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# The Continuous Movement of Water and Time

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The Continuous Movement of Water and Time

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## Abstract

Water has a relationship with every living thing on earth, and represents a force that both gives life and can eliminate it. In my work, I use water, color, and the figure to explore the sublime, death and decay, the passage of time, and overwhelming emotions. I have looked at my work in relation to Marilyn Minter's photography, Mark Rothko's color field paintings, Julie Evans' and Henri Matisse's cut-out works, Sam Gilliam's continuously changing canvas installations, and Ekaterina Smirnova's investigation into the meaning of an individual's place in the universe. By seeing the different ways in which these artists and myself have dealt with these different facets, I hope to gain a better understand of the different ways in which humans process difficult concepts such as these, which I can then use in my future art therapy practice.

Water is a singular entity that connects all living things. Adult human bodies are made of 60% water, and some organisms are made up of 90% water. All living entities are made up of a majority of water, which begs the question: are all living things not literal bodies of water? 71% of the earth is covered in water, it is something that every living organism needs to survive. When gazing out at a large body of water, it is hard not to be struck by the sublime, and to think about how water blankets the earth, simultaneously connecting us all with one another while also keeping us isolated on dry land. When faced with something so overwhelming, a person feel like a tiny, insignificant body in comparison, knowing that our existence on earth is fleeting, but water is this ever present force. Gazing at the ocean can make a person feel simultaneously enormous, like they could leave their body and become one with the water, while also feeling small and unimportant in the scheme of the universe.

In my work, I have combined abstracted, silhouetted bodies with overwhelming fields of colors, both in small and large scale works. The viewer is simultaneously isolated while surrounded, much in the same way that when standing in front of the sea, you are surrounded and overwhelmed by its vastness, but also aware of how isolated you are from others across the water. By using my work to evoke this feeling, I create a singularity of experience for each viewer, while also referencing the sublime and the continuous passage of time.

My exploration of water and figure started with a series of photographs I took. My photographs draw inspiration from Marilyn Minter's work, in the way that her photographs are jarring and continue to address the female body. The female body has always been prominent in the art world, but it is time to allow women to take control of

their own image. (Davies). As a woman, I relate more closely to the female body and mentality, and so I chose to use female figures in my photographs. I put them underwater because I wanted to capture photos that look otherworldly, as if the figure was floating in limbo, and it would be impossible to tell if they were alive or dead. I never captured their full bodies, as I did not want to seem to objectify women. By fragmenting the female body in the images, I was able to choose exactly what was exposed or hidden. As a woman choosing what to display of another woman's body, I want to dispel the inherent commodification and attraction of women's bodies, and instead focus more on the interaction between the body and the environment of water surrounding it. These pictures are still meant to reference beauty, but the beauty of the images is strongly juxtaposed by the possibility that this person has drowned, which would cause the photos to be read in a more grotesque way. Water, while being a beautiful thing, can also be deadly, and a person can only interact with it for so long before becoming engulfed.



Fig. 1.



Fig. 2. (Left)



Fig. 3. (Right)



Fig. 4.

Fig. 1-4. *Bodies of Water*. 2018. Ryan Brandt.



Fig. 5. (Left) *Blade Runner*. 2010. Marilyn Minter.

Fig. 6. (Right) *Vampire*. 2004. Marilyn Minter.

These photographs inspired me to then create a series of large scale, physically overwhelming paintings, that in turn created their own environment. By fully covering a section of wall with canvas, I create a space and a visual experience for the viewers. They are forced to approach the piece and immerse themselves in it, as opposed to experiencing one painting or photograph at a time.

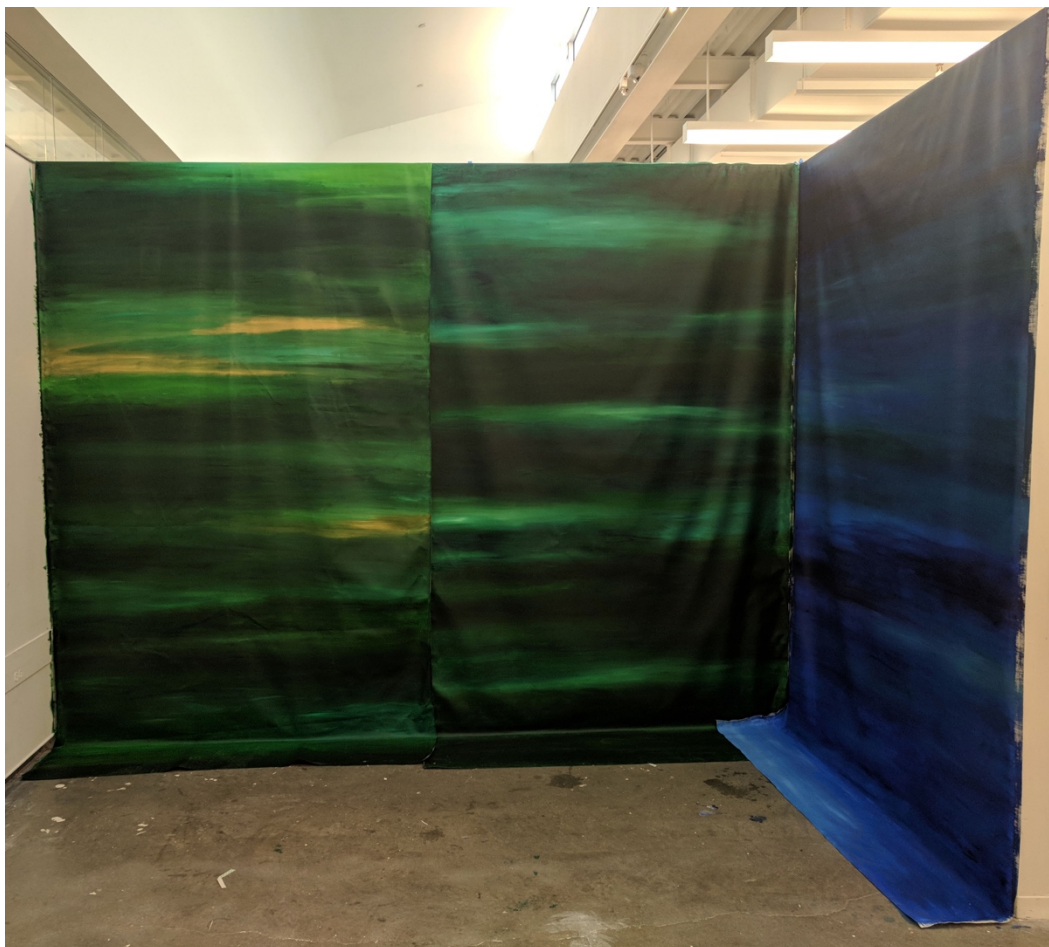


Fig. 7. *Bodies of Water III*. 2018. Ryan Brandt.

In order to maintain a pleasurable viewing experience, I chose to have each panel as multiple shades of the same color, but I have chosen to keep much of the color subdued, and to have these paintings be visually darker. In this way, the paintings are still overwhelming, but their compositions are not jarring to the viewer. In fact, they can be quite peaceful, which is a quality I have found in the Rothko chapel. The paintings in the Rothko chapel invite contemplation and meditation, and seem to transcend the physical space they are housed in. "He [Rothko] said the bright colors sort of stop your vision at the canvas, where dark colors go beyond. And definitely you're looking at the beyond. You're looking at the infinite."(Dowell). This physical space impresses the



sublime on the viewer, that there is something greater than themselves in the universe. This is an aspect of Rothko's chapel that I have continued to explore. Much like within meditation, experiencing this space involved the use of one's entire body. When trying to view the piece, the viewer will find themselves engulfed by canvas instead of walls, transported to a different world.



Fig. 8. *Rothko Chapel*. 1971. Mark Rothko.

A person is the sum of conflicting experiences, pushing and pulling in different directions, which is why humans are often drawn towards danger. Water, while a calming presence, can also cause destruction and decay. Julie Evans deals with decay in her work, and uses cut outs to suggest both the tangible: biological, aquatic, and geological, and the intangible: the atmosphere, the corporeal. By layering her cutouts, “surface layers of the paintings, both opaque and transparent, open up in places to reveal a lower other, or underbelly of activity.” (Evans). This is something I have tried to utilize in my own work as well. Each time I install my cutout pieces, the integrity and stability of them diminishes and decays, representative of the passage of time. Nothing in this world can withstand time, and each day time itself causes tangible stress and decay on both humans and their creations.



Fig. 9. (Left). *Creeper* (Wall installation at Storefront Ten Eyck). 2014. cut, assembled pieces of painted mylar, ink, tape, mounted on wall. Julie Evans

Fig. 10. (Right). *Swishbone #8*. 2011. cut, assembled pieces of painted mylar, ink, tape, mounted on paper. Julie Evans.

Towards the end of his life, Henri Matisse also began working with cutouts. He describes these cutouts as “drawing with scissors”, adjusting his designs until he was satisfied with a composition. Matisse used his cutouts to bring different physical locations he could no longer visit to life again. (Murphy). While I also chose to create a physical space out of cut out bodies, my space is not a representation of a place in the same way Matisse’s are. The ability to rearrange and adjust the cutouts before finalizing the layout is one aspect of working with cutouts where Matisse and I had similar practices. Because the cutouts are easily rearranged, I have been able to curate different compositions for my silhouetted bodies, evoking different feelings from them. I can choose to overlap them in some instances, while in others they are isolated from one another. While the ways in which we arranged our cutouts are similar, the creation of them is very different. I chose to first paint the bodies onto a piece of paper and then cut them out, whereas Matisse chose to paint rectangular pieces of paper a single color, and then cut shapes out of the paper. Matisse also often chose to permanently adhere his cutouts to the wall, whereas I chose to create temporary, moveable installations of my cutouts. (MoMA). I want to embrace the ever changing and evolving composition, because we as humans continue to change and evolve until we cease to exist.



Fig. 11. *The Parakeet and the Mermaid*. 1952. Henri Matisse.



Fig. 12. (Top). *Dancers (Configuration 1)*. 2018. Ryan Brandt.

Fig. 13. (Bottom). *Dancers (Configuration 2)*. 2018. Ryan Brandt.

Sam Gilliam also explores this notion of evolving work, as he says “Each time my work is installed, the composition changes.” (Gilliam et al.). This compilation of silhouetted bodies has no set composition in my mind. It can be constantly changing, in the same way that the world is constantly changing as we continue to explore. This constant evolution reinforces the idea that the present is fleeting, and though we make think what is current is the most important, in fact the present will soon become the past, and many of the things we think are so important will become irrelevant. I used water based media to depict these figures, and to represent the way that water and this installation are constantly changing and flowing.



Fig. 14. *Carousel*. 1970. Sam Gilliam

The point of the space I have curated is to at first overwhelm the viewer and to cause them to feel as though they are within a new world of color and entwining bodies that exists within its own space. However, as the canvas and silhouetted bodies can easily be taken off the walls, the existence of this world is temporary, much like each person's time on earth. *"Each of us is just a little part of the Universe, so versatile and limitless. I would like to understand our place in it, our triviality in the universal and our significance in the planetary scale."* (Smirnova). This is a part of Russian artist Ekaterina Smirnova's artist statement, and something I explore in my work as well.



Fig. 15 (Left). *Sky's Darkest Spot*. Ekaterina Smirnova.



Fig. 16. (Right). *Sky's Darkest Spot II*. Ekaterina Smirnova.

But while she looks upwards at space to explain the universe and humans' rolls in it, I want to look at water. The installation has the ability to change every time I take it down and put it back up, and because of constant changing and handling of the work, they will inevitably become damaged or begin to deteriorate. Overtime, some of the pieces may deteriorate until they simply cease to exist. This idea of impermanence and decay over time is why I chose to combine the large canvas works with photographs of fragmented bodies and paintings of abstracted, collaged bodies. This demonstrates how, though each viewer is present in the space, they are made up of many different parts, and one day all of those parts will cease to exist.

Finally, by creating a wall out of collaged, abstracted bodies feels like the culmination and combination of all my practices. This represents how, though many viewers can approach these pieces at the same time, they, much like each body depicted, are having their own singular experience. I used water based media to depict these figures, which are representative of a singular, still moment within a series of continuous movements. This is representative of the way that water may appear still, when in reality it is in continuous motion. We as humans are made up of many different experiences and ideas that come together to make up who we are. In this way we as humans are a singular experience made up of many facets, which I have represented through the different poses and colors used in my abstract bodies. The monochromatic visualization of each pose helps the piece to relate to the abstract color field space I have created. Though each pose uses only two colors representing separate experiences, the color is still compiled of different shades, which demonstrates both



how a singular event can still be made up of different emotions, and how the passage of time is made up of singular, individual moments.



Fig. 17. *Slow Me Down*. 2018. Ryan Brandt

This investigation into the sublime, death and decay, overwhelming emotions, and water has been liberating and educational for me. It has given me insight into how different artists have dealt with finding their place in the universe, as well as the way they handle the idea of their inevitable death and decay. Seeing the different ways in which people address ideas such as this has helped me to understand how ways that I process things are going to be different from the ways in which others process these overwhelming emotions. This investigation was inspired by my ultimate goal of becoming an art therapist, and the exploration I have done this year into death, overwhelming emotions, and the passage of time are all experiences I will be able to take with me and implement into my art therapy practice. I want to work with violent child offenders, and these are children who often have had to deal with a lot of tragedy in their young lives, and who become overwhelmed from dealing with the emotions that come with this. They are often dealing with overwhelming feelings of aggression, hopelessness, and anger, stemming from any number of past events. However, I do not believe these children should be defined by their actions that have landed them in prison, because a person does not deserve to be defined as a singular experience, when humans are the sum of many conflicting experiences and emotions. I hope that by showing these children how art can help them, they will realize they are so much more than their negative experiences, and will find a different outlet for their emotions.

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## Image List

- Fig. 1. Ryan Brandt. *Bodies of Water*. 28" x 36". Digital Print. 2018.
- Fig 2. Ryan Brandt. *Bodies of Water*. Digital Photograph. 2018.
- Fig 3. Ryan Brandt. *Bodies of Water*. Digital Photograph. 2018.
- Fig 4. Ryan Brandt. *Bodies of Water*. Digital Photograph. 2018.
- Fig. 5. Marilyn Minter. *Blade Runner*. 86" x 57". C-Print. 2010.
- Fig. 6. Marilyn Minter. *Vampire*. 86" x 60". C-Print 2004.
- Fig. 7. Ryan Brandt. *Bodies of Water III*. 192" x 104". Acrylic Paint on Unstretched, Primed Canvas. 2018.
- Fig. 8. Mark Rothko. *Rothko Chapel*. 1971.
- Fig. 9. Julie Evans. *Creeper (Wall installation at Storefront Ten Eyck)*. 136" x 166". cut, assembled pieces of painted mylar, ink, tape, mounted on wall. 2014.
- Fig. 10. Julie Evans. *Swishbone #8*. 30" x 22". cut, assembled pieces of painted mylar, ink, tape, mounted on paper. Julie Evans. 2011.
- Fig. 11. Henri Matisse. *The Parakeet and the Mermaid*. 11' 11/16" x 25' 2 9/16". Gouache on paper, cut and pasted, and charcoal on white paper. 1952.
- Fig. 12. Ryan Brandt. *Dancers (Configuration 1)*. Mixed Media. 2018.
- Fig. 13. Ryan Brandt. *Dancers (Configuration 2)*. Mixed Media. 2018.
- Fig. 14. Sam Gilliam. *Carousel*. 10 x 67 feet. Acrylic on Unstretched Canvas. 1970.
- Fig. 15. Ekaterina Smirnova. *Sky's Darkest Spot*. 52"x40", water media and naturally formed crystals on paper
- Fig. 16. Ekaterina Smirnova. *Sky's Darkest Spot II*. 52"x40", water media and naturally formed crystals on paper

Fig. 17. Ryan Brandt. *Slow Me Down*. individual: 9" x 12", total 64" x 104". Watercolor on Mulberry Paper and Yupo Paper. 2018.

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