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In an Expression of the Inexpressible: Even this title is stolen, but I chose it

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IN AN EXPRESSION OF THE INEXPRESSIBLE: EVEN THIS TITLE IS STOLEN,
BUT I CHOSE IT

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of
Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Abstract

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By Carmen McLeod, MFA

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Major Director: Barbara Tisserat
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This thesis provides a tour through an imaginary building that contains the work I have completed in the last two years at VCU. The body of the text provides a discussion of specific paintings as well as more general themes related to painting and art. The discussion includes thoughts on futility, desire, schism, the leap, collage, photography, materiality, painting, image, and landscape. The second part of the text is an abstract statement about the paintings included in the thesis show, *Splinter Paintings*.

The Tour

Imagine a building built around no discernible plan, growing as needed, each room adhering to a logic of necessity, a style and size particular to the objects it was built to house. Despite the variety of rooms, the building is joined under a single roof and is added to under the sole direction of a single person. This is the imaginary building that houses my work, my sensory memories, and the ideas I've held onto for any length: my experience thus far. We will confine our tour, today, to the series of rooms delegated for housing my work from the last few years.¹

Tracing a meandering path through the rooms, guided loosely by the chronology of additions to the building, we will see multi-colored threads stretching overhead, some tautly and some loosely. These threads represent the discursive path of thought and ideas and tend to run between paintings. They emanate, in part, from other sections of the building but also from the paintings themselves. Best not to use these threads as a guide though, they cross back over one another, retrace their paths, and sometimes become tangled. By keeping a sidelong picture of these networks held lightly in our minds, though, we may begin to notice traces of pattern. Particular colors and textures of thread will accumulate in greater numbers and with more purpose or logic in their path if we don't become distracted by the individual tangles of the networks tracing the ceilings of the galleries. With a guide, these patterns can be pointed at and the threads decoded. In

advance, your guide predicts that the threads representing futility, desire, schism, the leap, collage, photography, materiality, image, and landscape will be greatest in number, occasionally braiding and weaving together. There will be threads, of course, that are not decoded or discussed in the tour, no matter how they glitter or thicken in places; the privilege of a guide is to direct and define the tour.

The tour begins in a small room with dark green walls and an ornate carpet on the wood floor that links two larger rooms; a sort of foyer. It is unclear how, exactly, we have arrived here, but to the left is a room that contains a massing of paintings that date from roughly 1998 through 2003, spanning my time spent at California College of Arts and Crafts (as it was called then) and living in the Bay Area.

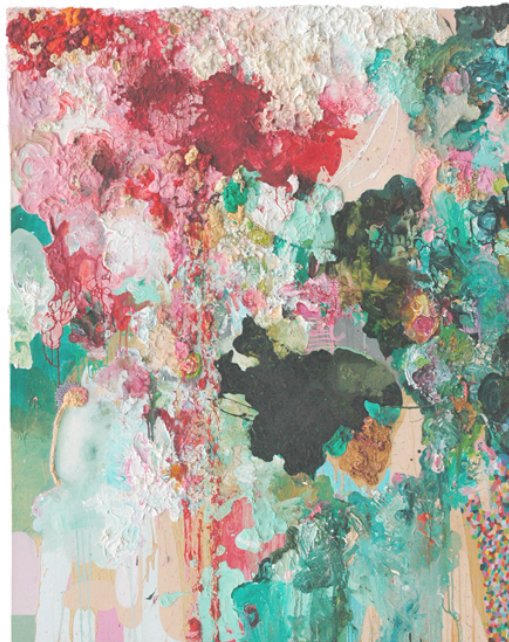


Figure 1: *So this is what it is*, 2002. Oil, enamel, acrylic, beads, glitter, and pompoms, 78 x 56 inches

Some of the canvases – mostly still lifes and figure studies – are stacked against the wall, others hang and are lit with pride – paintings that fairly ooze and drip with heavy layers of

oil paint, beads, glitter, and other foreign objects (Fig. 1). There are strings shooting off from these paintings, tracing over our heads where we stand in the little, empty antechamber and into the room to our right. This is the path we'll follow.

Entering the room, we find it's not quite spacious enough to comfortably hold the thirty-or-so paintings, ranging in size from nine inches square to 48 x 60 inches, hung almost floor-to-ceiling (Fig. 2).



Figure 2: Clockwise from top left: *In the Air*, 2005, oil on panel, 48 x 60 inches; *How it Sounds*, 2005, oil on panel, 48 x 72 inches; *Not Hungry Enough*, 2005, oil, acrylic, beads, and enamel on canvas, 9 x 9 inches; *Less Exploding*, 2005, oil, acrylic, and beads on linen, 18 x 20 inches; *Another Eagle*, 2005, oil, enamel, acrylic, and spray paint on panel, 48 x 58 inches.

Our guide informs us that the paintings, individually and taken as a whole, embody some traits that we may point to as a sort of foreshadowing of the work we'll see later. First of all, there is certainly a proclivity for thick paint, mostly oil, that is smeared, spattered,

scraped, and brushed onto the paintings' surfaces. Secondly, this paint sometimes describes abstracted landscapes or figures and, at other times, coalesces into the further abstraction of relationships between color, texture, material and two-dimensional form. These two observations seem to frame a struggle in the work, between abstraction and representation, materiality and image.

The thick, aggressive paint can be seen as a privileging of the material presence of the individual canvas, the physical site where the paint resides. This could be seen in terms of conforming to an interpretation of the mandate, handed down by Clement Greenberg, for strictly self-referential autonomy in painting². This interpretation doesn't seem quite right though as this present-ness of the work is compromised by the emergent forms and images in some of the paintings. The intimation of figures, mountains, and rooms undermines the regime of the purely present painting by calling the viewer to contemplate a *represented* space or object and moving her away from the painting at hand. So, the conventions of modernist abstract painting are undermined by the presence of imagery, meaning these paintings must be concerned with something outside themselves. But what? This isn't immediately clear, as the paintings seem too much engaged in undermining themselves to formulate a cogent position on the matter. More than anything else, the paintings in this room embody a sense of frustration; a thwarted desire to communicate *something* but without a clear sense of what, exactly that something is and how, with what means, it may be communicated.

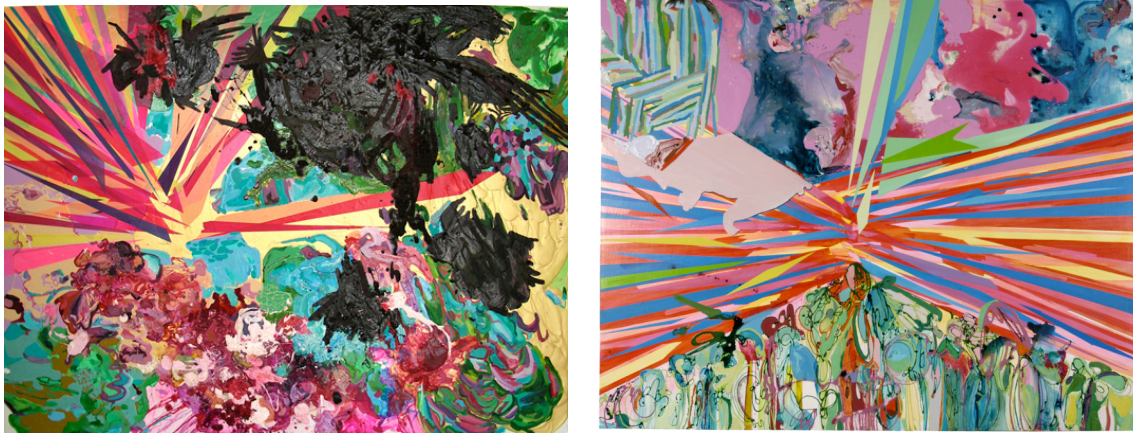


Figure 3: *Lying Wonder*, 2005, Oil, acrylic, enamel, and spray paint, glitter and beads on panel, 48 x 60 inches; *Sedona*, 2006, Oil, acrylic, and beads on panel, 48 x 58 inches

In comparison, the paintings glimpsed in the next room over fairly shout for attention. As we step into the room, rays of light or paint are suddenly shooting out of the paintings (Fig. 3). They seem to be exploding out of the center of themselves – sort of. Upon closer examination, the rays become tawdry, schematic approximation of the visual symbol for the Sublime³. The devices and conventions used to reference a notion of the Sublime, namely, the shooting rays, are undermined at every turn. The transportive, dynamic quality of the rays is undermined by the clumsiness with which they're painted. Individual colors bleed into one another – not in a pleasing, seductive kind of way – but in a way that's clear that the tape used to make the painting allowed the paint to leak under and mess the lines. There are areas where the tape has peeled up some of the earlier layers of rays. The awkward, heavy painting surrounds and interrupts the sublime rays (or harmonics) and the cheap plastic beads and glitter adorning the surface act as a hollow, compromised reference to the spectacular.

One interpretation of this work would see this deflationary action as a vote of no confidence in the whole possibility of being able to paint the Sublime, or possibly a distrust of the very notion of the Sublime. Yet the paintings are here, hanging on the walls of this imaginary room with their impossible, untrue transcendental rays. This reaching toward the unreachable, the imagined, and the numinous lingers and fuels the next group of work directly.

But first, we take a detour into a fairly large room, accessed through the room with the Sublime ray paintings.

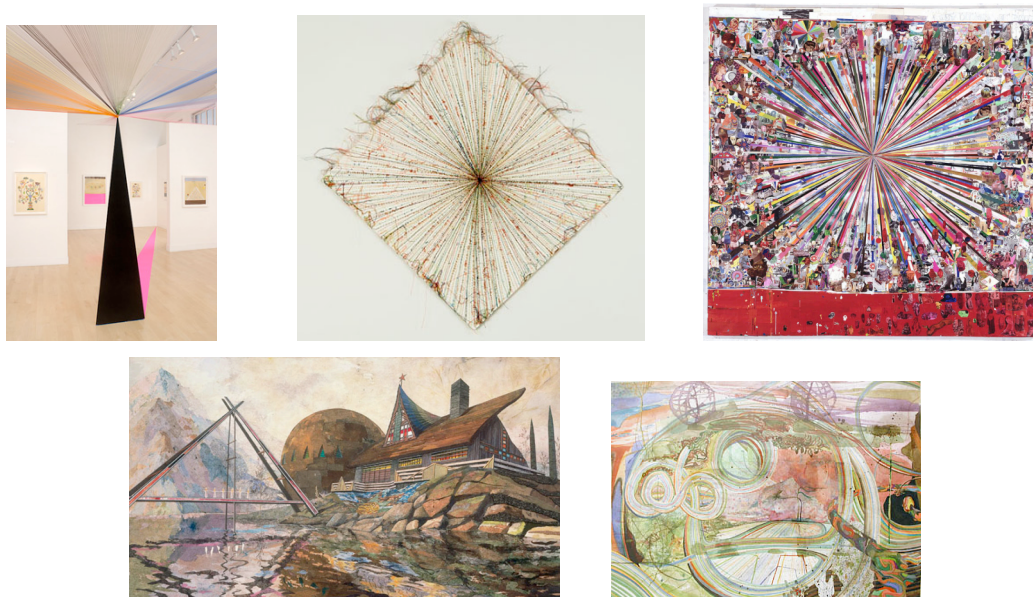


Figure 4: Clockwise from top left: Chris Duncan, *Moment Monument*, 2006, mixed media, dimensions variable; *2006*, 2006, thread and paper, 16 x 15 inches; Tal R, *Last Drawing Before Mars*, 2004, mixed media, 93 x 93 inches; Franklin Evans, *FF rdeksilentrosesister*, 2005, watercolor and ink on paper, 13 x 18 inches; David Thorpe, *Covenant of the Elect*, 2002, mixed media collage, 21 x 37 inches

This room houses paintings by a whole host of artists, all of whom could be said to be dealing with the semiotics of the Sublime and transcendental (Fig. 4). In these paintings, we see a recurrence of the ray form from the previous room, creating a provisional dialogue between the paintings. Utopian or visionary architecture makes an appearance

here in David Thorpe's collages, speaking of the compulsion to make the world reflect a spiritual ideal and the eventual failure or obsolescence of this effort. Looking up, our guide points out that there is an intensity of thread activity coming and going from this room. A great many of these threads twist together, forming a rope of ideas that leads us to the next room.



Figure 5: *Object Petite a*, 2007. Oil on canvas, 74 x 110 inches



Figure 6: John Frederick Kensett, *A Reminiscence of the White Mountains*, 1852.
Oil on canvas, 35 ½ x 50 inches

Following this sinuous line of thought, twisting overhead, we enter a large, airy room with a great, glass skylight, diffusing the space with natural light. *Object Petite a* (Fig. 5), loosely based on *A Reminiscence of the White Mountains*, 1852 by John Frederick

Kensett (Fig. 6), hangs on the long wall directly before us. The painting seeks, like Kensett's, to represent a landscape as well as the Sublime sensation created by looking at that landscape. Unlike Kensett's landscape, however, *Object Petite a* posits a landscape that has been visually altered by the psychic condition of the viewer. More specifically, *Object Petite a* reflects how a *painter's* eye shapes and changes a landscape, both in its representation and in the experience of it. The fractured, fragmented landscape contains interruptions that reference other paintings and various objects that are clearly referring to something outside the phenomenological float through the shallow representational space of the painting.

The overall feel of the painting, however, is a sort of carnival of the senses; something that relates to the sparkling, fragmented perception one has moving through a carnival or fair but placed in a "natural" setting. Again, the Sublime is being explored, this time with less of the mitigating, deflating techniques in the previous paintings. There are still clunky, self-conscious marks that bring the viewer back to the surface of the painting, reinforcing the material presence of the work, and cutting short the mental reverie that paintings dealing with the sublime are meant to provoke. All these interruptions are the psychological and emotional projections of the individual attempting to comprehend and be comprehended by the world. This way of picturing a landscape in *Object Petite a* has been collaged onto a traditional conception of landscape.



Figure 7: *Church*, 2007. Acrylic and paper on wood panel, 48 x 60 inches



Figure 8: Frederick Edwin Church, *Twilight in the Wilderness*, 1860. Oil on canvas, 40 x 64 inches

The grand, sweeping ideologies of the Hudson River School referenced in *Object Petite a* carry over into the next piece, *Church* (Fig. 7). This piece is based on a specific painting by Frederic Edwin Church, *Twilight in the Wilderness*, 1860 (Fig. 8) and manifests some of the collaged ideas from the previous work in a literal sense. The piece is composed of collaged paper and acrylic on wood panel⁴. The multitude of the pieces of paper, the lurid sky, and the “lightning bolt” all appropriate tropes of the Kantian Sublime but in such a way as to prevent actually recreating the *experience* of the Sublime.



No Place, 2007, oil, acrylic, enamel, and holographic paper, 57 x 92 inches

The third painting in this room, *No Place* (Fig. 9), touches on the Sublime again, or maybe just approaches it slant-wise, with the filter of the psychological space projected onto the original landscape. Collaged elements are very much in evidence here with holographic paper glued into crystal-esque shapes – representing the celestial music of the land of ultimate perfection and enlightenment – and the various sections of the painting are mostly just placed next to one another with very little transition and integration to form a cohesive, whole surface. The kitsch-referencing paper and the fluorescent, clumsily handled paint serve to lighten the painting, easing some of the seriousness of the subject and history of landscape painting. Simultaneously, the paint is handled in other areas with sensitivity and loving attention to the material substance of the medium, the physical wonder of paint. This serves to pull the viewer back to the object at hand, a painting, and by association to the question of painting as a whole, with the historical implications of the struggle between the surface and the image.

Notably, this is the first instance of a personal photograph making its way into the paintings included in this survey⁵. The original photographic image was altered by a desire

for another place, or a different experience of that specific place. The landscape of the photograph was disguised, removed from reality by dint of the harmonic orbs in the sky and the other moments of abstraction, but was still drawn from a specific photograph and so retained a secret, personal specificity. The title, *No Place*, reflects the futility of the desire to transform this original landscape outside the realm of painting. Desire, by its very nature, only exists as an unfulfilled state, and this is reflected in the incomplete, clumsy, and self-effacing way this desired world is painted.



Figure 10: *Journey into Fear I*, 2007. oil, acrylic, archival marker, epson printed collage, and graphite on canvas, 72 x 90 inches; *Journey into Fear II*, 2007, oil, acrylic and archival markers on canvas, 72 x 90 inches; *Journey into Fear III*, 2008, oil, spray paint and graphite on canvas, 75 x 90 inches

It's time to move on. In the next room we find three paintings, strangely, they are all the same image. The *Journey into Fear* (Fig. 10) paintings are all an outgrowth of a newspaper clipping from the January 4, 2005 edition of the Los Angeles Times. The photograph depicts the destruction of a town in Sumatra, Indonesia, with a collapsed tower holding a mosque's minaret in the foreground. The photograph has an effective, professionally dramatic composition and the emotional and psychological upheaval of the

tsunami seems to be reflected in the topsy-turvy, off-balance composition of the picture. The devastation was total and the top-heavy, front-heavy mosque projecting out of the picture plane shows the disorienting effects of disaster, almost with a surrealist's metaphorical language.

Two years later, when the photograph was being translated into the first of the paintings in this room, a murky, associative connection had been formed between the image of the photograph and images from the war in Iraq. Interestingly, almost everyone first assumes that the image in the painting is taken from a picture of the fall of Baghdad. In truth, we are dealing with a documentary image from the news media that has a pretty ambiguous read, removed from the context of its original publication. In reality, the violence experienced by the people affected by the 2004 tsunami is entirely unrelated to the war in Iraq. Yet the image from Sumatra on the front page of the Los Angeles Times was visually similar and called to mind the front-page images from the invasion of Iraq. Removed from its original context as a dramatic vehicle for selling newspapers, which in itself is a remove from photojournalistic representation of events thousands of miles away, the image has become even more homeless as the events of the tsunami recede into the past. This slippage and dislocation is something that allows multiple readings of the image, making way for a more open and complicated series of paintings.

Journey into Fear I uses the framing device of a stage proscenium as the main element divergent from the original photograph. The stage is a site of allegory, it signals that the painting is not necessarily a straight representation of an actual event and serves to create a distance between the content of the painting and the image depicted. *Journey into*

Fear II provides a slightly different kind of space that is more emotionally confrontational, with the tighter cropping of the image and lurid colors. Also, the round, lens-like compositional structure at the top of the painting references the camera lens- both photographic and cinematic. The last of the series, *Journey into Fear III*, is the only one of the three where the figure in the original image is immediately visible, bringing the scale back to the human level and somehow moving the painting a little further from an imagined, possibly generic scene of destruction toward a more specific moment. Also, the edges of the newspaper clipping are more aggressively attended to in this version with a lurid green along the right side and bottom and a sharp transition to abstracted painting language at the top. This serves to assert the physical source of the image – a paper clipping – and to simultaneously bring the painted-ness of the painting back to a position of prominence. Throughout the painting, the material of the paint creates a friction against the illusionistic space of the image, reminding us that this is a painting, not simply a representation of a news image; creating a pull between what is in front of us, what is here, and what is being referred to, what is half-way around the world.

Journey into Fear is also the name of two Hollywood feature films made in 1942 and 1975 as well as a film by Stan Douglas from 2001 that is based on the previous two. By titling the three paintings in this room *Journey into Fear I, II, & III* a third element (in addition to the found image and the painterly treatment of said image) is inserted into the work. The three films, taken as a whole, trace the cultural shifts over the last century from nationalism, to internationalism, to globalism. The setting of Norman Foster's 1942 film is World War II, while Daniel Mann's version takes place during the 1973 oil crisis. Both

films are driven by espionage, though in Foster's it involves arms smuggling for the war and in Mann's it is industrial. Stan Douglas, an artist based in Vancouver, Canada, takes the basic premise of the previous films and shifts the location to a cargo shipping vessel and pares down the action to include only confusing scenes of ominous money-driven interests working to shape the course of individual lives. A discussion of the move from internationalism to globalism is an important component to any consideration of contemporary world politics and events, and in particular the war in Iraq.

In short, these paintings mark the introduction of sources that retain some of their original context within the painting; the physical existence of the image before it was translated it into paint or the content of the films bearing the same title as the paintings. Here, for the first time as well, the fact that the image is projected onto the canvas using an opaque projector is acknowledged by the treatment of edges (of individual shapes, of the outside edge of the clipping), adding another layer of mediation to the resultant painting.



The Road, 2007, oil, archival marker, and graphite on canvas, 72 x 96 inches

The *Journey into Fear* series shares a room with a large painting that bears a tangential relationship to the imagery of the toppled mosque. *The Road* (Fig. 11) takes its source imagery from a personal photograph taken while traveling in Turkey and Syria.

The original photograph is of a road in the Syrian countryside, taken through the window of an overnight bus. There are a few indications that the scene may be somewhere in the Middle East, such as the clothing worn by the people on the road and the rocky, trampled landscape, but the picture is primarily pastoral. The decorative elements at the top of the painting create an abrupt compositional shift, a kind of distraction and contrast to the action below and as a space of semi-psychedelic patterning or doodling. The decorative elements within this painting may be looked at as a reference to the idea of the decorative hiding something that is ugly or difficult to look at, or as an embellishment that creates a layer between the viewer and the content of the painting, a method of slowing down the understanding of a piece. The painting asserts itself as a landscape, begins to identify its specific place, only to be interrupted by the noise above.

The use of different mediums all in the same painting – pencil, marker, paint – and different systems of representation – abstraction, drawing, painting – sets up the painting to possibly provoke basic questions of how to perceive and understand any landscape. By drawing attention to the different forms a painting can take, the painting draws attention to the fact that it is a painting, not simply an image. Reverie, projection, narrative are cut short only to be summoned again by the figures walking down the road through an evocative landscape.

Moving along, we enter a room with a small plaque by the door reading, the Forum for Topically Tangential Explorations; a room decorated with palms (because topical rhymes with tropical), big pillows made of wildly patterned fabrics from all over the world, with music playing, and book cases filled with novels and artist's monograms. This

room houses a collection of smaller paintings (Fig. 12), and seems to function as a sort of laboratory with great tangles of strings overhead that run from paintings, to books, to images of other artist's work, and back and around all again.



Green Bikini, 2007, oil on canvas, 28 x 22 inches; *verses*, 2007, oil, enamel, and spray paint on canvas, 28 x 22 inches; *Setting the Trap*, 2007, oil and graphite on canvas, 22 x 28 inches.

Many of these paintings have an air of unfinished-ness about them, as though their function is to hap-hazardly gather visual information (mostly different kinds of ways to apply paint, some of which are very specific to this exact moment in painting, could maybe even be called trendy) and spit these marks back out with a slight inflection drawn from the subject matter filtering through the paintings in the previous rooms.

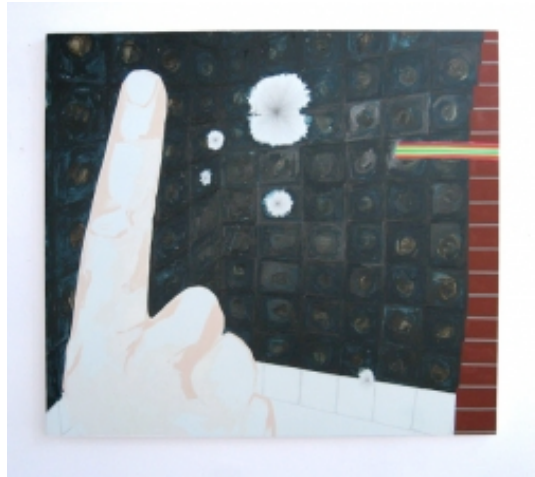
These paintings embody a desire to identify and claim features found in work outside the galleries of this building, the work of other artists (Fig. 13).



Figure 13: David Hockney, *California Art Collector*, 1964, acrylic on canvas, 60 x 72 inches; Jason Coates, *Car Fire*, 2007, acrylic on canvas, 11 x 16 inches; Jim Lee, *Currently Untitled*, 2006, latex paint on Sintra with wood, 20 x 20 ½ x 8 inches

A lot of these paintings are ugly, in a very intentional, faux-naïve, clumsy, intensely satisfying kind of way. This sort of mannered ugliness is so captivating because it deflates painting, or at least some imagined conception of painting as important, meaningful, and beautiful. There's a certain self-conscious irreverence and rebellion with this kind of painting that must confess some little absurdity considering that this style has become a painting trope in its own right. Nonetheless, this reflexive pseudo-critique is alluring and calls for engagement, at least while it seems to be in the thoughts of so many artists at this moment. The paintings in this room are an ongoing project and so sit comfortably in this room at the center of a virtual tapestry of threads extending into the rooms we've toured already and those yet to come.

Leaving the Forum for Topically Tangential Explorations, our guide informs us that we are near the end of our tour. We have entered a spacious room of indeterminate size; it seems large, but we are not quite able to determine where it ends. There are only three paintings present in this room but there are several placards on the walls that read, "work temporarily removed for exhibition." Our guide informs us that the works removed have been hung for viewing at a show titled *Splinter Paintings* at the Anderson Gallery. A discussion of the works in this room though will be an ideal preparation for a visit to the Anderson Gallery after the tour.



Stick, 2007, oil and graphite on canvas, 80 x 70 inches

The first painting we turn to is titled, *Stick* (Fig. 13). With the simplicity and immediacy of the paint handling, *Stick* is the first large-scale painting that has a look of having happened, a sort of unfinished-ness, similar to the small works from the previous room. The simplicity of the imagery in this painting allows for a chain of associations that might cause one to think of a finger in the eye. This might make a nice friction in the mind of someone thinking about how painting is often about looking and re-presenting the world. The painting might also just make someone laugh a little at the absurdity of a big finger right up at the front of a painting. Or maybe someone might be really frightened of this big, pointing finger in a dark, tiled space. The play between the sharpness of the bricks, the looseness of the tiles, the thinness of the painted hand, the way so much of the painting is painted schematically shouldn't be entirely ignored either. Ideally, the painting should function on all these levels at once, leaving the ultimate determination of what it might be about to the viewer.

Turning around, we find two more paintings in this room; the first painting to approach, obviously, is the one that looks most similar to *Stick*. For good reason too, as our guide informs us: *Dinner this year is outside* (Fig. 14) has a secret relationship with *Stick*.



Figure 14: *Dinner this year is outside*, 2007. Oil on canvas, 78 x 72 inches, installation view

Both paintings are attempts to paint the uncertainty of memory, revealing some of the structures that are used to construct memory and the narrative of a life. *Stick* uses symbolic images to represent sensory, body memory that can't be placed into any sort of decipherable setting and *Dinner this year is outside* is painted based on the memory of a photograph. Because the photograph wasn't actually used for the painting, the room in the painting has a strange, off-kilter space that has more to do with memory than reality.

The world outside the sliding glass door in the painting is similarly strained and the oleanders are painted in a schematic, flat way that emphasizes the idea of oleanders rather than how they actually look. Likewise, the chandelier, brown shag carpet, sliding glass doors, and patio are more referred to than they are painted. Unlike the oleanders though, the reference is a sensory, physical impression of an object, not the schematic reference to

the components that make up the object (in the case of the oleanders, the woody stalk, long, thin, dark green leaves, and white flower). The whole effect is one of a piece-meal construction of a scene that feels vaguely photographic, in the manner of a discarded snapshot, in its banality.

This, of course, is only one way to look at *Dinner this year is outside*. There are certainly others and that, not the interpretation above, is the important thing. The paintings in this room seem to more successfully hold multiple readings, to be able to entertain simultaneous, sometimes conflicting ideas. This is an important ability because it reflects an experience of uncertainty in the possibility of knowing oneself, the world, and anyone else with anything approaching completeness. A schism is identified – whether it be between photography and painting, representation and abstraction, one's own memories and those of others, psychological space and physical space, what's present and what's absent, between collaged elements – and heightened using different ways of constructing an image or a painting. This impulse to explore and manifest this schism is related to the desire to correct the sense of loss that is born, according to Lacan, in a person when they become aware of their separation from their mother and, by extension, the world. This separation, or schism, may be approached through metaphor by executing leaps across other divides; those in painting, those between empirical representation and emotionally driven abstraction, between the two or more, contradictory possible meanings of a given work of art. The desire to bridge the gap and fill the original loss can be translated into a need to be known completely by another person and to know the world, the other, and the self as completely; manifested in an impulse to reveal one's inner life as thoroughly as able

and to document the world in as many ways as possible. This, of course, is a futile because the moment a desire is fulfilled, it disappears and becomes something else, like fulfillment⁶.



Figure 15: *Untitled*, 2008. Oil on canvas 18 x 20 inches

To return to the paintings at hand in this final room: immediately to the left of *Dinner this year is outside*, is a small painting of an oleander moth (Fig. 15). The painting appears to be unfinished, but in a pleasing, intentional kind of way and has the high contrast particular to flash photography. Upon closer examination, the complete drawing of the moth becomes more noticeable on the exposed, unpainted canvas, implying, perhaps that the image was projected from a source photograph. Hanging next to a painting featuring oleanders, the oleander moth might have been conceivably found during a google image search for oleanders in researching the painting on its right. In this painting, an anonymous image from the internet acquires significance because of its chance relationship to another photograph or, rather, a memory of a photograph. This initiates a process whereby photographs are chosen for paintings intuitively based on their ability to

transform from generic to personal or from personal to generic, depending on the time invested in and the manner of their reproduction or re-presentation.

Abruptly, the tour has ended. Our guide invites us to please recall some of the dominant themes from today's tour before we visit the thesis show, *Splinter Paintings*.

The paintings that this building was built to house have, generally, revolved around a discussion of imagery in material form, namely, the material form of painting. Both "imagery" and "painting" are such wide, open words that there are, really, endless complications possible between the two. As the tour wound its way through the sequence of rooms it became clear that certain oppositions were being set up within works: between constructed and observed reality (more tangled together than not), between landscape and the interior territory of psychology, between painting and photography, between memory and narrative, between image and materiality, among others. Frequently, however, these oppositions lacked the full force of the dialectical friction needed for the creation of metaphor. As we near the end of our tour, the paintings seem to be clearer in their purpose to set up these oppositions. A metaphor – that which calls something by a name not its own (a man is a rat, for example) – must be an impossible combination of heterogeneity. Given the impossibility of ever erasing the schism that appears to be at the bottom of this group of paintings (remember Lacan, above), a metaphor becomes the ideal vehicle for at least mirroring, exploring, and learning what this break is. This break – the individual apart from the world – is what, it seems, must be navigated while alive and art appears to be the most comprehensive tool for this task.

Splinter Paintings

A splinter is a small, thin, sharp piece of wood, glass, or similar material broken off from a larger piece. The larger piece is sometimes not a whole physical object, but a grouping or body of thought. To splinter means to break or cause to break into small, sharp fragments.

A splinter is an object that is embedded in a finger, for example, and must be removed by tweezers by the summer camp infirmary nurse, before breakfast, precipitating the first and only episode of fainting remembered: an episode of remembered forgetting, so to speak.

A splinter can refer to a separation, a “splinter group” of paintings, for example, related to one another but also to a whole not present. Often these groups are concerned with a specific agenda that may be more radicalized or personal than the larger whole from which they splinter.

To splinter something, the constructs of image making, for example, means to break apart and into smaller pieces.

These pieces may then be placed in relation to one another to create new connections or simply to elaborate on old connections and stretch them out for contemplation. If these smaller pieces are placed in such a way that questions, delight, interest, and a tickling inclination of new correspondences occur in equal measure, then some poetry has been achieved.

Notes

1. I found the conceit for an imaginary gallery as the guide for an analysis in Beat Wyss's *Hegel's Art History and the Critique of Modernity*. Instead of the grand museum Wyss guides the reader through, though, I am imagining a dreamt-of building more in keeping with the house that Toni Morrison's *Sula* was born in, built by her grandmother Eva Peace, with only the faintest traces of logic in its construction.

2. It was only over the last two years that I discovered that these ideas originated with Clement Greenberg. They were first presented to me at California College of Arts and Crafts as simply the rules of painting, what paintings *ought* to do. This may help to explain their unconvincing application in these earlier paintings.

3. Edmund Burke wrote during the Enlightenment in the mid-1700's of the terror in nature and called the awareness of that terror or danger, at a distance, the Sublime. For Burke, the Sublime resides in the object (nature) of contemplation. Writing 30 years after Burke, Kant placed the Sublime in the person observing nature, the Sublime shifted from the object of contemplation to the subject processing their sensory experience. This processing becomes what is termed "Sublime." Kant differentiated a Mathematical and a Dynamic Sublime: both require human reason to triumph over our sensory inability to comprehend an object or vista of vastness, power, or great number.

I'm speaking of an understanding of the sublime that is from the lineage of Kant but is inflected by American writers like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman that picture the sublime in nature as that which uplifts the soul and expands the spirit. This is what I refer to as American Transcendentalism.

4. The dislocation of material from its original context into a foreign combination with other similarly dislocated visual imagery creates a tension between where something is and where it came from; between the absent space and the present space. In this tension, there is a reaching, a desire.

Collage has a certain awkward jaggedness that suits the inadequacy of trying to communicate or represent the metaphysical. By the very poverty of the medium (the trash, gathered aesthetic), the impossibility of ever telling the whole story in any one piece of art is shown clearly.

Aside from these vagaries, collage encourages appropriation and references the impulse to include everything in art, or the feeling of constant, unremitting inundation of imagery in the contemporary visual culture (a contemporary example of Kant's Mathematical Sublime). The Tal R collage in figure 4 is a perfect example of this function of collage.

Also, collage affords a visual translation of the experience of the world as I sometimes have it- shifting, sliding memories and time, the feeling of layers of references and ideas

and other people's thoughts before I can even see something. All of this adds up to a fragmented, over-lapping, jagged picture.

A disclaimer on collage:

I've decided that collage can only be allotted as much weight in my work as any other technique or form that allows for an exploration or embodiment of my ideas. Collage works well because it is suited for gathering disparate sensations and references into one place, but this is not always necessary and collage has its limitations just like any other medium. There are other ways of exploring the urge to know and be known completely.

5. Photography functions in two different ways in the work from here on out. First, it can serve primarily as a visual resource, as in *No Place*, a kind of sketch for the painting. Or, it can serve as an element within a painting, retaining the significance of its original context. This doesn't completely eclipse the sketch/ image resource function of the photograph, but it does bring into closer attention the different ways that we try to document and communicate out experience.

By setting up a comparison, pairing, opposition between painting and photography, a painting can open the space for another subject aside from the one directly communicated by the chosen imagery.

This is the mode that the paintings moved toward starting with the *Journey into Fear* series.

6. Anne Carson, in her book *Eros: the bittersweet*, writes of this idea in terms of Eros, in an essay *Finding the Edge* (p. 30)

Eros is an issue of boundaries. He exists because certain boundaries do. In the interval between reach and grasp, between glance and counter glance, between 'I love you' and 'I love you too,' the absent presence of desire comes alive. But the boundaries of time and glance and I love you are only aftershocks of the main, inevitable boundary that creates Eros: the boundary of flesh and self between you and me. And it is only, suddenly, at the moment when I would dissolve that boundary, I realize I never can.

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