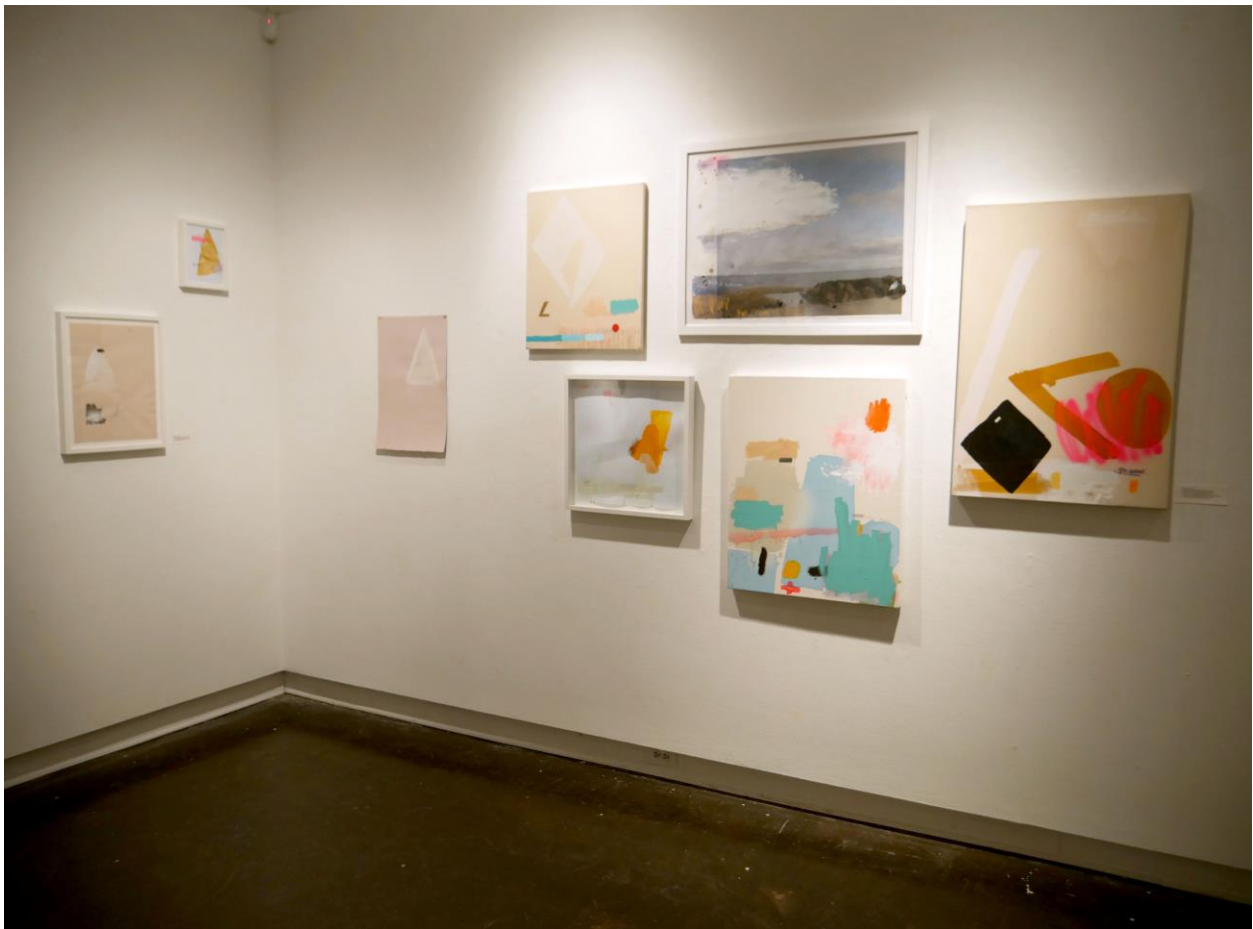


Figure 10 Lindquist, Travis, 2019, Ambiguous Criteria instillation

I incorporate text, choosing words and phrases of personal significance as well as gestural applications of paint and pencil and digitally printed photos. In the

past, I used elements of abstraction as under painting to build up layers and connote the passage of time. By layering into a dense conglomeration, the elegance of these simple gestures was lost. I always felt that a painting needed a representational image to become a finished work.



Figure 11 Lindquist, Travis, 2019, Ambiguous Criteria installation

My process has changed considerably during my graduate education. I now use my art to make sense of the world's noisy chaos, allowing abstraction to stand on its own. I also no longer rely on the dense layering of abstract gestures, instead using an ambiguous set of criteria that remains undefined, I now use as few abstract gestures as possible to create a successful work. As I leap into this investigation of mark making, I have come to realize that the viewer does not need to (and, I believe, cannot) understand the deeply encoded narratives in my work. The transition from explicit representation to pure abstraction allows space for both the personal meanings embedded in my art as well as a viewer's ability to construct their own meaning, uninfluenced by my original intentions.

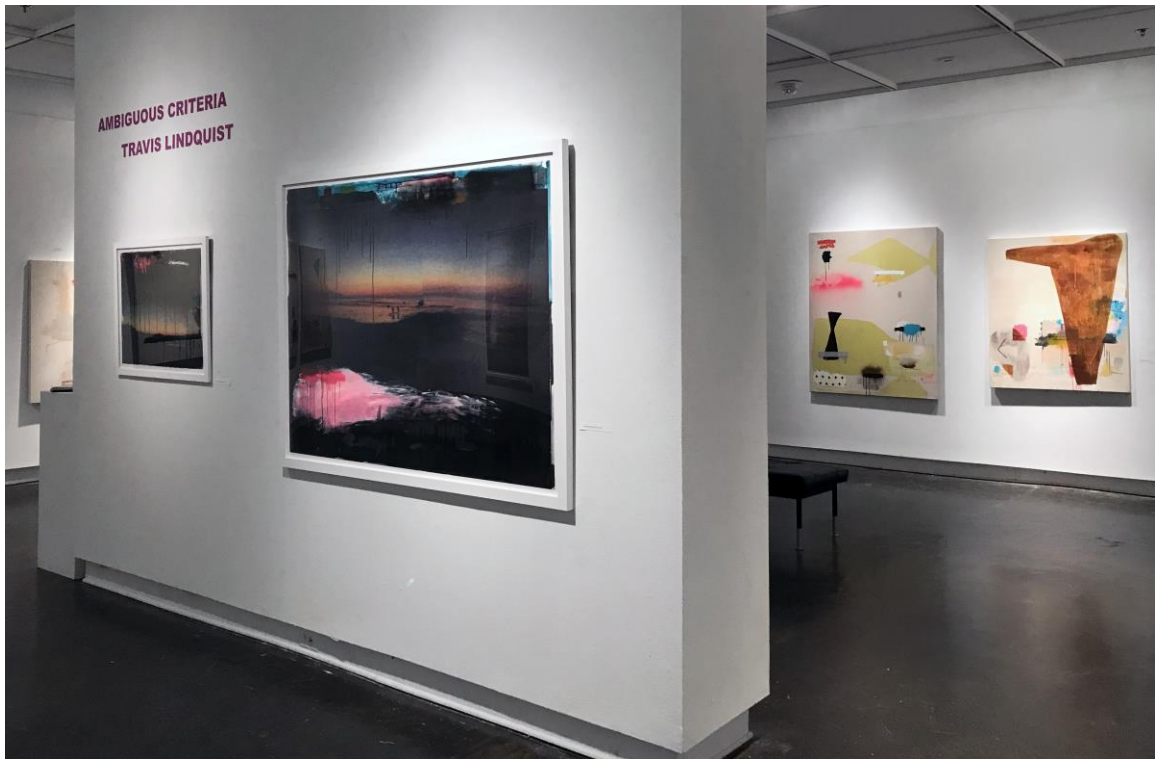


Figure 12 Lindquist, Travis, 2019 Ambiguous Criteria instillation

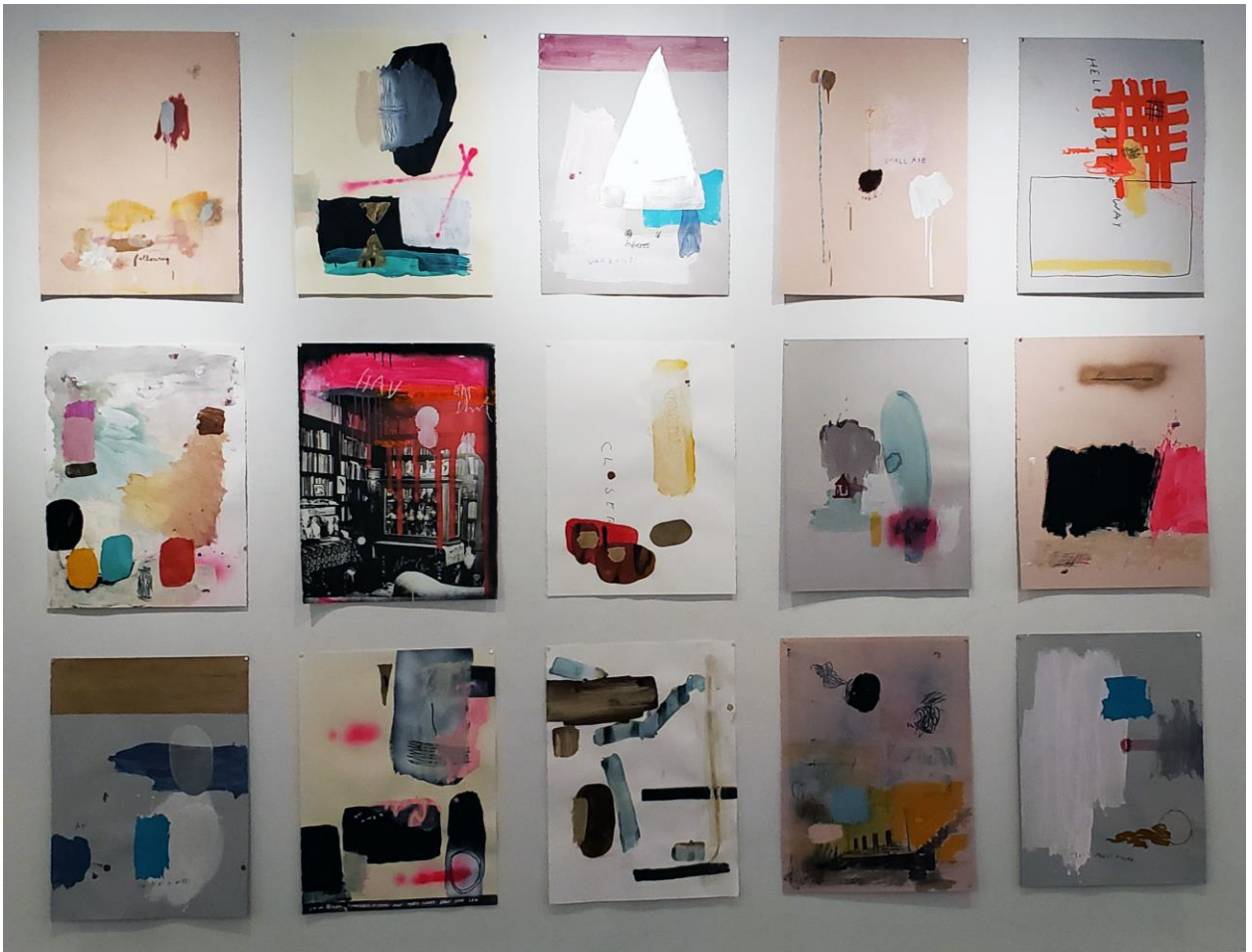


Figure 13 Lindquist, Travis, 2019, Ambiguous Criteria installation

CONCLUSION

Permitting various, sometimes contradictory, often arbitrary, elements to organically influence my process is central to my work. Alongside references to indelible memories from my childhood, I incorporate pieces of daily life with my children, as well as conspiracy theories. All of these ideas come together in a platform of my construction that allows disparate subjects to sit together, sometimes neatly, sometimes in tension. The use of abstract disruptions and redactions represent a coming-to-terms with subjects I find both compelling and difficult. This combination of inner and outer worlds results in a push-and-pull tension that corresponds with the making of the work. Rather

than following a linear method when working on these pieces, I ambiguate, improvise, and disrupt both the composition and the underlying subject matter through the addition or erasure of imagery. I am working towards minimalizing the amount of gestures it takes to satisfy the ambiguous criteria on which I judge my work successful or not.

There is a concerted effort to simplify and to disrupt these simplifications. This in fact relates directly to my relationship with the fundamental contradictions that exist in my life. While installing *Ambiguous Criteria*, I approached the installation with the same ideas in mind. I hung the art in the same fashion that I approach the canvas to create these paintings. I disrupted the traditional line that most shows are hung on in an attempt to capture the way the abstractions feel on the canvas. This was done in an informal and ambiguous way according to unknown criteria that exists in my brain and is only satisfied when it feels right.

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