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A Step of Two or The Pas de Deux

Molly A. Hoisington
University of Massachusetts Amherst

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A STEP OF TWO OR THE PAS DE DEUX

A Thesis Presented

by

MOLLY HOISINGTON

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

May 2015

Department of Art

A STEP OF TWO OR THE PAS DE DEUX

A Thesis Presented

by

MOLLY HOISINGTON

Approved as to style and content by:

Shona Macdonald, Chair

Benjamin Jones, Member

Robin Mandel, Member

Shona Macdonald
Director of Graduate Programs
MFA Department of Art

Alexis Kuhr
Chair, Department of Art

EPIGRAPH

“One does not simply remember oneself, seeing, experiencing, learning; rather one recalls the situations in the world in which one has seen, experienced, learned. These situations imply one’s own body and the bodies of others, lived space and, finally, the horizon of the world and worlds, within something that has occurred.”¹

“[In perceiving] the organism receives two kinds of messages, one from the sensory periphery of the nervous system, the other from consciousness, the second message confirming the veracity of the first. This means that the ego does not have direct access to reality even on this so-called “realist” view of the ego. Its function here is to discriminate between endogenous and exogenous stimuli, that is, between reality and what, being internal, passes as reality. A stimulus may present itself as a perception and be received by consciousness. This is true for internal excitations and thought processes as much as for external perception. It is for this reason that the internal excitation, the thought, must accede to language. Only by acquiring a mode of reality, not unlike that of a hallucination, can thought become conscious [....]”²

“The intimacy of...the nude...shows in a clear way that what is most intimate is not enfolded in interiority. It is, on the contrary, always completely exposed in the light, to the gaze that comes from the outside. Nudity is exactly this exit from the self that embodies the body. And it is therefore also the experience of a “becoming-subject,” but a subject without a face.”³

1 Ricoeur, Paul. *Memory, History, Forgetting*. IL: Chicago University Press, 2006. Print. Pg.36

2 Grosz, Elizabeth. *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. IN: Indiana University Press, 1994. Print. Pg.30

3 Nancy, Jean-Luc and Federico Ferrari. *Being Nude: The Skin of Images*. NY: Fordham University Press, 2014. Print. Pg.76

ABSTRACT

A STEP OF TWO OR THE PAS DE DEUX

MAY 2015

MOLLY HOISINGTON, B.F.A., MONTSERRAT COLLEGE OF ART

M.F.A., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

Directed by: Shona Macdonald, Benjamin Jones, and Robin Mandel

The second part of a two-part MFA Thesis presentation, this paper distills the content from the preceding exhibition *A Step of Two or The Pas de Deux*: an installation of paintings, drawings and projected video. It touches on various themes that surround [well researched] ideas about perception, dissociation, the gaze, and relationships. Most of all, this paper and the body of work it describes is about the visual representation of a sensual understanding of the world.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
EPIGRAPH.....	iii
ABSTRACT.....	iv
LIST OF FIGURES.....	vi
CHAPTER	
1. INTRODUCTION: THE INSTALLATION.....	1
2. DANCING AND DISSOCIATION.....	4
3. DUET.....	8
4. THE FIGURE.....	12
5. MEMORY AND PERCEPTION.....	15
6. LOOKING (AND MEMORY).....	18
7. PROCESS.....	23
8. PERCEPTION AND CONCLUSION.....	28
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	32
PHOTOGRAPH OF THE ARTIST AT WORK.....	34

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
1. Molly Hoisington, <i>Video-still from A Step of Two</i> 2015.....	4
2. Molly Hoisington, <i>Video-still from A Step of Two</i> 2015.....	4
3. Molly Hoisington, <i>Bend, Stretch, and a Straight Leg</i> 2015.....	8
4. Molly Hoisington, <i>Arch and Overlap</i> 2015.....	10
5. Molly Hoisington, <i>Peek and Bump</i> 2015.....	10
6. Molly Hoisington, <i>Video-still from A Step of Two</i> 2015.....	12
7. Molly Hoisington, <i>Away and an Echo</i> 2015.....	14
8. Molly Hoisington, <i>Curling Cocoon</i> 2015.....	15
9. Molly Hoisington, <i>Video-still from A Step of Two</i> 2015.....	17
10. Molly Hoisington, <i>Elsewhere</i> 2015.....	18
11. Jenny Saville, <i>Unknown</i>	19
12. Marlene Dumas, <i>The Neighbor</i> 2005.....	19
13. Auguste Rodin, <i>Hands on a Sex</i> ca.1900.....	25
14. Photograph of the artist at work 2015.....	34

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: THE INSTALLATION

A Step of Two or The Pas de Deux is an installation in three parts consisting of eight large-scale works on paper (approximately 65" x 50"), two floating projections on mylar (28" x 40"), and a collection of small works on paper installed in the hall outside the main gallery. Through figuration and spatial relationships, the exhibition provides a window into the effect dissociation has on one's experience of and engagement with, perception.

The exhibition begins with a grouping of small works on paper: broadly varied in material and technique, these small works stand both as preparatory studies and as finished works in their own right. They also serve to introduce the major themes that tie each of the three incarnations of this body of work together.

In the next room, skirting the boundary between painting and drawing, eight larger works on paper hang staggered along the perimeter of the gallery—floating an inch away from the wall. Their subdued palette of varying warm and cool greys made by layering and blending ink acrylic paint casts a hazy and dreamlike atmosphere over the room. Out of each drawing, two figures emerge, interacting with one another and commingling. Repetitions of gesture and the geometries produced by their poses hint at underlying dynamics and narratives within the pictures, between the pictures, and within the installation as a whole. Each painting captures a dynamic between two people, and each couple represents a single example of within the range of their interactions. As a result, each painting depicts an impression or encapsulation of a relationship, fusing together many discrete but related memories. Though coupled with another, each individual figure—and their psychology—is highlighted and exaggerated by their

relationship to the postures and gestures of their partner which, as a result, amplify moments of tension, yearning, and isolation.

Two pieces of mylar, suspended by jeweler's wire and secured by rivets, hang enclosed within the space of the large-scale drawings. A moving image is projected upon each piece of mylar; both showing a lone female figure—a woman—dressed in a nude stocking and moving in a space that isn't entirely clean. It's a room with dusty grey floors and grimy white walls. She is dancing but her movements are improvised, automatic. She is performing only for herself; it is a personal and intimate act, but every once in a while she glances at the camera and acknowledges the viewer—her audience.¹ By their nature, these recorded moving pictures capture specific moments in time, in contrast, to the 'pooling of time' within the paintings. Something *real* is captured by the videos; a real person moves through real space whereas, by comparison, the figures in the painted images are creations, figments—almost creatures. This contrast between the projected and painted images highlights another major theme in this exhibition: the confusion caused by the disparity between the interior [or psychological] worlds or experience, and of the external world of perception.

Floating in mid-air, the projections draw attention to the space of the gallery and allude to the space of the body, or the place where we process perception. Every manifestation of this body of work, the videos and the large and small works on paper, exists as a representation of that body-space. Due to their scale being approximately half that of life-size, the projections evince an effect of detachment from, even as they remain grounded in it. We expect the figure in the projections to be real and to identify with her

¹ "A double movement of exhibition and retreat." and "[The gaze is a] catalyst—something that mediates an exchange—an idea." Irigaray, Luce. *This Sex Which is Not One*. NY: Cornell University Press, 1985. Print. Pg. 26 and 27

as a real person. But since she's at such an awkward scale— neither miniature nor life-size, nor monumental—she seems diminished even as she draws our attention with her exposed nudity and her [sometimes] graceful movements. Viewing the videos, therefore, simulates a dissociative experience while the works on paper are symbolic interpretations of that experience.

CHAPTER 2

DANCING AND DISSOCIATION

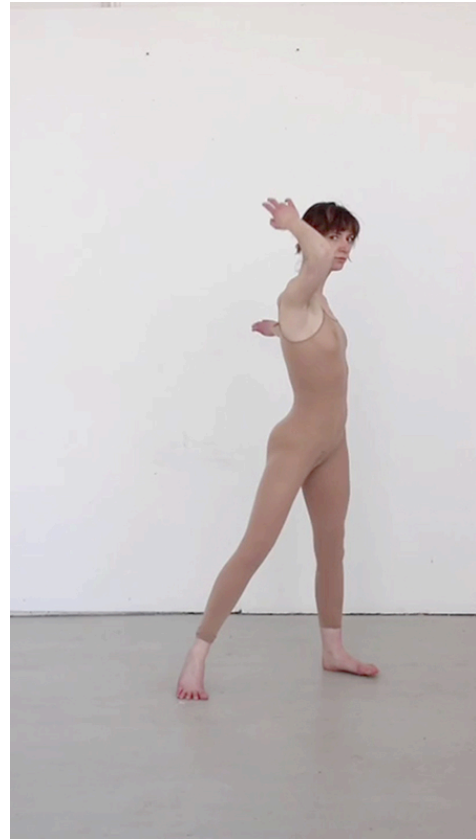
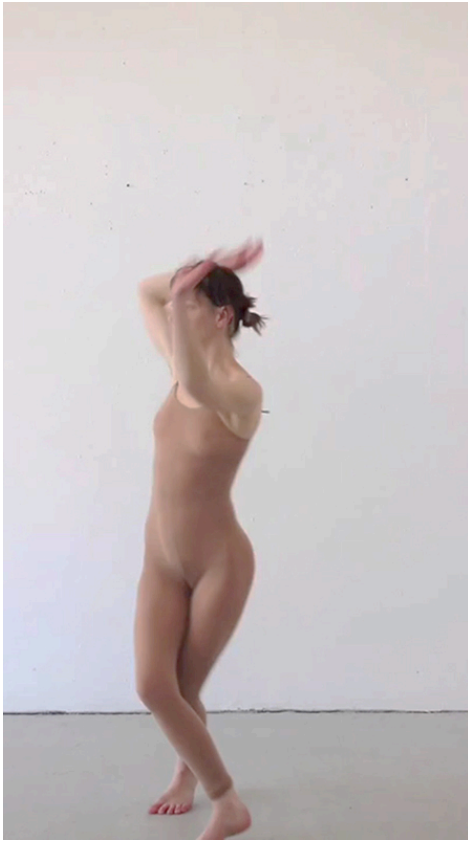


Figure 1. Molly Hoisington, *Video-still from A Step of Two* 2015

Figure 2. Molly Hoisington, *Video-still from A Step of Two* 2015

‘Pas de deux’ translates to English as *step of two*. I’ve borrowed this term from classical ballet, where the pas de deux is a suite of dances composed to act out an exchange between two characters. It is “a duet in which ballet steps are performed together, portraying an expression of feelings and thoughts between two dancers.”² In this exhibition, the pas de deux stands as a useful metaphor for interaction (or relationship) between two people. The pas de deux—and through the pas de deux, dance and the impact choreography has on our physiology—has allowed me to explore

² http://dance.about.com/od/ball2/f/Pas_de_Deux.htm

how an individual body engages with space and, in that space, with another.

Dancing with another involves an element of trust; you have to give up your control of choreography to the mingling of you and your partner and have faith that the other, your partner, will do the same. A duet without trust becomes two parallel dances performed simultaneously, but with trust, the two dancers perform as one. In the installation of this body of work, these dynamics manifest in the relationship between the two projections: each video work displays a solitary figure, moving within and through her own world. The projected figures are placed far enough apart that it's difficult to see both figures simultaneously, but, by gazing into the space between them and observing the movements peripherally, it's possible to observe moments of synchrony where the motion of one figure mirrors or even completes the motion of the other.³ This interaction provides an effect of very [very] distant union; the figures are *almost* alone, but there's a whisper of connection to another (even if the other is the self).

This echo of a connection speaks to dissociative experience:⁴ due to circumstances in my upbringing, I have struggled since childhood with degrees of dissociation - though I didn't know it or have the words for it until very recently. To engage with the world and with others felt like an Herculean task; I felt isolated and unreal. In compensation for the fragmented sense of the world engendered by dissociation, much of the more subtle content in this body of work involves pitting two concepts against one another and/or merging together seemingly contradictory concepts that don't fit comfortably into the same category. There are too many contradictions to enumerate completely, and I will address many as I go, but the most glaring contradiction

³ This was totally by accident, but it was such a happy accident.

⁴ The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (5th edition) defines dissociation as "a disruption in the usually integrated functions of consciousness, memory, identity, or perception of the environment."

I attempt to illustrate by this exhibition is the distinction between painting and drawing.

Painting and drawing aren't polar opposites, but they do not generally inhabit the same bracket of classification. I see the large works on paper both as paintings and as drawings because they manifest qualities of both. Line and gesture play important roles in defining what they are, but the varying density and substance of material is of equal importance.

Beginning in childhood, and continuing into adolescence, I spent hours gazing into the mirror, interacting with my reflection, speaking to it (more rehearsing than conversing), or just observing my face and exchanging gazes with my reflection.⁵ In his work on the mirror stage in childhood development, Jacques Lacan says that “The function of the mirror stage...[is]...a particular case of the function of the *imagos*, which is to establish a relationship between an organism and its reality—or, as they say, between the *Innenwelt* and the *Umwelt* [the ‘inner world’ and the ‘outer world’].”^{6 7}

Perhaps my preoccupation with mirrors was an attempt to make sense of the world outside myself or, rather, perhaps my reflection was an observable reminder that I was real; a subject acting in the world. Seeing my reflection in the mirror interrupted⁸ my wholly insular perspective by providing me with an “other” to interrupt me and jolt me

5 “When a child sees herself in the mirror, this recognition is (to my mind) based primarily on the look exchanged. The image in the mirror looks at the child, as the child looks at the image. Indeed, the child experiences a duality similar to what happens when we press our hands together and discover that each hand is both touched and touching. Here, the child is both seen and seeing.” Berthoz, Alain. *Simplicity: Simplifying Principles for a Complex World*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012. Print. Pg. 35-36

6 Lacan, Jacques, Translated by Bruce Fink. *Ecrits: A Selection*. NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004. Print. Pg. 96

7 While Lacan is speaking here about the infant's discovery of self, either through their reflection in a mirror or through their relationship with the mother, I feel the similarities between his theory and my experience justify the reference.

8 “This [...] action engenders primary narcissism (or what Lacan calls the mirror stage) [...]. It consists of the relative stabilization of the circulation of libido in the child's body, so that the division between subject and object (even the subject's capacity to take itself as an object) becomes possible [...]. This emerges as a result of two complimentary processes. First, the ego is the result of a series of identificatory relations with the other subject[...], its own image in the mirror.” Grosz, Elizabeth. *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. IN: Indiana University Press, 1994. Print. Pg. 32

out of my cocoon. This same relationship between the mirror-image and the other is referred to by Dany Nobus:

“...Lacan...subordinated [the mirror] to the intervention of the symbolic order (the Other). ...[He] even identified the mirror with the Other, a construction which had already been foreshadowed in Seminar I, where he had claimed that ‘the inclination of the plane mirror is governed by the voice of the other.’”⁹

Even into my late twenties it was difficult for me to understand the viewpoint and personhood of another; I had formed my sense of the world through the lens of dissociation and it took me that long to begin to sort through all my assumptions and distinguish between accurate observations and delusion.¹⁰ My few memories of truly engaging with the physical world and with an “other” before the age of thirty, took-place in the context of movement, in the context of dance. I believe this is because dancing involves being aware of your body and the relationship of your body to the surrounding space. Perhaps the reason I’m so drawn to figuration in my visual work is because I have learned to process the world through my body and by my attention to the bodies of others.¹¹

9 Nobus, Dany. “Life and Death in the Glass – A New Look at the Mirror Stage,” in *Key Concepts of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*. NY: Other Press, 1998. Print. Pg. 120

10 The brain makes assumptions about the world based on which it constructs internal models of reality” and “[...] perceptual illusions are solutions devised by the brain to deal with sensory messages that are ambiguous or that contradict each other are the internal assumptions that the brain makes about the external world. [...] That illusion is not an error or a bad solution, but rather the best possible hypothesis. Berthoz, Alain. *The Brain's Sense of Movement* MA: Harvard University Press, 2000. Print. Pg. 99 and Pg. 242

11 I think my sensitivity to this was a result of my relationship with a friend's mother, Brownie Siegler, and through her my introduction to the Alexander Technique. In order for the therapy to be effective, you have to be able to sense what your body is doing and identify with it – redefining your sensorimotor understanding.

CHAPTER 3

DUET

The first of these moments of engagement happened while I was in high school: the music department was staging *The King and I* and, as we waited for our cue, a childhood friend and I were watching our classmates perform *Shall We Dance*, peeking through the curtain that separated the auditorium from the cafeteria. I don't recall which of us asked, “*shall we dance?*” before we started to waltz around the huge darkened room: Laurel (my friend) and I both knew the steps to the waltz, but the dance we created wasn't choreographed. Rather, the waltz was the foundation of our dance, and from it we built something new.

Improvising as part of a duet requires you to respond automatically to your partner's movement and their potential movements all the while maintaining awareness of your own movements and decisions. Without time to plan or strategize, you must



synthesize these two independent, autonomous, dynamics into one. The waltz with Laurel was surprisingly fluid because we were confident both in one another's movements and in our own.

Another memory that broke through the cloud of dissociation was a dance between my father and I. I was sixteen and we were dancing at

Figure 3. Molly Hoisington, *Bend, Stretch, and a Straight Leg* 2015

my brother's wedding in Maine. In this case, instead of being an equal contributor to the dance, my task was just to identify my father's trajectory and allow him to lead. In retrospect, because he had total control over the choreography of the dance, the dance wasn't mine in the same way as the first. I was there for the dance, but he was the lead. While following along with the movements and decisions of another isn't terribly empowering, it can still be a pleasurable dynamic. The dance becomes a gift, an invitation to let go and allow the movement to swallow you. For the two or three minutes that the song lasted, the movements of the dance defined my world.¹² A similar dynamic can be seen in one of my large paintings: in it, the female figure reaches upward, her right leg lifted slightly, displaying herself. She is contorted, her head at an awkward angle and not quite attached to her body. The male figure is more firmly grounded; his feet are anchored as he bends his knees and reaches across his body toward her, seeming to direct her posturing. The female doesn't seem to be unhappy, but she is completely exposed and malleable.

The next duet was unlike the other two in that, instead of seeming to end almost as soon as it began, I felt like my partner—a distant acquaintance—and I were momentarily suspended in time. We were at a Halloween party, surrounded by a crowd of college classmates. I was dressed in a costume of a wide tulle skirt in canary yellow, a black leotard and navy-blue gloves but, oddly, I can't remember his costume at all. It felt like we were enclosed in a bubble of movement: the dance sprawled over the space of the room with him and me both adding to the choreography of the dance, making

12 Two interesting observations about this dance: first, my relationship with my father is a terse one, we don't really communicate and never really did. Dancing with him opened a surprising window into his personality; a moment of communication, however tacit that communication might be. Secondly, for the duration of the dance my father seemed to let go of the gruffness that, to me, defines him and defines my relationship with him; even as he controlled the arc of the dance, his tight control over his personality seemed to unclench. And when the dance finished, his gruffness—his mask—returned.

adjustments for and playing with the other's contribution.



Figure 4. Molly Hoisington, *Arch and Overlap* 2015

Figure 5. Molly Hoisington, *Peek and Bump* 2015

Finally, when I was maybe 27 or 28, my boyfriend and I decided one evening that it would be fun to make a pixilation¹³ so we cleared out the living room, set up the necessary equipment and began to pose. Dan and I played for hours, dissecting movement and playing with time; condensing it and expanding it by the progression of our postures. The film that came out of this evening gave an illusion of a whirling and spontaneous dance but it was just that: an illusion. We planned every gesture and every interaction in the thirty seconds before the click of the shutter.

That pixilation, and my acquaintance and intimacy with Dan formed the beginnings of this body of work. He introduced me to theories of movement and animation, and by osmosis, I started to pay attention to the stages or states of a motion, to

¹³ Pixilation is a stop-motion technique that involves capturing consecutive still images which are then combined together to make an animated film.

parse them out and isolate them. From that evening grew my first inklings of interest in exploring movement; how both movement and *implied* movement affect perception [and thus, emotion]. He also gave me the words that help me classify my approach to the figure; a process that involves both sympathy and empathy.¹⁴

14 In *The Physiology and Phenomenology of Action*, Alain Berthoz distinguishes between sympathy and empathy, or between simulation and emulation: “....for a given subject, [intersubjectivity consists] of being able to recognize the other as having itself and, on the basis of kinaesthesia[...], this power of constituting the world in the same way that he constitutes for himself. This is so much so that one could round the relation with the other not on empathy in general, but, more precisely, upon empathy with the actions of the other. When we see someone acting, we are not just the visual witnesses of the movements of another body. In truth, what we see is someone actively structuring his world, and this is because we are already capable of structuring our own world through such acts.” Odd that, given my history of difficulty in this arena, I should use it as my primary means of creation. But, it’s not really *identifying* with another that’s an issue, rather, identifying with another as an Other rather than momentarily adopting their reality as mine? Berthoz, Alain and Jean-Luc Petit. *The Physiology and Phenomenology of Action*. NY: Oxford University Press, 2008. Print. Pg. 255

CHAPTER 4

THE FIGURE

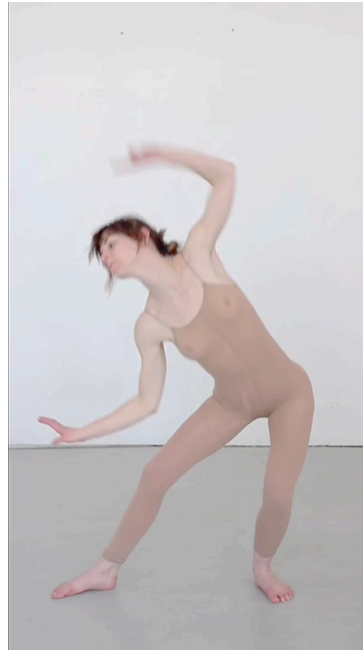


Figure 6. Molly Hoisington, *Video-still from A Step of Two* 2015

Watching a figure perform a dance and drawing the figure require the same intellectual process: in perceiving and/or processing any observed action¹⁵ a witness mirrors that action by physiologically, or bodily, recreating the perceived action.¹⁶ As we observe a dancer's movements, we experience those movements exactly as the dancer does by somatically—and neurally—mimicking their gestures and postures.¹⁷ ¹⁸ For me, this empathetic response also comes into play during life drawing: I imagine what it feels like to be the model's pose as I work my way through the puzzles of proportion, gesture

15 Whether that action is as complex as the choreography of a pas de deux or as simple as picking up a spoon.

16 Berthoz, Alain. *The Brain's Sense of Movement*. MA: Harvard University Press, 2000. Print. Pg. 10

17 Gallagher, Shaun. *How the Body Shapes the Mind*. NY: Oxford University Press, 2005. Print. Pg. 115

18 It's for this reason that I both love and hate watching ballet films. They offer a pleasurable experience of dance that I rarely allow myself but they can also be a disappointing reminder of my physical limitations.

and volume. To put physiological terms to the process: I use my “sensorimotor mode of processing spatial information”¹⁹ and proprioception—my sense of the space within my body and the relative positioning of my limbs—to identify with the figure and thus capture it.²⁰ This body of work has grown out of this practice: it is the nexus from which my work stems.

Beyond drawing from observation, attention to and sympathy with the figure have played an even more prominent role in the construction of this body of work. I built each figure without a visual reference by assembling and fusing together many separate but related memories. This method mirrored the active sympathetic drawing process I use when working from a figure or a reference; but instead of taking in and synthesizing visual information, these drawings and paintings came out of my memory of various postures, of intimately-known, specific, anatomies, and vague recollections of movements and demeanors. To apply the method meant calling up the memory, hypostatizing²¹ the memory and then slowly empathizing with the hypostatization [the mental incarnation of my memory]. Much of this was done through trial and error. It meant shifting my sympathies and empathies back and forth, between my memory and the image I was building; kinaesthetically following and completing the figural forms and attempting to experience them in my own body. I blended together and molded discrete memories of

19 Berthoz, Alain. *The Brain's Sense of Movement*. MA: Harvard University Press, 2000. Print. Pg. 117

20 “[...] we often consider that vision gives us information about the external world while the haptic sense is linked to the own body.[...] There is no dichotomy between the two forms of perception. Even if one of them should be treated as a camera, both are cameras of a kind, since each in its own way invokes a sense of depth and distance, so they should not be dissociated. According to the traditional dichotomy, there is proprioception and exteroception: vision is both an exteroceptor and a proprioceptor and that the haptic sense can be both a proprioceptor and an exteroceptor is illustrated by the dual perception of the two hands when they touch each other. As exteroception, vision is what tells us about the world out there. The haptic sense is the sense that informs us about what is to hand.” Berthoz, Alain and Jean-Luc Petit. *The Physiology and Phenomenology of Action*. NY: Oxford University Press, 2008. Print. Pg. 216-217

21 A more accurate, if more obscure term than ‘embody’, to hypostatize is to treat or represent something abstract as a concrete reality.

forms and gestures by integrating them with my sense of my own form [or body-schema] and recalling my experience of the gestures or motions.²²



Figure 7. Molly Hoisington, *Away and an Echo* 2015

²² I didn't do any of this consciously. This description has taken a lot of self-reflection and dissecting of what is an intuitive process, and I seriously wonder whether it is a hallucinatory [or dissociative] process in itself - even as I make a body of work *about* dissociation.

CHAPTER 5
MEMORY AND PERCEPTION



Figure 8. Molly Hoisington, *Curling Cocoon* 2015

I referred earlier to the ‘pooling of time’ depicted in the works on paper. The method I described in the chapter above causes this sense of overlapping time. Our perceptions unfold in time, but the passage of time also has a way of altering those perceptions. The figures’ blurred and stuttered edges reference the trial and error of attempting to fix a memory into something concrete, but they also suggest movement in time, albeit in a condensed or limited frame. Recalling a moment from the past, we know that it took place in time, but we don’t perceive the *memory* in time.

The juxtaposition of the painted imaginary images with recorded projections reiterates

the question of time-perception in my body of work. Paul Ricoeur:

“[...] habit and memory form two poles of a continuous range of mnemonic phenomena. What forms the unity of this spectrum is the common feature of the relation to time. In each of the opposing cases an experience acquired earlier is presupposed; however in the case of habit what is acquired is incorporated into the living present, unmarked as past.²³ In the other case, a reference is made to the anteriority of the prior acquisition. In both cases, then, it remains true that memory “is of the past,” but according to two distinct modes—marked and unmarked—of reference to the place and time of the initial experience.”²⁴

Unlike the *image* or moment of time presented [or, in Paul Ricoeur’s terms, “reference to anteriority” in time] in the paintings, narrative in the videos flow *through* time, or, the narrative of the videos “is incorporated into the living present.” Looping the videos, however, counters slightly this linear flow through time. By turning in on themselves, by looping, the projections allude to another aspect of the dissociative experience: flashbacks or vivid re-stagings of memory. Adding one more layer, since the two projections vary in duration, the choreographic relationship between the figures shift with each loop which references the rumination and questioning of these flashbacks.

“In representation the body appears not as itself, but as a sign[...] each physical body forms an individual whole, but it may represent many bodies.”²⁵

Each projected video depicts a solitary female figure moving, dancing, within an empty but grimy space; there are smudges on the white walls and grit on the grey floor, but the figure moves and interacts with the space as though it’s a dance studio. The source of her movement is sensation and feeling, shown explicitly in one moment when

23 Berthoz in *The Brain's Sense of Movement*, page 115: “[Perception] is predictive; receptors detect derivatives, and the brain contains a library of prototype shapes of faces, objects, and perhaps movements and synergies. Nature has devised simplifying laws among the geometric, kinematic, and dynamic properties of natural movements. But the predictive nature of perception is also—perhaps especially— due to memory. Form memory is used primarily to predict the consequences of future action by recalling those of past action.”

24 Ricoeur, Paul. *Memory, History, Forgetting*. IL: Chicago University Press, 2006. Print. Pg. 25

25 Nancy, Jean-Luc and Federico Ferrari. *Being Nude: The Skin of Images*. NY: Fordham University Press, 2014. Pg. 3

she rises from a crouch: you can see the moment when the upward motion begins and you can see her following that seed of movement upward. At times she is totally absorbed in the sensation of movement, but every once in a while she shifts her attention, for just a moment, to the camera recording her: she looks directly at it and by doing so, acknowledges and confronts her audience. She knows they're watching; she's putting herself on display, and by doing so, forcing the audience into a role that is both voyeur and intimate.



Figure 9. Molly Hoisington, *Video-still from A Step of Two* 2015

CHAPTER 6

LOOKING (AND MEMORY)



Figure 10. Molly Hoisington, *Elsewhere* 2015

“Insofar as the other cannot be, from a phenomenological perspective, an object of "knowledge," Sartre searches for manifestations of the "Other-as-subject" that signify the presence of the other individual as a conscious subject who modifies my being and my world. Being looked at is a sign of the presence of the other as a conscious individual. Being in the face of the other in the world is a universal characteristic of our being, one that is indicated by our awareness of the "alienating reality" of the other as an anonymous reality.”²⁶

The woman in the videos is dressed in a flesh-colored stocking, her nudity only marginally obscured by the translucent fabric. But instead of concealing her body, the stocking highlights her nudity. She is neither naked nor exposed, the stocking accentuates her body and by doing so turns her nudity into a costume. Jean-Luc Nancy says that “[the

26 The Phenomenon of "The Look" Author(s): George J. Stack and Robert W. Plant Source: Philosophy and Phenomenological Research, Vol. 42, No. 3 (Mar., 1982), pp. 359-373

nude is a] presence that is both filled with and stripped of itself [...] offered without reserve but also without revelation.”²⁷ The figures in the paintings affect a similar nudity to that of the woman in the video. While the imagery in the exhibition as a whole might veer toward the sexual, there’s nothing bawdy or grotesque in it. All the figures expose their bodies and their selves from behind a veil of representation.

The difference between the figures (and their nudity) in the paintings and those projected, lies in the density of the veil that obscures real-ness and identity. Gestural and general, only a few scattered parts call attention to the detail in the paintings. The figures in them are *almost* androgynous. Their identifying anatomies are vague; only by looking closely can you see that each contains a male and a female. This has to do, in part, with the specificity of memory: it takes time and concentration to bring a memory into focus, enough to see details, and sometimes those details contradict one another. In contrast, the figure in the videos is most definitely a woman. Her sex is on display. We can see her flaws; there’s acne on her back and her circulation is bad. She is closer to us, closer to real.

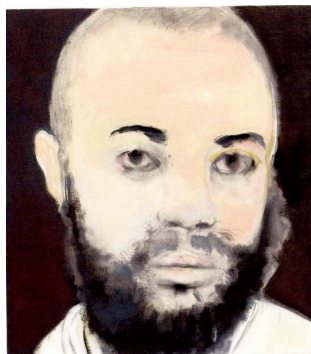
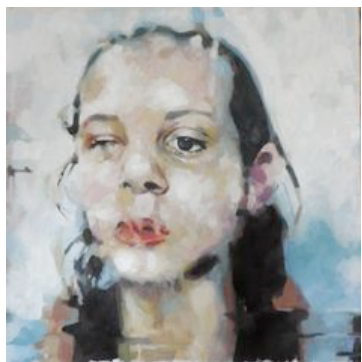


Figure 11. Jenny Saville, *Unknown* Figure 12. Marlene Dumas, *The Neighbor* 2005

²⁷ Nancy, Jean-Luc and Federico Ferrari. *Being Nude: The Skin of Images*. NY: Fordham University Press, 2014. Print. Pg.

This difference can be exemplified by comparing two portraits: one by Jenny Saville (above, left) and the other by Marlene Dumas: both paintings are masterfully made, both are representational in their imagery and both are slightly abstracted. Both portraits achieve an illusion of volume and depth. Their disparity lies in the question of the identity or sense of autonomy evinced by the subject of the portraits.

The young girl in Jenny Saville's portrait is an individual person. The painting goes beyond capturing a likeness; while the image is abstracted, with blurred features and shifted edges, the person in the picture has a presence, an underlying psychology. Jenny Saville works from direct observation and this fact comes through in the exactness of the girl's features. The man in the portrait by Marlene Dumas seems two-dimensional by comparison; his features are smoother, more generalized and more stylized, making the portrait seem more like an allusion *to* an individual than a depiction of an individual.

In Jenny Saville's portrait, there's depth in girl's right eye, her chin juts away from her neck which transitions from expertly modeled into abstraction near the bottom of the canvas. Her hair is just blocks of color- almost flat- and portions of her face blur and settle into the background. She is gazing into middle distance, neither engaging with us, nor looking away. The man in Dumas' portrait is *almost* looking at us. His eyes appear glazed but he too is looking into middle distance. His features are less voluminous but he isn't cartoonish. There's a difference, though, in the way his features are put together. While the girl in Saville's portrait seems totally whole, his face looks like a puzzle; his features appear to be an assemblage of rather than one, unified, whole. Marlene Dumas, unlike Jenny Saville, doesn't work from observation. She constructs her imagery from magazine cut-outs, photographs and reproductions, takes them out of one context and puts them into another. I believe it's this fragmentation, this disconnect, this layer of

distance that gives Dumas' pictures their vagueness.

Like the portrait by Marlene Dumas, my figures are pieced together and re-contextualized, but I am piecing together memories instead of found images. The figures' postures and gestures are sourced wholly from my imagination. That being said, these memories and imaginings emerge out of my training. They are possible only because I have spent so much time studying, observing and internalizing the figure - the figures of strangers and intimates as well as my own. As much as I refer to real people from my memories, and even my own body in some places, each figure exists as an amalgam of two or more characters from my past, never as a portrait of one individual. One memory is always blended with another, boiled down into a [subjectively] essential character. Each image synthesizes several memories and fuses them together in my attempt to make sense of a general, global dynamic between the self and the other.

In discussing one of her drawings, *Untitled 1940*, Louise Bourgeois describes a similar relationship and exploration of memory:

“Milan Kundera has said that when you leave your childhood, your relationship to what you have left becomes very important. You develop a certain attachment to it. To affirm your identity, you make the past—which in certain ways you hate—into a beautiful thing. But when you go back to the scene of the crime—I'm joking now—the actual scene of your early years, you don't recognize it. Either you have embellished it or torn it apart, or you have murdered it, or you have made it into a pie-in-the-sky. Whatever you did, you don't recognize it.”²⁸

She goes on to place particular emphasis on the geometry of the drawing—specifically the presence of symmetry—and how those geometries affect the meaning of the drawing.

And she talks about the way she approaches memory in her drawing in another passage:

“I am more interested in the abstract quality of the drawings than the subject. We are not talking about the recording of events, the recording of

28 Bourgeois, Louise with Lawrence Rider. *Louise Bourgeois: Drawings and Observations*. Bulfinch Press NY 1995. Pg. 24

emotions, the recording of motives. What we are talking about is a recording of lines and shapes; that is everything.”²⁹

It’s the transposition of memory into abstraction—and in my case abstraction and gestures as metaphor—that shapes the meaning of an image. Or, as Paul Ricoeur says, “...perception is not instantaneous[...] retention is not a form of imagination, but consists in a modification of perception.”³⁰ Even when paying attention to something as simple as your own pleasure in form, in line, in shape, it’s still *you* making the drawing. All your memories, fears, pleasures and pains still inform the pictures you produce.

29 Ibid. Pg. 21

30 Ricoeur, Paul. *Memory, History, Forgetting*. University of Chicago Press, 2009. Pg. 33

CHAPTER 7

PROCESS

Every one of the large works in this exhibition began with a soaking. At the outset, I doused each piece of paper with several applications of water and, while the paper was still damp, I made a gestural drawing using sumi ink. These ink stains provided a shadow from which figures emerged. The postures and arrangement of the figures were based loosely on smaller works but I worked more from my memory of what I had already done, decisions I'd already made, rather than copying those already completed images. This method gave me more room to improvise, explore and expand on the ideas in the smaller works.³¹

The works that hang in the hallway outside the gallery are literally scraps of paper;³² executed on the rear of old paintings and on top of old drawings. They are dirty and ripped, immediate and personal. I make them compulsively—for exorcism and meditation. There is no particular method to them, but I do have habits; I begin with a scribble and move on from there, identifying the whisper of a shape and making associations as I go. I use whatever materials are handy and I combine materials impulsively: inks, watercolors, colored pencils, acrylic paint and gouache mix together on the paper.

I mirrored this method when I made the video works. I had only the vaguest idea of what I wanted as I began dancing; I knew I wanted to remember and for the movement to come from those remembrances. I started each series of movements just by *beginning*

31 “Perhaps the most intimate, immediate works are her drawings. (“I always liked to draw,” Dumas tells me. “With painting the challenge is bigger.”) Cornelia Butler, Marlene Dumas, Lisa Gabrielle Mark, Matthew Monahan and Richard Shiff. *Marlene Dumas: Measuring Your Own Grave*. 2008 The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. Distributed art publishers inc.

32 Unlike a palimpsest, I didn’t alter the initial drawings and painting- I just worked on top of them.

and the dance emerged from that initial impulsive movement. And by following the impulse through to gesture and step—in the same way I might follow the lines and forms and composition of a drawing—I attempted to resolve it. In *Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty observes Henri Matisse going through a parallel creative process:

“Everything happened in the human world of perception and gesture [...] The chosen line was chosen in such a way as to observe, scattered out over the painting, twenty conditions which were unformulated and even in formulable for anyone but Matisse, since they were only defined by the intention of executing *that particular painting which did not exist*.”³³

Gesture was the foundation for the large-scale paintings, gesture drawing in the form of ink-shadows. As I added layer upon layer of ink, the shadows grew in volume and finally, by tentatively adding opacity with white acrylic paint, they slowly condensed and solidified. I allowed each stage in the painting process to leave a trace in the final work. For example, if I moved a figure, altered its position or adjusted a limb, I permitted an echo of the original thought, the original gesture, to remain. These repeating echoes threw into confusion the figure’s absolute position in space, they gave an impression of shifting perspectives, of movement through space and through time. I began to overlay and abut insubstantial and ethereal forms with forms that were more voluminous and solid. Their postures shifted, their faces moved, their eyes adjusted and then, with black acrylic, I began to define their outer boundaries. These edges began to contain the figures and then those delineations shifted too, and allowed the figures to breathe. Layering sumi ink white acrylic paint produces an interesting effect: placing the white *over* ink gives a very cool tone—almost blue—but laying ink over white makes for a very warm tone that

33 Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. ‘Indirect Languages and the Voices of Silence’, in Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, trans. by Richard C. McCleary, Evanston 1964, pp.39–83

verges on umber. I experimented with this effect over the course of making the large paintings and by this process I could pull out volumes and push forms back into space by means of a simple thin wash, which gave the figures their simultaneous, substantiality and insubstantiality.



Figure 13. Auguste Rodin, *Hands on a Sex* ca.1900

In his drawings and watercolors, Auguste Rodin, too, achieves a simultaneous union and disunion between figure and ground. The most affecting of these drawings, to my mind, accentuate the partition between figure and ground by isolating the figures in an expanse of naked paper, and then watercolor washes bind the figure and ground together into and onto one plane (exemplified by the image above). As a result of their confused relationship to the surface of the drawing, Rodin's figures appear both ethereal and substantial, seeming ghosts, but the ghosts in these drawings are voluminous, almost

tangible. This effect in his drawings makes me relate them to my experiences with dissociation. I'm sure it was not his intention, but Rodin's emotional distance, the voyeurism with which he made his drawings, mirrors the distance, the disconnect of dissociation.

The materiality of paper plays a key role in this effect of Rodin's drawings. If, for example, he had chosen to work in oil on canvas, the substantiality of the support would exert its influence over the drawing and, instead of achieving the effect of an ephemeral and distant slip of time, the work would take on the stability, fixed-ness, roughness and *firmness* of the canvas. I've chosen paper as the support for all the drawings and paintings in this body of work for this reason. And, beyond being a support, the paper plays as much of a role in producing meaning as the figures and their postures do.

Paper is thin, more or less smooth, tear-able; it affects a sense of impermanence, whereas a rigid surface, such as as stretched canvas or board, gives off a sense of indestructibility and of monumentality. To my mind, paper's ephemeral nature compliments the otherworldliness, the interiority of the images.

By installing my paintings and drawings to float an inch away from the wall of the gallery, I've tried to emphasize their materiality; I've attempted to straddle the divide³⁴ between a scrap of paper, a sketch to be thrown about, and an authoritative 'finished' work. This method of installation invites the viewer to notice the underbelly of the art-work by calling attention to the tears and creases in the paper, uneven edges and tack-holes clustered at the corners; all a result of several months worth of handling and manipulating the surfaces. Months that involved working with dirty hands and scrubbing at the paint on the surface, moving the paintings from one wall to another, dropping them

34 Maybe one I've introduced with my own prejudices.

and rolling them up. These signs of wear trigger a sense of fragility or impermanence and, at the same time, highlight their objecthood. The weight of the paper is important too: hot-pressed watercolor paper is stiff enough for you to notice its substance. And I removed the deckled edges to emphasize this even further; if my paintings were made, say, on rice paper, it would be too obvious.

CHAPTER 8

PERCEPTION AND CONCLUSION

Sensory input is not alone in producing our understanding of the world; fully processed perception synthesizes the information we take in through our senses with memory, prejudice, and fantasy.

“Perception is not representation: it is simulated action, projected into the world. Painting is not a set of visual stimuli, but a perceptual action of the painter who has translated, through his gesture on a limited medium, a code that evokes the scene he perceives, not the scene represented.

[...]

Because it is through the body that consciousness extends itself and is affected, perception becomes the means through which consciousness establishes itself as an integral part of the world. This is not a channel that simply filters in information from a separate environment, but rather it is a kind of interconnectedness that allows for a simultaneity in which both perceives the world through observation and interaction, and experiences the world revealing itself through its very essence.”³⁵

Sensory perception is information taken in by our senses that we then interpret and catalog; visual, aural, tactile and olfactory input come together to form a “picture” that simulates reality. Assumptions and guesses fill in the gaping holes that inevitably result in our understanding of an image, a space, or a relationship with another.³⁶ Our sense of space and sense of self or identity with that space relies on this sensory input and assumption. The phenomenological transformation of *abstract space* into *place* illustrates our sensory process:

I was so disoriented on my first visit to the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. It

35 Berthoz, Alain. *The Brain's Sense of Movement*. Pg 136. He goes on to say “The paintings move us because it reproduces the miracle of the images of Lascaux in reverse. I look at the canvas in the place of the painter who has projected into it his mental activity. A genius is someone who helps me to perceive things the way he does.”

36 “...Perceptual illusions are solutions devised by the brain to deal with sensory messages that are ambiguous or that contradict each other or the internal assumptions that the brain makes about the external world.[...]illusion is not an error or a bad solution, but rather the best possible hypothesis.” *ibid.* Pg. 242

seemed huge and foreign, a labyrinth with more visual information than it was possible to absorb. So focused on just holding onto the few bits of information I could process, I couldn't get a sense of the geography of the building; completely glazing over large parts of the architecture such as a marble staircase that leads to the upper galleries.³⁷ Following the interior courtyard around, I walked right by the staircase without noticing it, and since the hallway leads directly to the elevator, I took that to the upper floors. Once there, the galleries seemed vast and grand with even the paintings on the walls appearing intimidating and unreadable. I wandered in circles without knowing how I managed to get from one room to another.

A few years later, my second visit to the museum was a world apart. On my first day of work—I had been hired as a security guard—the building seemed smaller, calmer. From just one distant memory, the building had begun to take on a personality. In the seven (or so) years that followed, and as my relationship with the building evolved, my sense of the building evolved with it. The way I interacted with the museum changed several times, and some days I would play many roles at once: gallery guard, receptionist, conservationist and assisting in the curatorial department. As time passed, my relationship with the building became increasingly intimate. By the end of those seven years I knew every dusty, crumbly, corner of the building and the grounds.³⁸ In my job as a duster I had gone over every surface in the museum with a paintbrush; everything was familiar, every sculpture, every painting, every floor tile, tapestry, all the textures. I could blithely select what to notice and what to ignore. And, without turning on my flashlight, I could walk

37 My experience at the Gardner isn't unique; it's a weird source of frustration for the gallery guards who work there. I have one memory of a visitor asking me where the staircase was while we were standing in front of it.

38 I even have vivid memories of spaces and buildings that no longer exist; the carriage house and the greenhouses and the rose garden.

confidently through the rooms at night (there was usually moonlight streaming in through the courtyard). I relied on my memory far more than perception to navigate the spaces in the museum.

Through repeated (and repeated) engagement with the space, and by replaying and re-processing so much perceptual and emotional information, my sense of the museum transformed from unknown structure into a personality, into a home.³⁹ I had built a simulacra of the museum for myself, assigning context to the spaces by way of [so many] layers of memories. I had internalized the museum and had even established a lively, perhaps volatile, relationship with it. And now, having been away for three years, my sense of the Gardner Museum and my relationship with it and its spaces has changed again: the rooms are not so small as they were and I'm much less likely to race thoughtlessly through them. And the memories that inform my perception of the museum are more static, less malleable.

This same evolution of perception—beginning with the acquisition of information about the world in order to predict meaning and accessing knowledge and memory in order to contextualize perceptions—can be applied not just to how we experience and process the world and the spaces in it, but also to our relationships with others. Perception of another individual evolves over the lifespan of a relationship and it continues to evolve even after a relationship concludes. This process is not limited to our perception of the

39 Bachelard in *The Poetics of Space*: "...all really inhabited space bears the essence of the notion of home [...] the imagination functions in this direction whenever the human being has found the slightest shelter:[...]the imagination build[s] "walls" of impalpable shadows, comfort[ing] itself with the illusion of protection- or, just the contrary, trembl[ing] behind thick walls, mistrust[ing] the staunchest ramparts. In short, in the most interminable of dialectics, the sheltered being gives perceptible limits to his shelter. He experiences the house in its reality and in its virtuality, by means of thought and dreams. It is no longer in its positive aspects that the house is really "lived," nor is it only in the passing hour that we recognize its benefits. An entire past comes to dwell in a new house. The old saying: 'We bring our *lares* with us' has many variations. And the daydream deepens to the point where an immemorial domain opens up for the dreamer of a home beyond man's earliest memory." pp 5

other, perception of the relationship as a whole evolves as well. Beginning with observed information such as the other's demeanor and appearance and we expand our perception to the dynamic of interaction. We soon amass so much data that it's necessary to make generalizations, categories and titles, opinions, judgements and assumptions.

The large paintings in this body of work recreate this process visually. Not in-the-moment but after-the-fact. Time, information collected over time, and the distance and time between the present and the source of information, dramatically transforms our perspective—our understanding—of everything from an inanimate object to a space or to a person. And this is what the paintings, and the body of work as a whole, address(es): relationships with and people from my past and the struggle to see these people clearly when the initial information was distorted by dissociation. I emphasize a disparity between the images in the paintings and the *real* by placing the eight large-scale works in the same space as the two projections. While my difficulty with dissociation has exaggerated this disparity and confusion between internal and external experience, my research suggests that the disconnect is universal—with varying degrees of intensity. My hope is that this body of work will invite the viewer to consider their own experience with perception.

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PHOTOGRAPH OF THE ARTIST AT WORK



Figure 14. Photograph of the artist at work 2015