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Silence and Slow Time

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Silence and Slow Time

By

Steve Byrnes

A thesis presented to the Sam Fox School of Design and Visual Arts of
Washington University in St. Louis in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts

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Abstract

This thesis explores abstract painting from the perspective of a material based production, drawing parallels from poetry to augment its position. Building upon existing material-driven painting traditions such as Abstract Expressionism, and examining their physiological affects from a scientific perspective, it aims to substantiate a more corporeal approach to understanding and interacting with painting.

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Introduction

“It has been remarked that we are led to make a painting by two drives: first, by seeing another painting and wanting to emulate it; second, by the desire to squeeze paint from the tube and slide it onto the canvas. The first leads us to tradition, the second to physicality. In those paintings that are compelling to look at, both drives are in full swing.”

- Tony Godfrey, *Painting Today*¹

Tony Godfrey’s modest estimation of what urges individuals to make paintings is precisely what drives my practice. My desire to make a painting is propelled by seeing paintings and subsequently from making paintings. This is in no particular order, since I am also very much compelled to make paintings simply to see them.

By explaining what I am trying to achieve with my paintings – how they are designed to function, and why they are worth making – I hope to elucidate my practice. In doing so, I will introduce the Sublime, the Zenist strategy of Forgetting the Self, Automatism, Wabi-sabi, and Physiological Empathy in Esthetic Experience, and explain how my work relates to each.

The Sublime

The first work of literature dedicated to the sublime is known to have come from Longinus around the 1st or 3rd century AD. However, it was written about with more complexity in 1757 by Edmund Burke, who believed that the Sublime was any experience that was capable of inciting within the body a sense of awe. In art, it is usually associated with paintings that depict large expanses of sky or colossal

abstract works, due to the intense feelings of terror and pleasure they simultaneously kindle within the viewer. In these works, it is the viewer's confrontation with the unknown that produces these feelings.

Automatism

Automatism is a method that the Surrealist poets and painters employed to produce spontaneous literary, painting and drawn works ostensibly derived directly from their unconscious. In painting, it is helpful to understand it as an improvisational method, wherein the body begins to work automatically, without the mind. In painting, it is exclusively a physiological pursuit.

Forgetting the Self

Forgetting the self, or self-emptying, is a Zenist technique, where an individual clears their mind of any and all things in order to be receptive to any and all things. As a painter, this is a helpful skill, as it allows one to identify properties in material that might have been overlooked or unforeseen in the initial vision for the piece.

Wabi-sabi

Wabi-sabi is a comprehensive Japanese worldview that is based on the belief that it is precisely the imperfection of things that gives them their beauty. Wabi-sabi embraces the flawed, incomplete, impermanent and unresolved. "In many ways," says Leonard Koren, "wabi-sabi could even be called the "Zen of things," as it

exemplifies many of Zen's core spiritual-philosophical tenets."² One of the major codes to understanding both Zen and wabi-sabi, is that they are almost impossible to explain, and that in order to "get" it, one must "feel" it. The nearest English word to wabi-sabi might be shabby, or rustic, and it is typically the rough, irregular and asymmetrical that elicits it.

Physiological Empathy in Aesthetic Experience

Physiological empathy in aesthetic experience occurs when the body is able to understand something simply through looking at the physical traces left from an event. For instance, footsteps in the sand signify someone has just walked across the beach, or the smoke rising in the distance indicates fire. The mind can understand this kind of information because it has accumulated experiential knowledge.

My Practice

I improvise my way through the indeterminate realm of abstract painting by sewing together various sections of pre-painted canvas, often painting on them again in order to arrive at an unforeseeable and foreign image. Each painting must elicit a corporeal reaction in myself, especially if I intend for it to achieve this effect in someone else. Thus, the most effective way to evaluate its affect is if the painting operates physiologically, namely by activating the motor reflexes that were used to make the marks in the painting. To ensure that my gestures can be easily charted, I often incorporate indulgent or exaggerated brushwork.

By employing the aforementioned Surrealist device *automatism*, I am able to work quickly on each painting and focus strictly on the materials in front of me. Furthermore, by applying the Zenist instinct of *forgetting the self*, I can further detach myself from the process, so I may stumble upon something interesting in the work afterwards.

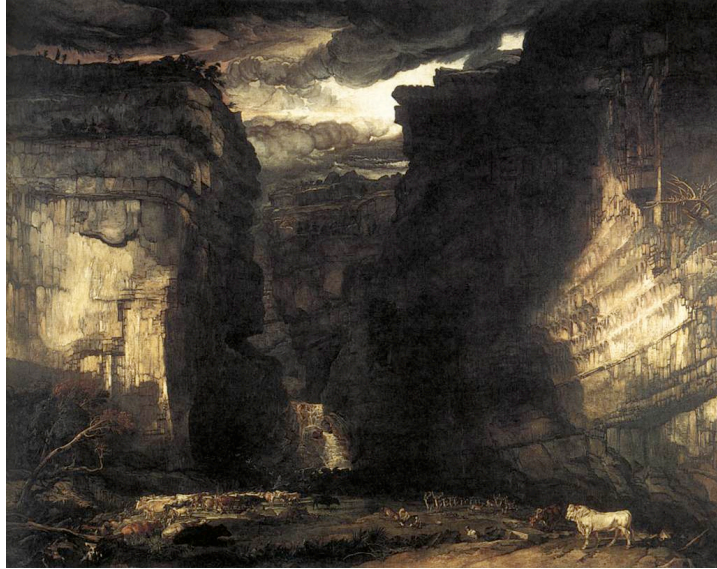
I am attracted to the metamorphic quality of abstraction and the psychological and emotional implications it can evoke. I want my work to function as a kind of Rorschach test. However, if an image starts to appear too resolved, it loses its associative qualities, and I feel compelled to complicate or obscure it in some way, in order to release it from its previously anchored condition. For that reason, my work always seems in a state of flux. It is this mutability, which imbues the work with its sense of the Sublime.

Due to the urgent manner in which I work, the abstract imagery I employ, the working methods I exploit (such as automatism), and the tactile nature of my paintings, my work often evokes the work of the Abstract Expressionists.

Chapter 1: The Sublime and Forgetting the Self

Poets and artists have, for centuries, spent their lives in pursuit of sublime aesthetic experiences. In the 18th century specifically, Romantic Poets such as William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge sought to create experiences of sublimity through private written accounts of their awe-inspiring incidents. Romantic painters such as James Ward, Casper David Friedrich and Joseph Mallord William Turner sought to achieve experiences of sublimity, too, through dramatic effects of light, color, space, and atmosphere. A century later, artists such as Mark Rothko, Clyfford Still, Barnett Newman and Jackson Pollock, adapted the strategies of their predecessor's to produce what the art critic Robert Rosenblum called, "The Abstract Sublime."³

As mentioned above, the sublime is often associated with a vast boundlessness. This was James Ward's intention when he painted *Gordale Scar* (1811-1815)—a dramatic limestone abyss, which dwarfs the figures in the foreground of the painting. Clyfford Still's painting *1957-D, No. 1* (1957), appears to use Ward's painting as a model for his own.



James Wards, *Gordale Scar*, 1812-1814, oil on canvas, 131" x 166".



Clyfford Still, *1957-D No. 1*, 1957, oil on canvas, 113" x 159".

By simplifying the shapes and increasing the contrast of Ward's painting, Still manages to extract the essence of what Ward was trying to accomplish. By abstracting the valley and removing the figures, Still brought the experience of awe one step closer by dwarfing the viewers themselves before the immense canvas, while at the same time preserving Ward's dramatic effects.

Jumping ahead several generations, many artists working today—including myself—are driven to produce similar experiences to those mentioned above however, our approach is different—via the incomplete, or provisional. Edmund Burke, a chief authority on the sublime and author of *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of The Sublime and Beautiful*, explains that the sense of “infinity” presented through the “unfinished” often produces sublime feelings “because the imagination is entertained with the promise of something more.”⁴ It is this upsurge in emotions, produced by the possible associations in the imagination, which lends our paintings their sense of sublime.

However, according to Coleridge, “No object of Sense is sublime in itself; but only so far as I make it a symbol of some idea. The circle is a beautiful figure in itself; it becomes sublime when I contemplate eternity under that figure.”⁵ Therefore, the imagination is a critical component to achieve sublime experiences. Still, in order to perceive the sublime, one’s mind must be quiet. This is the essence of Zen. Masao Abe, Buddhist and professor in religious studies, defines Zen as “a philosophy based on a ‘non-thinking’ which is beyond thinking and not thinking, grounded upon ‘Self-Awakening.’⁶ Similarly, Eihei Dogen, a thirteenth-century Japanese priest once stated “to study the Buddha way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be actualized by myriad things.”⁷ It is only through clearing one’s mind or self-emptying that one can experience the freedom from oneself that is required for these kinds of experiences. Consider William Wordsworth’s poem, *I Wandered Lonely As A Cloud* (a). Wordsworth wrote, “I gazed—and gazed—but little thought/ What wealth the show to me had brought,”⁸

which suggests that Wordsworth did not fully understand the significance of what he was experiencing until later, when lying on his couch, the image flashed upon his inner eye. By temporarily shutting off his urge to analyze the situation, he was able to fully engulf himself in the experience. The poem demonstrates the value of clearing one's mind in order to be receptive to having a richer, or potentially sublime, experience.

Chapter 2: Obscurity

According to Burke, “No person seems better to have understood the secret of heightening, or of setting terrible things, if I may use the expression, in their strongest light, by the force of a judicious obscurity, than Milton.”⁹ The way Milton dances around describing things, but ultimately leaves his images cloaked in a murky mist, has always astounded me. According to Alan Richardson, author of *The Neural Sublime*, this obfuscation was in fact crucial to the success of the leading 17th century English poet’s epic poem *Paradise Lost* (1667)—which spurred critics to begin dubbing him “the poet of the sublime.” Richardson stated that “the obscurity of Milton’s imagery is no fault but makes part of Milton’s claim to sublimity; a clear idea, after all is ‘another name for a little idea.’”¹⁰ In the second book, Milton paints a disturbingly unclear portrait of the Prince of Darkness:

*...The other shape—
If shape it might be called that shape had none
Distinguishable in member, joint, or limb,
Or substance might be called that shadow seemed,
For each seemed either—black it stood as night, 670
Fierce as ten furies, terrible as hell,
And shook a dreadful dart; what seemed his head
The likeness of a kingly crown had on.¹¹*

Darkness, for Milton, was a way of confounding his subjects. By keeping the reader in the dark, they are forced to concoct an image of the thing the words infer. For Milton, darkness adds to the complexity of his imagery. Richardson suggests that it is the potentiality of “infinitely extensible associational networks” that “gives his poetry its ‘energy’ as well as its sublimity.”¹²

Obfuscation is essential to the mutability of my work, as I wish for my iconography to remain in a state of perpetual flux. Constantly confounding my imagery by painting or sewing over it, preserves its associative qualities and allows it to mutate freely from one thing to another. By purposelessly assembling swathes of paint into amorphous shapes, they begin to signify objects, spaces, and things. Once something specific darts out of obscurity, I immediately obliterate it, forcing it back into darkness. Darkness, after all, is where uncertainty lurks most. The obfuscation that I am after is the kind that ultimately gives my paintings their intensity.

When looking at abstract painter Katy Moran's work, it is apparent she is well-acquainted with the notion of obfuscation. In her painting *Circus Town* (2011) it seems as if the frenzied field of reds, olives, greys and earthy browns, are being corralled, to some extent, by a healthy dose of Naples yellow.



Katy Moran, *Circus Town*, 2011, acrylic and collage on board, 19.09" x 23.23".

However, upon closer examination, it appears as though the Naples yellow might in fact be obstructing much of the information needed to decipher the image. In an interview, she affirmed:

Often I'll be walking along and I'll see something on the other side of the road, like a post in a shop or a picture, and for a split second, from this side of the road, I see something really interesting, and it sort of opens up possibilities as to what this image might be, and as I cross the road and get closer to the picture, and I see the figurative image, I tend to lose interest in it. I think what I'm trying to capture in my paintings is the thing that I saw for that split second from the other side of the road.¹³

Moran typically begins her paintings by finding images that speak to her on a formal level (i.e. shape, color, composition). Her images are derived from sources as disparate and generic as Google searches, magazines, or cellphone photographs. However, regardless of where she locates her images, they possess a certain ambiguity at first glance. After reacting to the image on the canvas, she obscures it even more by presenting the finished painting upside down in an effort to obfuscate the image further.

Very much like Moran, Patricia Treib's process stems from seeing something and then obscuring it. In her painting *Accoutrements* (2013) a gold angular text-like configuration dominates the center of the painting. This is a motif that the artist reuses regularly.



Patricia Treib, *Accoutrements*, 2013, oil on canvas, 66" x 50".

In a MOMA PS1 panel discussion, Treib stated that, “for me it’s something that comes out of vision and out of the process of observation and it involves the desire to make an image that is unnamable.”¹⁴ Similar to Still, Treib begins her paintings by looking at another painting, often times a lesser known historical painting, and uses the marginal spaces as points of departure. By simplifying the negative space, the image becomes abstracted—or as she says, “extracted”—from the original source and becomes a distinct entity. Due to this obfuscation, the sequential image begins to operate associatively, brimming with potential.

Chapter 3: Medium as Process

A painting is essentially an accumulation of materials. Like many artists, my practice starts by simply engaging with these materials. I begin by determining the painting's size, putting paint on canvas, and then manipulating the canvas by folding, cutting and sewing it. I do not necessarily know how the painting will turn out, but the materials give me some clues as to how to proceed. The way I approach the act of painting is equivalent to the way writers such as Gertrude Stein, T.S. Eliot and Rosmarie Waldrop approach the act of writing. To them, language itself is a medium, as well as a material. About the process of writing, Waldrop says:

Nothing is given. Everything remains to be constructed. I begin working, far from having an "epiphany" to express, I have only a vague nucleus of energy running to words. As soon as I start listening to the words they reveal their own vectors and affinities, pull the poem into their own field of force, often in unforeseen directions. ¹⁵

Waldrop sees the activity of writing not as a means of expressing something, but as a cognitive pursuit that evolves or mutates throughout its production, culminating in something unpredictable. The same thing that persuades Waldrop to sit down and move words around on the page is what prompts me to pick up a tube of paint; in both cases, the medium itself poses fascinating transportive potential to carry the artist to an unpredictable destination.

The materials that I use (canvas, oil paint, stretcher) are selected because they contribute to what I feel is necessary to make a painting. By involving only the bare essentials required to produce a painting (surface and pigment), each material

takes on more weight. Just as Imagist poets take great care in selecting each word in order to distill the experience of the poem into its purest form, I select only the necessary ingredients to make a painting. The economy of language practiced by Imagist poets such as William Carlos Williams and Ezra Pound, judiciously presses each word to take on maximum significance. The poem *The Red Wheelbarrow* (b) by Williams, exemplifies this approach. By presenting the reader with only a few images, “a red wheelbarrow” and some “white chickens,”¹⁶ the reader’s senses become heightened to that image; they can almost smell the scene. Due to the lack of noise in the poem, the colors almost become the main event.

When making a painting, I attempt something similar. As a result of the economy of material I employ in my paintings, the canvas for example, has to do more than act as a surface to put an image on; it has to contribute to the image itself. To get the most out of these few materials, I try and use them in a way that emphasizes what they are. If I am using paint, I want it to feel like paint. If I am using canvas, I want it to feel like canvas. In order to achieve this, I need to manipulate these materials in a way that provokes them into revealing as much of their inherent materiality as possible. Allowing the canvas to be trampled on, creased, crumpled, and marred with various substances from the studio floor—such as dirt, dust and oil—for me, makes it feel more like canvas. Similarly, paint can feel more like paint if misused. By permitting it to travel freely from one location to another, simultaneously sullyng multiple surfaces at once, it unabashedly performs its most basic and natural function.

Chapter 4: Automatism

Since asserting the material aspects of my work is primary to my aesthetic, I have adopted automatism as a working method. Automatism is a strategy developed around 1924 by Surrealist poet Andre Breton, as a creative technique inspired by Freudian psychoanalysis. Breton defines Surrealism in his 1924 *Surrealist Manifesto* as “pure psychic automatism by which one intends to express verbally, in writing or by other method, the real functioning of the mind. Dictation by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, and beyond any aesthetic or moral preoccupation.”¹⁷ Automatism offers a strategy for the artist to work in a purely intuitive way, uninhibited by the mind. As a painter, it encourages one to focus intensely on the physical properties of materials—an approach that promotes surprising results.

Though the Surrealists developed the term automatism, the French playwright, poet, and novelist, Victor Hugo, was one of its earliest practitioners, implementing it nearly one hundred years before its formal theorization. Breton even credited Hugo as a kind of honorary member and forerunner of Surrealism. To traverse dry spells in his writing, Hugo would often smear the dregs from his coffee onto the page in order to spur his imagination. Noticing the associative potential in this fluid medium, Hugo began experimenting with another substance available on the writer’s desk—ink. Hugo manipulated the substances in a variety of ways, such as smudging, folding, blotting, as well as using stencils to block out shapes. According to Hugo scholar Florian Rodari, “Hugo always took full advantage of his

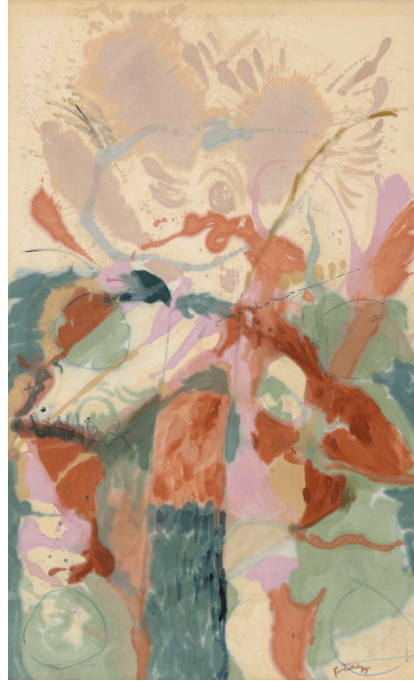
chosen material, studying it from every possible angle, even scrutinizing its defects. Just as in his writings he would hound the French language into the darkest corners, so as a draftsman he would seek to exhaust the expressive possibilities of the ink wash."¹⁸ *Abstract Composition* (n.d.), reveals the unpredictability of the ink wash. Hugo allows the ink to chart its own path across the surface by simply tilting the paper enough to indicate which direction it ought to travel. At times, the ink flouts the artist's expectations and wanders off in unanticipated directions. Hugo not only encourages this but uses automatism to provoke these kinds of surprises to occur more often.



Victor Hugo, *Abstract Composition*, n.d., brown-ink wash on vellum paper, 5 3/8" x 9 5/8".

Influenced by the Surrealists, this liberating way of working became the domain of many New York School painters including Robert Motherwell, Helen Frankenthaler, and Joan Mitchell, who have since influenced subsequent generations of artists (like myself). As it was for Hugo, their medium's expressive

potential became their subject, and Automatism inspired new ways for them to do so.



(top left) Robert Motherwell, *Spontaneity No. 3*, 1966, ink on paper, 30 ½" x 22".

(top right) Helen Frankenthaler, *Jacob's Ladder*, 1957, oil on canvas, 9' 5 3/8" X 69 7/8".

(left) Joan Mitchell, *Untitled*, 1960, oil on canvas, 63 ¾" x 51 1/8".

Joe Bradley, an artist working today who is undeniably inspired by the Abstract Expressionists, uses automatism to draw or doodle free-associated images

in oil paint onto his canvases. In *Vito* (2011), marks that seem as if they were engaged in describing something specific are abandoned to pursue other areas of the canvas, undoubtedly with no particular intention.



Joe Bradley, *Vito*, 2011, oil on canvas, 78.7" x 98.4".

Woman (2005) by Charline Von Heyl, uses the most basic of techniques—some of which Hugo had also experimented with, such as stenciling—to remind us what the medium is capable of with very little coercion. By masking out certain areas with tape, applying paint spontaneously upon the canvas, then removing the tape, Heyl manages to create simple but efficient illusionistic effects.



Charline Von Heyl, *Woman*, 2005, charcoal, acrylic and oil on canvas, 82'' x 78''.



Steve Byrnes, *Excerpt 24*, 2014, oil on canvas, 16'' x 20''.

In my own work *Excerpt 24* (2014), I exercised automatism by impulsively cutting out pieces from one painting and intuitively sewing them onto another. By mechanizing my practice with a sewing machine, I am able to work rapidly on many canvases at once, creating more of a likelihood that I will end up doing something that surprises myself.

Chapter 5: Poetic Devices (Caesura and Enjambment)

In poetry, a caesura, which is typically marked by the symbol ||, is used to insert a pause or interruption, similar to natural speech patterns, somewhere in a line of poetry. Take this line from John Keats' poem *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, for example:

*Thou foster-child of silence || and slow time,*¹⁹

By placing the caesura before *slow time*, it emphasizes both *silence* and *slow time* by literally inserting a silence into the poem.

The caesura is often used to dictate the speed and cadence of a poem, and it also affords the reader time for thought. In my paintings, the seams that occur as a result of sewing two pieces of canvas together are intended to operate the same way. By introducing seams strategically throughout a painting—perhaps near the edge or beneath a swath of paint—my hope is that it will alter the speed at which the viewer digests the painting by providing little interruptions that will generate a space for the viewer to pause. The placement of caesurae in my paintings might also serve to accentuate certain features as in Keats' poem, where slowing-down draws more attention to subtler gestural moments.

Another useful poetic device that I have adopted to help elucidate my practice is enjambment. Enjambment occurs when a poet separates a thought with a line break, building tension and, similar to the caesura, instructs the reader to pause

briefly before finishing the thought. Notice these two lines from the poem *Rainbow*, by Wordsworth:

*My heart leaps up when I behold
A rainbow in the sky:*²⁰

Because the thought is not resolved in the first line, the reader is propelled to the next line in order to complete the thought and release the tension and suspense introduced by the first. Enjambment was used heavily by Milton in *Paradise Lost*, as well as by many of the Romantic poets who succeeded him. Imagist poets such as Williams relied on enjambment to influence the pace and temperament of their poems and their protagonists. Enjambment is employed in Williams' poem *This is Just to Say* (c), to indicate hesitation on behalf of the guilty party.²¹

Like the actions and confession described in Williams' poem, my brushwork, too, can vacillate between boldness and hesitation. Enjambment also helps emphasize the nature of my actions. By cutting out a section of the painting and placing it elsewhere in the composition, like in *Excerpt 8* (2014) for example, it functions as a line break, fracturing the thought and building tension and suspense within the painting. Breaking up a large sweeping brushstroke affects the speed of the painting, as well, as it fractures the energy of the stroke – which, haltingly, slows it down.



Steve Byrnes, *Excerpt 8*, 2014, oil on canvas, 16" x 20".



Christopher Wool, *Untitled*, 2005, silkscreen ink on linen, 96" x 72".

Veteran abstractionist Christopher Wool often displays exquisite examples of both enjambment and caesura in his paintings. In *Untitled* (2005) for example, the screen-printing process allows him to create a gap between the large black blot of silkscreen ink, essentially cutting it in half. Similar to the way I use sewing, Wool employs multiple screens for one painting, which affords him the opportunity to create caesurae and enjambments tactically throughout his paintings.

The proclivity artists have for discovering complicated surfaces to paint on has extensive roots in painting. In fact, one of the earliest known paintings, which dwells in the Cave of El Castillo in Spain, contains beautiful examples of both caesurae and enjambments. In the painting below, the pigment is applied to an exceptionally craggy rock face, with gaps and cracks accounting for most of the image itself. The fragmented surface, for me, is what makes this particular image so alluring. The physical structure of the rocks stratification seems to also influence the configuration of the painting, since the dots seem to follow, or rhyme, visually, with the fissure or caesura, running horizontally along the middle of the image.



Cave painting at El Castillo in northern Spain. At least 40,800 years old.

Chapter 6: Beauty

Because I am interested in the most basic and fundamental characteristics of materials, my work may at first glance elicit a negative response, due to its outwardly crude appearance. However, that is what I find most beautiful in a painting. In other words, when looking at a painting, it is generally its physical presence (its materiality) that kindles a corporeal reaction from me. Until recently, this subjective declaration alone would not suffice as a convincing argument, since much art criticism up until now has tended to overlook personal subjective reactions to artwork in favor of purely intellectual methods of evaluating artwork. However, British neurobiologist Semir Zeki, recently uncovered in a 2012 Ted talk that “For the first time in human history, subjective mental states, which belong in our private world, can actually not only be localized but can be quantified.”²² This means that science can now not only detect if an individual experiences something as beautiful, but also measure the amount of beauty one experiences when confronted with the object of contemplation.

In 2011 Zeki and Tomohiro Ishizu formulated an experiment that calculated subjects’ experiences of beauty through functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), which corresponded to what they said was beautiful. Subjects were shown pictures of paintings and listened to musical excerpts, both of which they rated on a scale of 1-9, with 1 being the most ugly, 5 indifferent, and 9 being the most beautiful. Each category elicited activity in different parts of the brain. The medial orbito-frontal cortex (mOFC), a part of the brain (between the eyes) associated with

pleasure, lit up on the fMRI scan when subjects saw or heard things that they found beautiful. Granted, not all people experience the same things as beautiful; however, beauty is typically mutually agreed upon. If something is beautiful to one person, the odds are it is beautiful to someone else as well. “An experience of beauty entirely specific to one person,” American art critic Peter Schjeldahl explains, “probably indicates that the person is insane.”²³

Having said that, it might be helpful to describe the type of beauty I am trying to achieve with my paintings, so as not to confuse it with more popular or dominant versions of beauty. I am interested in the kind of beauty that is often overlooked due to its inconspicuous nature. It is a kind of beauty that is almost ugly at first.

Schjeldahl illuminates this kind of experience nicely:

*An experience of beauty may be intense, leaving a permanent impression, or quite mild and soon all but forgotten. But it always resembles a conversion experience, the mind's joyful capitulation to a recovered or new belief. The merely attractive (pretty, glamorous) and merely pleasing (lovely, delectable) are not beauty, because they lack the element of belief and the feeling of awe that announces it.*²⁴

The beauty I am interested in is not an easy kind of beauty. In trying to understand this kind of beauty, it is helpful to familiarize oneself with the Japanese philosophy of wabi-sabi. As mentioned earlier, wabi-sabi posits that it is the imperfections of things that makes them beautiful (i.e. cracks, seams, smudges, stains), because these flaws are what allow one to feel. Perhaps not unlike the initial viewing of my work, the term wabi-sabi initially fostered negative connotations as well. Leonard Koren states:

Originally, the Japanese words “wabi” and “sabi” had quite different meanings. “Sabi” originally meant “chill”, “lean”, or “withered.” Wabi” originally meant the misery of living alone in nature, away from society, and suggested a discouraged, dispirited, cheerless emotional state. Around the 14th century, the meanings of both words began to evolve in the direction of more positive aesthetic values. The self-imposed isolation and poverty of the hermit and ascetic came to be considered opportunities for spiritual richness. For the poetically inclined, this kind of life fostered an appreciation of the minor details of everyday life and insights into the beauty of inconspicuous and overlooked aspects of nature. In turn, unprepossessing simplicity took on new meaning as the basis for a new, pure beauty.²⁵

The gritty surface of *Excerpt 33* (2014), for example, is not a particularly desired effect for many artists, but for me, the patina that it accrues from being handled or mishandled a certain way, charges the canvas and brings it to life. If there is anything to be gleaned from this, it is that trusting ones “gut” might actually have merit after all, since physiological responses to artworks may in fact be the most accurate compass in the pursuit of beauty.



Steve Byrnes, *Excerpt 33*, 2014, oil on canvas, 16" x 20".

Chapter 7: Empathy in Aesthetic Experience

The intuitive gestures and tactile nature of my work afford the viewer the opportunity to experience a sense of physical involvement in the work via mirror neurons, as the same neurons required to produce the mark are activated when responding visually to the mark. According to professors David Freedberg and Vittorio Gallese, authors of *Motion, Emotion and Empathy in Esthetic Experience*:

the artist's gestures in producing the art work induce the empathetic engagement of the observer, by activating simulation of the motor program that corresponds to the gesture implied by the trace. The marks on the painting or sculpture are the visible traces of goal-directed movements; hence, they are capable of activating the relevant motor areas in the observer's brain.²⁶



Michelangelo, *Slave (Atlas)*, 1519-36, marble, height 82”.

Essentially, the observer is able to experience what the artist's gesture implies through mirror neurons, because, as Freedberg and Gallese state, "mirror neurons not only underpin action understanding, but they are also involved in understanding the intentions that underlie action."²⁷ Michelangelo's famous unfinished sculpture *Prisoners*, elicits a bodily empathy towards the process of carving the figure out of the block of marble. The viewer is able to imagine themselves completing the task by chiseling away at the block in order to free the rest of the figure from its marble confinement. In the same way that I allow my process to remain accessible to the viewer, Michelangelo invites the viewer to participate in the act of sculpting. In terms of the static residue left-over from goal-oriented actions on the surface of two-dimensional works, Freedberg and Gallese affirm that:

*With abstract paintings such as those by Jackson Pollock, viewers often experience a sense of bodily involvement with the movements that are implied by the physical traces—in brushmarks or paint drippings—of the creative actions of the producer of the work. This also applies to the cut canvases of Lucio Fontana, where sight of the slashed painting invites a sense of empathetic movement that seems to coincide with the gesture felt to have produced the tear.*²⁸

In *Excerpt 33* (2014), the viewer is not only capable of understanding how the painting was assembled by observing which layers of canvas occur over others, but they are also able chart the path of the brushstrokes as they move freely across multiple planes of fabric. Because my work is meant to be felt and not necessarily understood, it is all the more important that the viewer be able to understand and follow the way the paint was applied.

Conclusion

As demonstrated by numerous artists and poets, an effectual way of achieving a sublime experience is to lose oneself in material—whether that material is text, paint, or daffodils, it does not matter, as long as it rouses within the individual a curious fascination. Negotiating these materials through the highly fecund strategy of automatism, I offer up my contribution to the tradition of painting. Drawing from prosody, specifically the caesura and enjambment, to illuminate certain aspects of my work, I aim to provide a structure that bestows meaning or logic to some of my actions, in an effort to enhance the viewer’s interaction with the paintings. By introducing the workings of mirror neurons and their capacity to allow one to literally feel a painting, as well as the quantifiable power of one’s physical reaction to art, I seek to foment a dialog that revolves around the value of feeling as a critical approach to engaging with contemporary art.

For me, since looking at paintings is equally as satisfying as making them, I strive to make my paintings as pleasurable to look at as possible. The most sincere way to achieve this is to make the kind of paintings that I want to see and trust that their enchanting materiality infects the viewer as it does for me. The formidable nature of this enterprise, I feel, is what gives me permission to indulge fervently in the process, so that the effort of my labor is palpable. Embedding plenty of process-based cues throughout the surface of my paintings essentially furnishes them with the potential to be re-experienced again and again, via mirror neurons. As a result, when hung silently on the wall, my paintings operate as batteries for experience—the experience of painting.

(b) William Carlos Williams, *The Red Wheelbarrow*, 1923.

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens.

*Geddes and Williams, 40

(c) William Carlos Williams, *This Is Just To Say*, 1934.

I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox

and which
you were probably
saving
for breakfast

Forgive me
they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold

10

*Geddes and Williams, 36

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Notes

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- ¹ Godfrey, 16
 - ² Koren, 16
 - ³ Rosenblum, 39
 - ⁴ Burke, Part II #12 Infinity in Pleasing Objects
 - ⁵ Shaw, 95
 - ⁶ Rudy, 13
 - ⁷ Rudy, 16
 - ⁸ Wordsworth, 115
 - ⁹ Burke, Part II # 3 Obscurity
 - ¹⁰ Richardson, 40
 - ¹¹ Milton, 65
 - ¹² Richardson, 40
 - ¹³ Moran, 101 Art Now Strange Solutions Katy Moran
 - ¹⁴ Treib, Artists Present at Noon. MoMAMultimedia
 - ¹⁵ (Baker) Waldrop, 74
 - ¹⁶ Geddes, Williams, 40
 - ¹⁷ Fineberg, 20
 - ¹⁸ Rodari, 48
 - ¹⁹ Keats, 13
 - ²⁰ Wordsworth, 107
 - ²¹ Geddes, Williams, 36
 - ²² Zeki, Ted Talk
 - ²³ Beckley, Schjeldahl, 58
 - ²⁴ Beckley, Schjeldahl, 54
 - ²⁵ Koren, 21-22
 - ²⁶ Freedberg and Gallese, 202
 - ²⁷ Freedberg and Gallese, 200
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