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Seeing it Straight

Heather Harvey

Virginia Commonwealth University

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SEEING IT STRAIGHT

HEATHER HARVEY

MASTER OF FINE ARTS THESIS

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SEEING IT STRAIGHT

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
of
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By

HEATHER HARVEY

MASTER OF FINE ARTS, VIRGINIA COMMONWEALTH UNIVERSITY, 2007

Director: RON JOHNSON

ASSISTANT PROFESSOR, DEPARTMENT OF PAINTING AND PRINTMAKING

Virginia Commonwealth University

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1.

FAITH AND DISBELIEF

To my great surprise, the central artistic dilemma of my graduate work has been to reckon with faith versus rationality. As a secular nonbeliever I presumed issues of religiosity to be on the periphery of my artistic concerns. The past two years have precipitated an essential reconsideration of this presumption that, in retrospect, was the inevitable intertwining of the current state of the world and my personal biography.

The rituals of the Catholic calendar set the rhythm of my childhood, providing both a sense of belonging and an attenuated awareness of a mysterious order operating in the world. Ordinary activities and objects contained unnamed significance, and were ripe with metaphoric potential. Catholicism also initiated me into ethical concerns including charity, honesty, and the value of hard work. But I puzzled over much of the received wisdom of my catholic school and family. In the quiet of my own mind I tested theories and drew conclusions that were sometimes contrary to or slightly askew from what I was taught. These moments when my inner life didn't meet up with outer convention became my earliest experiences with the ineffable.

They also eventually led me to reject Catholicism, and in fact theistic religion in general. Faith became untenable. I developed a profound distrust in those who would claim authority – religious or otherwise. Being young, female, and working class I was vulnerable to others' whims. I developed an early, self-preserving awareness of the illogic driving people, and a visceral understanding that people hide ulterior motives even (or especially) from themselves. Equally dismayed by my own capacity for self-delusion, I developed increased devotion to measured

There's a certain kind of personality – my own, maybe yours – that sets great store on seeing it straight.

-Joan Didion

Early on in life I learned that life was meaningless, since life was not a sign; that novels were meaningful, because signs were the very material of their composition. I learned that suffering served no purpose; that the good guys didn't win; that most explanations offered me to make the mess I was in less a mess were self-serving lies. Life wasn't clear, it was ambiguous; motives were many and mixed; values were complex, opposed, poisoned by hypocrisy, without any reasonable ground; most of passions pageants were frauds, and human feelings had been faked for so long, no one knew what the genuine was; furthermore, many of the things I found most satisfactory were everywhere libellously characterized or their very existence was suppressed; and much of adult society, its institutions and its advertised dreams, were simply superstitions that served a small set of people well while keeping the remainder in miserable ignorance.

-William Gass

Beware the irrational, however seductive. Shun the "transcendent" and all who invite you to subordinate or annihilate yourself. Distrust compassion; prefer dignity for yourself and others. Don't be afraid to be thought arrogant or selfish. Picture all experts as if they were mammals. Never be a spectator of unfairness or stupidity. Seek out argument and disputation for their own sake; the grave will supply plenty of time for silence. Suspect your own motives, and all excuses. Do not live for others any more than you would expect others to live for you.

-Christopher Hitchens

rationality. Anchored with the facts, I hoped to live honorably and honestly.

Ironically perhaps, my desire to know the 'real' truth rather than wishful thinking cloaked as truth, made me wary of education. As a college undergrad I developed a quirky aversion to study. I worried that my mind could be colonized by attractive and convenient untruths that, once planted, would be virulently difficult to remove. This sounds paranoid, but actually I think I was on to something. The interior self is a delicate ecosystem easily thrown off kilter. I became skillful at surreptitiously protecting the native contours of my mind.

Confronted with the inscrutable, Americans tend to fall back on religious or supernatural explanation. The crushing gravitational pull of religion's cultural dominance, along with an anti-intellectual quit-yer-whining pragmatism, robs this country of nuanced ethical and philosophical dialogues. The predominance of religious explanation for what is incomprehensible (birth, death, and much in between) creates the illusion that these essential mysteries are inherently religious.

Prior to the fallout from September 11th, 2001, I thought of this unique American mind set, if I thought of it at all, as the largely benign and peculiar charm of my country. In a post-9/11 landscape, throbbing with misguided extremism, I am no longer so sanguine. The irony of reactionary religious extremism is that it forces the hands of those more moderate. My previously rather slack tendency towards nontheism became increasingly clarified and fixed. I am not alone in this trend. Alongside the growing religiosity has been a parallel increase in conversations and publications around doubt, skepticism, and the non-theistic roots of our country. This is a good and probably long overdue

Why does this matter? It matters, for one thing, because it belongs to our dignity as moderately rational creatures to know the truth. And that includes knowing the truth about truth. It is also best not to be deceived if we can possibly help it.

-Terry Eagleton

THE SOUL'S superior instants
Occur to Her alone,
When friend and earth's occasion
Have infinite withdrawn.

-Emily Dickinson

My objection to supernatural beliefs is precisely that they miserably fail to do justice to the sublime grandeur of the real world. They represent a narrowing down from reality, an impoverishment of what the real world has to offer.

-Richard Dawkins

No one after a certain age has the right to this kind of innocence, of superficiality, to this degree of ignorance, or amnesia.

-Susan Sontag

national debate, though painful and polarizing as well. On a personal level, it had the unfortunate effect of further alienating me from my already remote instincts. All around, in schools, communities, local governments and, particularly dangerously, in the White House, people were increasingly making crucial decisions with their guts and their religion rather than their minds. This further impressed upon me the ethical imperative to use reason and facts in every instance.

It took a return to graduate school to reclaim a more complicated relationship with faith and reason, to recognize that religion does not have a monopoly on mystery, and that a visionary can also be a rigorous skeptic. It has been a surprise to discover how central both faith (not in a deity but in my own unwashed sense of things) and rationality are for my working process. Despite my earlier conclusions, the rational and the poetic are not incongruous at all, but coexistent and equally necessary. They are two paths to knowledge that can also serve as check and balance to the other. The writer Jeannette Winterson argues that the rational mind is insufficient to comprehend life's full immensity; that a mythic imagination can sometimes access a denser, more obscured reality. It is perhaps no coincidence that the eminently rational Winterson was raised in a devout Pentecostal working class family. She escaped the intellectual restrictions of her upbringing but retained its instinctive respect for revelation and imagination.

Ethics and a propensity for awe endure from my catholic upbringing, but healthy skepticism remains a reliable compass to navigate the world. I am led, inspired, and consoled by facts. Still, something sacred, earthy, and essential, some tender aching place, is lost if life is lived only through reason. The spirit, and indeed art, suffer when so confined. The great gift of Ca-

Flanders isn't embarrassed about the harsh story of America. If anything, he's cheerful.

And there is something sort of profound about that combination. In fact, the greatest sitcom characters, which is to say the funniest and the most riveting to watch, are cheerful at the same time that they're self-absorbed and galling and oblivious to the destruction left in their wake. Think Homer Simpson, Michael Scott on *The Office*, Ted Baxter from *Mary Tyler Moore*, Larry David, the entire cast of *Seinfeld*. . . Sitcoms tell the true story of our nation every time the Michael's, and Homer's, and Larry's open their mouths. We're well meaning, lovable, unintentionally destructive; believing we're more important than we are. Like we're some kind of *City Upon a Hill*.

-Sarah Vowell

Romanticism, whether as a return to the Gothic, or as a treatise on the Sublime, is an argument against Reason, as the only way to truth. That there are invisible powers, that the springs of behaviour are often irrational, and will continue to be so, that instinct, and 'sensibility' must accompany rational man, are all part of the Romantic frame of mind. The extraordinary influence of this movement is less extraordinary if we believe in the psyche as a self-regulating system that will always move towards balance.

-Jeanette Winterson

Only part of us is sane. Only part of us loves pleasure and the longer day of happiness, wants to live to our 90s and die in peace, in a house that we built, that shall shelter those who come after us. The other half of us is nearly mad. It prefers the disagreeable to the agreeable, loves pain and its darker night despair, and wants to die in a catastrophe that will set life back to its beginnings and leave nothing of our house save its blackened foundations. Our bright natures fight in us with this yeasty darkness, and neither part is commonly quite victorious, for we are divided against ourselves.

-Rebecca West

tholicism and perhaps all religion is this alertness to life's mysteries. If in the end I disagree with Catholics over where the mystery lies, it remains true that my early experience in that religion taught me to pay attention to what is non-evident and oblique; the intricate complexities residing just behind the veil of everyday reality.

In short run, I think, the intellectual satisfaction that came of doing criticism and philosophy. . . put a damper on the instinctive feeling I had for fiction writing.

. . . The truth of the matter is that the creative act doesn't fulfill the ego but changes its nature. . . You learn to trust what comes to you unbidden. . . It is not that you have no intellect when you write.

. . . It is that nothing good will come of merely filling in what you already know.

You must trust the act of writing to scan all the passions and convictions in your mind, but these must defer to the fortuitousness of the work; they must be of it. A book

begins as an image, a sound in the ear, the haunting of something you don't want to remember, or perhaps a great endowing

anger. But it is not until you find a voice for whatever it is going on inside you that you can begin to make a coherent composition.

The language you find precedes your intention or, if not, is sure to transform it.

-E. L. Doctorow

2.

IDEAS

This fascinating, fecund area just beyond current understanding is central to my work. I want the work to inhabit a border region between what is known/familiar and what is just one step outside of that; to be on the periphery, synthesizing, reworking, creating new vantages and exploring interstices between established knowledge. That place of indeterminacy is the central locus of my work; it's the zone I like to inhabit, and the meaning I'd like to convey. At its best the work is shifting and indeterminate in the way an emerging thought is before imprisoned in words. It is a visual embodiment of uncertainty and transformation. It has psychological, philosophical, emotional, biological, and political aspects without being altogether any of those things.

This has nothing to do with mysticism, science fiction, or anything else unmoored from established fact. It is about the unexplained, but not the unexplainable. It is closely aligned with scientific research in that it begins with concrete facts of ordinary materials to get at something less resolved. It approximates the moment a scientist, confronted with unexpected research results, realizes that the world is more complicated and strange than previously imagined.

Disparate facts from eclectic sources – natural science, physics, economics, anthropology, current events, memory, the emotions – can be synthesized in surprising ways, allowing a glimpse at some broader understanding than we currently have access to. This kind of art-making lies at the edge of human awareness, and straddles every known discipline. It addresses the big questions and points to future possibilities.

Work from the known to the unknown.

–Excavation advice from an archaeologist instructor and friend

Reality is huge. We need to try and show it in all its dimensions, not simply the things that lie on the surface or the things that are obvious. If it works in the book, if it has authenticity, if it has power, then you can use it. If it is simply a literary device then it should be thrown out.

For instance, suppose I read the story of a magic fish whose heart beat for five days after it was pulled out of the water. You might think that that was an annoying invention. [But] we have just discovered that when you take a carp out of the water its heart beats for five days. That's what I mean about reality being often much huger than we can encompass at any moment and sometimes the things which we think of as inventions prove to be the things that are most real.

–Jeanette Winterson

I'm taking in information, synthesizing it, putting it out. Everything starts from something specific that's seen. Then it gets respecified through the activity of making the painting and the drawing. I have a lot of source materials. . . These aren't things I make up, but in some way they end up being products of the imagination.

–Terry Winters

From this vantage, art is not only an aesthetic undertaking, but a philosophical and ethical one. Aesthetics becomes the language but not the meaning. For the artist this requires trusting your gut without selling yourself a line of goods. There is the looming danger of being no more than a wizard behind the curtain; making work that comes uncomfortably close to spectacle. The fear of making merely pleasing art continues to inform (and at times limit) my work. Beauty can be complicated, contradictory, unclear, even creepy or disturbing. It can come out of wounds and darkness as much as from ease and facility. This sublime sort of beauty carries darkness and terror within its depths. It can border on the repulsive. Yet it also can be paradoxically funny, ironic, and silly.

A complete success for me would be a piece that, from certain vantages or in certain lighting, almost disappears or remains unremarkable, but in another angle or moment pops out with the shock of surprise that prompts the questions "What is it?" and "What does it mean?" There should be more than one answer to those questions. The work can be familiar, simple, even mundane, but also strange and unplaceable. This is connected to the Russian Formalist literary device of *ostranenie* in which the familiar is made to seem strange or alien (Shklovsky 1917), as well as to a Gothic aesthetic that gravitates towards the uncanny, disorienting, absurd or disturbing (Ryan 1998). On one hand, the work is meant to be ordinary and nothing special. Yet latent within this ordinariness is the potential for transfiguration that Arthur Danto (1996) links to Pop Art and Eleanor Heartney (2006) to the Catholic imagination.

Another way of saying this is that I'd like my work to function in the way Winterson says myths do (PEN World Voices 2006).

I always wanted to be an observer of life. My desire to be an artist was not really about talent or craft, but more a way of living that would allow me to fully focus and understand life.

I chose art school because it seemed closest to this frame of mind, this tendency towards philosophy.

-Kimssooja

The art lover who wants beauty will not find it in Hesse's work. Beauty made her nervous. She called it, 'the only art sin. The beauty question, which is the Big Question for Modern Art in all its incarnations - Minimalist, Surrealist, Pop, Abstract, Expressionist, you name it - has particular meaning for the woman artist. The terror of being dismissed as merely decorative, of being pretty, pleasing, easy on the eye, is a gender terror. Hesse did not want to be a glorified flower-arranger, so for her, the special problems of being female, meshed with the over-riding aesthetic of transgressive art; don't be nice.

-Jeanette Winterson

[Bas Jan] Ader's search for the miraculous, his journeying in and around the sublime . . . acknowledges even as it anticipates a contemporary yearning for the heroic, for art to tap into something greater and grander than the self-weary self, yet he managed to treat this desire with a healthy dose of irony: If he knew that his strivings were grand, he also knew that they might fail - or that he may fail them.

-Bruce Hainley

This is an old song
These are old blues
This is not my tune,
But it's mine to use.

- Joanna Newsom

That is to say, to possess some underlying universal human undercurrent that people recognize and respond to. The work is less concerned with innovation than with enduring truths, albeit filtered through a particular artist's aesthetic predilections. This is one reason I had to be dragged kicking and screaming to the idea of innovation. Among artists, and especially among art critics, there is great emphasis placed on novelty and newness. I have been wrongly skeptical of this. I am temperamentally inclined towards and curious about universal aspects of human experience (what Winterson, William Blake and others would say is the realm of myth and imagination). Yet having endured my fair share of uninteresting or derivative art, I recognize the incredible value of a unique vision.

In her essay "Another History is Possible" Katy Siegel notes the surprising number of experimental painters in the 1960s and 70s who "came from working class backgrounds, and . . . relate their art-making to their experiences working with materials as journeymen masons or carpenters, or to traditional domestic work" (p.30). As outsiders in what was still a relatively small art world they felt free to improvise and hybridize. Siegel notes that these artists tended to have a "contrarian gesture," and despite admiring established artists, felt "compelled to contradict" them. On all counts, my work is indebted to these artists. Like them, my work straddles artistic disciplines and is informed by a working class sensibility. I am also keenly aware of the immense privilege of being an artist, as well as the relative absurdity and impracticability.

Country singer June Carter's reported aphorism "I'm just tryin' to matter" is a uniquely working class (and perhaps par-

The Nature of Visionary Fancy, or Imagination, is very little Known, & . . . its ever Existent Images is considered as less permanent . . . but Its Eternal Image & Individuality never dies, but renews by its seed. Just so the Imaginative Image returns by the seed of Contemplative Thought. . . .

The Nature of my Work is Visionary or Imaginative; . . . This world of Imagination is the World of Eternity; it is the Divine bosom into which we shall all go after the death of the Vegetated body. This World of Imagination is Infinite & Eternal, whereas the world of Generation, or Vegetation, is Finite & Temporal. There Exist in that Eternal World the Permanent Realities of EveryThing which we see reflected in this Vegetable Glass of Nature.

-William Blake

All I ever wanted or hoped for was to live the life of an artist, and that's what I am doing, so I am grateful.

-Bruce Nauman

ticularly female working class) thing to say. It is the frame of mind of someone sensitized to financial instability and social invisibility. Interestingly, it also has a double meaning for visual artists. Perhaps this explains why so many artists with working class roots have been obsessed with material itself, with manual labor, and with doing things their own way rather than following established avenues. The power of their vision comes out of their tenuous life experience, and out of the very materiality of the stuff they needed, and worried over, and scrambled to have and use.

It is the music which changes the place from a rear-room of a saloon in the back of the yards to a fairy place, a wonderland, a little corner of the high mansions of the sky. ...The little person who leads this trio...has taught himself to play the violin by practicing all night, after working all day on the "killing beds." ... His notes are never true, and his fiddle buzzes on the low ones and squeaks and scratches on the high; but these things they heed no more than they heed the dirt and noise and squalor about them – it is out of this material that they have to build their lives, with it that they have to utter their souls.

-Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle*

3.

THE WORK

The affinity for liminality and interstices carries over into materials and methods. My work exists somewhere between painting and sculpture and embodies aspects of both. For my site specific installations I work directly on the wall with the same materials the wall is made of – plaster, drywall, spackling, paint – to subtly transform the walls from placid, inanimate architectural space to something alive, erotic, and psychological. The wall approaches sentience, becoming a prickling zone of self-awareness that, like most humans, only dimly recognizes the full nature of its predicament: the pleasure and peril of being corporeal.

The installations also allude to natural processes of decay and transformation. Perhaps the wall has been abandoned for years, slowly pulling apart from itself under the weight of time. There is a sense of some concealed event happening just behind the wall's surface. This alludes to other intangibles: unseen infrastructures, unrelenting change, and half-intuited realities.

Connected to this is aging, decay, infirmity and mortality. There is a longing in the work for what is unnamed, impossible, or secret. Each element pulls out from itself, seeking transformation or connection to something outside of itself. In that sense the work is about relationships. Discrete elements almost take on consciousness and want to interact or connect with neighboring elements. There is a solitude, even loneliness, in the work because of this. And that solitude and emptiness is indirectly connected to the landscape tradition in art because it possesses desert-like, wide open expanses, whether actual or psychological.

I want the work to be unexpected and quietly beautiful. I like the idea of creating a sacred, sensual, strange space. On the other hand, I bring a scientific temperament to the work, probing the material, searching for order and meaning in the chaos.

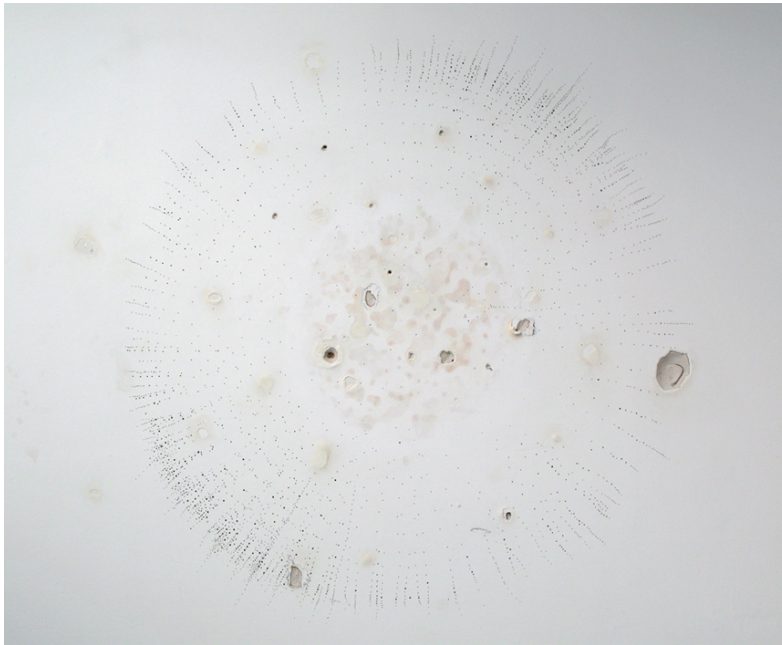
Despite the seriousness of ideas, the work has an intentionally silly aspect as well. The dangers of taking art too seriously was demonstrated in the late modernist era. I'd like to maintain a light, even comical, touch. The work is not ironic or knee-slappingly hysterical, but it is playful and deals in the unexpected and absurd.

Not a shred of evidence exists that life is serious, though it is often hard and even terrible. . . Since everything ends badly for us, in the inescapable catastrophe of death, it seems obvious that the first rule of life is to have a good time; and that the second rule of life is to hurt as few people as possible in the course of doing so. There is no third rule..

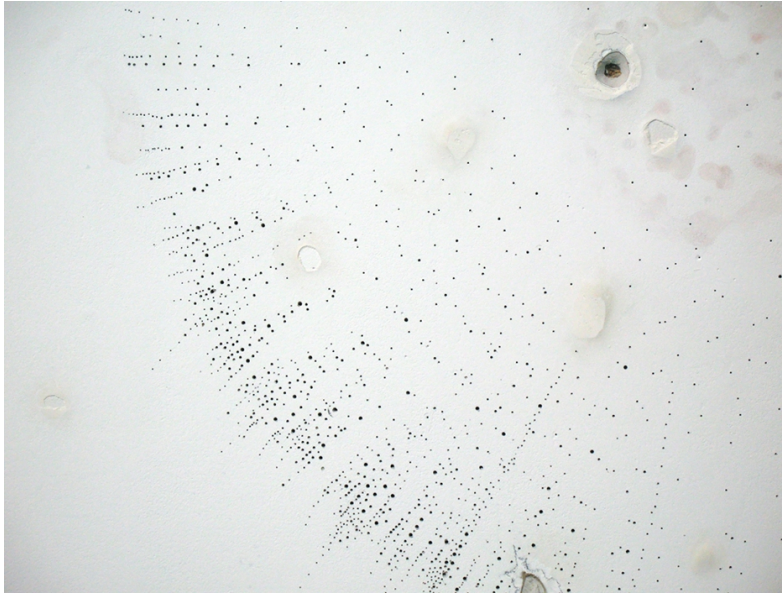
-Brendan Gill

I am for an art that imitates the human, that is comic, if necessary, or violent, or whatever is necessary.

-Claes Oldenberg



In this Untitled Wall Drawing, I wanted to merge several layers of imagery/elements. The work began with gouges and holes (the remains of a previous installation) which revealed the stratigraphy of the studio walls. This simple beginning suggested a whole range of connotations, setting me off on a trajectory around the history of the wall and the discrete actions that gave the wall its layers of paint and repairs. Above the gouges I gridded out a circular chart made with drilled holes (the chart came



out of an engineering dissertation I stumbled on). I was loosely thinking about this circular map as something that could impose order (engineering chart) over chaos (gouges, holes, random removal of material, destruction). The final element added was a circular area of almost indiscernible painted blobs. I thought of these colored patches as mold, seeping liquids, or old stains from uncertain activity. All together the piece is a constellation loosely connected to history, mourning, absence, change, interconnection, transition, and a sort of mysterious order that exists even in chaos and dissolution. In the end I think these are recurrent themes in my work. Aspects of all of this, and more too, are in every work I've ever made.

The hole and gouges suggest absence, loss and damage. The muted palette tending toward white, and the volumes of space they take up have the sense of ghosts or some other invisible presence.

Poetry, for me, is a lot about trying to find some little piece of order in a very disorderly and sometimes chaotic world.

-Ted Kooser



Pressure Points was meant to be very quiet and nearly indiscernible, but once noticed to be surprising, beautiful, creepy and funny. Something is pressing out from behind the wall. Or perhaps the wall is longing to be freed from the architecture to join the mortal, human world. The idea of ghosts, absence, and empty space is involved, as is a concern for the architectural space itself: what lay behind the walls, the inaccessible spaces that exist in every building. This connects back to an interest in unseen (but not supernatural) realities. I wanted to transform the architectural space, make walls do things they don't normally do. They become stand-ins for the human body. Oozing, aging, undulating, transforming. Unnamed things push in or pull out. The work is beautiful, but tempered with violent, erotic, and gross aspects.





In work like *Goose Pimples* and *Pressure Points*, the wall seems to literally be cloaking the main event. There is the sense that some strange activity is happening just behind the wall, possibly something that could be threatening or dangerous.



Beneath, Behind follows along this same trajectory, but is meant to be more comic than threatening. The colors remain subdued and match the surrounding space, but the individual elements are unruly, verging on the cartoony.



The pressed plaster wall pieces are confined to a rectilinear shape and 'hang' on the wall like a painting. Yet they are also three-dimensional. They can only be called painting or sculpture with qualification. As plaster applied directly to the wall, the work has a direct dialogue with the plaster wall that supports it. It is both the same as the wall, yet not a wall. That flip-flop between sameness and differentness is funny and interesting. It also reiterates the dual nature of plaster: both utilitarian (a wall) and art (not a wall, an aesthetic object). Time is suggested by the allusion to decay, mold, and disrepair. There is also the sense of layers of hidden or embedded elements.



All of my work, including *MilkSplat* (above) has some aspect of suspended time. Things held in abeyance; unresolved and anonymous. This evinces a tenderness towards fleeting, inscrutable moments of time.



The Splat Panels are simple, graphic, and cartoony. They are like abstract stations of the cross for a nontheist. The splats are congruous to the biblical idea of ashes to ashes, dust to dust. All the stuff of the world eventually returns to dust; or in this case gets 'splatted'. The simulated splats reference everything in the material world: green apples, skin, peanut butter and jelly. It also references the emerging sense that art history is more like a splat of interconnected ideas than a unilinear evolution (Heartney 2006). The work has a comic book feel ("splat, plop, pow") and is both elegant and gross. It evinces a tenderness towards the material world, and the fleeting moments when things are made, changed, or destroyed.

4.

EMPTINESS, STILLNESS, ABSENCE, GHOSTS, DOUBT

The work of those who influence me tend to have aspects of what might be called emptiness. In truth though, emptiness as a term is not large enough to cover the multivalent sense of what I am trying to get at. There are other words that dance around but also ultimately fail to capture the same issue. Words like: doubt, uncertainty, ambiguity, stillness, mystery, ghosts, absence, blankness, transience, the universal, the specific, indeterminate, undecided, quiet, ineffable, abeyance, nothingness. It is easy to see why this is more easily approached with visual art than with prose. Emptiness is as a good place as any to begin to get a handle on it.

Emptiness, absence, indeterminance is inherently ephemeral and difficult to talk about. Still, empty space has great expressive potential for the visual arts because it is loaded with metaphoric meaning. It can operate as compelling a allegory for life's transience or as a blank slate upon which to project idiosyncratic thoughts and desires. The elusiveness of empty space allows a place for contemplation: of life, of loss, of what is past, and what is unreachable or inconceivable. It has been used in powerful ways in the visual arts; from the literal empty areas in Anish Kapoor's sculptural voids and Lee Bontecou's 3-D paintings, to the implied emptiness of Agnes Martin's paintings and Giorgio Morandi's anonymous, iconic vessels.

Perhaps the most powerful and recurrent meaning of empty space is loss, absence, and the persistence of change. There is a long tradition in art dealing with these inevitabilities. For example, *vanitas* paintings that were meant as reminders of life's fleeting nature. Today artists use a wide range of strategies to

We should talk less and draw more.
Personally, I would like to renounce
speech altogether and, like organic nature,
communicate everything I have to say in
sketches.

-Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

I realized that Joyce had gone as far as one
could in the direction of knowing more, in
control of one's material. He was always
adding to it; you only have to look at his
proofs to see that. I realized that my own way
was in impoverishment, in lack of knowledge
and in taking away, in subtracting rather than
adding.

-Samuel Beckett

explore the transitory. Some, such as Anya Gallaccio and Peter Decupere incorporate organic material into their work. As the elements decompose the viewer is left to contemplate transitions and the tension between presence and absence.

Rachel Whiteread (and Bruce Nauman before her) creates sculptures that record the negative space around things rather than the things themselves. Her casts are of private objects and areas – books, baths, beds, furniture, rooms. Her installation *House*, for example, is a casting of the entire interior of a condemned East London home. Attention is drawn to the intimate spaces where a family only recently lived. The result is a quiet meditation on impermanence and memory.

Gordon Matta-Clark also worked with abandoned architectural spaces, but compounded their inherent emptiness with his own aggressive cuts into the structures. The variety of meanings to be gleaned from his work is staggering. Like Whiteread's *House* it inevitably calls to mind the past inhabitants of his structures, the lives they lead and the ghosts they left behind. The work also points to historical and personal memory, social and domestic violence, poverty, transience, and the mystery of even utilitarian building materials and techniques.

Artist Yukinori Yanagi works with the delicate ebb and flow intrinsic to our world. He creates national icons out of colored sand and then releases ants to tunnel through and slowly undermine the icons. As the ants move indifferently through the sand they create holes and intermingle colors. His work is a commentary on national identity and cross-cultural fertilization; but also alludes to the fragility of the nation-state and the mutability of our various identities.

Wounds and scars are literal holes (i.e. empty spaces) in the

All stories shimmer and move in so many
different directions.

-Colum McCann

body, but they also suggest a metaphoric loss. Zoe Leonard's installation *Strange Fruit* – created to honor a friend who had died – is made with fragments of fruit rinds separated from their inner flesh then sewn back together. The fruit is symbolic of the corpse as an empty vessel, but also of those left behind to mourn, changed and scarred from their loss. The last works of John Coplans are large-scale photos of his aging, fleshy body. While not literally empty space, they – like wounds and scars – are meditations on mortality and the body's vulnerability.

Empty spaces suggest incompleteness; something partially destroyed or eroded, something misplaced, or something started but never finished. What remains focuses attention on the passage of time, and the imperfection and impermanence of the material world. Kendall Buster, for example, creates fossil-like forms that seem to record contours of long dead animals; implying the flesh that was once supported there. In doing so she invokes the slow pace of geologic time and the mysteries of half-remembered ancient history.

The spindly fragility of Margret Blöndal's work points to the wide open, unresolved landscape of the mind. Blöndal uses mass-produced or synthetic materials – rubber, wood, chalk, foam and plastic – but fragmented and decontextualized from any obvious function. Ephemeral landmarks are scattered here and there amid otherwise empty terrain. The private logic of her dispersed, restrained installations approximates the winding trajectory of thought processes; like watching the untroubled musings of a curious, placid mind. Blöndal tenderly attends to the incidental and ordinary; the unexceptional stuff of everyday life. Yet, the work's peculiar anonymity (nothing here has a name) defamiliarizes her mundane activities and materials, drawing out their inherent mystery.

Spencer Finch's work deals with the zone of indeterminacy at the intersection of memory, perception, and desire. His is an amazing blend of conceptual rigor that lacks didacticism, and emotional insight that doesn't cloy. He works with the impossibility of human longing (desire to communicate with outer space aliens, desire to remember and reinhabit meaningful times in his life, desire to recreate and contain sublime experience, etc), and at the same time makes a gentle joke of his yearnings.

Crumbling ruins of vacant old buildings have long held romantic appeal, providing fertile ground for artists to reflect on what one poet called "this world's passing pageant." There is little charm, though, in a building abruptly struck down by a violent act. The gaping holes left in the earth and the national psyche following September 11th spawned countless proposals for on-site memorials. In fact, the incorporation of a chasm or hole is common to many monuments to the dead, including Maya Lin's Vietnam memorial with its slash of granite cutting into the earth, as well as Isamu Noguchi's unrealized memorial to the dead of Hiroshima. His design includes a symbolic sculpture above ground, but the heart of the memorial is a below-ground cave containing the names of the dead. For each of these monuments, an empty space carved into the earth becomes a womb-like protective place of solace that provides a liminal space between life and death, and between daylight and subterranean darkness, where visitors can mourn and contemplate the absences created by violent episodes.

Empty space in art may also be a stand-in for things beyond our ability to grasp. We respond to the inscrutable in art because it invokes a wider mystery. We sense there is more to know in the artwork, as in life, but the fullness of that knowledge escapes us. Eva Hesse spoke of wanting to make "dumb" art. By this she

How profound that mystery of the invisible is! We cannot fathom it with our miserable senses, with our eyes which are unable to perceive what is either too small or too great, too near or too far from us - neither the inhabitants of a star nor a drop of water.

-Guy de Maupassant

meant getting around the limitations of her mind and formal artistic considerations to create something else which she called “non-art,” “nothing,” or an “unknown quantity.” This attempt at non-art is in effect an attempt to include everything. To name nothing is to imply all. It is interesting that Hesse often created empty vessel-like forms. One author has suggested this was her attempt at metaphorically “holding or containing” absence.

In her video series, *Needlewoman*, Kimsooja herself becomes the empty vessel as she stands imperturbably on busy streets throughout the world. Her unchanging, faceless presence reflects back commonalities as well as the differentness between places and cultures.

Anish Kapoor views art as a fundamentally spiritual experience in which his role as an artist is to create perceptions capable of moving a viewer “towards a poetic existence.” He accomplishes this by creating literal voids in unexpected places that confront the viewer and threaten to suck them in. The result is an uncanny experience in which conventional spaces become alien and unpredictable. This shift in focus suggests how unlikely even the ordinary is, and how little we yet understand or control.

Lee Bontecou’s work from the 1960s also contain impenetrable chasms. But whereas Anish Kapoor’s voids are about the sublime and poetic, Bontecou’s are the dark, ominous, mysteries of the mind. Hers is the unsafe terrain of war, insane asylums, rabid dogs, and interrogation rooms. Behind the surface of her canvases we are watched, threatened, controlled. But the enemy is within. We look in the void and see . . . ourselves; the depths of horror to which we are willing to subject and be subjected; the animal, irrational basis behind much of what we do. The

ocular voids are still present in some of her more recent work, but diminished in size. She seems to have concluded that the mysteries of the universe and the human psyche are less utterly malevolent.

The enigmatic, inscrutable spaces created by artists such as Blöndal, Hesse, Kapoor and Bontecou are effecting because, though suggestive, they remain ambiguous and unfixed. The shifting connotations allow the art to mean many things to many people.

Empty space is also implied by reductive form or muted color that suggests the timeless essence of things. This essentialist character of idealized art gives it an airy spaciousness that is equivalent to empty space. This sort of empty space is more akin to the philosophical 'emptiness' of Zen Buddhism, and can be understood as the timeless universal experience behind the cacophony of everyday life. Agnes Martin, an artist deeply influenced by buddhist thought, creates paintings that are light, open, spare and repetitive. They read like a blank space or a window. The nonspecificity of her work is Martin's method for returning to a classical ideal. She wants her paintings to "represent something that isn't possible in the world; more perfection than is possible." Her work is emblematic of her life philosophy. "There's no difference between the whole thing and one thing," she wrote, stating elsewhere that "There is only the all of the all." In fact this describes her paintings well; they can be seen as a collection of "one things" (lines, dots, dashes, brushstrokes) working together as a single, unified "whole thing." Giorgio Morandi's still lifes are private contemplations of utilitarian objects painted over and over with a religious intensity. His vessels hold empty space creating a sense of suspended time. The objects he paints are both sweetly idiosyncratic, like people, but

I have nothing to report, my friends.
If you want to find the meaning, stop chasing
after so many things.

-Ryokan

[Agnes Martin] understood Abstract Expressionism to be based on the premise that art could, and should, be a vehicle for certain concrete but ineffable emotions. . . . She wanted an art without biography, without personality, without mysticism, without detachable ideas.

Martin's work has always attracted metaphorical readings, which often become "spiritual" readings, exemplified by one critic's description of her art as a form of prayer. In reaction to this interpretive trend, there is a more recent fashion for a materialist, "scientific" approach to her art, one that focuses on her paintings' formal, optical properties. Martin's own view of her art was probably somewhere in between.

At the same time she vehemently rejected the view of her art as spiritual in any conventional sense. As she said repeatedly, she wasn't religious; she didn't believe in God, and she considered artists to be spiritual only in the sense that everyone is: that we all have the capacity to access emotions that can lift us out of the blinkered, pulled-down state of mind to which we are prone.

-Holland Cotter

Morandi is an example of how you can whisper, without ever repeating yourself.

-Umberto Eco

also idealized, possessing a monumental quality like tombstones or Ancient Egyptian architecture. With his subdued palette and sensitive rendering Morandi creates quiet, mournful paintings that transform otherwise unremarkable objects into archetypes. The objects in his work read like ghosts or the fundamental nature of things.

Wolfgang Laib's piece *Milkstone* consists of a large slab of white marble with a slight depression carved into its surface. Laib pours milk into this shallow void, creating a difficult to discern intersection between translucent white liquid and hard white stone. His piece may be read as a visual allegory of the elegant essence of material things, or alternatively as the ephemeral intermingling of our spiritual and physical selves.

Isamu Noguchi thought that effective sculpture makes the air around it breathe. He wanted to activate the spaces between his sculptural elements because he felt these inter-relationships were as important as the things themselves. This was not merely a formalistic device for Noguchi, but was in fact the distillation of ideas culled from contemporary science, art and philosophy. He saw modern artists as contemporary myth-makers who take the peculiar messiness of their time and place and connect it with timeless truths. He held that "the very materiality of sculpture is its most evocative aspect" because it is capable of conveying "the mystery at the base of matter." His art works with the tension between polarities; the seen and the unseen, the ideal and the actual, the material and the immaterial, the timeless and the time-bound.

5.

EPILOGUE

I remain haunted by my disbelief, haunted by the specter of who I might have been as a comfortable believer. There are vague memories, now nearly gone, when I possessed an easy, unquestioning faith. The world seemed straightforward, benign and knowable. Battles were clean and clear. That elysian field of the past probably never existed, but I still have its aftertaste shadowing me. The fact is, we don't know what is at the base of existence at all. That vast and shifting unknown continues to drive and inspire my work.

I have already lost touch with a couple of
people I used to be.

-Joan Didion

The fact that a believer is happier than a
skeptic is no more to the point than the fact
that a drunken man is happier than a sober
one.

-George Bernard Shaw

Is that all there is? Is that all there is?
If that's all there is my friends, then let's
keep dancing
Let's break out the booze and have a ball

-Peggy Lee

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