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### What Painting Can Do

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# WHAT PAINTING CAN DO

By Michael Schreyach

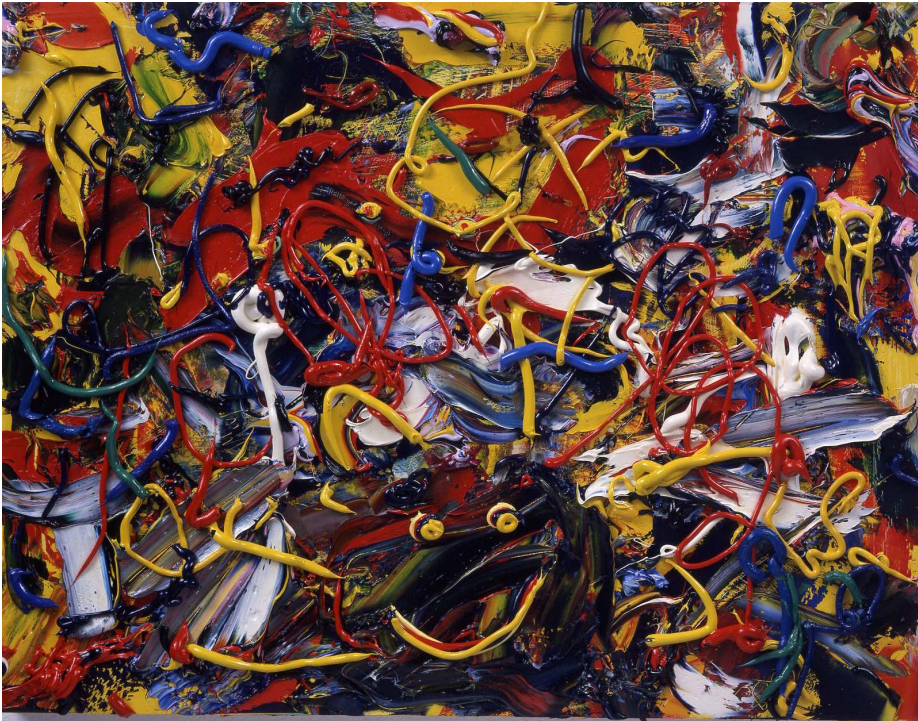
## **1: Surfacing**

All paintings metaphorically face their viewers, but not all literally feature faces. Michael Reafsnyder has become widely recognized for his colorful abstract surfaces livened with quirky personages, chief among them a centrally placed smiling visage that has been a staple of his imagery for two decades. Critics and audiences alike have interpreted the entity as a sign of either playful exuberance or cynical irony (sometimes both). Yet either verdict fails to capture the relationship in Reafsnyder's art between the being that virtually "faces" us and the formal problem of *pictorial address*.

A mode of pictorial address regulates the relationship between a painting and its beholder and also facilitates the artist's communication. Doubly inflected, pictorial address can be understood as a dialectical structure of presentation and reception: it is the fiction of a painting's self-display or self-signaling that is created by the artist. Paintings are actual objects, but they are imbued with the virtual power to face us. Like being greeted by another person, pictorial address does not merely stimulate an automatic reaction, but also solicits an involved response. It implies a form of acknowledgement under which the picture's materialization (as a marked surface), its virtualization (as an image), and its temporalization (as a dynamic plane) may, in our experience of the object, be correlated with our efforts to understand what it communicates as a work of art. In other words, the notion of pictorial address depends on a viewer's recognition of the means by which Reafsnyder's paintings focus one's attention and guide one's responses along the way to interpreting his meaning (or expression, or statement, or intent).<sup>1</sup>

To be sure, that relationship has often been thematized by the conspicuous smiling (not *smiley*) faces for which his images are known.<sup>2</sup> Hints of what would become the signature visage appeared in Reafsnyder's work in the late 1990s, and the motif was firmly established in such paintings as *Feast* (2000) and *Sunday Best* (2001). In this year's *Evening Delight* (2019), two members of a more recently devised family of biomorphic personages bracket the older, archaic type. It is possible to see the advent of the smiling face as a solution to the problem of pictorial address (see plate p. 49). In particular, the smiling face acts as a kind of control on two typical reactions to gestural abstraction. The first is the tendency of viewers to see the surface primarily as a repository of the artist's putatively spontaneous activity, wherein each mark is equated with the personal expression of "feeling" (a habit that tends to privilege affective responses over the interpretation of pictorial effects). The second is the propensity of viewers to project into any complex accumulation of marks and colors an arrangement or pattern that can be mistaken for the depiction of objects (as might happen when gazing at clouds). As we shall see, the smiling entity challenges this generic polarity.

To begin with an early example, consider *Feast*, where Reafsnyder applied a number of lines and ringlets of oil paint squeezed copiously from tubes over an already glutted surface. Nevertheless, the initial battery of passages, marks, scrapes, and smears collaborate to yield the sense of a more-or-less even plane lying under the coils and curlicues, which sit decisively on top of the field as if on an invisible scrim. The consequence is a visual disparity between "surface" and "screen," and thus between whatever dimensional "space" we might perceive to be projected by the field, and the planar "space" demarcated by the floating curtain of squeezed lines.<sup>3</sup> The smiling face is at least in part an attempt to fuse the levels. Its eyes and mouth are lines and circles on the scrim; its rounded face belongs to the field. Reafsnyder has positioned its features within smeared passages that mix colors into a cloudy paste, while the sunshine rays that help define the circumference of the head seem simultaneously part of its physiognomy yet independent of any depictive function. The capacity of the face to read as both of the surface and of the



Feast (2002)



Sunday Best (2001)



*Feast, 2002*

screen amalgamates the disparate spatial and planar effects of the painting's surface. The importance of the formal role that the face plays in this dynamic accommodation of one pictorial space to another far outstrips its (presumed) status as an index of the artist's emotive expressiveness or his childlike revelry in sheer materiality.<sup>4</sup>

Turn now to the visage in *Evening Delight*, which seems to parody the typical routine of viewing gestural abstraction: looking for faces and finding them. Here, Reafsnnyder offers us an easy target. The smiling personage happily acknowledges that into any amorphous visual phenomenon viewers will automatically project shapes they see as resembling real things. The entity in *Evening Delight* channels the response: *here is the face, not there*. Reafsnnyder explains, "It interrupts what you think you are going to get, or proposes what you think you are going to get, but it also allows you to do what you might be inclined to do anyway—namely, find things in abstract paintings."<sup>5</sup> By conspicuously but playfully managing our projections, the face releases us from the game of finding faces everywhere. But it also marks a passage from the frivolous to the serious. Far from being



Evening Delight (2019)

a gratuitous gesture, the inclusion of the smiling entity is meant to thwart the passive enjoyment of these canvases as mere abstract compositions. We are confronted instead by works that must be faced in a posture of active interpretation. This means, going forward, paying careful attention to the specificity of Reafsnyder's achievement in particular works of art. Of special importance is an account of his practice in relation to four categories (including the present one) that I suggest are fundamental for understanding his work in general: *surfacing*, *spacing*, *siting*, and *timing*.

## **2: Spacing**

What quality of space might an abstract painting project, and what content might that space hold? Reafsnyder's formal and philosophical inquiry into these questions is ongoing. In general, his mode of abstraction produces a pictorial flatness that not only exists in pointed contrast to conventional spatial illusionism, but visually compresses the shallow *bas-relief* of his thickly painted surfaces into a virtual, but still optically dense, imagistic plane. Especially in slick passages of striated quasi-geometries, the paint seems to press against the linen surface from behind and ultimately seep or even surge through it.

In *Salsa King* (2018), a central vertical imprecisely bisects a colorful streaked array. Such edges or "lines" result from Reafsnyder's application technique: using a sizable palette knife or the edge of a long piece of plastic (e.g., Plexiglas) he is able to smoothly drag wide swaths of acrylic over large areas of canvas. Here, the pull has preserved the impression of a nearly continuous gesture. The axis marks a resting point where the painter paused before resuming his action, perhaps to adjust the angle of the Plexiglas plank or to better control the pressure applied to it. (The crevice is in fact a physical depression, and it digs into paint layers.) Where the indented line now appears to intersect the horizontal sweep of banded colors, it creates the sensation of a fold or channel out of which those hues flow, as if streaming toward us from the other side of the plane. The



Salsa King (2018)





Salsa King, 2018

liquid effect is bolstered by blobs and droplets pooling elsewhere on the canvas. Viewers sense an onrushing of color that swells toward them, yet that—as the vibrant bands collide with the apparent picture plane—stretches and spreads laterally toward zones of peripheral vision. The twofold visual effect is of a radiant display that is both impacted and dispersed. To adopt a term from the teaching of Hans Hofmann (one that was taken up by the critic Clement Greenberg), Reafsnnyder’s “re-created” flatness suspends color within a taut but still flexible screen and establishes a high-definition picture space that is at once puzzlingly planar *and* dimensional.<sup>6</sup>

That description is meant to capture the complex optical effects of these paintings and to connote a kind of unspecified spatial extension that is neither depth nor volume in the usual sense. It would be misguided to describe Reafsnnyder’s picture space as lacking pictorial dimension according to this amplified definition, especially in light of the artist’s precise control of color relationships that can alternately tighten and loosen areas of the fluctuating

array. Although his surfaces flatly contest the still-automatic tendency of viewers to compare any picture—whether figurative or abstract—to a norm of naturalistic space containing real objects, Reafsnyder nonetheless is concerned with expressing the plenitude and internal coherence of his unique space. In *Red Baron* (2018), vertical and horizontal striated passages mainly respect the midline  $x$  and  $y$  axes of the support. (An emergent cruciform stands out near the top right corner, where diagonal swipes meet the bars of a right angle.) The incipient cross-brace internalizes the painting's physical dimensions as it helps stamp out the totality of the array. At the same time, the partitioning of the surface area into approximate quadrants by these mesial passages suggests the division of a glass pane by grilles or muntins. By somewhat obvious analogy, the tactic calls to mind a central metaphor of a traditional painting as a "window." While Reafsnyder's abstractions obviously do not yield "views" on these terms, his surfaces nonetheless harbor something that suggests a norm of transparency. In our experience of his work, we see the power of abstract space to contain a *world*.

Still, the contradictory commitment to flatness and depth, to planarity and dimensionality, presents Reafsnyder with a seemingly intractable problem: how to preserve a sensation of depth while simultaneously renouncing the chief technique—shading in light and dark—by which the imitation of space and its objects is most convincingly achieved as a visual illusion. Although many modern abstract painters have endeavored to create pictorial space through color relationships rather than through tonal modeling, shading remains the most effective means of convincing viewers of a depiction's verisimilitude.<sup>7</sup> Suggesting the mass of objects by representing the light and dark values that consistent illumination would produce on them is a powerful tactic when used by artists to represent the natural world. Clearly, creating such visual likenesses is not Reafsnyder's goal. Nonetheless, one senses in his paintings an almost preternatural reluctance to relinquish—to the vagaries of abstract "mark-making" for its own sake—the types of pictorial structure and form with which tonal modeling has traditionally been allied. In view of that commitment, a particular facet of Reafsnyder's technique assumes



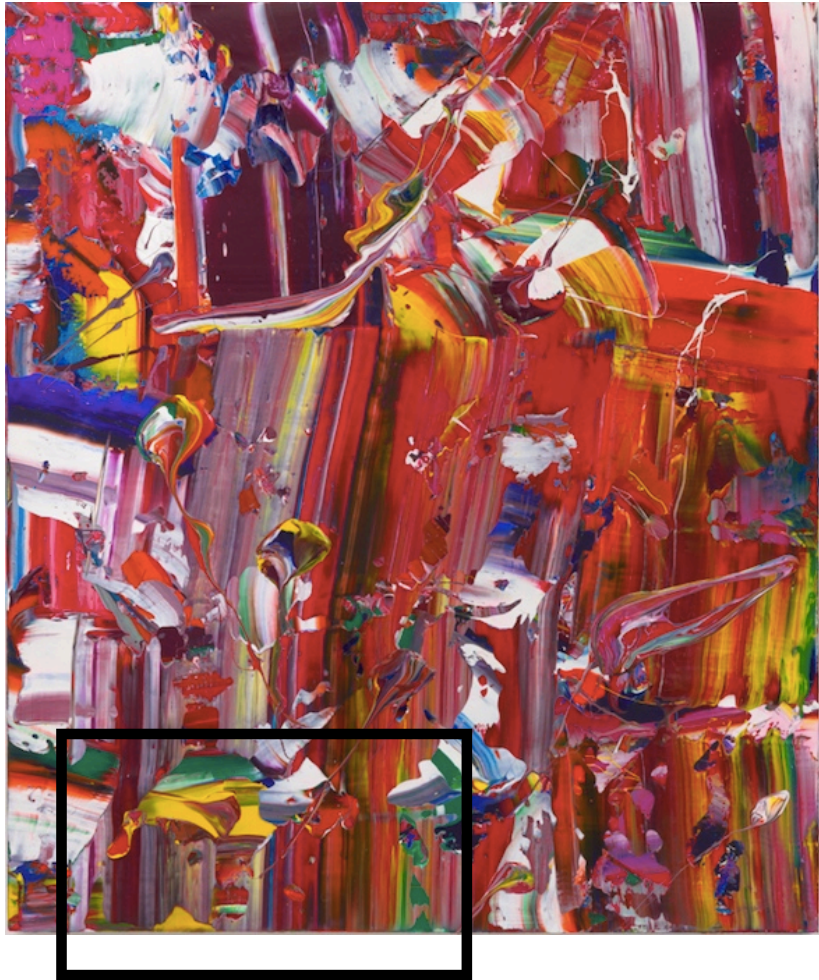
Red Baron (2018)



*Red Baron, 2018*

heretofore unremarked significance. As I mentioned above, characteristic features of his surfaces are the broadly swiped passages comprising sequences of vibrant color stripes that he forms with customized flexible planks of Plexiglas. (Of course, he also uses traditional palette knives.) In *Sunny Flow* (2019), a striated bar of red, orange, yellow, and purple sweeps upward from the lower edge of the canvas. Within the area, the slender parallel “lines” achieve a degree of independence from neighboring ribbons. Yet the effect of a continuous modulation of hue and value across the zone prevents us from describing those lines as independent “strokes.” That is, the longitudinal streaks seem to result not from a sequence of individually applied marks but rather from a single—almost impossibly broad—gesture (see plate p. 75).<sup>8</sup>

Typically, a painter can achieve such an effect by loading a large brush with unmixed colors, relying on the physical press and drag of the brush’s flexible hairs across the surface to “blend” them together. Reafsnnyder’s instrumental modification slightly alters the formula. The rigid edges of Plexiglas more readily preserve the independence of each ribbon of color. Because



Sunny Flow (2019)





*King Cruiser*, 2017  
*Charcoal Soul*, 2019

the areas exhibit internal color variation plus physical striation, the wide slabs begin to suggest something like *forms* modeled in light and shade. (The tight or loose spacing of hues as well as their texture suggest hatching, a conventional means for rendering illumination across a surface, especially in drawing and etching.)<sup>9</sup> The re-emergence of that tonal convention, however vestigial it may be, conveys in turn the impression of volumetric fullness without resorting to more traditional means of rendering naturalistic space. When Reafsnyder restricts his palette to grisaille, as he does in *King Cruiser* (2017) and *Charcoal Soul* (2019), the effect is even more pronounced.

Given Reafsnyder's eschewal of light and dark modeling proper, other features of his Plexiglas instruments and their utilization deserve emphasis. The planks are either opaque (black), translucent (white), or transparent (clear). In other words, the plastic material itself reproduces the gamut of the tonal scale running from black to white (with clear acting as a middle-value gray). While painting, Reafsnyder views the Plexiglas against the "background" of the color surface. Depending on whether or not the plastic is clear, white, or shaded, the juxtaposition of the plank (nearer to his eyes) and the surface (in the background) exposes the value shifts between hues. The visual information allows him to more precisely adjust color combinations in the service of the spatial and perceptual effects he seeks to realize. Moreover, the width of the blade and its angle relative to the plane permits him to frame particular views of the surface in progress. And



King Cruiser (2017)



Charcoal Soul (2019)



Michael Reafsnyder  
in the studio painting *Bliss*

if he is using clear plastic, he is able to see through the blade in order to determine exactly where and when to increase or decrease pressure during a swipe.

Finally, Reafsnyder accumulates different “value piles” of scrapes along the length of the Plexiglas, which he can use in other areas of the surface to push modeling back into the equation. Remarkably, at the level of his instrumentation and within his activity of painting, Reafsnyder sets within his view and within his reach a kind of standard against which to judge and thereby control color shifts in relation to the value scale. Although he eradicates the traditional means for depicting the illusion of space or depth (shading in light and dark), he preserves it in his technical practice (using white and dark Plexi).

Reafsnyder began using Plexiglas planks in 2008, a few years after he switched from oil to acrylic paint.<sup>10</sup> Physical differences between the two media motivated him to experiment with different tools and procedures of application. As he explained in an interview:





With oil you could always go back into [the painting]. You could make decisions, but you could flub them a little bit, you could manipulate the timing a little bit. But with acrylic those decisions have to be made faster, and they become much more specific.<sup>11</sup>

Hence, the importance of devising a way to keep painterly options open even as decisions have already been made: a large piece of Plexiglas functions not just as an instrument for regulating color, but as a “palette” that preserves along its length a material record of Reafsnyder’s artistic choices—and that can be mined for alternative routes, the roads not taken. Moreover, the plank can switch instantly from being a tool of accumulation and application to one of excavation and modification: its color piles can be transferred to other areas of the canvas, or its edges can be used to gouge a line or contour into layers of paint. Not only does Reafsnyder cut Plexiglas to various lengths and widths, he also manages thickness. Variable combinations of these properties determine the degree of flex in the plank and the tension or relaxation of movement it will allow. Incised lines scattered across the surface of *Bliss* owe their gawky appearance to the sharp corner of a piece of Plexi long enough to be unwieldy (see image p. 11). The painter nonetheless managed to use it as a scratchy stylus.

When accounting for the historical dominance of imitation within Western visual representation, scholars often privilege the technique of light and dark shading. To be sure, chiaroscuro is a highly efficient means of suggesting the likeness of a mass in space. And in instances where value modeling is employed in conjunction with one-point perspective, the results have proved to be authoritative. But there exists another important, although less frequently highlighted, technique for suggesting form: one that relies on the manipulation of complex contours. The art historian Michael Baxandall has pointed out a basic contrast between the two modes that helps illuminate a key feature of Reafsnyder’s art. (Although it might seem unusual to invoke an analysis of Renaissance painting in the context of an essay on contemporary abstraction, there are good reasons to do so, as will become clear.) In his landmark *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth*

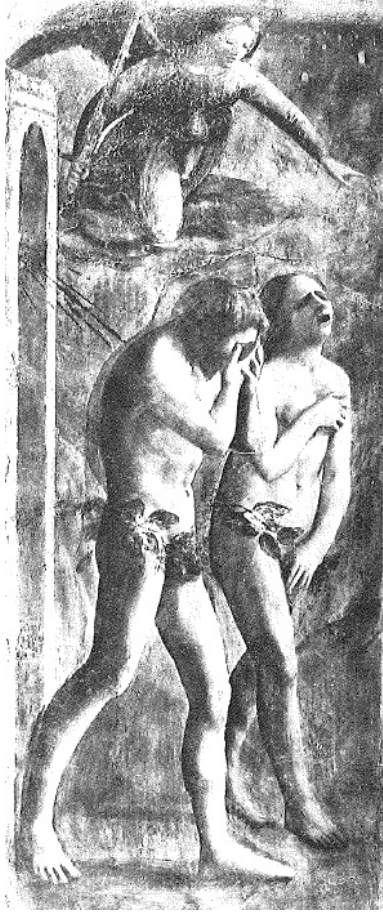


Masaccio, *Expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden*, Brancacci Chapel, Santa Maria del Carmine, Florence, Italy, ca. 1424-1427

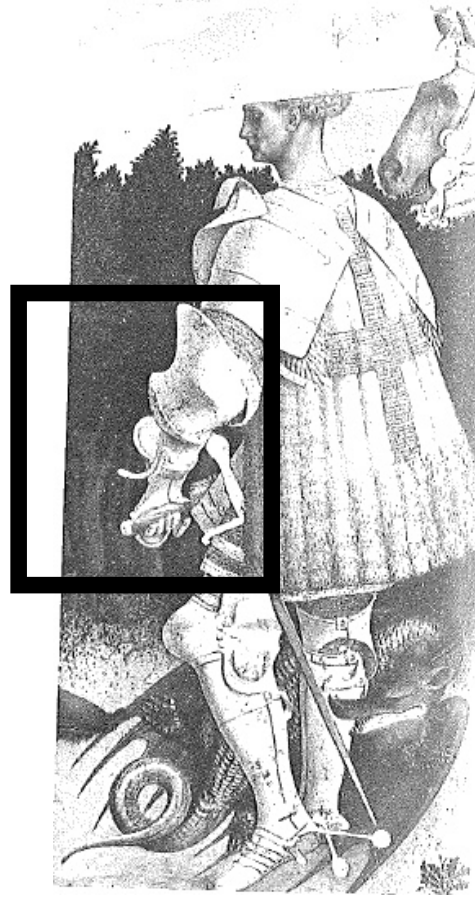
Pisanello, *The Virgin and Child with Saint George and Saint Anthony Abbot*, ca. 1435-41 © National Gallery, London

*Century Italy*, Baxandall compares the Tuscan convention of suggesting mass by representing the tones of light and shade on an object or body under consistent illumination (think of Masaccio) with a divergent north Italian tradition exemplified by Pisanello.<sup>12</sup> In *The Virgin and Child with Saint George and Saint Anthony Abbot*, the twisting edges of St. George's armor (which seem to encircle his left arm like ivy winding around a branch) visualize the rotation of masses in volumetric space, without solely relying on shading.

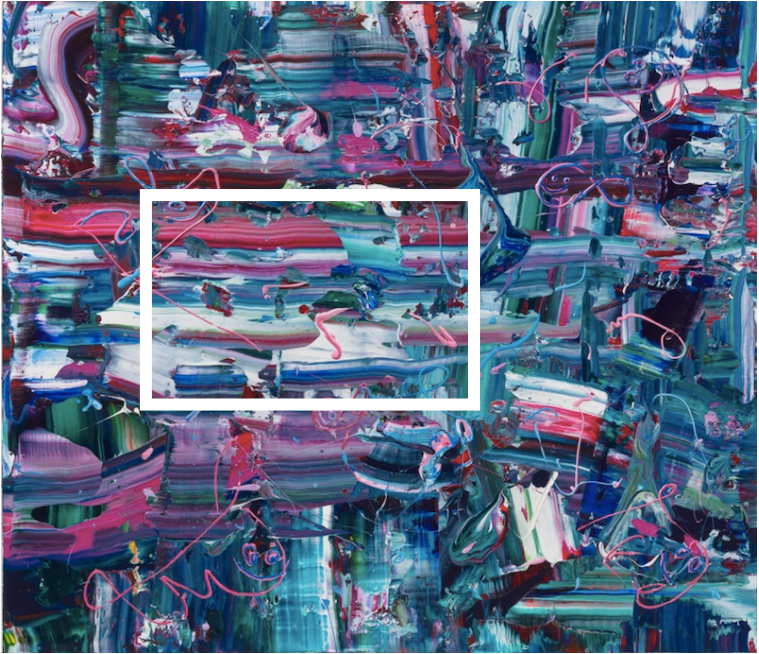
Once we have identified the convention of employing snaking contour lines to suggest torsion independently of chiaroscuro in Pisanello's art, it becomes easier to see how the technique pertains to describing certain features of Reafsnyder's surfaces. Here again, a careful technical analysis of the image is crucial. In *Sea Friends* (2019), Reafsnyder creates "dimensional" yet "flattened" space by overlapping striated color areas with irregular contours. Although some of those passages are actually swiped over previous applications, they often appear to be on the same plane, so one of the strongest visual cues for signaling depth—one plane or object obstruct-



Masaccio



Pisanello



Sea Friends (2019)

ing the view of another—is compromised. But since, as I’ve already suggested, the color ribbons *within* the striated zones function like parallel lines used to model forms in space, it is as if Reafsnnyder simultaneously provides us with a conventional cue for depicting masses in volumetric space (hatching) and rescinds another (occlusion). In other words, he draws our sight into the field (thus soliciting us to enter the painting’s depth), yet he immediately moves the viewer’s eyes across the surface (thus deflecting our entrance into the painting’s depth) (see plate p. 37). The sheer adjacency of color areas begins to contribute to the vertiginous effect. The painter’s multi-directional drags, pulls, peels, and excavations produce scraped edges between contiguous areas of paint. These meandering ridges and winding “lines” seem to twist and turn into space like those of St. George’s armor. For instance, just above dead center and to the right of a loopy personage, observe the interruption of a mostly red, blue, and purple by an aqua passage that channels through it. While it might be inaccurate to describe the edge between them as a proper *line*, it nonetheless begins to function as the implied contour of a complex form. The dynamic effect bears comparison to Pisanello’s intricate silhouettes, which situate masses and activate their rotation in illusionistic space.

Given what we have seen of Reafsnnyder’s exacting manipulation of materials and techniques in pursuit of surfaces and imagery with particular effects of spacing and facing, none of this should be surprising. But what is extraordinary is the mounting evidence of his keen sensitivity to traditional problems that are central to painting as an art. He demonstrates that those problems—and the contemporary visualization of solutions to them—continue to be at the heart of discovering what painting (now) can do. And what it can do is nothing less than to investigate the present conditions and historical conventions under which pictorial communication is possible.

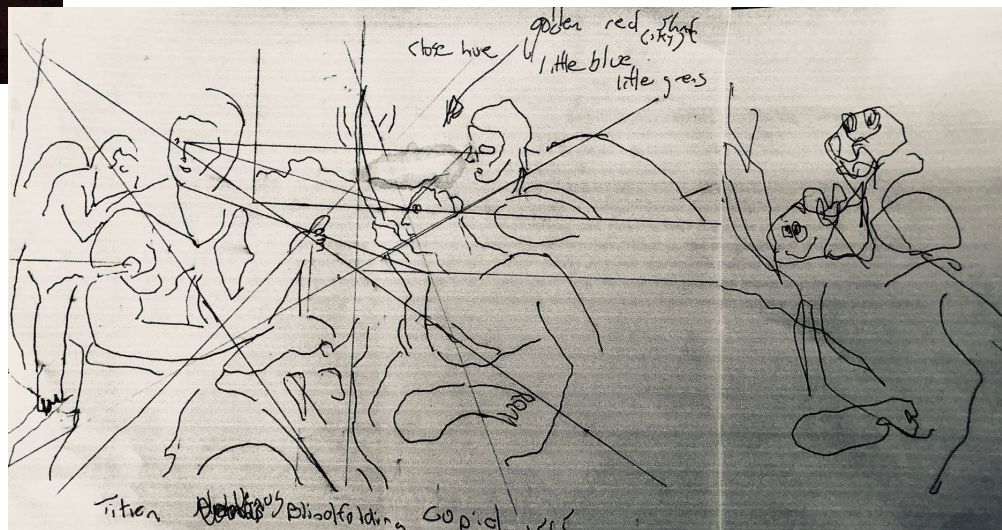
### 3: Siting

Reafsnyder self-consciously involves himself with certain recalcitrant but ineluctable formal problems of painting, such as those I've been discussing. "Creating volume is a tricky space in my mind," he has said, continuing:

I often think about how it is possible to create the tension that potential volume contains while still moving the viewer's sight across the surface. . . . I often wonder how full a volume can be before too much space is created. . . . I see [indications of volume] as a device to create an effect of deep space that refuses to ever go back, while fulfilling the desire to do so.<sup>13</sup>

This statement reflects a seriousness of purpose that might seem at odds with the playful exuberance exemplified by his buoyant art. But as testimony to Reafsnyder's commitment to engaging with such problems, consider another aspect of his practice. Around the same time that he began using various shades of Plexiglas planks to preserve his sense of tonal modeling and value shifts while painting brightly colored surfaces, he made a habit of diagramming masterworks of Renaissance and Mannerist artists, including Titian, Pontormo, Rosso Fiorentino, Jacopo Bassano, and Tintoretto.

Since Reafsnyder chooses not to work from plans or sketches, it would be a mistake to construe the diagrams as templates for paintings. Still, the exercise has sensitized him even more to the strategies by which past artists have staged interactions between persons within narrative scenes. Moreover, the practice helps him see how painters have contended with characters and their actions in relation both to the work's literal surface and its depicted space. In his diagram of Titian's *The Education of Amor* (ca. 1488/90-1576), Reafsnyder has drawn a network of lines over a schematic rendering of the group (Venus, Cupid, his brother, and two nymphs). Diagonals





ruled from corner to corner mark the geometric center of an ideal picture plane, which is also pinpointed by intersecting horizontal and vertical midlines. But it is important to note that aside from those precisely measured crossings, the linear scaffold Reafsnyder has sketched does not mathematically subdivide the surface. His diagrams are not grids, nor are they motivated by an interest in mapping the abstract geometries underlying compositional unity (or even in discover-ing hidden symmetries). Rather, they track patterns of interaction. The other lines of the diagram indicate the invisible lines of sight that bind the protagonists to each other through the exchange of glances—or in the case of the blindfolded Cupid, glances not exchanged.

In the margin of his diagram proper, Reafsnyder has rendered two of Titian's figures in the style of his personages. The grinning faces are the creaturely translation of the nymphs who deliver to Cupid his traditional accoutrements: a bow and a quiver filled with the arrows of love (aptly, those darts are themselves metaphors of amorous glances between the eyes of soon-to-be lovers). But Reafsnyder is not simply using the nymphs as models for his own imagery. The transcribed faces are an idiosyncratic re-imagining and intensification of the affective and existential modes of being he attributes to Titian's characters. In other words, Reafsnyder's diagrams are not merely a tool for analyzing compositions (as if he were simply trying to discern the mechanics of picturing); nor are they raw material for future paintings. Rather, they are the means by which he contemplates the relationship between the inhabitants of Titian's allegorical world and the pictorial space within which they exist and act. The relevance of the exercise for Reafsnyder's pictures should be clear.

There are a number of considerations to bear in mind when thinking about the appearance of Reafsnyder's multiplex personages. The little figures are essential not only for guiding a viewer's eyesight across the plane, but also for establishing each painting's mood, tone, or scale (both physical and temporal). More strongly stated, they are vital to the meaning each work contains. Thus, assessing their distinct types of materialization and modes of existence is paramount for the task of interpretation. As a first step, we must take into account the formal relationship

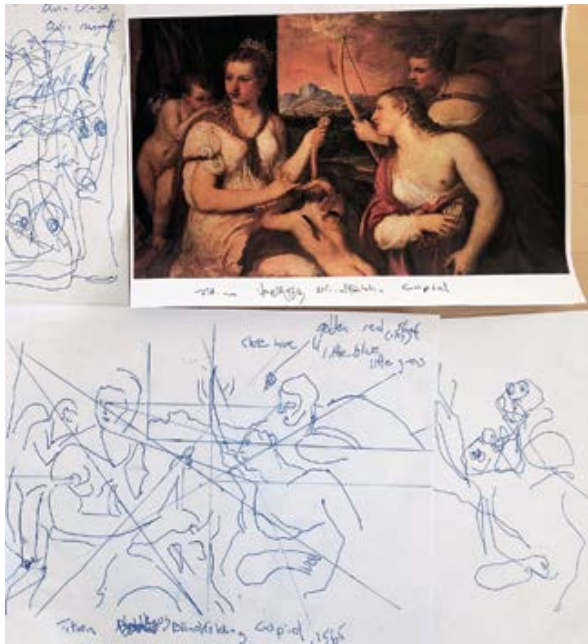
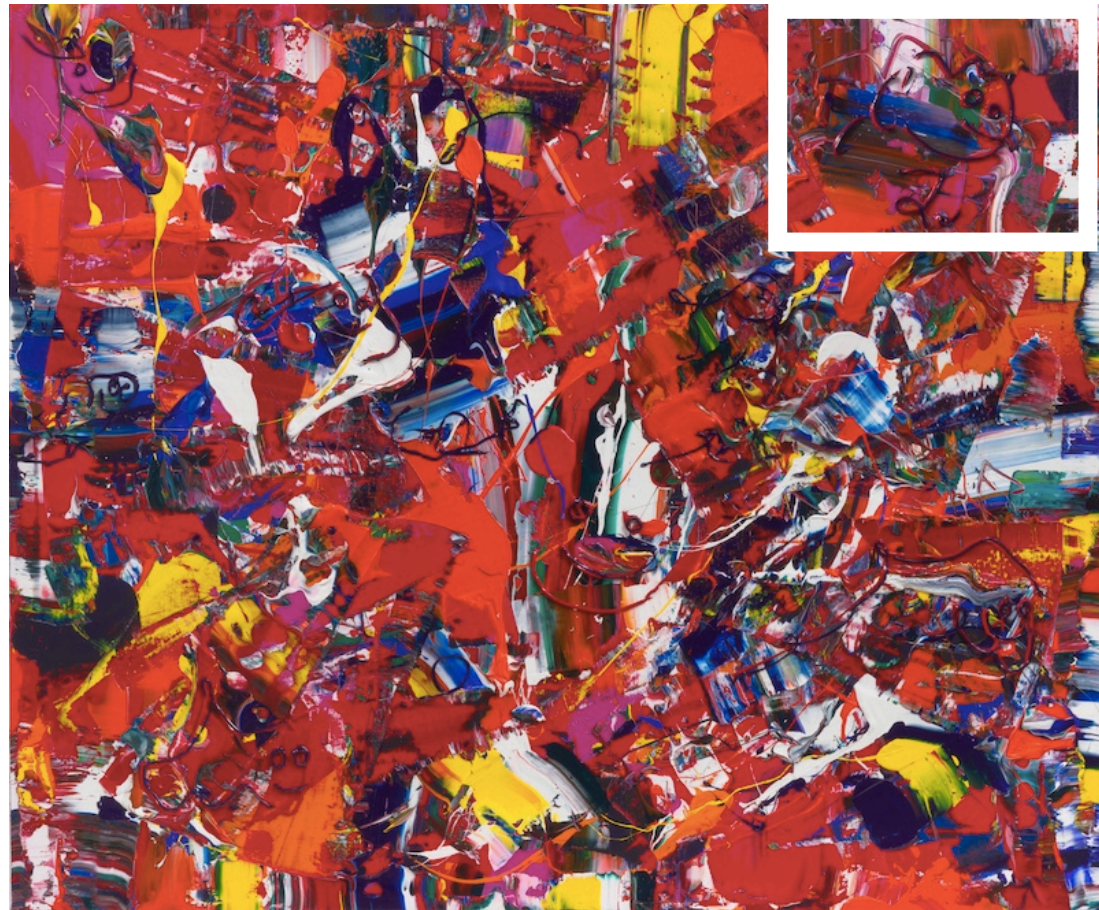


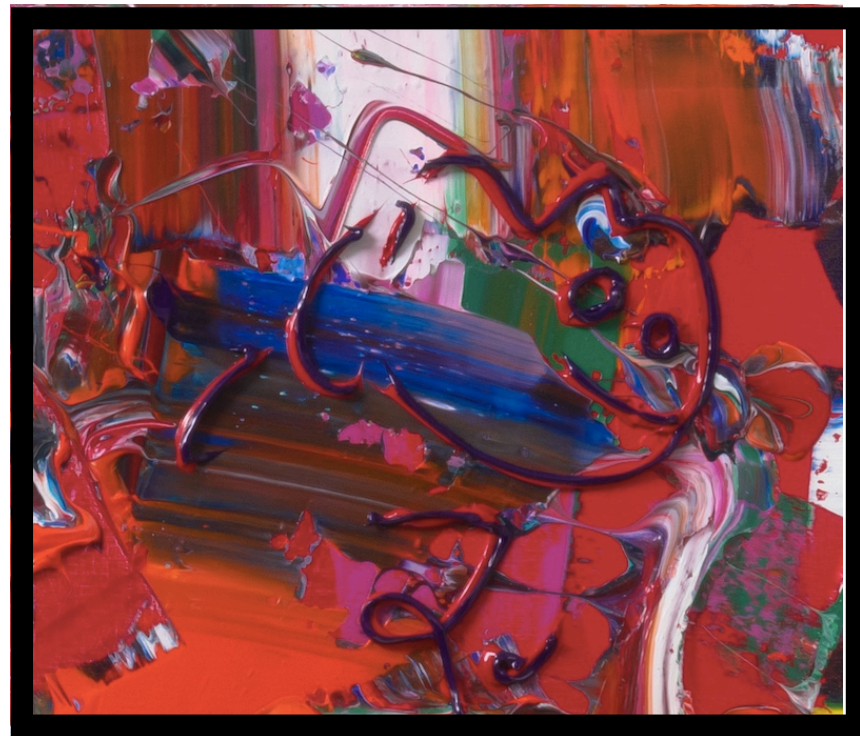
Diagram of Titian, 2019

between a personage and the place where the personage is sited. This will involve entertaining a distinction between the surface as an actual physical substrate and the painting as a virtual image. Since positioning the creatures constitutes Reafsnyder's final act of painting, it is possible to understand his prior procedures of spreading, layering, marking, drawing, and excavating paint on the canvas as the material condition of their production. (In fact, it can take as long for him to position the entities as it does for him to paint the rest of the surface, and it involves a significant amount of deliberation, experiment, and reworking.)

In the upper right corner of *Paint Chew* (2019), for instance, Reafsnyder used a palette knife to slice into a broad passage of white and dig out a double-crested pink line. The mark apparently motivated him to continue its trajectory: the whiplash line springs into the contour of a schematic figure which now confidently occupies the quadrant.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, the genetic evolution of straightforwardly physical marks into a biomorphic life form is evident in the pink line's



Paint Chew (2019)



resemblance to part of the creature's silhouette, specifically the double-bumped undulation of back, ear (or fin?), and forehead (see plate p. 59). Even the partitioned field "behind" the figure becomes integral to its anatomy and physiognomy: the belly is defined by a blue passage, while the abutting areas of green and red divide the face into left and right halves to make the ridge of a nose or snout. (Speaking figuratively, one could say that the entity *incorporates* the field.) Analogous concordances regulate the appearance of the personage in the lower right corner of *Sweet Falls*. The straight line defining the side of its face continues the terminal ray of the fan-like "chatter" behind it, while its rippled outline echoes the wobbly swipes of paint that are prominent in the surrounding region (see plate p. 83).

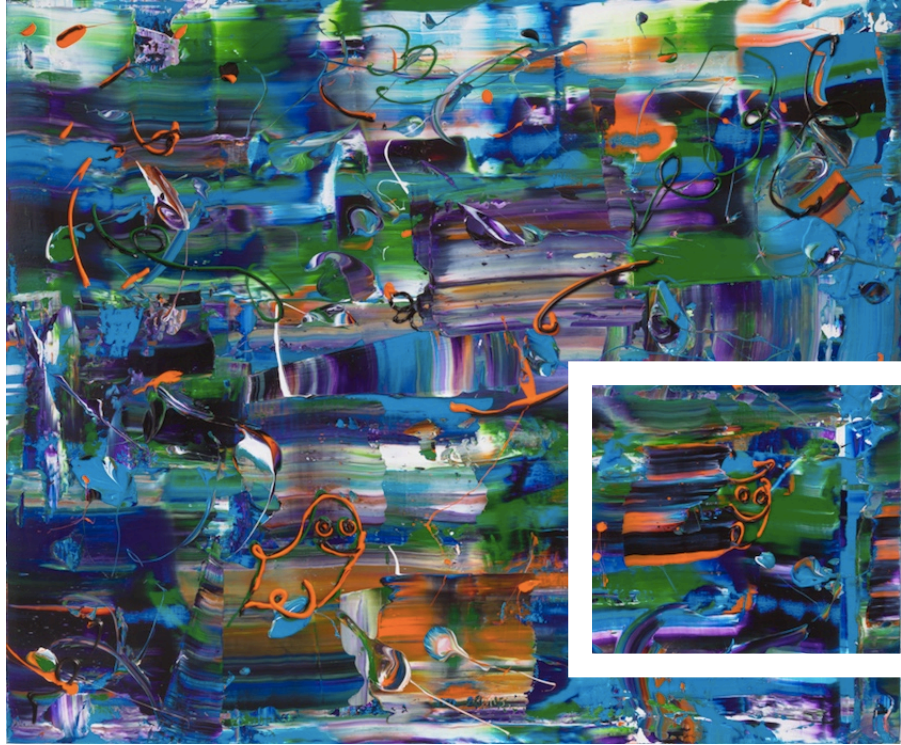
In these two instances, the figure's appearance seems governed by or responsive to preexisting marks or passages in the immediate vicinity, but the relation can work the other way around. In the lower right corner of *Super Scoop*, Reafsnyder used the flat edge of a palette knife or a piece of Plexiglas to press and drag part of a figure's contour to the left, creating a broad, striped passage (see plate p. 79). The attached personage now seems to streak toward the right edge of the canvas, its velocity registered visibly by the bands of color trailing it. In shape and internal variation, the striped passage resembles the other mosaic-like pieces that tile the picture. In fact, its insistence that we perceive it as a single stroke and the impression that it lies on top of the surface begin to suggest that it may be the chief unit among the overlapping planes that compose the field as a whole. Instead of the creature taking its cue from the field, the field seems to take its cue from the figure—as if reorganizing itself around the sudden appearance of an anomaly.

Although Reafsnyder did not haphazardly execute the actions that initially produced the passages I've been discussing, they nonetheless belong to a type of gestural mark-making that is

often linked to Abstract Expressionism, and consequently to various cultural values associated with spontaneity and indeterminacy.<sup>15</sup> Yet there is a more pertinent basis on which to assess his strategies. The personages establish a sense of a thoroughly *motivated* relationship between the



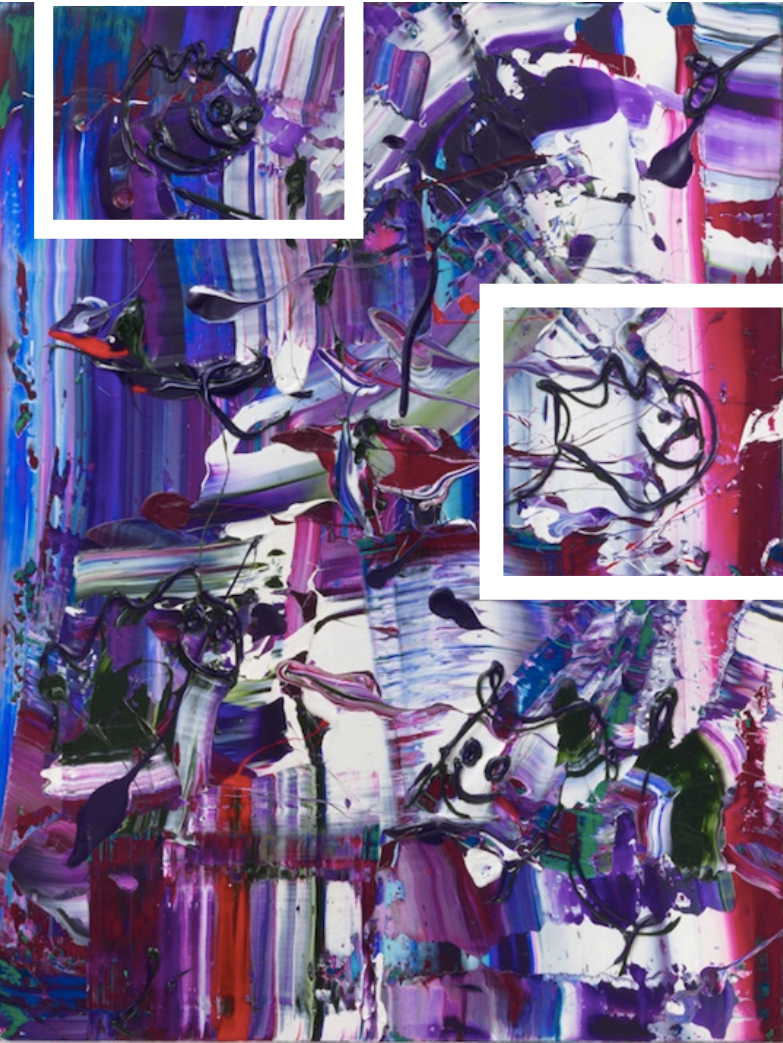
Sweet Falls (2019)



Super Scoop (2019)

physical substrate and the virtual image. Or rather, they demonstrate that what we often construe in abstract art as mere accident is in Reafsnnyder's paintings meaningful pictorial incident. The appearance of the personages thematizes the subordination of process (means) to the emergent order of the painting's projected world (ends). There is the impression that each mark in the field, and each installation of a figure, is the result of point-by-point decisions and coordination. And insofar as that structure of intention is felt to permeate the field, it becomes possible to see Reafsnnyder's personages as entities produced not by purely physical or material conditions, but as inspired into being by the painting as a total environment. Or perhaps it begins to seem as if they are self-originating, flashing in and out of existence like subatomic particles. Although there is a sense of contingency to their appearance, so too is there a sense of their inevitability and autonomy.

As inhabitants of the virtual world projected by the painting (not just squiggles on a material surface), the personages demand our attention in specific ways. On a basic level, they control our pattern of visual scanning by soliciting us to follow their lines of sight or directional movement across the plane, laterally deflecting our views of deep space. More complex is what we might call their modes of existence. We are asked not only to notice the ways the personages are incorporated into or excluded from the field, but also to contemplate the *character* of the relationship between each personage and the environment in which it dwells. Naturally, this requires us to detect nuances in the possible relationships between one personage and another. There are four entities in the aforementioned *Sweet Falls*, each occupying a quadrant of the canvas. Most pronounced is the figure outlined against a white background: finned, fusiform, and smiling, it seems happily immersed in a fluid medium as it darts right. (The invocation of "falls" in the title, along with the paint's slick application and the tableau's predominant blues seems to sanction liquid metaphors.) Trailing it are four or five lines of chatter, spread like a fan. The staccato blades channel the energy of the surrounding area into the creature's body, further bolstering the impression that it is continuous with the painting and its projected space, swimming "inside" it (see plate p. 83). The



Sweet Falls (2019)



chatter marks also compositionally direct our attention to another figure, harder to see, in the upper left corner of the canvas. This one's double-line silhouette sits definitively on top of the surface, and therefore renders the figure somewhat excluded from, or "outside," the pool. Bulbous and grinning, this personage locks its wide-eyed gaze on the other personage, whom it now seems jealously to chase. They are in competition. But what is the basis of their rivalry?

The schematic figures are notations of attitudes, a kind of graphic shorthand for psychological states. Over time, they accrue a dimension of individuality, even personality, however strangely alien it might be. In conversation, Reafsnyder frequently discusses the social dynamic of personages in terms of what we might call their psychogeography: that is, the way their intersubjective relationships are conditioned by their relative immersion within or exclusion from the painted field. In *Sweet Falls*, the heavy outline of the second personage compromises its full submersion in the painting's projected space, a circumstance that contrasts markedly with its marine companion, who teases the excommunicated one. It thus becomes possible to understand the two figures as competing for pictorial "depth." While the possession of one and the dispossession of pictorial depth by the other sets up an antagonism, the contest is tempered by a buoyant humor that moderates any sense of cruelty or violence. That optimism is characteristic of the personages across Reafsnyder's work.<sup>16</sup>

Where and when they appear, the personages cultivate a painting's particularity and its distinct manner of self-signaling. They do so by inspiring viewers to adjust incrementally to the dimensions of space and time that they occupy. The keying of a beholder's attention to the specific nature of their appearance seems appropriate given the attention Reafsnyder lavishes on their situation. As I mentioned, personages always come last in the painting process, and their placement can take as long as all the painter's previous activities combined. The eyes are set down first, followed by mouth and silhouette; should Reafsnyder deem placement, expression, or shape insufficient, the entity is removed by scraping, and the ground is reworked before another

attempt is made to accommodate the creature's presence in the field. The successful integration of the personage into the abstract array marks the moment of the painting's completion. As a finalizing touch, it also marks a moment of separation. Reafsnyder explained to an interviewer:

When I paint, I get so into it and so wrapped up in it that I always wondered how I'd detach myself from the paintings. . . [I] was concerned with how to place marks in the surface of the painting that would serve as an indication that I'd finished with it. There was always a mark that I would make, like the sign-off, like now it can go into the world.<sup>17</sup>

The personages are that mark. In coming to life, they correspondingly function as signs of the *painting's* creation, its origin or birth as an independent or autonomous presence. While the work is the realization of an artistic intent, the painter and the painting seem at this moment of parturition to stand toward one another as separate entities facing one another (as if meeting for the first time). Lest that sound overly metaphysical, recall that artists commonly attest to the condition Reafsnyder describes: feeling radically continuous with their works, of experiencing an immersion or absorption so powerful that disengagement may come as a surprise. But equally prevalent are accounts testifying to the fecundity of separation, in which the painting's actuality takes definitive form.<sup>18</sup>

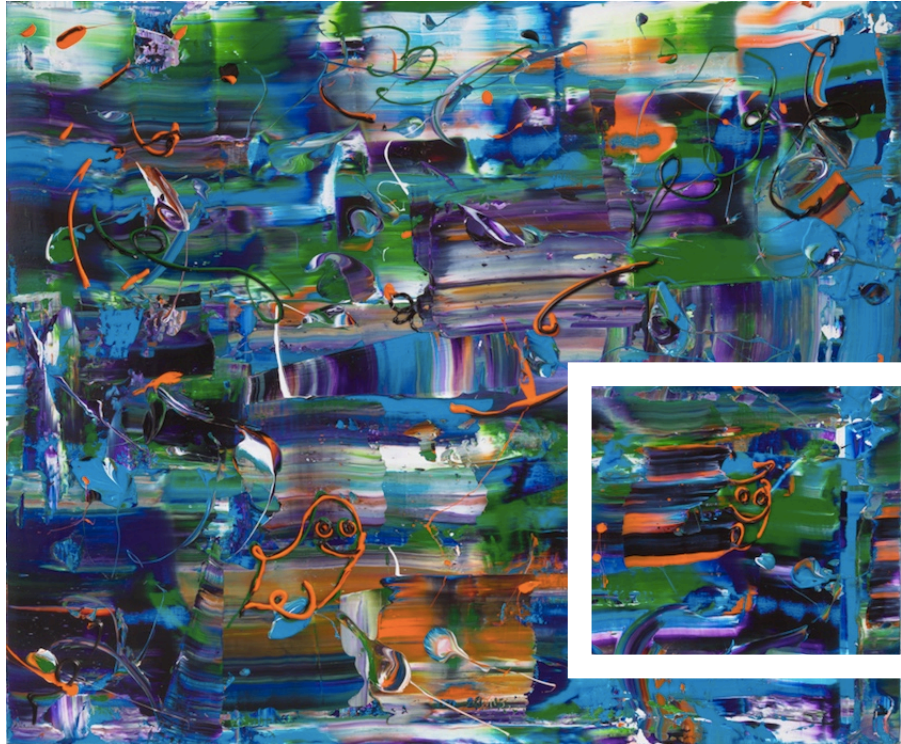
#### **4: Timing**

Reafsnyder's areas of operation are replete with passages of sweeps, drags, ridges, pools, blobs, excavations, lines, and drops. While naturalistic painters aspire to suppress signs of fabrication, such as brushstrokes, to suspend a viewer's awareness of the actual canvas surface (in other words, to create the illusionistic effect that the picture is a window onto the world), for abstract

painters the procedures of manufacture are conspicuously present. As residues of an artist's handiwork (whether intended as a demonstration of skill or as its willful repudiation), the artist's marks call attention to the materiality of the medium and to the temporality of hand and surface. Such a claim is nothing new: the critical potential of modernist physicality has been evoked repeatedly since the nineteenth century in contradistinction to traditional art's privileging of narrative events transpiring in illusionistic space.

In the history of abstract painting, artists have developed various strategies to regulate a beholder's sense of what we might call a work's *timing*. The emphasis signals a double meaning: timing can refer both to the pace by which a viewer is encouraged to perceive the external canvas as a visual totality (the spectrum runs from a single glance to an extended gaze), and to the internal pacing of the painting's fictional world (protracted or momentary as the case may be). A painted surface can exemplify numerous temporal scales, including that of the artist's touch (a "timing" of the physical surface and its handling) and that of the virtual projection (the "timing" of the image, whether abstract or representational). The capacity of a painting to confer a singleness of aspect (analog image) upon what are in fact the discrete moments of an artist's deliberate marking of a surface (digital handling) sets up yet another differential measure.<sup>19</sup>

The formal problem of abstraction's infinitely flexible pictorial spaces and the modes of temporality to which they give rise is a historical one of which Reafsnnyder is keenly aware. His personages play a key role in the unfolding drama. For instance, I drew attention above to the speeding personage in the lower right corner of *Super Scoop* in terms of its formal relationship to the tiled swipes that constitute the overall field: it is as if the creature's sudden appearance triggered an immediate reconfiguration of the total array. But the instantaneity I've attributed to the figure is not unqualified. In fact, the temporality of the visual field that the personage inaugurates turns out to be much more complex than one might initially suspect (see plate p. 79).



Super Scoop (2019)

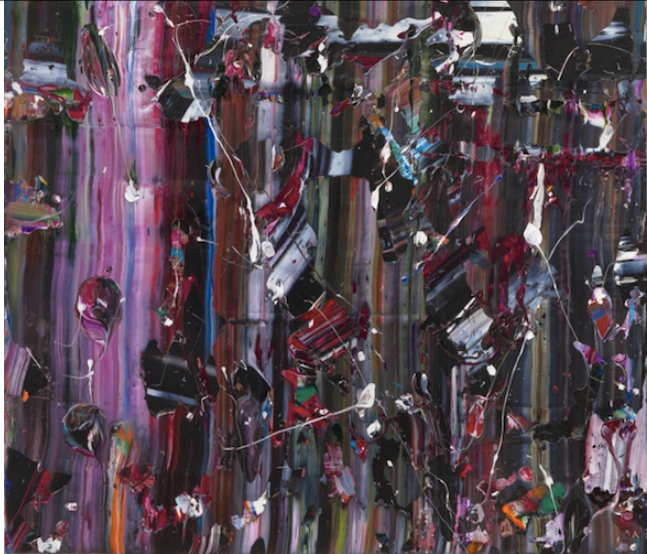
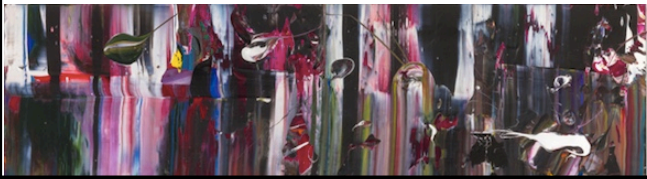


Observe the substantial blue line to the right of the ballistic figure and perpendicular to its trajectory. It parallels the vertical edge of the canvas, sectioning off a slim margin from the larger field. Toward the bottom of that reserve area, a swipe comprising a sequence of orange, blue, and purple bands appears just off center from the creature's flight path. On closer inspection, the slender passage and the personage share the same, or at least a similar, pattern of alternating colors. In fact, it seems to be the remainder of the paint that Reafsnyder used to enliven the personage. Notice that the striations near the right edge are the inverse of those trailing the creature (that is, the color sequence is flipped upside-down relative to the first). A speculative reconstruction of the procedure that may have produced this mirroring is possible. After applying the creature's tail with a flat blade by smoothing out a substantial quantity of paint (swiping right to left), Reafsnyder rotated the instrument 180 degrees and deposited the residue of the first application at the painting's margin (swiping left to right).

The physical connection is the foundation for a significant theme: because the color pattern of the marginal passage closely resembles that of the "tail" of the figure's body, one could see it as a displaced part of the creature's anatomy. But since the streaking tail is also meant to indicate its lateral movement, the marginal passage can be seen to anticipate and visually project the figure's itinerary beyond the limits of the canvas. To describe the temporal effect of this visual shift requires combining grammatical tenses: the color lines at the edge of the canvas *presently indicate* what *will have been* the trailing streaks of the personage's transverse motion *after* it has left the frame. (There is even perhaps the sense that it has *already* left the frame, and that the smiling personage we see has somehow just returned after its momentary disappearance. We are witness to an alien world with neither a standard chronology nor a guarantee of natural cause-and-effect relationships.) Reafsnyder's formal displacement figures the simultaneity, exchangeability, or even reversibility of immediate, antecedent, and subsequent "moments" in *painting* (used here as both a noun and a verb). Once we have detected the operation of that paradoxical or recursive synchronization, we discover it to be a general effect in his art.

By rendering disparate temporal moments concurrent, Reafsnnyder produces a kind of visual hiccup. That type of glitch can sometimes be observed in the cinematic projection of reel-to-reel film, and the example exposes a pertinent distinction for understanding Reafsnnyder's timing. When film frames are imperfectly aligned with the lens of a projector, an opaque band is displayed across the luminous image from one side of the screen to the other. Above the bar appears the lower section of a camera shot; below it, the upper part of the next image in the sequence. (In traditional movies, it is the split-second differential between successive camera shots that creates the illusion of cinematic movement as the film is advanced from one reel to the other at twenty-four frames per second.) Sitting through the malfunction is usually a minor inconvenience, but when the problem persists it creates an anomalous and quite striking optical effect: the audience will see the band as either floating upward to the top of the film screen or else as descending to the bottom. The motion alternates and, if the misalignment goes uncorrected, the visual rise and fall of the opaque bar will soon distract viewers, preventing them from perceiving the illusion of naturalistic space, time, and movement that is characteristic of conventional film. In calling attention to the discrepancy between a time scale that is proper to the cinematic narrative (a virtual or fictional one) and a time scale that is proper to one's experience of seeing (an actual or embodied one), the glitch spotlights the general difference between the temporality *inside* a work of art and the time *outside* it. Like a glitch, the divided timing of the personage in *Super Scoop* declares that difference, too.

The alien temporal dimension of Reafsnnyder's paintings is not always dependent for its signification on the presence of a biomorph that obviously enacts or embodies it. In *Prime Choice*, no obvious personage sets a narrative scene. Here, recursive timing is generic: it is not just a function of creaturely activity, but it is seemingly possessed by the field itself. As usual, the pictorial qualities that create the time within the painting—and the technical procedures underpinning those temporal effects—prove notoriously difficult to describe. For a start, observe the restrained band of stripes, about seven to eight inches wide, parallel to the upper limit of the canvas and



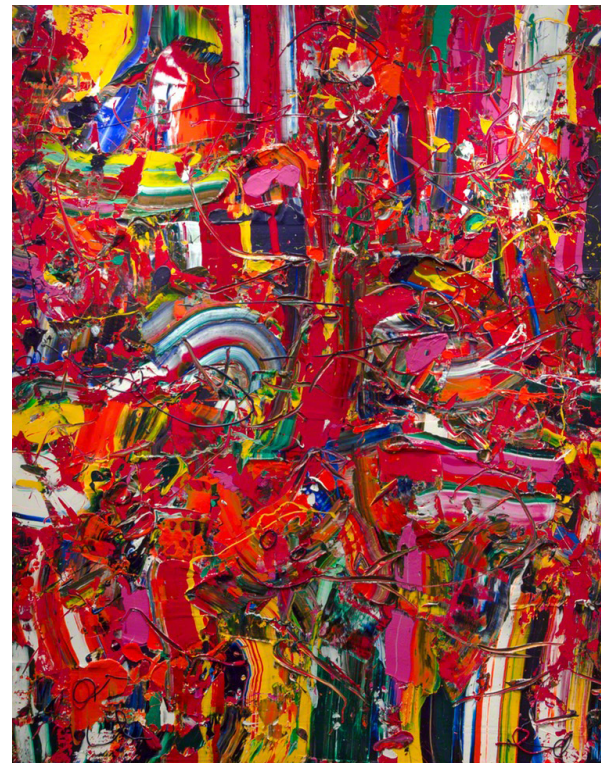
Prime Choice (2019)

spanning its width. Although the band has a slightly irregular bottom edge, there is enough of a defined ridge along its length to create the impression of a horizontal “line” between the marginal area and the larger but similarly patterned field below it. In fact, a good portion of the color strands within that slender belt seem to be continuous with those on the other side of the crease. The matching is especially apparent on the left, where a predominantly purple, pink, and red swipe steadily runs the full height of the canvas, bouncing as it crosses the horizontal ridge (see plate p. 63).

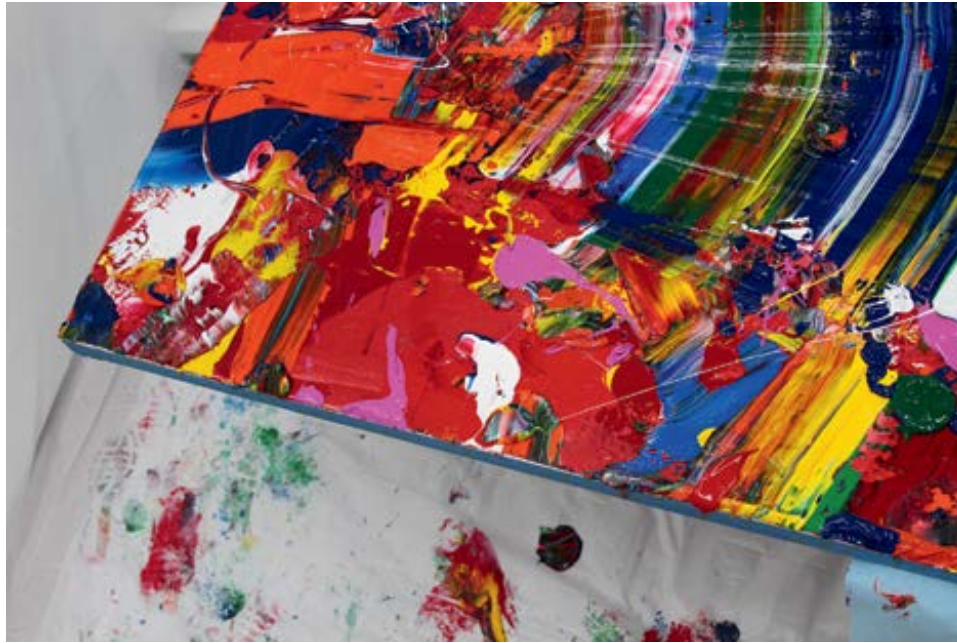
While the correlation between the stripes in the band and those in the field is less consistent on the right, the overall effect is to suggest that the narrow strip reserved at the top of the painting is continuous with the run of color-swipes that stretch down the surface—and which, of course, must stop as they reach the lower edge. But even more significantly, there is a mounting impression that the top of the painting is the continuation of the visual field that is projected beyond that bottom limit. The painting continues itself.

I’ve begun to suggest that the imbrication of “timing” across surface, space, and image in Reafsnnyder’s art produces a strange impression wherein indefinite extension and temporal allowance coexists with fixed limits and temporal contraction. Certain key physical features of Reafsnnyder’s canvases, combined with his means of handling them, bolster the claim that his aim in these works is to represent visual fields that appear continuous with themselves from edge to edge while at the same time declaring their containment within a frame. (Once again, material and technical conditions have everything to do with content and meaning.) His works are painted on a relatively smooth grade of Belgian linen stretched on an adjustable aluminum frame. The canvas is double-primed with a titanium white base to produce a surface conducive to Reafsnnyder’s application of acrylic paint with speed and control. (He explains that heavier fabric with a more pronounced woven texture compromises the “glide and slickness” he seeks with unnecessary “chatter and resistance.”)<sup>20</sup> Each stretcher has a tension-key system located at the corners





Bliss (2019)

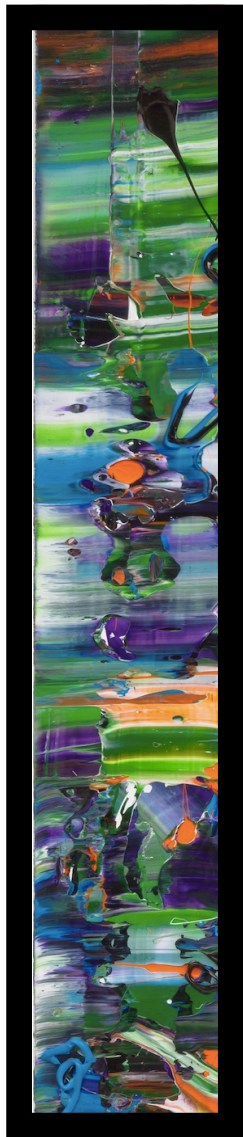


Michael Reafsnyder in the studio painting *Bliss*

and crossbars that allows Reafsnyder to tighten or loosen the plane while painting and to set the ideal tautness for display when the work is finished. Crucially, he avoids over-straining the canvas: pulling the material too tightly creates a perceptibly rolled edge around the perimeter of the frontal plane (that is, where the linen turns the edges of the stretcher bars as it folds around the tacking margin). To further maintain an ideal flatness on the facing view, Reafsnyder tapes off the outer sides of the canvas. The preparatory step allows swipes of paint to slightly overhang the edge of the surface, but prevents the acrylic from touching the sides. Should that occur, the color marks would impel vision around the edge of the plane to the tacking margin, and thus call attention to the canvas and its armature rather than to the virtual image projected by the painting. All told, Reafsnyder's procedures confine the viewer's optical scanning to the plane, but in a manner that permits vision to "glide" across the painting's surface, seemingly unimpeded by even the slightest interruption at its limits and always resituated or *re-sighted* on it.

Think back to the personage in *Super Scoop*, whose displaced “tail” paradoxically anticipated and continued a motion undertaken elsewhere in the field (and in doing so thematized its simultaneous escape from the delimited surface and its instantaneous return). The narrow belt in *Prime Choice*, too, signifies the resumption of the painted field’s color flow after its necessary cessation at the actual limit of the plane. And though it would be excessive to insist that while we are looking at *Prime Choice* we should imagine a surface that can be rolled like a tube, the idea nonetheless captures something of the painting’s cylindrical effect. Such spooling is comparably present in *Glow Time*, where a three-inch strip of green, blue, and purple color-swipes parallels the left edge. Like the narrow belt in *Prime Choice*, the marginal register functions to “resume” the lateral extension of the visual field beyond the right side of the canvas by “returning” its color patches to the other side (see plate p. 53). The strip “continues” the virtual spread of an image that seems as if it could extend indefinitely, yet the strip “contains” the spread within the painting’s facing plane. (The scare quotes indicate a necessary degree of equivocation in my description.) As Reafsnyder words it, the aim is to “make a space that is continuous and open but that also has boundaries to highlight the internal structure of the work.”<sup>21</sup> One implication of that statement is that the paintings are not samples cut from a larger pattern that extends beyond the delimited, framed area of the surface. His timing confounds standard measures: Reafsnyder simultaneously evokes a sense of the continuation of the visual field (hence its prolongation) and fortifies the impression that the image is delimited (hence its instantaneity). Once we know what to look for, we can detect the effect everywhere in the artist’s recent paintings.

We might infer a final lesson from the pictorial effects of Reafsnyder’s work (at least insofar as I have endeavored to interpret them). To make a painting that seems continuous with itself and involved in itself is also, somewhat paradoxically, to gesture toward an ideal of openness and exchange. I began this essay by suggesting that the potential for self-signaling in Reafsnyder’s painting—or rather his capacity to create each painting’s specific form of address—was fundamental to the content his art holds. His inflected surfaces, with their particular qualities of



Glow Time (2019)

surfacing, spacing, siting, and timing, establish the structures of beholding by which his communication proceeds. Two entities face each other (as in any act of communication): by attending carefully to the relationship of material incident and visual array, we experience the simultaneous sensation of real surfaces blended with a unique abstract dimensionality. The reciprocal relation of actual painted surfaces and the virtual worlds to which they give rise is apparently inexhaustible. That deceptively simple category of sensation continues to challenge our critical acumen, soliciting patient observation, description, and interpretation. Reafsnyder motivates us toward those ends, seriously and joyfully. It's what his painting does. ■

## Endnotes

1. Historically specific forms of pictorial address have been analyzed by numerous scholars, but see especially the foundational account of structures of beholding in Michael Fried, *Manet's Modernism: or, The Face of Painting in the 1860s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). On the relationship of materialization (or physicality) and the temporalization of surfaces, see especially Richard Schiff, "Breath of Modernism (Metonymic Drift)," in *In Visible Touch: Modernism and Masculinity*, ed. Terry Smith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 184–213.
2. Both audiences and critics seem to find it impossible to resist using the term "smiley face" to refer to these outward looking personages. But the name is both inaccurate and misleading, reducing to consumer branded nomenclature what is for Reafsnyder the complex ontological existence of his creatures or inhabitants. (The adjective "smiling," when used in a merely descriptive sense, may be slightly better.) The artist's frustration with ascriptions of silliness or jokiness to these faces led him in 2005 to cast an already extant oil painting in bronze, creating an edition of three wall-hanging relief sculptures entitled *Happy People*. (The painting was destroyed in the process.) Choosing bronze—the premier traditional material with which to signify the seriousness of high artistic ambition and achievement—was Reafsnyder's way of responding to overly facile assertions that the face was, as one critic put it, a "deliberately silly trademark" which "remind[s] viewers not to take the art-historical references too seriously" (Doug McClellmont, "Michael Reafsnyder at Ameringer | McEnery | Yohe," *Art News* [April 2001]: 111). More persuasively, Christopher Knight mobilizes "smiley face" for a socio-political interpretation in "Michael Reafsnyder," *Art Issues* (March/April 2000): 49. See also David Pagel, "Art Reviews: Michael Reafsnyder," *Los Angeles Times* (8 June 2001): F22, and Dave Hickey, "Michael Reafsnyder: 'Please Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood,'" in *Michael Reafsnyder* [exh. cat.] (New York: Ameringer | McEnery | Yohe, 2015), 5.
3. A key precedent for the dialectic of surface and screen is Jackson Pollock's *Stenographic Figure* (1942), a painting Reafsnyder testifies is among the major reference points in his artistic pantheon.
4. The point counters such basic claims as: "Reafsnyder is merely exploring the paint material and canvas surface in the same manner as the previous generations of artists. They were/are both trying to combine sophisticated issues of 'pure' painting with childlike spontaneity" (Victoria Reed, "Michael Reafsnyder at R.B. Stevenson Gallery," *Artweek* [June 2007]: 20).
5. Conversation with the author, November 2018. The presence of the personage is a form of negative invocation. If an interlocutor says: "Don't think of a deep lake," it will be hard to avoid doing so. The more specific the rhetorical trick is, the more challenging it is to seal one's mind against a nascent image ("Don't think of a gurgling brook in a green meadow"). It is as if *Evening Delight* teases, "Don't think of a face," and in so doing begins to thematize the mutual infringement of marks and patterns characteristic of a naïve view of abstraction. On negative invocation as a strategy in surrealism ("This is not a pipe"), see Roger Shattuck, "René Magritte and the (Irish) Bull" (1966), in *The Innocent Eye* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1984), 277–87.
6. Hofmann used the term in his teaching, and Greenberg adopted it in print in a 1947 review of Jackson Pollock's work. See Greenberg, "Review of Exhibitions of Jean Dubuffet and Jackson Pollock" (1947), in *Clement Greenberg: Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O'Brian, 4 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press,

- 1986–93), 2: 125. Greenberg later used the variant “created flatness” to describe successful painterly abstraction in “The ‘Crisis’ of Abstract Art,” *Collected Essays*, 4: 181. For an extended discussion, see Michael Schreyach, “Re-created Flatness: Hans Hofmann’s Concept of the Picture Plane as a Medium of Expression,” *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 49, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 44–67. Although it would be nearly impossible for any conscientious student of painting to overlook Hofmann, Reafsnnyder was specifically introduced to the older artist’s work by his teacher William Boaz, a professor of art at Chapman University, and he has continued to contemplate Hofmann’s achievement over the course of his professional career.
7. The pertinent precedent is again Hofmann, whose understanding of color-created space derived in part from his exposure to advanced artists working in Paris during the early twentieth century, and particularly to Henri Matisse. The title of an essay authored by Hofmann succinctly describes the problem at hand: “Space Pictorially Realized through the Intrinsic Faculty of the Colors to Express Volume” (in *Hans Hofmann: New Paintings* [New York: Kootz Gallery, 1951]).
  8. My description pertains to the way the passage looks, not how it was actually made, since in Reafsnnyder’s work what might appear as one large swipe is often a layering of several distinct swipes or scrapes that either build up or reveal underlying layers of paint. In *Sunny Flow*, numerous mottled excavations partly interrupt the visual continuity of the swiped lines that otherwise rhythmically measure the composition.
  9. To create the illusion of three-dimensional masses by shading with simple hatching (using sequences of parallel vertical or horizontal lines, with or without cross-hatching), a draftsman can vary the spacing between the line (in which case, increasingly compressed striations across a plane suggest mass by indexing conditions of illumination); or, to get a similar effect, vary the pressure applied to the pencil (thus changing the width and density of lines in relation to each other); or use pencils or pens with differently sized nibs.
  10. Reafsnnyder’s paints are produced by Golden Artist Colors Inc. Not only is their pigment load extremely high, but Golden colors are manufactured to maintain their normal state of surface—meaning their particular gloss or matte characteristics and their given transparency or opacity. Those attributes are often manipulated or adjusted by paint companies to create a color line that is relatively homogenous in secondary qualities (i.e., qualities besides hue). Nor is the historical legacy of the company lost on Reafsnnyder: Its founder, Sam Golden, partnered in the 1930s with his uncle Leonard Bocour, a New York art supplier whose enterprise produced hand-ground oil paint purchased by the artists Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and Barnett Newman. In the late 1940s, Golden discovered by experimentation a way to manufacture acrylic paint and created Magna, famously used by Newman, Helen Frankenthaler, and Morris Louis. Later, he produced a waterborne version of acrylic, Aquatec. Golden opened his own company in 1980.
  11. Quoted in Kim Beil, “Surface Tension,” *art ltd.* (June 2007): 53.
  12. Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1972), 91–93.
  13. Correspondence with the author, February 2018.
  14. It would be more accurate to say that the directionality of the personage reverses the trajectory of the mark, since the tapered end of the line shows it to have been made when Reafsnnyder swiped the palette knife from right to left while at the same time changing the angle of the blade relative to the surface—whereas, judging from its profile, the figure moves across the plane from left to right. But in terms of describing the artist’s complex images, it is sometimes expedient to subordinate the actual stages of the procedure to the overall visual effect the procedure creates. Which is just to say that there’s a difference between what a painting *is* (materially) and what it does (virtually).

15. The classic explication of the cultural connotations of spontaneous mark-making comes from Meyer Schapiro, "The Liberating Quality of Avant-Garde Art," *Art News* 56, no. 4 (Summer 1957): 36-42; reprinted in Schapiro, *Modern Art 19th & 20th Centuries: Selected Papers* (New York: George Braziller, 1978), 213-27. By symbolically linking unregimented marks to an individual's authentic experience and self-expression, critics have historically adduced touch to indicate an individual fully committed to self-directed activity and its personally expressive results—a healthy contrast to the depersonalization and regimentation of activity under modern industrial and technological conditions.
16. To enhance our sense of Reafsnnyder's attitude, contrast the disposition of personages as I've described them in *Sweet Falls* to those that sometimes appear in paintings by Asger Jorn (1914-73), the Danish artist and avant-garde provocateur whose work Reafsnnyder admires.
17. Quoted in Kim Beil, "Surface Tension," *art ltd.* (June 2007): 52. Reafsnnyder was referring specifically to the archaic form of his smiling faces, but the sentiment applies to the new family of personages as well (conversation with the author, July 2019).
18. A compelling account of the theme of continuity and separation in modernist painting is provided by Charles Palermo, *Fixed Ecstasy: Joan Miró in the 1920s* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008). With regard to the issue, yet another feature of Reafsnnyder's practice assumes heretofore unremarked significance. For over two decades, he has composed numerous figurative representations of a somewhat surprising motif: mermaids. These figure studies are considered by the artist to be "private, but not personal," and have never been exhibited (although series of ceramic sculptures of the creatures were shown in 2009). The works are made on paper in gouache or black ink (specifically Cel-Vinyl, a special type of toner used for animating cartoons on plastic transparencies). The imagery differs depending on the medium. The Cel-Vinyl drawings feature variations on a few standard iconographic elements: a liquid environment, mermaids and other aquatic creatures with fusiform anatomies or tentacles, a floating platform or small island, a ladder, and a star. Often, Reafsnnyder chooses to depict the mermaid only from the neck down, as if she has swum past the visible range delimited by the paper (she is both "in" and "out" of the frame). The smaller gouaches, on the other hand, are relatively simplified compositions showing a single mermaid reclining by the shore or floating halfway submerged in water. Often the creature seems to caress the surface of the water with as if in a gesture of invitation or enticement. Mermaids, of course, are an excellent symbol of both continuity and separation, since they have no proper environment, being both "in" and "out" of sea and land. The duality is also evident in bodies that are dimorphic (both aquatic and human). Each half of the mermaid's body prevents (or separates) the other half from being fully admitted into (or continuous with) a liquid or terrestrial ecosystem. The theme is ripe for psychological speculation: perhaps the mermaid drawings function as Reafsnnyder's way of holding onto figuration within an abstract style that prevents its full incorporation. These private exercises are his way of staying both "in" (representation) while being mostly "out" (abstraction).
19. For a primer, see Richard Schiff, "Corot and the Painter's Mark: Natural, Personal, Pictorial," *Apollo* 148, no. 435 (May 1998): 3-8.
20. Correspondence with the author, November 2018.
21. Correspondence with the author, July 2019.





Reference Images for Endnote 18