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# Magic, Mystery, Illusion and Magic

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MAGIC, MYSTERY, ILLUSION, AND MAGIC

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

by

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Director: RICHARD ROTH  
CHAIR OF PAINTING AND PRINTMAKING

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# Abstract

By Alexis Semtner, MFA

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Major Director: Richard Roth  
Chair, Painting and Printmaking

This document vaguely describes what happened to me and my paintings during my time spent at VCU.

## Being

My interests in illusion, figure-ground reversal, spatial contradictions, and in painting itself are all cases of the cart before the horse. I did not know why I was so interested in them until I got to know them through painting, only then did I began to understand what I had been wanting to say.

Though I begin at an intuitive point, every element within my work is intentional and considered. While individual decisions within a painting often come from a personal or obscure place the reasoning is always specific. Though the starting point is often a specific conception of an idea, a painting may shift emphatically by the time it reaches a conclusion. I constantly negotiate and reevaluate my concepts throughout the process. I try to keep an open space around my concept so that it and I have the ability to change a direction or belief. I am grateful for this shifting, as I don't think I would make very interesting work without it. The places I seem to start from are fundamentally mundane, predictable, and literal. It is the materials, the process of painting, and the choices that happen inside of this process that transcend the ordinary.

I was a figurative painter until 8 months prior to coming to Virginia Commonwealth University. I realized on my last figurative piece that I could no longer say what I wanted to say through a figure- I was using it. The figure had simply become an armature on which to move paint around. I was attempting to express through

application, color, etc. ideas concerning the human condition, and the figure itself had the least to do with this expression. Tension, redemption, failure, impossibilities, confusion, contradiction; this is where my search for form began.

Initially, I sought out organic, odd, somewhat gnarled forms for which it was at least difficult, at best impossible, to identify the context of their origin. By removing preconceived notions complicit within identifiable objects, I hoped to create a forum that would allow for materiality and form to solely carry the content. It was here that I began to walk a line between reality and abstraction. My work is most successful when it references reality and abstraction in equal measures. It loses something when materiality and other essentially formal ideas do not transcend their formalities, just as much as it falters from being too firmly planted in an identifiable reality. I need references to the world to be present, even if the only clue to that presence is abstract as a constructed space or light.

One recurring form became the portal; I initially latched onto this form because it embodied many aspects that I saw as foundational in my search as an artist and person. The Portal was incredibly influential during my preliminary search for form.



Figure.1: Untitled, Oil on Canvas. 2006, 48"x48". Figure.2: Untitled, Oil on Canvas. 2006, 48"x48"

Figure.3: Average, Oil on Linen on Panel, 74"x96" (Detail)



Figure.4: Portal, 2007. Oil on Canvas, 96"x96". Figure .5: The Mean, 2006. Oil on Canvas, 96"x67" (Detail)

My relationship with the portal has developed over the past few years and continues to shift and grow. I have come to think of it as a physical manifestation of a place between, specifically the space between internal and external. It holds the question of separation or unification between these two places. The portal represents the notion of a liminal space which is defined a transitional or initial stage of a process, or occupying a position at or on both sides of a threshold. It embodies the unidentifiable nature of origination and dissimulation. It is simultaneously the container and the contained.

The ability of a form to emerge as something separate, while still maintaining its oneness, is an idea functioning in nearly all of my work. A battle that I continue to fight is my inclination towards a literal illustration of an idea. Though a painting may not seem literal to a given viewer, they often are. Below is a sampling of others forms I have



explored. Each form was either chosen or constructed based on their ability to convey or contain a concept.



Clockwise from top left: Figure.6: Box Flock, 2007. Oil on Linen, 72''x48''. Figure.7: Slip, 2007. Oil on Canvas on Panel, 48''x48''. Figure.8: Stuck, 2007. Oil on Panel, 60''x72''. Figure.9: Average, Oil on Linen on Panel, 74''x96''

In my paintings forms are nearly always personified. Box Flock is an extreme example of this personification. At the conception of the painting I plotted a community of boxes, choosing them for nearly the same characteristics that are inherent to the portal. Each box was rendered at a unique angle, creating a parallel between the literal drawing perspective of the form and the metaphorical perspective, or perception, of the individual. Though each box occupies a unique space, they are being forced to exist on the same plane in the same space. The piece is essentially an exploration of how much is misunderstood from being locked into a given perspective. Through the process the characters grew and formal decisions began to be based on the character of each box. The lavender box is a liar. He employs a traditional means of shading to imply the recession of space within his internal planes but to convey this illusion he uses a pungent red that refuses to recede. The large cerulean box is a suck-up. Shifting and changing, a chameleon forced to continually reconstructed himself to any given situation.

This group of paintings illustrates many aspects of my search during these past years. Though at any given time I may have been latched onto a particular idea that I was wrestling with, lurking underneath was the fact my interests and ideas were still too broad, that my work and myself were confused. I wanted to talk about life and everything in it; about past, present, future, and the simultaneity of their existence; about being human and searching for more; about death, redemption and hope. It was too big, but I didn't know how to make it any smaller. While I was attempting to get more specific, I was simultaneously being told that few to none of these ideas were being communicated to the

viewer. People seemed to be viewing the paintings on a purely formal level. Formalism is very important to me but by no means do I want the discussion to end there; I see it as a beginning rather than an end.

I always look first for paintings to captivate me visually. There are now limitless art making possibilities, but I feel that if one chooses to make visual objects as a vessel to house one's ideas, then great consideration should be taken of the fact that one is making visual objects. This is the place that I come from, not a rule I apply to art in general. I find that the art that interests me operates on this level. First I am baited, be it by beauty, the grotesque, the absurd, whatever- I am captured in a visual experience. I stay there. I then begin to look for more. Actually, it is not such a one-two experience as it is a simultaneous one. But if content and form are not equally powerful I find myself unable or maybe just unwilling to listen.

This said, it seemed obvious that I was failing to convey a concept that was too large for me to express. In an attempt to diverge from such an illustrative path I began thinking about specific formalities and their inherent concepts. Figure-ground reversal is a conceptual and formal tool that kept rearing its head. It alludes to the search for consciousness and mimics the action of a spiritual practice. The perpetual oscillation between emphasis on the figure or the ground stands to illustrate a part of the act of perception, the gaining and subsequent losing of grasps or understanding of these concepts. This action of figure-ground reversal allows objects and spaces to convey their uniqueness and oneness simultaneously. I want a painting to operate in one way, then

another, and then dance between the two. To be experienced as life is, moment to moment, shifting in between.

Thinking isolates a situation or event and calls it good or bad, as if it had a separate existence. Through excessive reliance on thinking, reality becomes fragmented. This fragmentation is an illusion, but it seems very real while you are trapped in it. And yet the universe is an indivisible whole in which all things are interconnected, in which nothing exists in isolation.<sup>1</sup>

Space was the first tool I began to utilize as a signifier for perception. It began in a very literal manner, employing the viewer's body. Large-scale paintings housed kinetic happenings that were suspended in the work, they felt as though they could succumb to gravity and at any moment, could fall upon the viewer. Scale was imperative to envelope the viewer's body, joining the painting's space with the individual's. Also within the work certain spatial relationships were absolutely incompatible with one another, which clued the viewer into the fact that this seemingly realistic space could not actually exist and thus was not depicting this physical world. I became very interested in the seams of space that contradicted one another, hoping that the inconsistency of spatial planes would allude to the notion of conflicting realities.

My current endeavor concerning space confronts the actual image space. By centralizing a form, or by not allowing the image to continue off the picture plane I highlight the fact that this is a composed image, a construct. This is also emphasized by placing the images upon a raw linen, not attempting to cover up the fact that I am constructing a painted image, exposing the illusory nature of image making. I feel that this is the space where my interests in the history of painting and in perception frequently overlap and exchange with one another.

One overt dialogue existing within my work is an art historical sampling, simultaneously exploiting and celebrating painting. I want painting to laugh at itself. I exploit illusion for many conceptual reasons, but also just because I think it's amazing. I paint to aid in my understanding of this world, but I also paint because I love to do so. I am excited by the boundless and simultaneously limited possibilities of the medium. The ability for a single medium to have such a polyphonic range of expression simply by varying applications or colors still astounds me. My work takes advantage of the fact that painting is an extremely mined territory. The fact that painting has such an extensive history just about guarantees the unoriginality of a particular mark. This relieves the pressure to have to make one and fosters a playfulness that leads to new territories. Any one of my paintings may contain a number of references to other artists, genres, or time periods. At this level they are simply paintings that love to talk about painting and its history.

## Optical Illusion

I have recently become interested in optical illusion and Optical Art. For the last three years I have been grappling with perspective and illusion, optical illusion and Op Art seem to be explicit means of expressing this exploration. This is in part because the optical illusions require perceptual activation from the viewer. Physically, the language of Op Art is traditionally a very slick, smooth, essentially flawless finish that is extremely image based.



Figure.10, 11, 12: Taken from [coolopticalillusions.com](http://coolopticalillusions.com)

The contrast I set up to this slickness is another reason I enjoying utilizing the parameters of this language. Materiality will always manifest itself within my work, it is my inherent language. Thus, for me to use op art is like forcing a square peg into a round hole. A tension is created in the process; the work begins to function optically but is then deflated once attention is forced back to the surface.

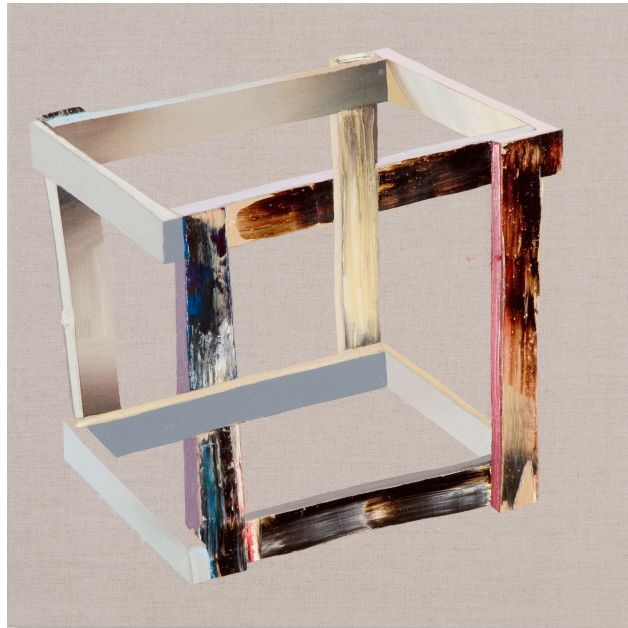


Figure.13: Cube, 2008. Oil on Canvas, 24"x24".

In The Cube (Fig.13), I wanted to overtly expose the artifice of illusion. When the viewer encounters the form straight away its impossibilities are revealed, but there is still the desire to make sense of it. It embodies the absurdity of our perception, and keeps the viewer in this moment for as long as possible.

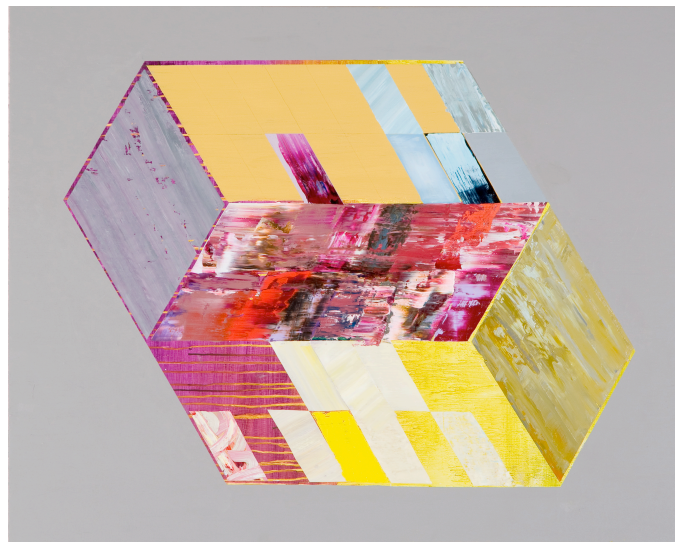


Figure.14: FlipFlop, 2000. Oil on Panel, 60"x48"

The form in FlipFlop (Fig.14) was chosen for its ability to fluctuate between states. The switch from one form to another is activated by the viewer's perception that dances with the form in an attempt to reckon with its impossibility.

During my 2<sup>nd</sup> year here, and specifically my last semester, I have drastically edited my work. I realized my paintings' images had become so complicated that they emitted too much peripheral noise, formally and conceptually the images' voices were muffled. This new body of work creates many parallels between Buddhism and framing devices within art history, engaging both the precepts of Buddhism and self-referential painting.

Now I am utilizing notions of perception and illusion as a metaphor that illustrates the Buddhist concept of delusion. Kadampa Buddhism, a Tibetan lineage of Buddhism, continually brings its practice back to the individual's mind. It teaches that a majority of what one perceives as truth or reality is, in fact, a delusion. A delusion is a false, conditioned belief pattern that exists in thought, but that one believes to be real. Kadampa states that reality itself is simply a projection of our mental state, that our minds are so contaminated with delusions that most of what we consider to be reality is in fact a hallucination. Kadampa teaches that the way to find release from this affliction can be found in continual meditation and relentless selflessness. Taking some of these precepts Eckhart Tolle writes,

The greater part of most people's thinking is involuntary, automatic, and repetitive. It is no more than a kind of mental static and fulfills no real purpose. Strictly speaking, you don't think; Thinking happens to you. The statement "I think" implies volition. It implies that you have a say in the matter, that there is a choice involved on your part. For most people this is not the case. "I think" is just a false statement as "I digest" or "I circulate my blood."<sup>2</sup>



Buddhism teaches that form is actually an illusion and that it is the mind that constructs the form. It recognizes that how things appear has much more to do with how we filter reality through our delusions or mentally constructed framing devices. A large part of the function of obtaining clarity is so that the individual can become conscious and free of the false constructs they have been participating in. They believe that enlightenment can only be obtained by identifying the constructs for what they are and thus unsuturing themselves from given ideologies.

Choose an object close to you—a pen, a chair, a cup, a plant—and explore it visually, that is to say look at it with great interest, almost curiosity. Avoid any objects with strong personal associations that remind you of the past, such as where you bought it, who gave it to you, and so on. Also avoid anything that has writing on it such as a book or a bottle. It would stimulate thought. Without straining, relaxed but alert give your complete attention to the object, every detail of it. If thoughts arise, don't get involved in them. It is not the thoughts you are interested in, but the act of perception itself. Can you take the thinking out of the perceiving? Can you look without the voice in your head commenting, drawing conclusions, comparing, or trying to figure something out? After a couple of minutes or so, let your gaze wander around the room or wherever you are, your alert attention lighting up each thing that it rests upon.<sup>3</sup>

When speaking about my work I often find myself trapped within a barrier between a verbal language and a visual one. The concepts of these paintings are visually ingrained within the work. It is difficult to translate such a visual experience verbally. I want the viewer to inform the painting as much as the painting informs the viewer.

During my time here I have gained a much greater understanding of what I am saying and how I could say it more explicitly. I am grateful for all of the people here I have had the pleasure of getting to know, share ideas with, and be informed by. I am grateful to be concluding my time here at the beginning of an idea.

## Citations

1. Tolle p. 196
2. Tolle p. 129
3. Tolle p. 240

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2. Gyatso, Geshe Kelsang. *Transform Your Life: A Blissful Journey*. Tharpa. Cumbria, England 2001.
3. Gyatso, Geshe Kelsang. *Eight Steps to Happiness; The Buddhist Way of Loving Kindness*. Tharpa. London, 2000.