

NEVER FULLY RIGHT

A thesis presented to the Graduate School of
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ABSTRACT

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In my sculptural paintings, which I refer to as Hybrids, the covering/uncovering relationship between the beautiful and the repulsive elements is a metaphor for art's attempt to reveal Truth, which Heidegger describes in terms of the relationship between the "world" and "earth". Referencing James Turrell's work in regards to my volumetric light sculpture, I will demonstrate how it seeks to free the individual from the weight of maintaining a self-constructed reality, allowing one to experience temporary freedom from self and be open to the light of revelation. In further pursuit of this objective, my work enters the realm of time and sound based media. I will discuss three videos, one about the anxiety of maintaining a self-constructed reality, one about the search for truth of being, and one that aims specifically at experiencing what Heidegger calls Dasein, a primordial state of being in the world. For comparison I will examine Stan Brakhage's experimentations with visual perception and the act of seeing.

ARTISTIC PRECEDENTS & PERSONAL CONTRIBUTIONS

HYBRIDS

My Hybrids are abstractions that are process driven and play with the idea of using paint as a sculptural medium as well as combining it with other more traditional sculptural elements. At times I will juxtapose unlikely materials together to express dualities, such as natural versus man-made objects. The creation of the Hybrids is about multiples and repetition and result in organic compositions with highly built up surfaces that also break free from the boundaries of the traditional frame. There is also an element of ephemerality, since the latex paint strips start out soft but will harden over time, becoming more and more delicate. Adding an organic material such as marsh reeds further contributes to the idea of impermanence.

In this way my work parallels Eva Hesse's, whose career also began as a painter, but whose sculpture broke free from the confines of two-dimensionality and the containment of boundaries associated with Minimalism. Her abstractions are organic and often employ ephemerality in a similar manner, such as latex and rope pieces that become more fragile with time. Hesse's work plays with the force of gravity, often dangling towards and sometimes even laying on the floor. In the Hybrids, paint strips will sag and dangle towards the floor, letting gravity take over. My most recent work abandons the rectilinear substrate altogether, completely succumbs to gravity, and rests on the floor.

Unlike Hesse's work, I continue these inquiries further through exploration with

multiples and repetition. The work is put together intuitively through a process of cutting, rearranging and reassembling. This results in elements that become layered, overlapping and sometimes even interwoven. The hybrids often become so heavily layered that much of what has been created becomes hidden to the viewer.

For every element that further reveals the artist's intention, something becomes hidden beneath it. This revealing as concealing action of the layers becomes a metaphor for Heidegger's explanation for how the discovery of a new truth of being, the way in which humankind sees itself, is to come about. As the World reveals things to us, Nature is simultaneously is concealing. Where the occurrence of this strife is seen, that's where truth of being is revealed. (Heidegger 31) Heidegger explains that the discovery of a new truth, in the historical sense, can only be revealed through art, as science merely cultivates from that which is already known- what is possible and what is correct. The revelation of truth in a work of art shows something that has never been seen before. (Heidegger 37)

SPACE & LIGHT

In Jeffrey Kosky's essay "Contemplative Recovery", he examines the work of James Turrell in relation to religion, the Enlightenment and ideas of a post-secular world. While humankind had previously felt that truth could only be revealed through the light of a divine power, now people are put in control of their own realities. Religion has been replaced with reason. Truth is no longer determined through contemplation, but instead through knowledge gained from mastery and self-assertion. Kosky puts forth

that enlightenment has come with a high price, that, while humans control their reality through self-will, they are in bondage to it, afraid to let it go in order to experience anything else. He feels that letting go of this constructed reality would allow for enjoyment instead of anxious mastery of reality (Kosky 46-48). He sees Turrell's work as a vehicle to allow moderns to get back in touch with the power of contemplation. It is about the light of revelation and it has the power to shift our perception and give freedom from the onus of mastery.

Like Turrell's Light and Space work, my sculpture *Reliquarium*, is concerned with the search for the light of revelation in a secular world. The outside of it is unlike the work of Turrell and is a continuation of my previous work, dealing with multiples, repetition and materiality. However, when one peers into the inside, the interior contrasts from the exterior in that it's clean and simple, illuminated with violet and purple hues, flooding the vision of the viewer. It is representative of the light of revelation and is meant to bring about a meditative state, encouraging one to contemplate a knotted and split wooden board within, beautiful in its imperfection, a stand-in for a religious relic.

VIDEO

Seeking to further develop the investigation of illumination, perception and contemplation, my research has turned to non-conventional methods of video work. Avant-garde filmmaker Stan Brakhage was not interested in following the mainstream rules of photography, such as perspective and composition, but, rather, he was interested in developing new ways of seeing. He believed that a viewer experiencing projected light and rhythmic changes in visual imagery could

experience a metaphysical encounter. (Brakhage 31-34) Through the manipulation of the senses, his work takes one out of the passive role of the observer to become immersed in the scenery of the work.

Like Brakhage, my video work is process oriented and focuses on textural imagery, non-narrative sequences and emphasizes the properties of the moving image such as in his work *Text of Light* (1974). Other elements incorporated into my video work include tempo, repetition, flickering of visual elements, and the passage of light such as in Brakhage's *Mothlight* (1963). I am incorporating these elements into my video work with the aim of drawing the viewer into the moving picture and freeing them from the thinking mind.

The main way in which my work differs from Brakhage is the use of sound. He felt that, in general, the use of sound is superfluous to the visual aesthetics and would only detract from the desired effect on the viewer. In my videos, I place the viewer in a first-person role by using such things as the human sound of a heartbeat or breathing. This serves to reinforce the idea that the viewer is a part of the imagery and not a passive viewer. The aim is to allow the viewer to experience what Heidegger refers to as a primordial state, where the viewer is a part of the scene rather than a subject viewing an object.

WORK



Figure 1. *Revealing / Concealing*, 2016, Acrylic on wood, approximately (3x) 46 x 2.25 x 16 inches

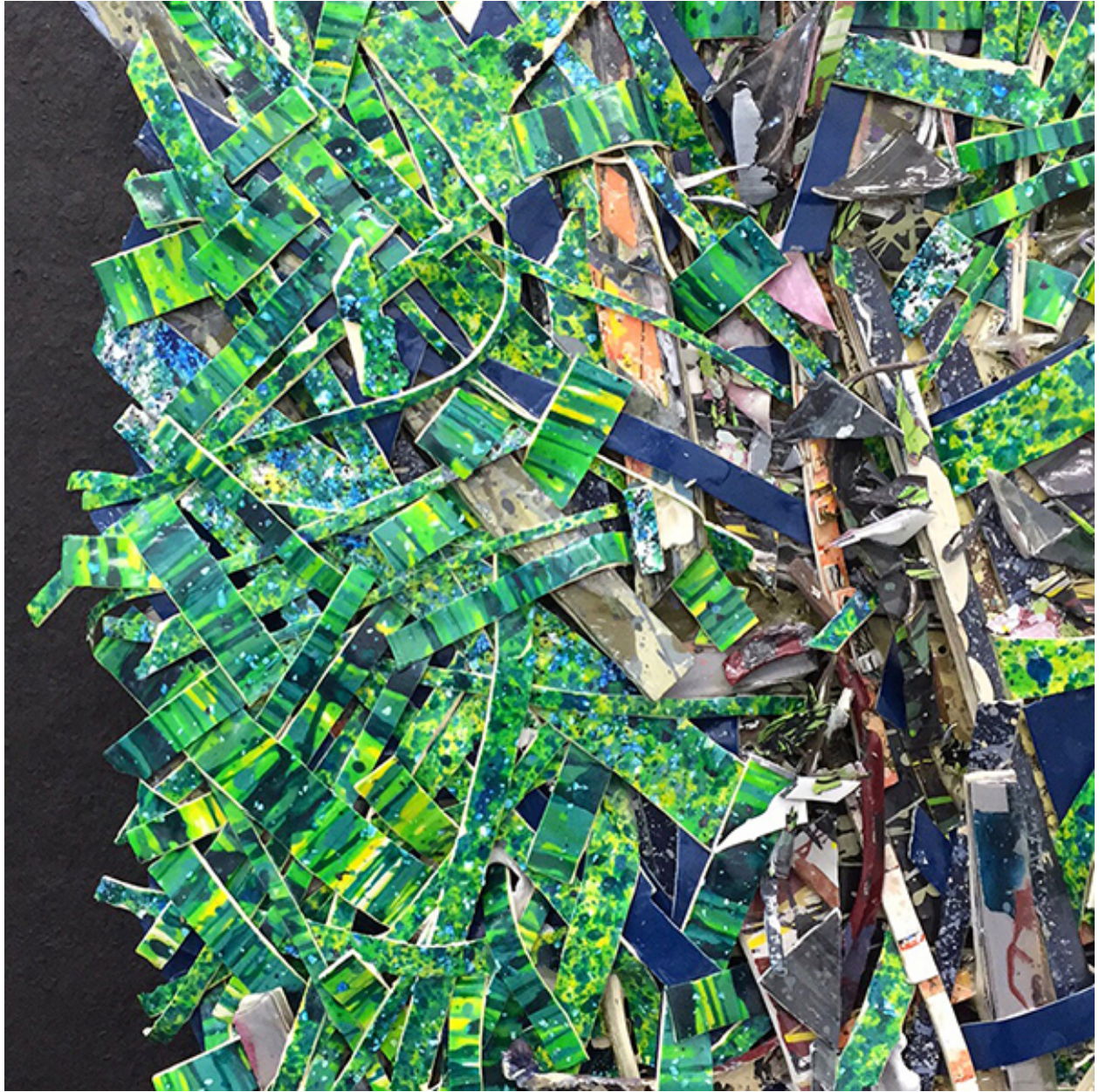


Figure 2. *Revealing/Concealing*, detail

The process that goes into the creation of the Hybrids is time-consuming, repetitive, and, above all, requires patience. They begin with creating compositions of thickly dried paint on a large piece of glass that is laid flat. These paintings are created

mostly through the dripping, splattering and pouring of paint in reverse order, foreground first and background last. Once the paint is dry and thick enough, the composition is cut into various sized pieces, removed from the glass and collaged down-side-up onto a wooden substrate. The paint pieces are mostly overlapping or interwoven into so many layers that most of the strips become completely covered or only partially seen to the viewer. It usually takes many compositions from a piece of glass to produce one final work on a substrate of roughly the same size.

The triptych nature of *Revealing/Concealing* is a nod to my faith-based upbringing and reveals an attraction to religious iconography and the comfort that I find therein, in spite of my current un-belief. In Loren Lerner's introduction to a set of essays from *Religion and the Arts*, she addresses the presence of religion in contemporary art. While practically no artist today claims a set of specific beliefs or a connection to a religious body, there has been a revival of faith-based subject matter in recent times. (Lerner 1) At the core of this revival is the idea that artists can uncover new grounds for discovery and experimentation that no institution is capable of revealing. It is not that conventional belief systems are going away but, rather, they have triggered new responses to theological doctrine. (Lerner 16-17) Both this piece and *Re-Cover / Un-Cover*, deal with the revealing as concealing nature of World and Earth and contain religious references as well.

The paint strips in *Revealing / Concealing* achieve sculptural dimension, go beyond the boundaries of a frame, and lack conformity to a rectilinear substrate. There is a push/pull relationship between the polarized elements of the

visually pleasing and the grotesque in this piece. The outer paint strips are made of pleasing, highly saturated color combinations and represent Earth. The grotesque center section is comprised of mostly de-saturated colored paint chunks and represents World. Together, the two parts serve as a metaphor for the push/pull relationship Heidegger speaks of. Once again, he explains that this action of World and Earth and the point at which the state of conflict is seen between them, is when a new truth of the essence of being can be seen. (Heidegger 31-33)



Figure 3. *Bitter Morass*, 2015, Acrylic, steel, plywood, and marsh reeds on wood, 55 x 10 x 39 inches



Figure 4. *Bitter Morass*, detail

In his essay, “The Question Concerning Technology,” Martin Heidegger saw the technological era arising out of the excesses of subjectivism, where the modern subject’s quest for mastery turns back onto itself and humans also become nothing but another resource to be mastered and optimized. (Heidegger 26-27) This offers a logical explanation for why science and technology, whose aims are to make life better for us, causes so much harm, from pollution to inhumane practices to nuclear fallout.

In addition to thick paint pieces, the Hybrid making process sometimes includes the combining of more traditional sculptural elements, such as in *Bitter Morass*. The

steel and plywood in this piece represent industry, technology and the idea of maximum output. They are the grotesque and appear as though a blight on the natural sculptural elements. The reeds, loosely interwoven into each other, function as the organic and more visually pleasing element of the work, antithetical to the manmade objects. Just as art's function can be to reveal truth, here the painting element, appearing as though a blanket being pulled away, is a metaphor for art's ability to reveal the fissure between World and Earth.



Figure 5. *Re-cover, Un-cover*, 2016, Acrylic and repurposed chips of house paint, on wooden substrate, 53 x 6 x 31 inches



Figure 6. *Re-cover, Un-cover*, detail

The biomorphic abstraction, *Re-cover, Un-cover*, is comprised of a wooden substrate and completely covered with heavily layered paint chips and paint strips. The color choices are reminiscent of representations of the Virgin Mary in historical religious paintings. The shape can be interpreted in many ways- a burial mound, a cross, a wound, female genitalia or a cocoon.

In the center are off-white paint scrapings that came off of a house being prepared for a new coat. The newer paint strips, which are heavily layered and interwoven into each other, contrast and grow out from the jagged paint chips. The juxtaposition of the old and new points to time and change. The work represents an in-between state. The cocoon, healing wound or genital shape suggests that a rebirth is about to happen and symbolizes metamorphosis. It is also a transition piece for my work and parallels the change of perception necessary to shed late-modernist views of art and truth.

According to Heidegger, in the search for truth, artists must identify when something new is taking form out from the earth and “help draw it into the light of the world”. This can only be accomplished if the artist sees the “fissure” that connects World and Earth. In the finding of Truth, one is bringing into being. (Thomson 3.6)



Figure 7. *Reliquarium*, 2015, Wood, nails, plastic diffuser, fluorescent lights, LED colored lights, power strip, and extension cord, 3.5 x 6 x 4 feet



Figure 8. Reliquarium, backside



Figure 9. Reliquarium, backside detail

When *Reliquarium* is approached from the front, the viewer sees white light coming through cracks of a wooden structure and there is a violet light refracting off the wall behind it. On the outside, this human-scale, volumetric light sculpture is a continuation of the practice of the cutting and reassembling multiples seen in the Hybrids. The outer shell of the structure is made using wood scraps, stacked together and fitting in a loose way, leaving many cracks. The building process is repetitious, intuitive and time consuming. Although the result resembles a rectilinear box, it resists geometric uniformity, as it is misshapen and full of irregularities. Between the outer shell and an inner box, there are white fluorescent lights surrounded by semi-transparent plastic sheets that function as a light diffuser. The light can be seen through the many cracks of the outer wall, but one cannot see within to locate the light's source, due to the diffuser.

As one makes their way around to the far side there is a stool in front of a window that allows one to view into an inner box- the source of the violet light. The stool invites the viewer to sit down in front of the window. Inside is a fractured, lone piece of wood, fetishized in a pure and flawless rectilinear container, flooded in colored light. Given the title of the piece, the viewer may wonder if the wooden artifact, a found object, is meant to be humorous or is it actually intended to be the object of adoration.

In contrast to the rugged exterior, the box within is perfectly constructed out of white melamine panels. The interior is illuminated by colored L.E.D. lights- two red and one blue, the light fixtures are not visible to the viewer. Due to the positioning of the light sources, these colors combine to make an intense violet light, while also creating a purple shadow from the plank on the back wall. They illuminate the partially split plank,

beautiful in its imperfection, mounted erect in the middle. With no visible fasteners, it appears to be standing all on its own.

Dasein, Heidegger's term for "being-in-the-world" goes beyond the subject/object duality that is intertwined in modern aesthetics. What we are and what the world is are interdependent: there is no such thing as a world apart from our experience. This is the primordial state of experiencing. (Thomson 3.6) *Reliquarium* is meant to do just that, draw the viewer in to become fully immersed in the work instead of separate from it.

Like Turrell's work, the saturated light in *Reliquarium* is meant to induce a state of contemplative vision. Those who are confined to their own self-determined world may see the artifact as nothing more than a humorous imposter of a relic. If one can let go internal resistance caused by fear, then one can let go of the self-constructed reality, enter a state of contemplation and be open to experience the light of revelation.



Figure 10. *The Great Reality*, 2016, Stop Motion Video, 0:42 (looped)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jo9mfVtC9Gc>

In a continuation of the previous work, *The Great Reality* is made using its leftover wood scraps and the same type of lighting. It is made using stop-motion animation and is another way to engage in a slow and repetitious process. Using many scraps in each photograph, there was a lot of set-up time involved. It was shot in single frames with a camera and then taken into an editing program and spliced together.

The animation is run on a loop and shows a close-up of scraps of wood flowing in towards the camera lens and then away from it in an endless cycle. An unlikely accompaniment to wooden blocks is the sound of water gurgling, which reinforces the tide-like motion. This tidal motion plays back into the theme of the revealing as concealing nature of World and Earth. The wave of blocks flowing towards the camera

is concealing and going away from it is revealing. Halfway through the tidal motion there is a rumbling sound and rising/falling motion of the blocks, representing the fissure wherein Truth is revealed.

A continuation of the concepts discussed in the light sculpture, this piece brings in the fourth dimensional elements of time and sound. The repetitious, cyclical nature of this work combined with the light and sound have a calming and almost hypnotic effect and is meant to draw in the viewer to be completely immersed in the work, not apart from. This reinforces the notions of self-forgetting, freeing the viewer to experience a primordial state of being.



Figure 11. *Tosspot*, 2016, video, 1:32 (looped)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M8fnHT0sySM>

In *Tosspot*, an out-of-focus close up of ginger ale pouring into and overflowing a bottle of apple juice was recorded. The image is completely unrecognizable to the viewer and appears as a moving image that is a textural, shimmering golden color. There is cutting and the insertion of white and black screen transitions that are interspersed between these textural clips. Overlaying the video are transitions between the sounds of anxious breathing and periods of silence.

Tosspot allows the viewer to experience what it feels like to be caught up in addiction. This is achieved by placing the viewer in the position of first person through visual effect and the human sound of distressed breathing, thus the video impresses

upon the viewers that they are part of the experience and not an outside observer. The abstract imagery, the back-and-forth between silence and anxious breathing, and cyclical nature of the looped projection all work together to give the viewer a psychological impression of being stuck in the cycle of addiction. This relates back to being in bondage from the anxious mastery of ones own reality, as discussed in Kosky's essay. The struggle to maintain ones own self-constructed reality of denial and justifying this destructive behavior is exhausting. One has to let go of this control over realty in order to be placed in a position that is open to the light of revelation, a new truth of being.



Figure 12. *Unsuspected Inner Resource* 2016, Video, 0:57 (looped)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qUnNj-z45qo>

Unsuspected Inner Resource is a projected video and comprised of many quickly-timed cuts between out-of-focus shots of running stream water. These video shots are blurry close-ups and difficult to recognize. The frames are sliced many times, jumbled up and reassembled. The result is a textural video of moving images. The stream sounds are cut out and replaced with a steady, rhythmic beat of a normal resting heart rate, which is also synced to the frame changes in the video and a flickering effect. The video has the tempo of Stan Brakhage's *Mothlight* (1963) and imagery similar to *Text of Light* (1974), though it is achieved in a different manner. It is process

based and a series of many splices of video, strung together, uninterrupted and run on a loop. The imagery is unrecognizable footage of running water in a river.

Like Brakhage's *Text of Light*, this piece is a metaphor for perception itself. Flashing and flickering effects keep the mind's eye from wandering away from the moving image, keeping the viewer immersed in the artwork (Brakhage 45). In other words, though the viewer's attention may try to stray, the constant flickering snaps the viewer back from the mind, which enables one to simply experience the textural imagery, free from the thinking. Additionally, because the footage is out-of-focus the subject is unrecognizable, therefore the viewer will eventually stop trying to make sense of what he or she is seeing and simply experience it. These elements are reinforced by the steady heartbeat, which has a hypnotic-like effect and, after a while, becomes white noise. Using a different delivery system, this video piece expresses a similar aim as that of *Reliquarium* in that the viewer is immersed in the experience of viewing and becomes a part of, rather than apart from, the work.

CONCLUSION

In summary, my studio practice has evolved from sculptural paintings to light and space sculpture to fourth-dimensional time and sound-based work. Yet, through these changes in medium, the underlying process has stayed the same. The work is created intuitively by way of slow, repetitive actions, implementing methods of cutting, slicing and reassembling multiples of pieces.

Dasein, Heidegger's term for "being-in-the-world" goes beyond the subject/object duality of modernist aesthetics. The world and our sense of being are intertwined, our experience cannot be separated from the world. This state of interconnectedness is the primordial state of experiencing. (Thomson 3.6)

This body of work serves to reveal a path that moves beyond late-modernist ways of thinking and into Heidegger's idea of the primordial experience and post-modernism. The revelation of the fissure between World and Earth is where we find truth, allowing us to find a new understanding of being, and the Hybrids serve as metaphors for this. The light sculpture serves to induce a contemplative state within viewers, allowing for them to enter a state of self-forgetting and total immersion into the work. Finally, using a time and sound-based medium, projected video continues this line of inquiry and allows for the viewer to experience the primordial state of being.

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