

Dylan Thesis TOBETITLED

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts in the Department of Painting at the Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Rhode Island

By
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Abstract

My practice is rooted in an investigation of truths embedded in digital and painted images. Through painting and error-prone processes of mechanical reproduction, it meditates on the interbred way in which contemporary images are produced and consumed. As seeing is, for many, our confirmation sense (you have to see it to believe it) I search for power structures and epistemological values within contemporary images; particularly in the representations of objects. This thesis maps how the meaning of objectivity has shifted dramatically over time and paintings relation to that change. It investigates how these inherited ideas of objectivity have impacted the design of image-generating software, and how I use two and three dimensional software in reflexive patterns to examine the implicit structure of these tool's design. I argue that the unified visual language of image-making software masks the fallibility of the produced representations, the subjectivity of the image's creator, and thus, the values inherent within the creator's aesthetic choices. By translating my own digital images to paint, the obfuscated subjectivity of the digital is excavated through painting's innate ability to foreground the maker through touch and time.

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Image Glossary

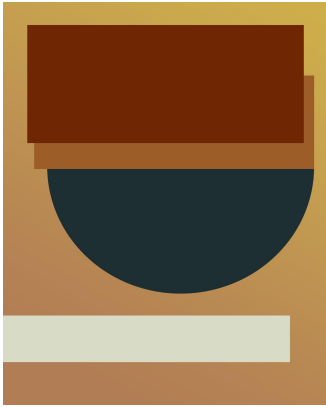


Image 1

Sample photoshop drawing
Digital Image

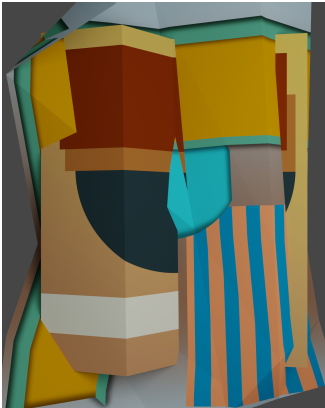


Image 2

Sample folded composition
Digital Image

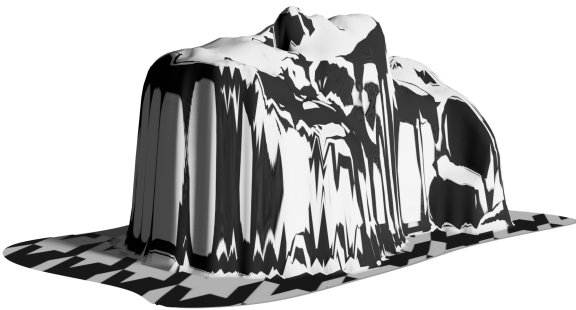


Image 3

Sample draped object
Digital Image



Image 4

Sample full composition
Digital image



Image 5

What a Drag

Dylan Riley

Acrylic and sand on canvas over panel

48" x 60"

2022



Image 6

Dropped Cloth (vase)

Dylan Riley

Oil on canvas

22" x 26"

2021



Image 7

Tire Fire

Dylan Riley

Oil and acrylic on canvas

48" x 66"

2022



Image 8

I think I'm feeling it

Dylan Riley

Acrylic on canvas

36" x 48"

2022



Image 9

Draping a bust

Dylan Riley

Oil and acrylic on canvas

40" x 40"

2021



Image 10

Ilisos

Dylan Riley

Acrylic and sand on canvas

48" x 60"

2022

DYLANTHESISTITLE

My practice is rooted in an investigation of the ideas of truth embedded in digital and painted images. Through painting and error-prone processes of mechanical reproduction, it meditates on the interbred way in which contemporary images are produced and consumed. As seeing is, for many, our confirmation sense (you have to see it to believe it) I search for the power structures and epistemological values within contemporary images; particularly in the representations of objects. As an artist, I believe an ongoing examination of our relationship with the two dimensional image and its manner of production is essential to understand and subvert the power they hold.

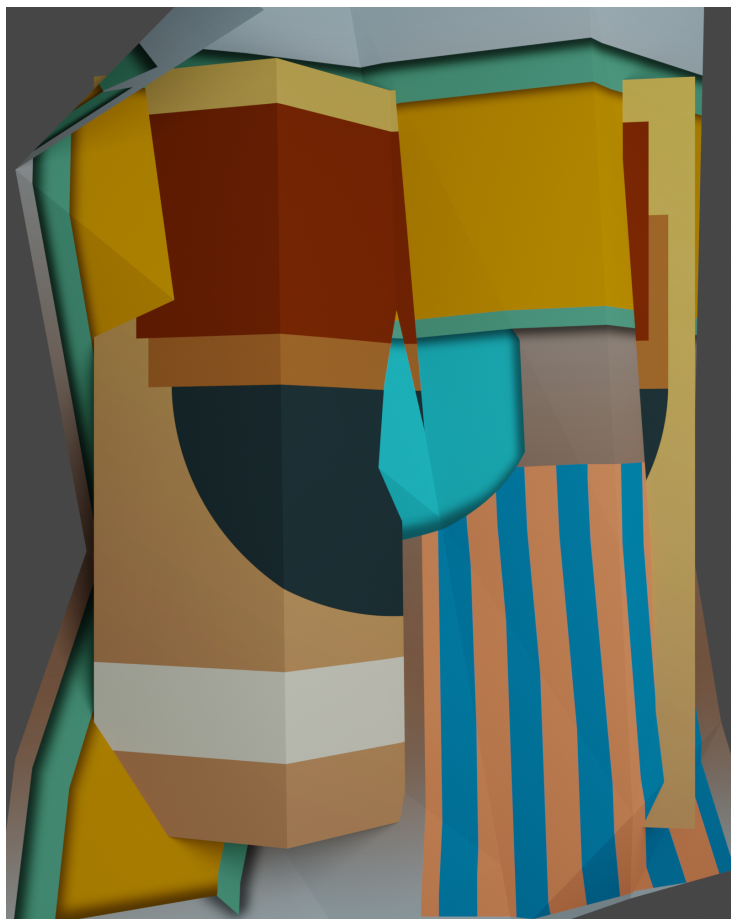
My process relies on images made with 3d modeling and rendering tools. I first make relatively simple drawings in Photoshop. I try to make these drawings beautiful, but they're ultimately intended to be derivative and a little banal. These become raw material for later digital manipulations. I allow myself to follow my base compositional impulses knowing that later digital manipulations will complicate them.

The colors are chosen with the backlit screen in mind, often landing in a pastel world—as high saturation combined with the luminosity of a screen can be jarring. They exist somewhere between 80s Miami (I've never been) and Wes Anderson (who I don't care much for). The compositions are hard edged and resoundingly modernist. They are built additively and in layers. Oval curves and smooth shapes and stripes interrupt the sharp angularity of the rectangular planes I tend to begin with. Often, transparent overlays redistribute the weight of the composition. They balance the drawings so that they look nice at any scale, from postcard to billboard. Despite my reservations towards them



it's important that I earnestly like these drawings: that I find them seductive, that they're sweet but not saccharine.

I sometimes wonder if these drawings could be enough for me. For a short while they were, and so I painted them—but quickly I felt bored so they became increasingly complicated. I'd layer and layer until they lost their initial referents. They stopped looking like textless logos, Elsworth Kellys, or architectural color schemes, and that was no good.



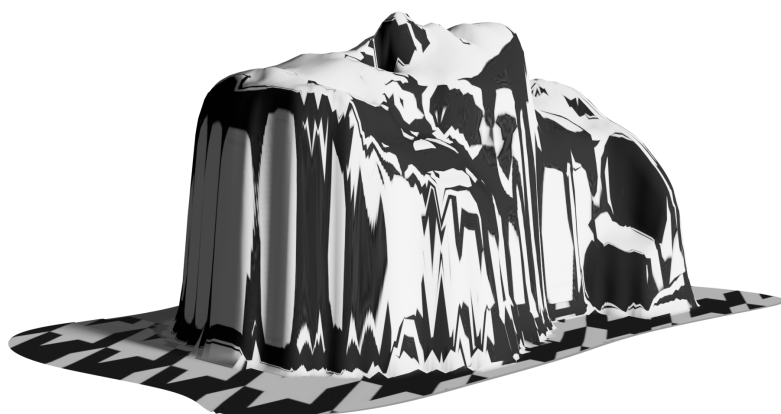
After they're composed, I pull these drawings into 3d software. I haphazardly chop them up, creating seams in order to digitally fold them. I initially work on major sections, then moving into details as one would when sketching. Large folds come first, while corners and small peaked areas come last. During this folding I respect the implied physicality of the drawing as if they were sheets of paper. I don't stretch them to impossible depths or freeze them into curves that wouldn't hold— although it would be trivial to do so. As I manipulate them I think about how these folded drawings would stand or rest on a flat surface in the real world,

if I would enjoy the shape.

These compositions are made with a bit of character or emotion in mind. A modernist drawing folded to hold some sort of pathetic fallacy can make me giggle. Multiple drawings are folded individually, but after I'm satisfied with them I overlay the drawings so that they intersect and

cut through one another. Areas of one drawing will jut and interrupt forms and areas of color in the other. It's the part of my process that is open to chance and discovery. This digital clipping creates compositional tensions and color relations I otherwise would not find. I make many iterations of these compositions, ultimately narrowing down to a handful of options. I lightly edit the folds to push areas of particular interest while landing on a final image. The interwoven forms are then virtually lit to accentuate or withhold the depth information of their juxtaposition.

Threaded through the compositions of folded drawings are the subjects of the paintings: ambiguous draped forms, with striped or distorted patterns. These



subjects are often sourced from 3d scans of historical art objects, namely cut up fragments of classical sculptures. The recognizability of these forms is not important, but I often allude to them in the titles of the work (the example is a scan of *Sorrow* by Jean Escoula (1890)). The fragments are covered by physics-driven simulated cloth drapes. These drapes have many manipulatable variables to simulate different types of cloth under different conditions. The final form of the drape is simplified: in a process called decimation, the computer takes a form made up of many planes and averages their direction sizes and orientation, combining them while trying to maintain as much of the illusion of form as possible. Taken to the extreme this pushes the

artifacts of the process. Geometry from the original form pokes through the simulated fabric

(referred to as clipping), folds and whole areas get lost in the averaging, highlighting the fallibility of these simulations. The result is rendered as a two-dimensional image. In a mirror of the 2d (drawing)-3d(folding)-2d(rendering) process, I reproject this 2d image onto a flat plane within the 3d space and thread it through the folded composition. Through my manner of working I'm reciprocally shifting from 2d to 3d to 2d; always considering the other dimensionality while working in either.

Of course, this is nothing new:

Using the three-dimensional and mimicking its depth is a long standing tradition in the history of painting and representation. If we're to believe Hockney's hypothesis in *Secret Knowledge*, the 15th century development of glass lenses and their deployment in camera obscuras was vital to the rapid advancement of convincing depictions of objects and people.¹ Real three-dimensional compositions were projected onto two dimensional surfaces to aid the illusionistic quality of a two-dimensional image. The continued development of glass lenses facilitated the creation of larger and more intricate images, just as the development of computer hardware lends itself to more convincing simulated light and the creation of more convincing renders. I foreground and collapse these related histories of illusionistic representation.



¹ Hockney, D. (2006). *Secret Knowledge: Rediscovering the Lost Techniques of the Old Masters*. Thames & Hudson.

Today, mechanical replications, or rather the *look* of mechanical replications, are a marker of objectivity. But surprisingly, this marker, our ideas of objective and subjective, and scientific objectivity as a whole, are relatively new developments. While the words objective and subjective have been paired together since their 14th century inception, they initially held opposite meanings to our current usage. “Objective” referred to things as they were presented to consciousness, or the way one experiences them from their particular personhood, whereas “subjective” referred to things in and of themselves, their essence or truth.²

(Galison and Daston 2007) It is only in the 19th century that Kant laid the roots of our usage. He repurposed what, at the time, were niche terms and flipped their meaning. But Kant’s usages are the “grandfather, not the twins” of our contemporary definitions [Daston and Galison]. It was the adaptation of Kant’s words by philosophers like Fichte and Schelling that brings us to our contemporary definitions and their widespread adoption in the 1850s.



This history is the backdrop to look into three major arcs of scientific epistemology. In the early 1800s, scientific images of specimens were idealized, perfected, and characteristic of the species rather than any individual specimen. For a flower, many examples would be gathered, and then a close examination of what characteristics and traits defined that species of flower would be determined. An artist, guided by the scientist, would then draw a characteristic example, a perfected specimen. This “Truth to Nature” paradigm required the smoothing of defects and

² Daston, Lorraine, and Peter Galison. *Objectivity*. Zone Books, 2007.

imperfections. The removal of any individual's misleading idiosyncrasies: a correction of nature's imperfect specimens. The scientific images of this time are clearly manufactured. They are open about the editing that took place both in process and in the final image. The choices of both the scientist and artist are embedded within the image for a viewer to see.³

In the late 19th century, the “Truth to Nature” manner of image-making began to be supplanted by means of mechanical reproduction. While this can, and often did, mean the use of photographs, it did not necessitate it. Mechanical reproduction also included precise measuring in the pursuit of accurate hand reproductions. With much debate, individual specimens, rather than an idealized amalgamation, became the pedagogic standard in the depiction of living things and objects. This shift towards mechanically “objective” representation in scientific images signaled a change in the way researchers viewed the self. They believed that one's interpretation and subjecthood was something to overcome and eschew in pursuit of objectivity and truth. This attitude is in a stark contrast to the close analogies between scientific and artistic work that persisted through the Enlightenment.

During the 1900s, researchers became increasingly willing to enhance an image or instrument reading to highlight patterns, delete artifacts, or remove outliers. An idea of “Trained Judgment” began to complicate these notions of mechanical objectivity. Mechanically produced images presented several pitfalls. The images could be cluttered with unimportant detail or artifacts (for example, dust on a lens), and the individual nature of the images made them difficult to use in pedagogic environments. It was believed that an editor with an appropriate level of expertise could separate signal from noise without compromising the objective standpoint that faithfulness to the



³ Galison & Daston, 2007

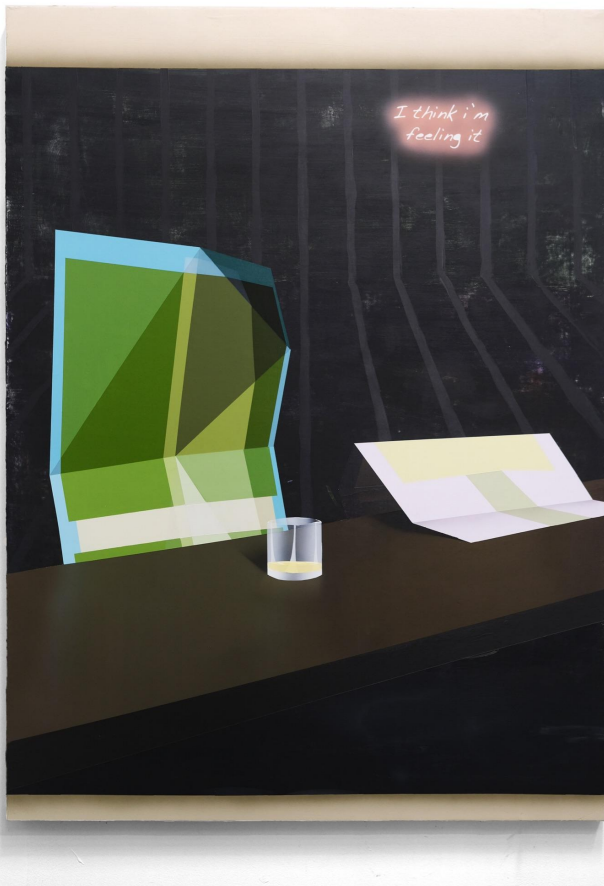
mechanically reproduced image attempted to embody. ⁴

A trained judgment paradigm is meant to take something real and highlight vital attributes while limiting unnecessary distractions. This process of editing necessitates self-concealment. If the defects of the tools are distractions, and distractions are to be avoided, it becomes important to avoid calling attention to the process of making an image. The subjective choices of the editor are hidden. We've grown to expect the edited image even in an "objective" context. It does not break scientific or journalistic integrity to crop, edit exposure, or to remove flares or lens scratches. ⁵

Photo editing tools like Photoshop fall directly into this lineage of thought. They are editing tools designed specifically with the idea of masking themselves: software aimed at a trained judgment. Not only are the users of the tools making masked choices, the tools themselves are

imbued with the beliefs and virtues of those who designed them. As these tools developed, they gained the ability to distort, change, and invent while maintaining their ability to hide the maker's hand.

The maker is, by design, masked through the pervasive lack of affect. By design the software unifies the visual language of the produced image, the digital creates an impenetrable black box around the subjectivity of the creator. On the surface, we know that objectivity is not just a moving target but a flawed endeavor. The complete removal of the subjective self is impossible. However, due to this masking, or moving the subjectivity upstream, the digital has been



⁴ Daston, Lorraine, and Peter Galison. *Objectivity*. Zone Books, 2007.

⁵ Ibid

exalted from this knowledge. There is a god-omniscience that comes from a Google Map satellite view that makes it difficult to remember the truth of an object that is not captured by an overhead view. Similarly, it is difficult to remember that the truth of a scene is not more accurately represented by a two-point perspective drawing than an isometric one. The default visual language of the digital is touchless and makerless, an affectless language that connects to our contemporary sense of self-removal in pursuit of “objective” representation.

The history of scientific representation is played out within the techniques of computer-aided rendering. A modeler creates an object, say a couch, in a systematic way. When one follows the best practices of modeling, one initially makes an idealized version of said couch, devoid of defects—a “truth to nature” representation. Defects are then superficially imposed as scars upon the surface of the object to simulate a specific localized instance of that couch: one that overcomes its idealization and, when rendered, imitates a mechanically reproduction of an individual instantiation. These processes are designed to be hidden. 3d scans are not immune from these inherited logics. They appear to be objective mechanical replications, but there is a necessary averaging and smoothing inherent in the tool itself. Information is lost through the translation to data due to the imperfection of the hardware and memory limitations. This interpolation, averaging, and removal of outlying data is an automated replication of a human-trained judgment.

Much in the way that I employ them, image-generating softwares also uses each other in reflexive patterns. The primary way a computer wraps textures to digitally constructed three dimensional objects is through UV Mapping, a process that wraps a 2 dimensional image around a three dimensional object. The surface of many convincing 3d representations is reliant on the use of 2d images.

Painting the digitally generated images adds a real history and instance from my own subjective humanhood to the objects depicted in them. In a certain sense the subjects of the paintings become signifiers for the software they are constructed with, and the paintings could be read as still lifes or portraits of software. But this is not all-encompassing, despite my

hesitancy towards them, my work does not subscribe to the notion that the depicted 3d objects have no depth or poetics. Rather, I engage with these simulations in order to assert the possibility of their depth in relation to the lineages that inform their design.

Draping a Bust a painting of a draped bust floating over a receding virtual space. Here, emphasis is placed on the wrapping of the object—but the draped object is not fully obscured. What is underneath is decidedly present even if the object is, quite literally, covered. In this painting the digital draping more closely simulates vacuum forming, the cloth was sucked to the surface, allowing the simulation to reveal more of the underlying object than the action performed in reality could. The image is a digital reproduction of a physical obfuscation, but it



affirms the object's instantiation more readily than the physical action it replicates. As with many of my paintings, there is a deliberate attempt to highlight the surface of the work. Areas in *Draping a bust* are raised through extensive priming, giving the illusion of collage or vinyl sticker; while other works have aggregates like sand or vermiculite. These areas break the implied perspectival depth by building a physical one, pushing the paintings objecthood as a contrast to their digital referents.

To paraphrase Timotheus Vermeulen, simulation is not a means of preempting history, locality, or personal affect, but rather the vehicle of exploring them.⁶ As almost all contemporary images have been edited, photoshopped, or conjured from rendering software; it feels all the more pertinent to examine the hierarchies and power structures surrounding these supposed objective representations and their means of production. As Hockney states, “If we think what

⁶ Vermeulen, T. (2015, January). *The New “Depthiness” - Journal #61 January 2015*. e-flux. Retrieved May 24, 2022, from <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/61/61000/the-new-depthiness/>

is in front of a camera is truth, verisimilitude, then those who control over optical imagery have great power". An ongoing examination of our relationship with the two dimensional images, in all their manners of production, is important in our attempt to understand and subvert that power.



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