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DIMINISHING CONNECTIONS

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School
Of Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts
Visual Art

by
Mary Jane King
May 2016

Accepted by:
Professor Todd McDonald, Committee Chair
Professor Kathleen Thum
Professor Todd Anderson
Dr. Andrea Feeser

ABSTRACT

I explore our skin's durability as it protects our inner being, but its fragility in our death. Paint allows me to understand the physical quality of skin and the structure underneath its surface. We experience the world and one another through this outermost layer of our selves, providing the ability to feel touch and to establish corporeal bounds and connections. Skin provides a means of communication and interaction, of touch and intimacy. It contains, protects, and stretches with the growth of the body, adapting to the interior bodily demands. It is through this growth that there is also a regression or a slow decay of the body.

In addition to exterior exploration, I also investigate the vitality of our viscera even when disease destroys it and claims our lives. From this visual exploration, the tension between the reality of life and death begins to emerge. My paintings engage the disconnect between living and dying. Our experiences of both can be beautiful and repulsive, intimate and removed, private and public, and involve connections as well as loss. My work's content, formal qualities, and historical and contemporary references, elicit physical, emotional, and existential reflections on life and death.

The works and studies of artists from the Italian Renaissance, such as Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo, have influenced my work through their dedicated desire to understand our physical existence and anatomical structure. The human body, the subject of my artwork, is inspired through the exploration of paint and flesh by artists like Peter Paul Rubens, Jenny Saville, and Lucian Freud. The skin as a means to understand the surface of our being is explored through the works of Anne Noggel and Susan D'Amato,

helping to shape my own investigation. Lastly, the work of Mona Hatoum challenged my thoughts on bodily representation, altering my investigation of the exterior to beyond the surface of flesh. It is through the work of these artists, their processes, and various depictions of the human body that my own reflections upon our existence and mortality in this finite state are evoked.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this research and body of work to all who experience and contemplate the finite bounds of our corporeal existence.

In particular, this body of work remembers the lives of Mark Borsz, Joan and Michael King, Mary-Lib and Jack Rodgers, and Mary Jane and James Rodgers, as it is through the healing process of their deaths that this work, reflection, and investigation began to emerge.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful for the opportunity and experience to study here at Clemson University and work with a challenging and knowledgeable faculty. Thank you to each of you for your interest, support, and investment in my work throughout my time here.

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Lastly, I would like to thank my family, for their constant support, encouragement, and love as this investigation reflects close, shared experiences within our family.

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INTRODUCTION

I explore our skin's durability as it protects our inner being, as well as its fragility in our death. The paint allows me to understand the physical quality of skin and the structure behind one's surface. Our skin continues to stretch, aging with time, and we too must succumb to the effects of passing time entirely. It is through this growth that there is also a regression or a slow decay of the body. I also investigate the vitality of our viscera even when disease destroys it and claims our lives. From this visual exploration, the tension between the reality of life and death begins to emerge. My work's content, formal qualities, and historical and contemporary references, elicit physical, emotional, and existential reflections on life and death. My paintings engage the disconnect between living and dying – how our experiences of both can be beautiful and repulsive, intimate and removed, private and public, and involve connections as well as loss.

CHAPTER ONE: THE EXTERIOR

Through the medium of oil paint, the structure of our skin is explored. Within the process of painting, I build up layers of subtle color changes to create the illusion of physicality. The paintings contain moments in which I have let my mark be shown through a viscous brushstroke. I have expanded my technique and process, revealing my hand as the artist and allowing the variety of marks to further articulate and enhance the surface of flesh.

Within the expansion of mark making, the manipulation of the viscosity of oil paint also functions in a multitude of descriptive ways. I use the range of the paints' viscosity to emphasize the durable and physical traits of the human body. Some areas of the body are more thick and compact. This concept is described by a viscous, tactile mark alluding to weight and solidity. In contrast to this, translucencies are used to allow thin glazes that describe the wear and expansion of skin upon our structure. This represents the fragile and temporal quality that skin possesses. These layers also show the process of time and growth to a painting and to skin.

Specifically in the painting, *Corporeal*, both fragility and durability within our bodily existence are revealed (Fig. 1). This painting explores the base of a foot, revealing moments of thick tactility in the volume and the stretched sheerness within the skin. The bold reds, browns, and greens describe the arch of the foot in a voluptuous manner. This area contains segments of flesh that are durable and thick. Illustrating the strength of skin, as it protects our inner being. As the composition guides the eye upwards, the quality of the paint becomes thin and luminous. The color is saturated, but the value remains light.

This begins to describe the area in which the skin moves from beneath the foot, to stretching over the underside of the ankle. Here the skin is thin as it is articulated through the transparent glazes, representing the skin's fragility.

The artist Jenny Saville paints raw representations of existence and body, manipulating the viscosity of the paint to articulate human physicality and weight. Her paintings are aggressive and bold, demanding the attention of the viewer in the billowing folds of tissue. Saville renders the body in an unforgiving manner, painting the forms as she observes them and emphasizing the brutality of existence. Depicted through the physicality of paint, her figures challenge the standard conventions of beauty in society and what is considered ideal. Saville reveals these bodily "flaws" through each aggressive and descriptive stroke of paint.

The quality of brushstrokes help to elaborate and describe the various characteristics and traits of skin. Defined brushstrokes aid in conveying a rough or coarse texture. This is evident in the paintings titled *Corporeal*, *Exchange*, *Brace*, *Cradle*, *Guide*, *Surface*, *Caress*, and *Bridge* (Fig. 1-8). Each of these paintings depicts an area of the body in which an articulation or rhythm in brushstroke, helps communicate a more tactile, durable, and substantially fleshy area. These paintings reveal areas that are bulging with volume; flesh, folding over itself. In contrast to these works, the paintings *Access* and *Bond* are smooth and soft (Fig. 9, 10). The areas depicting the nose and ear contain a more thin consistency of skin. This is due to the support of cartilage to this location as opposed to bone and muscle. The brushstrokes are blended gently, resulting in a passive quality within the marks. Without strong linear brushstrokes to define form and

create volume, these pieces rely on the built up layers of glazes to convey depth and form. Although the paintings are all from areas of a body, they require different forms of mark making depending on the characteristics of the location.

Flesh contains many textures and qualities found within the landscape of wrinkles and marks upon the skin. I use these characteristics to visually describe the porous quality of the body through the application of paint. Skin acquires elaborate line, surface, and color unique to each individual, helping to identify human physicality.

Within the piece titled *Extend*, the paint describes a coarse texture and tactile surface through the built up overlay of line and color (Fig. 11). The deliberate strokes of paint are in complimentary colors. The cool purples and warm yellows combine to create a pronounced and coarse description of surface. Movement is established through the paintings by directing and activating the surface of the canvas. The organic folds described through the quality and form of line begins to guide the viewer's eye through the composition. The linear quality of *Extend* is thin and soft towards the top of the painting and becomes more thick and aggressive as it continues to move down. Creating a visual sense of movement from one area to the next.

The parts of the body I find to be the most compelling are those that are full in volume, establishing folds, creases, rolls, etc. Within the painting titled *Guide*, the base of the composition depicts a voluminous space (Fig. 5). Each organic segment is rendered with warm reds and oranges. The paint's pigmentation layered upon the surface of the canvas creates a strong materialization of flesh. Towards the top of the composition, the crevices are not as boldly defined in color. The layers of paint in this area become thin

and smooth. The pale translucencies begin to dematerialize in light and substance from the durable base. This alludes to the skin stretching across a surface, becoming thin in its consistency, once again.

Lucian Freud was a painter whose work directly communicated what it means to paint flesh. Freud kept an intense focus on the surface of the body, rendering his subjects in a manner in which identities becomes unimportant. His figures were mainly nudes, allowing the subject to be solely flesh, in a natural and revealing state. Every stroke and nuance seemed to elicit a strong understanding of skin. He painted in a thick and distinguished manner, as he uses the physicality of paint to articulate the volume of body. He analyzed the form of the figure, to an honest and observational degree.

Within my own observations of flesh, I choose to intensify the color found within skin, compelling one to look closer. I use saturation in order to reveal and articulate the lush and bodily characteristics. Within the heightened level of saturation, bodily vitality is declared in elaborate color. The lively and romantic palette pushes the clinical imagery beyond the scientific documentation. The folds, curves, and colors of flesh create images that can be seductive and erotic.

In addition to color, light also helps establish and evoke the nature and quality of skin. The light upon skin reveals and distinguishes the physical consistency within flesh, sometimes articulating a thin stretch or a bulbous curve. Light also begins to reveal the abundance of colors within our skins pigmentation. There is a luminous quality within the light of my paintings. As the use of light begins to dematerialize areas, it helps convey

the vulnerability of our existence in this finite state. Our skin is an elaborate structure, providing a challenge to articulate through the properties of oil paint.

It is complex to paint flesh- to capture its texture, color and light. Flemish artist Peter Paul Rubens executed this subject matter with great physicality and sensuality in his figures. Rubens nudes bring awareness to form and solidity of the body. He describes the weight and lush quality of flesh through moments of thin glazes of paint layered upon the canvas. Upon the built up layers of transparencies are heavy accents of solid color. His expressiveness within the figures depend on the delicate distribution of lights and darks. His figures are full in volume, soft, and also idealized. However through out history, the figure and body have contained an idealized depiction and glorified rendering within art. I aim to diminish these glorifications and idealizations through the close proximity within my scale.

By limiting the surrounding context, I am making the image less identifiable and offer the viewer something to figure out. I present the bodily imagery in an unfamiliar way under different contextual circumstances. This challenges the viewer to distinguish between familiar and unfamiliar bodily depiction. These unfamiliar, abstracted renderings become representations of corporeal existence. The close proximity limits the “whom” and focuses primarily on the physicality and color of body and flesh. Within the paintings, although various areas of the body were explored, all were examined to the same degree of proximity and detail.

This intimately cropped investigation was brought on through the drawings within the *Lineage Series* (Fig.11). The series contains and represents thirty-six members of the

Rodgers Lineage through their left palm. Each palm is recreated through powdered graphite on paper. The illusive and fragile quality of the graphite represents the skins pigmentation and suggests the paper as skin. By removing the fingers, the palm is taken slightly out of context. Allowing the palm to fill the space, the crevices and folds take on a topographical quality in the natural and organic rendering of flesh.

The close proximity and amplified details reveal more information about the area of the body. Within the *Lineage Series*, passing time is represented through various stages of life and age shown in one consistent bodily location. The lineage of palms range in age from 16-91, providing a visual spectrum of how time has an effect upon our skins surface.

Photographer, Anne Noggle, investigated the effects that time bestowed upon our skin within her own work. She created a series of portraits she describes as the “saga of fallen flesh.” Noggle looked to mortality within her photographs, as she took images of older women that revealed imperfections and character of age. Amongst the photographs of others, Noggle also documented her own self-portrait as she continued to age in life. Her work commented on the ritual of existence, the common experience of time and age, as they affect the human body.

Within the close examination of my work, an element of intimacy becomes established. The work is about the revelation of the body, as the close cropping presents the closeness required for touch and connections. I use these intimate segments as a means to communicate physical existence, mortality, and the temporal qualities the body possesses in life.

The work of Susan D'Amato depicts specific intimate features as a metaphor for human identity, vulnerability, and mortality. Her work establishes a non-descript relationship between representation and abstraction. This is achieved as D'Amato examines areas like the navel or nipple, and enlarges these small, private segments into a large-scale drawing.

Intimacy is not only established in my work through the cropping of the composition or subject, but also through the scale. As the drawings within the *Lineage Series*, maintain the proportional relationship to a palm itself, the paintings reveal more surface in a slightly expanded scale. The abstracted areas are heightened in proximity and are depicted larger than life. The scale, although moderately increased, still reveals the areas in a personal and private exploration through detail. The increase in scale elaborates and exploits this detail within the body in a more dominating and captivating space, however, not to completely engulf the viewer within it. As our body grows, there is a regression or a slow decay. I also investigate the vitality of our viscera beneath our skins surface.

CHAPTER TWO: THE INTERIOR

In addition to the exterior pieces, I have works that are about the interior of the body. While these different bodies of work are related through the context of the human structure, they each possess a different look and meaning. I am further investigating the fragility of our existence through the health and vitality of our viscera. From this visual exploration, the tension between life and death emerges. There is a commonality shared between our death and birth. Death is about the beginning as much as it is an ending. They are two events that do not belong entirely to us, but belong to those around us who experience these occurrences. The enlarged scale of the paintings emphasizes the scale of the organs and exposes them within the gallery space, allowing the internal depictions to take a significant spatial dominance within the gallery.

The paintings are all based off of individuals I have known and their cause of death. I am exploring their physical absences through the body as I represent the internal failure. I am using inaccessible visceral representation as a metaphor for the inability to touch and engage with one who is no longer physically accessible or present. Therefore, depicting a loss of a connection and a visual attempt to understand mortality within the body.

Through the process of painting, art brings dead matter to a new form of life. When a viewer looks at these paintings, I want them to gain insight into their own mortality, into what lies beneath the surface and how well one truly knows and understands their body. The paintings aim to take the viewer to another moment in time

during their reflection, to remember those that they have known and lost and contemplate their own existence.

Through the medium of paint, I take personal and private experiences of the body and reveal them publicly within the gallery. For my reference material, medical documentations of the infected organs are used. The internal viscera become visually accessible through these medical studies and research. In the Italian Renaissance, artists such as Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci scrutinized over the anatomical structure that the human body possesses. There was a need to understand our physicality. Through the process of dissection and medical studies, artists were able to begin to understand what was beneath the barrier of skin. The experience of and within the body is private and by painting it on an enlarged scale, it becomes public. Each disease and cancer represented is a representation of a loss I have experienced. Therefore, also revealing publically my own private and personal experience of loss.

The paints consistency is generally soft and blended within the painted images of viscera. These blended transparencies hide the specific brushstroke of paint, allowing the eye to optically mix the pigments. The concealment of my hand, as the artist, parallels with the concealment of the cause of death represented. Although the cause is being shown through the subject matter and composition of each painting, I use color that is contrary to our expectations of diseased or dysfunctional organs. The seductive transitions in color and value deceive the viewer and encourage the gaze.

Within the painting *Silence*, the central neuropathological feature of Parkinson's disease is shown, depicting the loss of pigmented dopaminergic neurons of the substantia

nigra (Fig. 13). The soft blended application of paint helps represent the fading and loss of the pigmentation that occurs in Parkinson's.

Similar to the formatting of the exterior compositions, I wanted to continue to limit the surrounding context to a moderate degree within the internal paintings. In order to negate a grotesque depiction of internal organs, I cropped into the referenced medical photographs to obtain a closer proximity. This allowed the surface of the organ itself to be the focal point and an abstracted representation, as opposed to its focus being location and specificity.

Through this abstracted composition, the organic material is presented in a new and dynamic way. This is done through the captivating surface and structure each organ contains. No surface is the same and the close proximity allows the unique qualities and characteristics to emerge. For instance, *Silence*, *Rest*, and *Transfer* all depict areas of the brain, however they all are vastly different (Fig. 13-15).

Line is a descriptive and informative element that establishes properties of the viscera represented. For instance, in the painting titled *Transfer*, the texture that occurs due to the use of line brings forth a familiar characteristic of the brain's cortex (Fig. 15). The lobes are rendered in linear and staccato brushstrokes, establishing crevices within the fleshy coils. The forms appear to build upon each other, creating a sense of movement within the composition. The organic curves and coils recede in space with cool purples and reds in the middle of the canvas. The spatial depth that occurs is referencing the ventricles, the fluid filled spaces within the brain that grow larger in Alzheimer's. The lobes, although shrunken, begin to emerge outward as they become warm in tans and

greens. Color and line combine to help push and pull this linear composition occurring within *Transfer*. Guiding the viewers' eye from the cortex to fall within the ventricles. The composition of *Transfer* pushes the edges of the canvas, striving to continue past. This sense of expansion further enhances the movement occurring within the painting.

The visceral images are appealing in substance as they fill the composition of the canvas. The compelling forms established, are fleshy through the medium of oil paint. As the viscera imagery depicts a loss of a connection, the paintings create a visual attempt to understand mortality within the body. These lush forms activate the space in a manner that references photography, but are enhanced in both volume and space through oil paint.

Volume is shown through the attractive cool reds, purples, and warm browns within the painting *Departure* (Fig. 16). This combination of color and temperature pushes the two-dimensional structure of the canvas. Within *Departure*, the eye is cast up and around the bottom of the canvas leading within the organ. This composition seems to fold in and over the organ itself.

With intentions of engulfing the viewer within the body, Artist Mona Hatoum works with similar imagery as she uses endoscopic and coloscopic cameras to reveal her own interior self. She records and projects her videos on the walls and floors so that the viewer feels completely contained within her internal body. In contrast to this, I reveal the internal to the viewer within my paintings, as opposed to enclosing upon.

Although diseased organs are being referenced and represented, the use of light within my paintings helps to articulate and establish a sense of liveliness. This liveliness

acts as a means of preservation to the connection or memory. The vibrancy and luminosity that occurs captivates the eye and depicts this subject matter under new visual circumstances. In the painting *Parting*, the light establishes a swirling and succulent surface, contained of homogenous pinks and yellows (Fig. 17). The surface is speckled in a descriptive characteristic to the cancer of Lymphoma. The vivid reds and purples provide an alluring sensation to the lush composition. There is a beautification quality that is established between light and color. With the context of the organ as a cause of death, the passive and gentle light parallels with comfort and peace.

It is not the intention to show a gory organ to represent death. Nor is it the intention to depict organs of grey discoloration as they are removed from the body for medical information. Instead, I deliberately choose to render these diseased organs in lively and vibrant colors. The vitality of the palette helps evoke a tender and sensitive quality, representing a comfort in the acceptance of death.

It is through this manipulation of the majestic and seductive color palette, that I aim to diminish any clinical or grief stricken representation. These paintings are about the acceptance of and the peace within death. They are about reflecting on what once was, and the ability to carry that memory as one proceeds in life. It is my hope that the paintings will cause the viewer to consider the finite bounds of their body as a vessel.

The romantic colors of the diseased organs confuse the viewer in terms of what is healthy and what is not, concealing these moments of sickness. Drawing the viewers' gaze in through the luscious and seductive tones, to then hold the potential for repulsion. It can be unsettling to view the cancerous and failed organs rendered in illusive and

romantic colors. There is an inviting, seductive lure to these paintings due to their form and color. For instance, within the painting *Passage*, the circular composition contains vibrant and succulent yellows and reds (Fig. 18). The colors are sensual and enticing, leading the eye around the composition. Through this manipulation, the viewer is drawn in closer and provided with a means to become repulsed from the context of the organ, which represents colon cancer. A strong tension between seduction and repulsion emerges within these pieces through this relationship.

This alteration of circumstances between the viewer and the internal paintings correlates with the destabilization that occurs within the experience of a loss. It brings forth the question on our own internal workings and health. Providing the notion of how much we know of our body and selves. This uncomfortable tension can also resonate with the acceptance of our own death in unknown time and circumstances.

CONCLUSION

The body of paint combined with the surface of canvas, are the materials I use to explore physical existence and surface of skin. We experience the world and one another through this outermost layer of our selves, providing the ability to feel touch and to establish one's corporeal bounds and connections. Skin provides a means of communication and interaction, of touch and intimacy. It contains, protects, and stretches with the growth of the body. My work investigates the skin's structure as a barrier and explores the viscera of the interior that hides beneath. This exploration between the complex relationships of living and dying brings forth the beautiful and repulsive qualities, the intimate and removed, the private and public experiences, all in which occur during the experience of connections and loss. It is through my work's content, formal qualities, and historical and contemporary references that I ask the viewer to contemplate their own reflections upon the experience of life and death.



1 *Corporeal*
Oil, 29x24", 2016



2 Exchange
Oil, 9x12", 2016



3 Brace
Oil, 9x12", 2015



4 Cradle
Oil, 9x12", 2015



5 Guide
Oil, 16x12", 2015



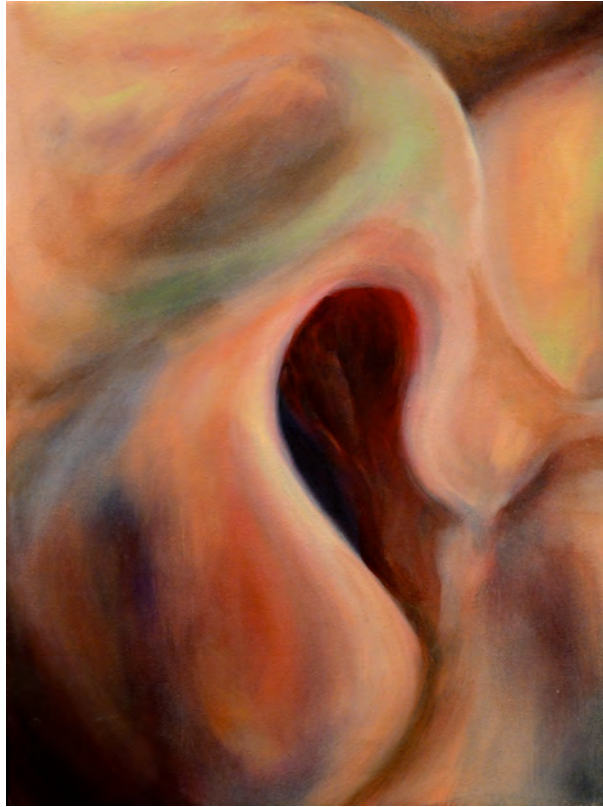
6 Surface
Oil, 12x12", 2015



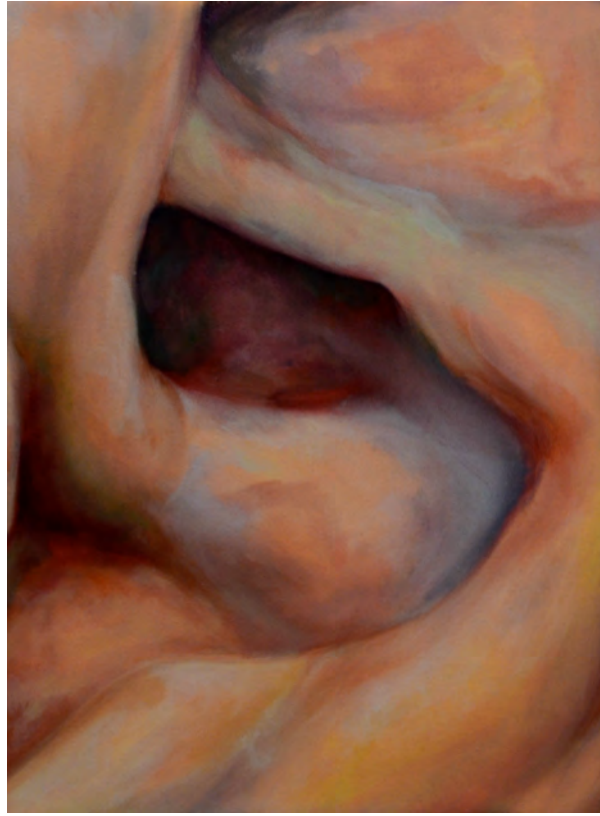
7 Caress
Oil, 16x11", 2015



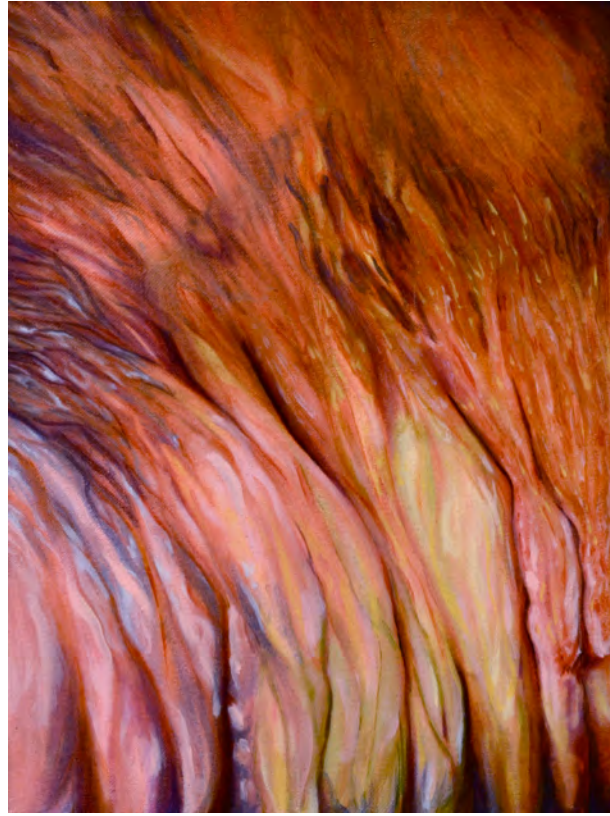
8 Bridge
Oil, 20x16", 2015



9 Access
Oil, 9x12", 2015



10 Bond
Oil, 9x12", 2015



11 *Extend*
Oil, 9x12", 2015



12 Lineage Series
Graphite on Paper, 3.5x5", 2015



13 Silence
Oil, 19x24", 2016



14 *Rest*
Oil, 19x24", 2016



15 Transfer
Oil, 19x24", 2015



16 Departure
Oil, 19x24", 2015



17 Parting
Oil, 19x24", 2015



18 Passage
Oil, 19x24", 2016



19 Release
Oil, 19x24", 2015

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