

## **An Itinerary for Painting Through Space**

By

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## Introduction

When I moved to Vancouver, Commercial Drive was one of the first areas through which I wandered. Chinatown came second. Beginning to familiarize myself with streets, neighbourhoods and the architecture in this new city was exciting to me. Commercial Drive and Main St. are two parallel streets, and a view of mountains to the North makes it easy to orient oneself. Making one's way down the street, the mountains become more visible and sublime in their scale. At the north end of Commercial Drive, after the ethnic stores and hip cafes, and a small stretch of residential followed by industrial buildings, there is a fence that blocks you from the pier with silos, tankers and shipping containers. I began to photograph these along with other nearby architectural details. In Chinatown, I observed pagodas, dragons on light posts, bakeries where I could get my fix of barbeque pork buns and Hong Kong milk tea. I found Chinese medicine stores with walls of shelved jars with sea horses, corals and various dried plants that were weighed and portioned on scales before being packaged for patients.

As I began my graduate program, my practice involved photographing these neighbourhoods and documenting my initial impressions of the ambiance. In Chinatown, I was attracted to the character of the store awnings and signs, including the colours, the dirt and the quality of light as the sun was setting. On Commercial Drive, it was the eclectic store fronts and views of the mountains mixed with urban details like telephone wires and stop lights. In my studio, I would paint from these photographs. I was also interested in the politics of walking and what it means to belong to a place. It was about the process of being attracted to the unknown, and familiarizing myself with my surroundings through documentation. The painting process was to create an impression of the fleeting glance that I experienced when I was exploring these places.

In her article, "On the Value of Not Knowing: Wonder, Beginning Again and Letting Be", Rachel Jones writes that when attempting to understand something that is "other", like another culture or person of another race or sex, the desire to know can turn into a desire to colonize or assimilate. Leaving that which we do not know open to wonder, we can avoid this negative consequence. In the earlier work described above the problem of cultural appropriation was raised. My effort to capture that which was foreign and exotic to my gaze could be interpreted as an attempt to claim these cultural differences for myself, to assimilate them.

In the summer, I shifted my focus. While I was still making drawings and paintings from my urban explorations, I began painting the inside of my studio at the now closed old campus of Emily Carr University. I photographed the patterns of the light on the floor and cropped them into a tall and thin format so that the painting would give the impression that the viewer is peeking through a crack in the doorway (Fig.4). I then painted from these photographs, choosing a palette that altered the local colours, making them more vibrant, and taping off the geometric shape patterns that the light made on the floor so that they were clean and precise. I also combined thick and thin paint application; the patches of light were cleanly blended whereas the hallway receding in the distance was thicker and more gestural. I chose to combine different methods of paint application in this way to distort the space. I wanted the viewer to

be able to recognize that it is an interior space and to be able to put themselves in my spaces, but not be able to place exactly where they were painted from. I wanted to paint light moving across a floor because light can be an indicator of the passage of time. Even though a painting is a still moment it can be a record, a documentation of the event of time passing.

In September, I began painting the interior spaces of the new Emily Carr University campus from direct observation. My interest in architecture, cropping and colour usage remained central to my practice. What changed was this different way of looking and the time it took to execute my paintings. The process became more improvisational where I was making decisions while painting. When I was working from a photograph, I would grid and map out shapes on the canvas with pencil before the painting process had begun. Unlike my city explorations where I was seeking out the strange with which to familiarize myself, I began taking a closer look at my everyday surroundings, to see if I could through the act of painting, personalize them while at the same time transform them in to something strange for the viewer.

In this thesis paper, I will discuss my method, how defamiliarization functions in my artwork, and my attempts to make the interior spaces of Emily Carr University my own, and I will argue that the act of painting can be considered a political act, discussing how ideas from Jacques Rancière's *Distribution of the Sensible* and Michel de Certeau's idea of *Social Delinquency* as well as the Situationist International's *Dérives* relate to my artistic approaches. Finally, I will conclude by discussing how my identity as an artist relates to the above ideas and informs my practice.

## **Method**

My thesis project involves making paintings of interior architectural spaces from direct observation and the creation of larger paintings modeled on smaller ones. I create 12 x 16 inch paintings on Masonite as well as 48 x 60 inch paintings on canvas. I move around the graduate studio and through hallway spaces and classrooms, stopping in front of interesting features to paint. I seek to create multiple viewpoints of interior spaces, making some that create spatial disorientation, where it isn't made clear to the viewer for example where the ceiling ends and the wall begins and some that are more recognizable but still have been altered in some way, whether it be through colour choice, abstraction, distortion or simplification.

I have moved from making paintings that rely on the way a camera perceives space to the way I perceive and experience space with my eyes. Painting from life mimics the way we perceive space as different from the way a camera perceives space, as the frame of the camera crops images rather than the frame of the edges of the Masonite panel. My compositional choices could be borrowed from my experience as a photographer and my aesthetic sense of what makes an effective and balanced composition; however, the choice to include some details and not others, or to alter shapes and details, is a process that evolves as the painting is being created. In some cases, scanning from floor to ceiling with my eyes blends architectural details together in a continuous stream, and they can exist together on the same plane, whereas a photograph crops and displays a separation

between floor, wall and ceiling. Through my painting, I focus on the immediacy of space to directly experience and contemplate on my surroundings. I aim to discover and excavate details in the banal and the everyday that often go unnoticed. I am interested in creating a world within a world—a corner in a room, a room within the institution, and the institution within the city.

One reason that I choose to paint the interiors of the new Emily Carr University is because of the plethora of different surfaces, lighting conditions and structures that lend to reinterpretation and abstraction. Also, it is a new building and a new institution that hasn't been used for long enough to become set in its ways. I walk to scout out my next painting position. I am drawn to forms such as the curving lines of a ventilation pipe or the triangular geometry of a shadow. The sheen of an air duct reflects something green from someone's studio. I began by trying to capture the local colours, which would end up slightly exaggerated. The cool institutional green of glass skirting the atrium became a wet-on-wet combination of shades of seafoam. This led to the invention of vibrant greens for the grad exhibition space, layered choppy over some purple underpainting. I started painting objects in the places I found them, such as a ladder leaning against a wall, with striated wall shadows from light shining through the rungs. I would drag an acrylic wash across the Masonite surface to create a streaky underpainting and then scuffle a sun yellow oil, forming the outline of a floor shadow and delineating negative space. A white wall lit with day light from a skylight above becomes a gradient of warm to cool peach, over a bright green underpainting, becoming countless experiments in complementaries. I make rules for myself, like only using chromatic greys to test how many different tones can come from mixing only two colours. Ceiling beams become stripes and a single planar surface that flattens the distance from foreground to background, eschewing perspective. Emblems of modernity, tubes of florescent lighting evoke the dividing lines of a highway and branch off from a central horizon line where the ceiling tiles of a classroom meet and seem to puncture the floor. I revisit spaces from different vantage points. As I move through these spaces, I create and revise my itineraries, my planned routes for how I will execute my paintings.

My process begins with walking around and deciding on the best place to set up my chair and paints. I think about composition, how shapes and lines overlap, and consider possible colours. When I set up, I start with thin lines to delineate what I want my composition to be. I paint with oil, but sometimes I apply an acrylic underpainting first. My colour choices change from painting to painting. I take approximately two to three hours to finish one. I consider formal and process choices such as brush stroke direction, wet-in-wet applications vs solid color and which details to include and exclude. I find it is often an exercise of simplification and distillation. For example, if I perceive that a reflection in a window into a classroom divides a chair that is sitting in the classroom into two separate tones, I decide that I want this detail to be the focal point (Fig. 6).

Choosing how to crop is central to my practice. It is a process of translating architectural details to the painting surface and one of distortion and invention. Previously, when painting from neighborhoods in Vancouver, like Commercial Drive (Fig. 3) and Chinatown (Fig. 1), I worked with photographic source images. I was attracted to similar subject matter. An example would

be my interest in the quality of light at specific times of the day, like golden hour and evening, leading to contrasts between shadows and light, and specific colours. On these excursions, I wanted my photographs to be documents of an aesthetic experience of these places. Through cropping, I wanted to create an impression of the fleeting glance, where the act of walking briskly down a street, allows for only fragments of visual information to be taken in. I was drawn to subjects such as a flash of blue shadow cast from a parked van on a curtain (Fig. 3) and fragments of colourful signage - a few letters or characters, not enough to be read and understood (Fig. 2).

In Western art history, a link has been observed between the emergence of painting banal and everyday subject matter and certain approaches to cropping in painting. According to scholar and curator Peter Galassi, this had to do with changes in perspective and the placing of the viewing subject. This is evident in his essay for the 1981 MOMA exhibition *Before Photography*, an exhibition of paintings and drawings from the 1780's until the 1830's that were executed during the early days of photographic technology and which foresaw certain uses and aesthetics of photography. Galassi compares renaissance artist Paolo Uccello to Edgar Degas in their methods of creating a composition. He uses the example of a "pyramid of vision", a compositional device brought into existence by Leon Battista Alberti in his writing *On Painting*, published in 1435. In this device, a pyramid creates a window for a viewer through which the subject of the painting is seen. At the top point of the pyramid is the focal point that the viewer's eye is drawn towards, and the base is the edge of the painting. For example, in Uccello's *A Hunt* (Fig. 15), painted in 1460, the pyramid is a static form or container wherein everything else in the painting, figures and trees, are organized; the entire work is composed within this frame. In Degas' *The Racing Field: Amateur Jockeys near a Carriage* (Fig. 16) painted in 1877-80, the pyramid is placed on top of a scene and shifted until he has found the appropriate vantage point, including some figures and excluding others. This shift meant that more emphasis was placed on the unique, singular, fragmented point of view of the artist, rather than a universal static system of perception.

Although the exact time of the shift cannot be placed, Galassi estimates that it occurred around 1800 with a growth in popularity of the landscape sketch. As with my small paintings, these landscape sketches were often made quickly, and painted in series in an attempt to record the passage of time, as in changes in light conditions and weather. At this point in history, such quickly executed works weren't taken as seriously as larger landscape or historical paintings. Galassi writes:

It is as if the very ordinariness of the subject were a challenge to the painter's aesthetic imagination—a challenge to make something out of nothing...by showing, in their variations, that even the most humble scene offered a variety of pictorial aspect, the painters claimed an active, potentially poetic, role in their works (27).

In these paintings, this process of making something out of nothing increased the presence of the hand of the artist. It was a method of making the banal more interesting. Style had a role to play, when it wasn't so much about subject matter. I also seek to make something out of the seemingly banal. The gestural application of paint and the distortion of forms are ways in which my hand



becomes present in these pieces. I also find it challenge to take my surroundings and imaginatively restructure them, provoking an experience of space that could not be had by simply walking around the building.

Galassi writes further about this attraction to banal subject matter and how this is related to cropping as a compositional strategy:

What made a pictorial “something” out of “nothing” was – literally and metaphorically – the painter’s point of view...It is precisely the mediating conditions of perception – the cropping frame, the accidents of light, the relative point of view – that make the pictures seem real. Separated from the ideal drama of older art by the triviality of their subjects, the pictures are also divergent in form. It is as if the expository order of traditional compositions were an obstacle to the spirit of immediacy the artists sought. The works appear to be formed by the eye instead of the mind (27).

Through painting from life I am seeking an immediacy with my surroundings that I would not have had, had I begun with a planned composition or a photographic image. I am commenting on my surroundings and diverting from the built environment I find myself in and through this, am creating a divergence in form and communicating my own personal perceptions and point of view as well as my experience of the space. I began making my small paintings to record the passage of time, be that of light in a space or the displacement of objects. However, cropping with the eye is only my starting point; I then diverge from what it is I see and my painting becomes one of imagination. For this reason, my work could be said to be composed with both eye and mind.

In Degas’ time, the cropping process gave the viewer a sense of the immediacy of the moment and of a scene one could enter from a specific point of view. Cropping in contemporary painting sometimes serves a different purpose. In the paintings of Luc Tuymans, for example, the exclusion of information creates an image that isn’t immediately discernable to the viewer as in his painting *Mirror* (fig. 17) where only the title informs the viewer of what has been painted.

In removing the photographic process from my painting practice, I have moved the cropping mechanism from the fleeting glance to the prolonged viewing. When I was painting from photographs, the prolonged viewing took place in the analysis of and translation from the photograph. The choices I made for composition, and in some cases colour, were already mapped out for me by the previous decisions I made with the camera. Through the execution of the paintings for my thesis project, I am breaking away from this method. I am now interested in the immediacy of painting from life and the roughness or spontaneity that results from a quickening of pace. I am conquering the fear of not knowing, and resisting the need to pre-determine the outcomes of my projects.

Although my itinerary for working is set—I am moving around the studio and the hallways of the 4<sup>th</sup> floor at Emily Carr University—I want each painting to be different from the last. Rachel Jones stresses that ingenuity in art is achieved through unlearning past behaviors.

Rachel Jones writes:

To work without knowing where one is going or might end up is a necessary condition of creation: of the generation of difference rather than the reproduction of the same. One of the counter-processes that tends to block or shut down such “artistic working” is the quest for knowledge itself, understood as a desire to reduce the strange to the familiar (16).

As I am trying to make each piece unique, I am building on what I have learned from the execution of the previous pieces. I seek to expand my knowledge of painting techniques and my knowledge of rendering interior spaces. Although I don’t know how each piece will turn out, I become acquainted with these spaces through painting them. As the spaces become more familiar to me, I work towards making them my own while I make them seem strange to the viewer, inviting them to see these spaces anew.

### **Defamiliarization and Making the Space My Own**

*Ostranenie*, the Russian word for “defamiliarisation” or “making the familiar strange” was coined by Viktor Shklovsky in his essay “Art as Device” in 1917. In this essay, he wrote:

And so this thing we call art exists in order to restore the sensation of life, in order to make us feel things, in order to make a stone stony. The goal of art is to create the sensation of seeing, and not merely recognizing, things; the device of art is the “estrangement” of things and the complication of the form, which increases the duration and complexity of perception, as the process of perception is, in art, an end in itself and must be prolonged (162).

Through painting, I want to bring attention to details in the interior spaces of Emily Carr University that are often overlooked. I choose Emily Carr University to paint because of both access and because it is the most intimate of my surroundings. This is a space I have gotten to know in depth, and a space that I can rightfully claim as mine, unlike the city that is not and never can be mine completely.

Through the installation of my pieces, I want to take the viewer on a meandering path through the spaces of Emily Carr that is an alternative to how they might experience the spaces themselves. At the same time as I am showing the viewer how I have chosen to travel through and alter these spaces I am asking them to, through the viewing of my installation, move through these spaces themselves. Through installing pieces that I made from opposite ends of the 4<sup>th</sup> floor side by side, I am setting the viewer up to have a disjunctive journey through the space (fig. 18, 19, 20). Through alteration and distortion of the spaces I see, and the translation from observation to support, I want to complicate the forms, so that I can prolong the experience of the viewer who then has to decipher what it is they are seeing.

I have combined more recognizable spaces with ones that are more difficult for the viewer to locate because while I want the viewer to enter and experience these spaces through the lens that I have created, I want to challenge the viewer to figure out where they could have been painted from—to recognize certain architectural details.

Luc Tuymans is a painter who succeeds in making the familiar strange. He represents the banal and the everyday along with historically charged subject matter derived from secondary sources, such as historical imagery from photographs and films. I was initially attracted to his minimalistic renderings of interior spaces, his monochromatic colour palate and his decision to leave the information out of his paintings that would make them decipherable. For example as I mentioned earlier, in his painting *Mirror* (Fig. 17), most of the mirror is cropped out of the frame and it is only the title that informs the viewer of the subject. His process generally consists of two stages. First, he considers the image and the idea, a process that can take as long as months or years, often altering the image digitally or building a maquette to consider how the subject appears in space. The second stage is the painting stage that is usually completed in one day.

As in my paintings made from photographs, much of his decision-making process takes place before the painting has begun, in the photo selection process or the maquettes. My preliminary decision-making happens in the physical act of walking and observing. When I paint from observation, I am still making choices throughout the painting process.

In “Painting and Atrocity: The Tuymans Strategy”, Peter Geimer writes that Tuymans' paintings succeed in unsettling the viewer because they are recognizable and yet indecipherable: “Luc Tuymans paints figuratively and yet his pictures deny a palpable legibility”; his pictures “change between perceptibility and retreat to the undefinable” (23). Unlike modernism’s “making the familiar strange”, which according to Geimer was an attempt to combat the supposed “end of painting”, Tuymans' strategy was to prove painting’s competence in light of themes of contemporary history, through commenting on atrocities such as the holocaust and how painting can represent the unrepresentable.

Using a style that has been dubbed a “‘deskilled’ aesthetic” (Kantor 170), Tuymans paints wet into wet, which contributes to the painting’s sense of “speed and immanence”. He also depicts deep space through the use of perspectival rendering, while at the same time refuses that space through the “overt display of its painterly construction” (174).

My paintings oscillate between the recognizable and the indecipherable so that my viewers can either place themselves in my pieces or feel displaced. Part of the disorientation or engagement that I wish to achieve, is achieved through the creation of spaces that look like interiors while at the same time are estranged to become experimentations in form and colour. These experimentations are what create these alternate spaces of the imagination. As in Tuymans’ paintings, my technique combines a speedily applied wet-in-wet, the rendering of architectural structures and details in ways that suggest depth and gestural brush strokes.

Another artist who uses defamiliarization, is Renée Van Halm. Her works disorientate the viewer through her use of collage. She makes collages from images she has collected from décor and fashion magazines as well as from architectural and design sources. She then paints from these collages. The cropping takes place in the collaging process. These collages “employ absence as a determining structure”, (Sawatsky 22) in which she has removed a figure or a product from an advertisement so that something is felt to be missing from the composition. Van Halm often emphasizes this sense of something missing through leaving a clue or a trace such as a piece of hair or a fragment of an arm (Fig. 21). In one series of paintings, her method is an attempt to upset the accepted hierarchy of foreground to background as well as subject/object relationships through a tension between figuration and abstraction (Van Halm). Through her painting, she is able to use the avant-garde invention of collage to create fragmented environments that disorient the viewer, prolonging their perception, and bringing their attention to details in the everyday that are often overlooked.

To compliment the small paintings, I also make larger-scale paintings based on the small works. The challenges in this change of scale are in the physical and conceptual acts of translation that arise from this process. Through my process I am taking what I learned by responding to the spaces the first time, when I created the small paintings, and amplifying these forms. Certain techniques can be implemented on a larger canvas that cannot on the smaller masonite panels. For example, for one of my larger paintings, I added mineral spirits to oil paint in order to apply a drip underpainting, then used tape to create clean, crisp lines before covering the tape with thick oil paint (fig. 22). In the smaller painting that I used as a model, these lines were gestural oil line washes (fig.23). So I took an idea, that the lines be transparent, and translated a technique that is applied on a small scale to a technique that can only be applied on a large one.

Through my process, I am embracing the modernist geometries of the architecture around me and finding a way to personalize my observations of the utilitarian structures. My subject matter is an emblematic piece of contemporary Canadian art-school architecture, and through altering the details that I observe and augmenting the colours, I am creating alternate spaces of the imagination. I am subverting the cool detachment of the building, transforming its purpose from one of function to one of form, inspiring personal expression.

## **A Politics of Aesthetics**

In the first year of the MFA program I was interested in maps and the personal routes taken when exploring a city. What does it mean to belong to a city? When does one begin to identify with it?

I am interested in art as a way to work within a structure, while at the same time deviating from it, just as a map that delineates a route can be circumvented with some creativity. I am compelled to deal with architectural structures, language as a structure -- both of painting and words -- political structures, and paintings themselves as structures. Structures are more

engaging when challenged and painting can be seen as a form of deviant documentation. Rather than the photograph, painting can distort and disorient as a method of bringing attention to everyday structures, and subverting them. The surface of a painting is a signifier for the ideas that underlie it. In my paintings, I am creating new forms from what I observe, establishing my independence from the architecture at the same time as I am engaged with it. Through the deliberate choice to create autonomy in the shapes and the formal elements I produce—lines that are uneven or parts that are left unfinished to let the underpainting peek through—I am expressing my autonomy as an individual. I am diverting from the functional way to move through the spaces of the University when I move through them with the intention of altering the existing spaces and creating new ones. I am reimagining the institutional structures as an artist and student.

In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau writes about experiences of space as expressed in personal narratives or stories. He refers to “tours” or personal accounts of routes taken, as opposed to the authoritative making of maps, which is a scientific “colonization of space”. In his opinion, when we moved from the itinerary to the map we moved from ordinary culture to scientific discourse. He considers the creation of personal stories within the structures of colonized space as *social delinquency*. He defines it as such:

[S]ocial delinquency consists in taking the story literally, in making it the principle of physical existence where a society no longer offers to subjects or groups symbolic outlets and expectations of subjects [how we are supposed or expected to use the space], where there is no longer any alternative to disciplinary falling-into-line or illegal drifting away, that is, one form or another of prison and wandering outside the pale (130).

The personal narratives of my travels through the spaces of Emily Carr University could be said to deviate from the map of the institution. Perhaps not an actual map, but the structures inherent in the making of art, such as the historical expectations of painting or a primarily male cannon in the history of Western art. The act of painting in hallways that were meant for walking isn't exactly a deviation, structures are often malleable in the context of the art institution. Students have the freedom to use the space as they wish, what is being altered is the conventional ways of using the space. Jacques Rancière believes that painting can become a political act in that a voice and everything that is attached to that voice, such as gender, circumstance, point of view, and disability, can become visible. Although what can be seen visually in paintings, the visible surface—composition, color, form—these elements are signifiers for the ideas that underlie them. Through the contextualization of ideas addressed in a painting, the artist's voice has the potential to be communicated. Through the making of art, in any space, there is a power that can be obtained for marginalized voices that would otherwise be silent. In the *Politics of Aesthetics* Rancière discusses modernist discourse around painting and the revolution of pictorial abstraction as examples of a democratic art. Rancière posits that by rejecting perspectivist illusion, painting regained mastery over its surface. Rancière writes however that a 'surface' “is not simply a geometric composition of lines. It is a certain distribution of the sensible” (10).

Rancière explains his concept of *Distribution of the Sensible* as a relationship between politics and aesthetics. He defines aesthetics in the Kantian sense as a system of a priori forms determining what presents itself to sense experience. This means that the theoretical knowledge one obtains influences how and what is perceived. Rancière defines 'aesthetic practices' as "forms of visibility that disclose artistic practices, the place they occupy, what they 'do' or 'make' from the standpoint of what is common to the community" (8). The "Distribution of the Sensible" determines those who have a part in the community as citizens and "reveals who can have a share in what is common to the community based on what they do and on the time and space in which the activity is performed" (8). Politics "revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the property of spaces and the possibility of time". Thus, becoming visible as an artist is achieved through the participation in a common language shared by a community who spend their time similarly, in spaces in which a common activity is performed, and spaces where certain paradigms of knowledge influence how and what we perceive.

I also consider the politics of color expressed through my painting. In David Bachelor's book *Chromophobia*, he writes about attitudes towards color throughout the history of Western philosophy. He writes that figures like Rousseau, Kant and Le Corbusier often reduced color to surface effect, arguing that it lacked substance and associating it with "others" or those who lacked power, for example, the bodily, feminine, queer, pathological and with Near East and Eastern cultures. Le Corbusier, for example, held the view that color was "suited to simple races, peasants and savages" (Bachelor, 41). Color is a surface and structure in painting that can bring the viewer's attention to underlying political ideas.

In an essay that she wrote for Rene Van Halm's exhibition *Dream Homes* in 2003, Lisa Robertson describes walking the city and enjoying the surface effects of colors and signage:

When we walk in the inscription splattered street we are interested to question the relation of surface to belief. This question defines our stance as citizens. Thinking about color we open up a space in the surface, the potent space between substance and politics. A tiny freedom drifts there and we adore it. But our gluttony for the ethereal has not to do with fame or glamour or scale. Through gluttony we come to resemble history. Through gluttony we are indexical (144-145).

Lisa Robertson, writing about the pleasures of walking and looking at colors, is inspired through this aesthetic experience to think about the political, and the active body in its relationship to its surroundings, such as the nuances of neighborhoods and their inhabitants. Through this pleasure or what she has termed "gluttony" we become part of the history of a place, its architecture and its past and present politics. I have been interested in the relationship of aesthetics to history and philosophy in the same way as I am interested in painting as a structure that contains both surface and depth. Looking at painting is a visceral experience, and color contributes to this. Looking at painting is experiencing it through embodied looking. Paintings contain within them the history of the language of painting, and looking at paintings

can mean engaging with history, philosophy, economics and other realms of knowledge. By altering the colours, I wish to provoke an embodied viewing, where although it might be difficult for the viewer to place themselves in my spaces, at the same time I am transporting them to and asking them to experience an alternate space. Even in the paintings where I have paid attention to the local colors of a space, I have exaggerated them so that they have greater vibrancy and still succeed to dislocate and disorient the viewer.

The Situationists were interested in maps and the structures of the city, and valued walking and exploration for their political potential. In their view, the political was present in the creation of art as well as the liberation of everyday life. Their concept of *psychogeography*, or the study of the effects that cities can have on the emotions and behavior of individuals, inspired the concept of the *dérive*, or “the drift”, an exercise that involved moving through the city in groups, sometimes taking routes frequently travelled and other times deviating from conventional passages. For example Debord explains their activities as “slipping by night into houses undergoing demolition, hitchhiking nonstop and without destination through Paris during a transportation strike in the name of adding to the confusion, wandering in subterranean catacombs forbidden to the public, etc.”. The goals of a *dérive* would be “to study a terrain or to emotionally disorientate oneself” (Debord).

One behavior inherent in the exploration of cities and places is the slowing of pace, with the intention of taking in details that would otherwise be passed over. My navigations through the hallways, classrooms and studios could be seen as a *dérive* across the fourth floor of Emily Carr University. A rule I have made for myself is to slow down my pace and adjust my eye level to observe details that are above and below the conventional gaze level. I am making a study of the different spaces and through the distortion of the architectural details, my paintings disorient my viewer, just as the act of getting lost disorients walkers.

One of their other concepts *détournement* was also central to their practice. *Détournement* involved altering already existing images, whether advertisements or paintings, to modernize them and to comment on the commodification of art and culture. Asger Jorn, one of the members of the group utilized *détournement* when he took existing paintings he came across in junk stores and flea markets, and painted over them with expressive, gestural strokes. Jorn revived an artworks political potential by detouring it; by playfully taking an old idea or trope and modernizing it by combining it with something contemporary. In his 1959 essay “Détourned Painting” he writes:

Be modern,  
collectors, museums.  
If you have old paintings,  
do not despair.  
Retain your memories  
but détourn them  
so that they correspond with your era.  
Why reject the old

if one can modernize it  
with a few strokes of the brush?  
This casts a bit of contemporaneity  
on your old culture.  
Be up to date,  
and distinguished  
at the same time.  
Painting is over.  
You might as well finish it off.  
Détourn.  
Long live painting.

The memories that I am detourning with my painting practice is the avant-garde strategy of defamiliarization. Defamiliarization is a modernist trope and my attempt to use this device as a way to comment on current social and historical structures has been called nostalgic. I argue that in our contemporary political climate, progress is often achieved in different, more subtle ways that in the period of high modernism within which this concept originated. It is through a subtle gesturing and a borrowing of the language and techniques of modernism that I am able to allude to a “progressive” past, sparking a conversation about what that movement achieved and contemporary political objectives to achieve change in an incremental way.

In his article, “Modernism Post-post modernism: Art in the Era of Light Modernity”, Luke Smythe argues that we are still in a variation of the modernist period, a period that he has labeled “light modernism”. He contrasts this present modernism with the period of the avant-garde, which he terms “heavy” or “evangelical” modernism. The “heavy” modernist period was defined by heavy industry and a Fordist economical model along with more rigid social constraints, universalizing mindset and more prevalence of collective social movements. “Light” modernism on the other hand is defined by post-Fordism, greater fluidity, uncertainty of one’s place in society and social isolation, where political action has become more fragmented, with the appearance of more diverse social causes, with greater individual power to communicate opinion through outlets like social media, where ideas are circulated enabling conversations that are capable of provoking change, but on a more moderate level.

Smythe writes:

Thanks to the loss of a supportive climate of impending social transformation, as had been present during the early twentieth-century heyday of heavy evangelical modernism, to a growing recognition of the failings of prior modernists, and to the increasing complexity and obscurity of the mechanisms governing contemporary life, socially minded artists have in recent decades been obliged to downgrade their ambitions. Whereas evangelical heavy modernists were wont to set their sights high and pursue goals of far-reaching social and cultural transformation, their post-evangelical successors have been forced by dint of circumstance to content themselves with more modest objectives (375).



A current challenge for artists is the fight for the validity of their art practice; to prove its competence to those that disvalue its political potential. Smythe also writes that artists of light modernity attempt to regain the heaviness of their art practices through attempting to form communities to counter the current culture of disorientating and disempowered individualism, and sometimes in returning to traditional forms of art making like painting in an attempt to push back against the weightlessness of a post-medium condition (378). Part of this cultural disposition is the freedom of artists to pursue any political objective with little opposition from institutional structures, diluting the political potency of their statements. Smythe continues:

Whereas heavy modernists of a bohemian persuasion were obliged to lodge their claims for cultural and social freedom in the face of widespread opposition, as brought to bear by attitudes and institutions that were hostile to their activities, the growing permissiveness of light modernity has seen the social field become increasingly hospitable to bohemian objectives in recent decades (374).

Through a return to painting and a borrowing and elaboration on the language of modernism, I am subtly and playfully crafting a political gesture that motions towards a break with the institutional structures inherent in the art school of Emily Carr University, at the same time as I am engaged with and working within these parameters, using the aesthetics of the places I find myself in to create alternate spaces of colour, form, and imagination.

## **Identity**

I have been asking myself how much of painting is about communicating identity and circumstance to a viewer. In her essay entitled “The Value of Painting: Notes on Unspecificity, Indexicality, and Highly Valuable Quasi-Persons” Isabelle Graw writes about the anthropological ideas of Alfred Gell who suggests that paintings are social indexes and indexes of agency in which you can see traces of the producing person. Gell also believes that a strong bond is created between the painting and the beholder as between two people.

When I think about my identity as an artist, or what makes me visible through the creation of my art, I consider how I could be considered “other”. I note my gender and my stutter. In her article “Painting and its Others: In the Realm of the Feminine” Shirley Kaneda writes:

Poststructuralism has brought out the multiplicity of criteria for any given text. When one eliminates the notion of a decisive reading, the notion of closure and dominance comes to an end. By their very exclusion, those who are disenfranchised or repressed (women, gays, racial minorities) are in the best possible position to define ‘otherness’ for our culture. This means submitting to a discourse of ‘difference’ in which how something is put forward is more important than the gender and race that puts it forward; how it is stated (the means) will determine the conditions by which it will be received and judged (72).

By focusing on how something is put forward rather than the gender or race that puts it forward is empowering and I see it as a way to cease talking about master narratives in painting. Kaneda later states that we no longer want to talk about “painting”, but rather “paintings” (72) which would eliminate the need to talk about dominant knowledge structures, or a history of painting that is exclusive. It also suggests that each painting made is capable, through its style or method, of deviating from past or repressive institutional structures.

While looking into the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze, I came across an article by Christa Albrecht-Crane discussing his essay “Style, Stutter”. She is discussing stuttering in a metaphorical sense, a stuttering of method in which oppressive conventions of language are disrupted and new languages are created. These new languages, because they are not so easily understood, provoke thought in readers and viewers. As a child, when I would get stuck on a word, I would often try to hide my stutter by switching to a different word. Occasionally the word I chose was not really appropriate for the context of what I was trying to say, and the other person would either get confused or just think it was weird. It was a verbal collaging of sorts.

Crane gives the literary example of the character Bartleby in Herman Melville’s “Bartleby The Scrivener” who defies his oppressive circumstances by declaring, “I prefer not to”. She writes:

He evades meaning by opening himself up to not being understood, yet at the same time refusing the system and defining himself no longer by the identity-language around him. In that sense, he stutters, stammers, breaks off understanding, abandons a definitive space and enters a virtual realm of intensity, becoming anything-what-ever: non-categorizable in the language of his peers and his culture (128).

Through a metaphorical stuttering then, I could achieve what de Certeau calls *social delinquency*. I could separate myself from the identifying language of the institution and dominant knowledge structures and enter into this “virtual realm of intensity”. But this stuttering is also a way to speak that communicates ideas and participates in a dialogue with others. Donna Haraway invents words to deviate from western master narratives and patriarchal structures. Virginia Woolf writes in a stream of consciousness style to deviate from older more conventional writing structures. These are stutterings of style that have spoken to me throughout my life as an artist. Unlike my speech that stutters involuntarily, through a painterly stuttering, I seek to be understood.

### **Reflection on Thesis Defense**

It was posed to me by my supervisor and the external examiner as to why I have chosen to paint the interiors of Emily Carr University. I answered that part of the reason was access to these spaces, and part of the reason was because I am commenting on surroundings that I have gotten to know intimately; these are spaces where I rightfully belong. In my earlier work, I was

painting the city and neighbourhoods that were not mine, or not mine for very long as I am new to Vancouver.

The other reason I chose to paint the interiors of Emily Carr University was because I am commenting on my place within the institution and my power to exercise my subjectivity within its structures through the alteration and distortion of the spaces and architecture and the creation of alternate spaces of the imagination.

One professor in the audience wanted me to elaborate on how my art was achieving a political aim. I answered using Jacques Rancière's example of *Distribution of the Sensible* where voices become visible through the creation of art by participating with others in a dialogue that is shared. My voice is being communicated through my choice to paint within the art institution, an activity which is in dialogue with other artists who share the same setting. Also, by altering the architecture and colours of Emily Carr University, I am creating alternate spaces and pushing back against institutional parameters. Through my paintings, I am addressing the political in a metaphorical way. Ideas themselves are political and their dissemination through metaphor is just as powerful as a physical attempt at political demonstration, for example.

## **Conclusion**

Through the process of painting I am finding my delinquent, stuttering voice and my place in the world as an artist. I struggle with how to make myself heard and relevant. I am talking about personal journeys within institutions, as well as within institutions within the city. How does one talk about architecture when not an architect or history when not a historian? Rancière posits that the making of art and aesthetics are political acts that can make voices visible. De Certeau believes that it is possible to be rebellious within a system. Through my painting I demonstrate that it is possible to claim subjectivity within an institutional setting. It is possible to push back against its structures. Through defamiliarization, I am participating in a metaphorical stuttering of method. I am breaking away from oppressive structures and imaginatively restructuring the existing architecture; distorting and complicating the forms I see, to both prolong the perception of the viewer and to bring their attention to details that are often overlooked. I am thinking about paintings as surface as well as the underlying ideas and references. In the future, I will continue to paint the architecture of the spaces I find myself in. New contexts will add new layers of meaning and commentary to my practice. My explorations are twofold: how to get my imaginings and spatial experiences to manifest in the painted form, and how to assert my agency as an artist.

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fig. 1 *Vancouver Chinatown*, oil on masonite, 12 x 9 inches each, 2016



fig. 2 *Vancouver Street Signage*, digital photographs, 8 x 12 inches each, 2016



fig. 3 *Commercial Drive Billiards*, oil on canvas, 40 x 60 inches, 2017





fig. 4 *Emily Carr Studio*, oil on canvas, 18 x 36 inches, 2017

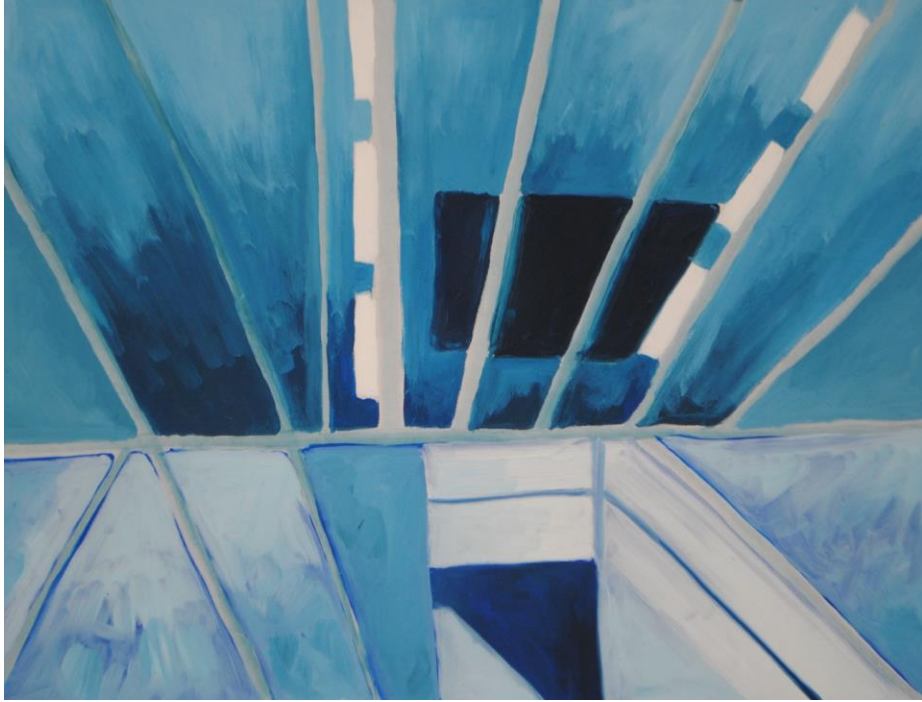


fig. 5 *Untitled*, oil on masonite, 12 x 16 inches, 2017



fig. 6 *Untitled*, oil on masonite, 12 x 16 inches, 2017



fig. 7 *Untitled*, oil on masonite, 12 x 16 inches, 2017



fig. 8 *Untitled*, oil on masonite, 12 x 16 inches, 2017



fig. 9 *Untitled*, oil on masonite, 12 x 16 inches, 2017

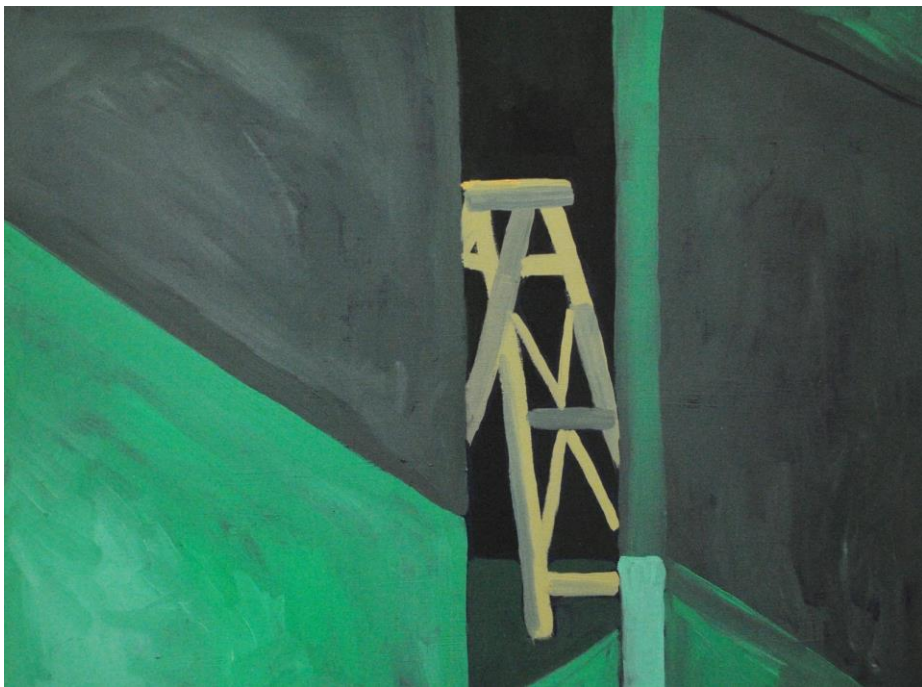


fig. 10 *Untitled*, oil on masonite, 12 x 16 inches, 2017



fig. 11 *Untitled*, oil on masonite, 12 x 16 inches, 2018



fig. 12 *Untitled*, oil on masonite, 12 x 16 inches, 2018



fig. 13 *Untitled*, oil on masonite, 12 x 16 inches, 2017



fig. 14 *Air Duct*, oil on canvas 48 x 64 inches, 2017

fig. 15 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. *A Hunt*, Paolo Ucello, c. 1460. Panel.  
<https://www.ashmolean.org/hunt-forest>

fig. 16 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. Edgar Degas, *The Racing Field: Amateur Jockeys near a Carriage*, oil on canvas, 1877-1880. <http://bridgemanimages.com/en-US/asset/33818/degas-edgar-1834-1917/the-race-course-amateur-jockeys-near-a-carriage-c-1876-87-oil-on-canvas>

fig. 17 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. *Mirror*, oil on canvas, 210 x 47 cm, 1999, by Luc Tuymans, *Luc Tuymans*, Phaidon Press Ltd, 2003, pp. 175.



fig. 18 *An Itinerary for a 4<sup>th</sup> Floor Emily Carr Dérive*, Thesis Exhibition Installation, 2018

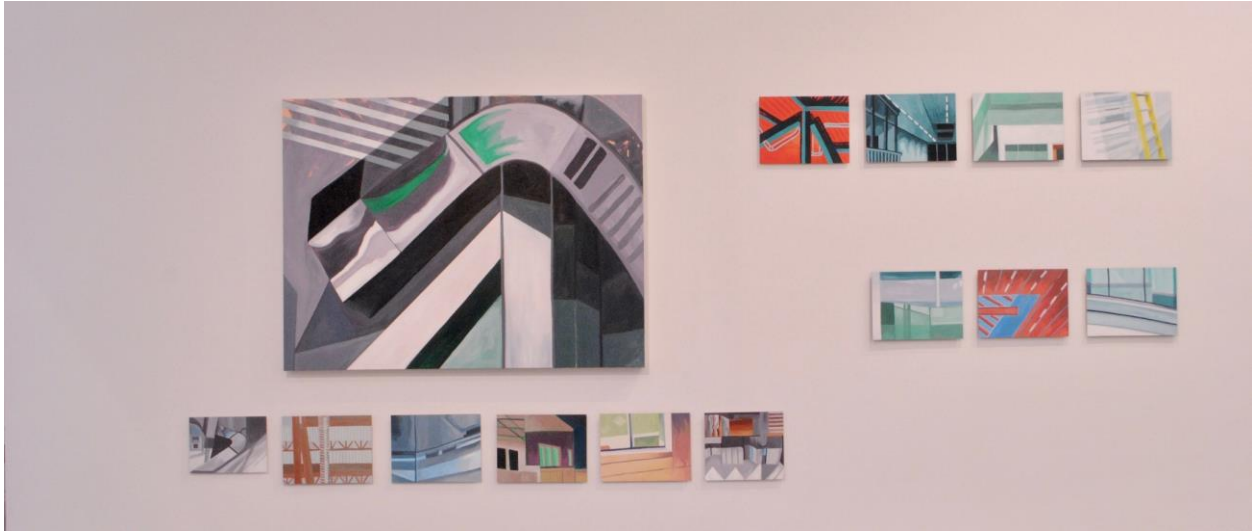


fig 19. *An Itinerary for a 4<sup>th</sup> Floor Emily Carr Dérive*, Thesis Exhibition Installation, 2018

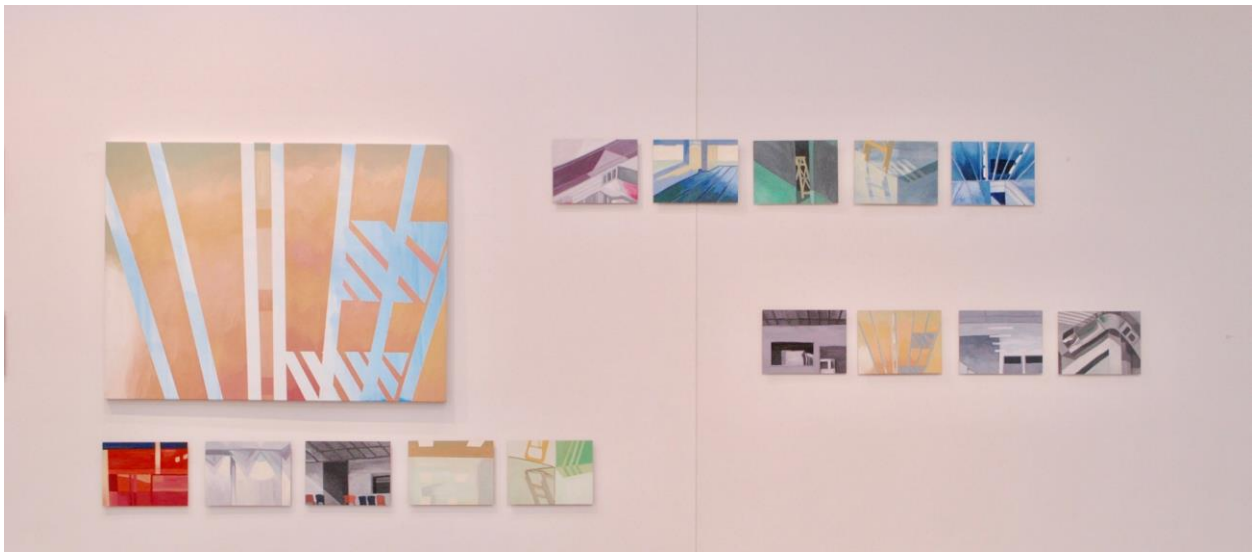


fig. 20 *An Itinerary for a 4<sup>th</sup> Floor Emily Carr Dérive*, Thesis Exhibition Installation, 2018





fig. 21 Renée Van Halm, *Icycles*, 2011, gouache on paper, 32.0 x 24.7 cm. Used by permission of Renée Van Halm.



fig. 22 *Untitled*, oil on canvas, 48 x 64 inches, 2018

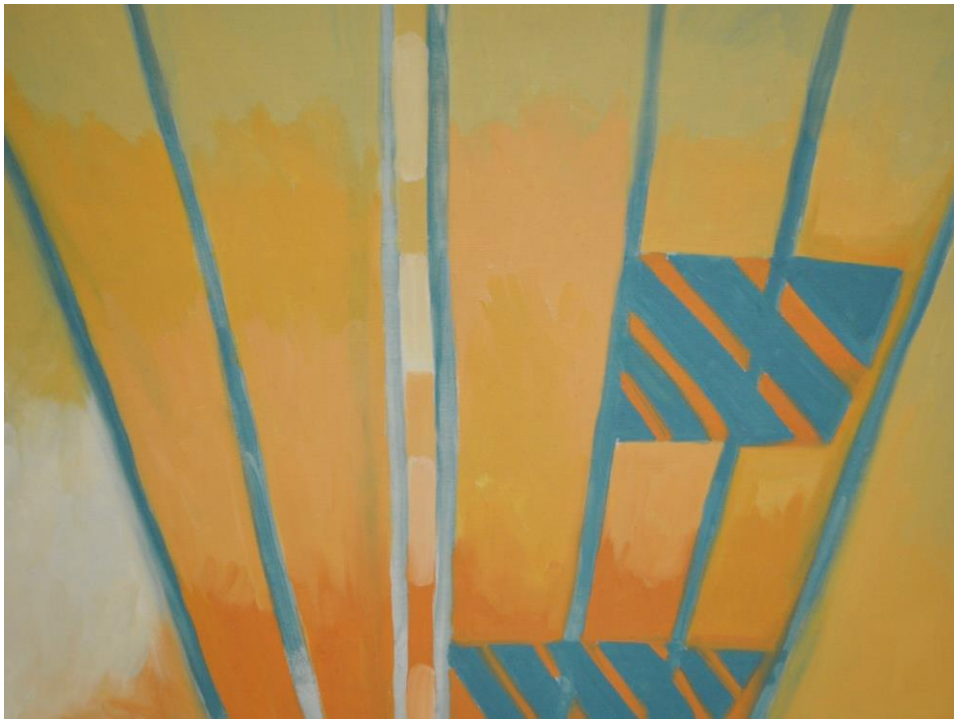


fig. 23 *Untitled*, oil on masonite, 12 x 16 inches, 2017