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Achy Awfulness

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Fine Arts degree in Visual Arts

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Abstract

This written thesis is an accompaniment to a Master of Fine Arts Degree and Exhibition, at Western University, in London, Ontario. The following thesis dossier looks at how I use colour in my painting practice to archive my raw and vulnerable experiences with depression, anxiety, and ADHD. Having colour be the signifier for memories, feelings, emotions, and objects that pertain to my mental health, while painting, has allowed me to project my experiences onto the canvas essentially creating a physical archive; one that allows for me to shed the weight I am carrying and working through. The dossier is divided into three chapters. The first being my extended artist statement which outlines how I arrived at the practice I have created today, with personal experiences weaved throughout. The second chapter is a documented portfolio of my practice, including individual photographs of the paintings, as well as exhibition images. Lastly, the third chapter is a case study on Mark Rothko, outlining his practice, beginning from early childhood immigration to his untimely death.

Keywords

Colour, Monochrome, Painting, Mental Health, Depression, ADHD, Suicide, Memories, Emotions, Feelings, Personal Objects, Archive, Mark Rothko

Summary for Lay Audience

The following thesis dossier looks at how I use colour as a signifier in my painting practice to archive my raw and vulnerable experiences with depression, anxiety, and ADHD. With supplemental practice documentation and a case study on Mark Rothko.

A Note to the Reader
Trigger Warning

A note to the reader, there are moments within the extended artist statement that will discuss the artist's own experience with depression, intrusive thoughts, and passive suicidal ideation with mention of suicide.

Acknowledgements

I would like to start by thanking Tricia Johnson, my advisor, who has been nothing but patient, kind and thoughtful as we navigated this process together. I am appreciative to have had the opportunity to work alongside you throughout my two years here at Western, as a teaching assistant. The guidance, understanding and support you have provided me both individually and in a critique setting, will stay with me as I move forward with my future endeavors.

To Patrick Mahon, your knowledge and sage advice is invaluable, and I cannot thank you enough for the interest you have had in my practice. To Sky Glabush, Soheila Esfahani, and Christof Migone, thank you for engaging in my work and helping to push me beyond the limits I had set for myself, I am grateful. And to Ivan, who never failed to put a smile on my face and always checked to make sure everything was OK when I stayed late at the studio.

To my cohort and Anahi, I appreciate your support as I navigated integrating my Mental Health into my practice and for all the conversations about art and life; these past two years would not have gone the way they did without you.

To Joan, my therapist, you aided in making this paper possible. Over the last five years you have seen me at my most vulnerable state and some of my happiest. You, amongst others, helped me to nurture a healthy coping mechanism that turned into what my practice is today, and I cannot thank you enough for everything you have taught me and helped me through. To Melissa, my Nurse Practitioner, you met me when I was in an extremely fragile state and took me on as a patient and helped me get back on right track with the proper medication. I appreciate our monthly check ins and for never making me feel less than.

To Alyssa, I knew we would be best friends the first day we met. We bonded very fast, which made transitioning to a new city and a new school so much easier. I am going to miss our late-night studio sessions, driving to find inspiration for your next body of work and all the belly laughs we've shared, oh and queen stella of course. You are the friend I never knew I needed until I met you. You saw me through some of the toughest times I have had, let me cry and complain about the same things over and over, but you never left my side, and for that I am grateful. This paper and exhibition are as much yours as it is mine, so cheers babe, we actually did it.

To my mom and dad, AKA Deb and Trev, thank you for buying little me my first sketchbook and pencils, you helped to make a dream, a reality. Thank you for learning and growing with me, but more importantly for buying that plane ticket home. I know it was difficult at times, but I would not be where I am without your constant support and willingness to help. You both held my hand to ensure I was moving forward and not staying stagnant. Thank you for loving me not despite but regardless. I love you— Ry

To my partner, Spencer, my Spenny. Thank you for loving me through the hard times and the good. You have been a witness to my Mental Health journey since the start and I cannot express how much your love and support means to me. I love you – Ry

Last but certainly not least, to my sister, Devynn, if it were not for you, I do not think that I would have made it to see today. Thank you for being the big sister I always needed, and my lighthouse during all the storms. I cherish the bond we have because there is no love like the love from your sister. I am beyond grateful for you because you helped save my life, and because of that, my paper is dedicated to you. I love you - Ry

Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Keywords	ii
Summary for Lay Audience	iii
Note to the Reader	iv
Acknowledgments	v - vi
Table of Contents	vii
Preface	viii
Chapter 1: Extended Artist Statement	1
<i>On Achy Awfulness and Painting</i>	1
<i>Who Am I? Where Am I? And Colour</i>	5
<i>The Archive</i>	12
<i>Feeling, Processing, Creating</i>	13
<i>A Work in Progress</i>	18
Chapter 2: Practice Documentation	19
Documentation by Alyssa Sweeney	
Chapter 3: Case Study on Mark Rothko	41
<i>Introduction</i>	41
<i>Introduction to the Artist</i>	41
<i>Modernism</i>	42
<i>Surrealism</i>	44
<i>Abstract Expressionism and Colour Field Paintings</i>	46
Bibliography	53
Supplemental Reading List	54
CV	55

Preface

This thesis looks at how I use colour in my painting practice to archive my raw and vulnerable experiences with depression, anxiety, and ADHD. A shift occurred within the first year of my Master's, where I decided to remove my hand in the work and create paintings that are one single flat colour across the entirety of the canvas. Having colour be the signifier for memories, feelings, emotions, and objects that pertain to my mental health, while painting, has allowed me to project what I am working through now, onto the canvas essentially creating a physical archive; one that allows for me to shed the weight I am carrying and working through. I do so in a systematic process that involves constantly layering the same colour repeatedly until I feel a sense of release and at peace with myself. The titles of my artworks are also an essential part of the process. My titles allow the viewer to understand what that colour means to me, but in no way should the titles influence the viewers from having their own opinion. The poetic nature of my titles is quite personal, as the meaning inherent to my paintings goes far beyond the built-up surface of the paint. My most recent body of work is the closest extension of myself that I have made, and I feel the works are a more visceral representation of who I am, what I am struggling with, and how I choose to cope.

Chapter 1: Extended Artist Statement

On Achy Awfulness and Painting

Throughout the beginning stages of writing my extended artist statement, I planned to intertwine reflections on the past and present to help tell the story of my mental health journey and how it has affected how I live and view life. I wanted to start the paper by working chronologically with the defining moment that led to my severe depression diagnosis. However, entering the final semester of my MFA, I realized that my writing approach left me more confused than feeling accomplished. While I do feel as though I have been successful in representing depression, anxiety, and ADHD through the narrative charted by my painting, it was my writing that continuously lacked substance.

Although my body of work is mainly about making physical archives referring to certain moments, or objects – my childhood blanket, the sweater I wear when I am sad, street lights, my medications etc.,- relating to memories, emotions, and feelings about what I have experienced in the last four years; my project is also about realizing that the development of my artwork, with its deep-rooted process has allowed me to understand myself better, and to finally feel at peace. While it was the moment that I decided to leave the exchange program I was enrolled in during my undergraduate degree that will always be the catalyst for my mental health, it is no longer the defining moment; these past two years, since starting at Western, have been so.

The paralyzing anxiety I had yet to experience up until that point set in the second I landed in London, England on September 7th, 2018. That overwhelming feeling continued to brew, and I knew that I would not be able to follow through on the next four months of the exchange. At first, I denied any anxious feelings and worrying thoughts I had and willed them to disappear. However,

no amount of preparation could have equipped me for what would unravel within the following days. I could not eat. I could not sleep. The action of brushing my teeth made me want to vomit. As much as I tried to occupy both my mind and my time, my thoughts wandered to a dark place, and I knew I needed to return home.

Nonetheless, the darkness that was looming and slowly beginning to consume me while I was abroad was so unbearable that I could not articulate to anyone how achy and compressed my body and brain felt. I had become mentally and physically unwell, whether it was noticeable to others or not. The thoughts I was having and the compulsions I was experiencing were related to suicide without my fully comprehending or caring. However, two weeks later I was on a plane heading home, unprepared to face what I had been denying for a long time.

Once I returned home, my studio practice became my most effective coping mechanism. I found that working with the darkness that hung over me, instead of against it, allowed me to be more experimental in printmaking, heading in a direction that was completely different from what I had created previously. I made prints about feeling consumed and isolated by my thoughts. I was intrigued by dark and disturbing imagery, and it felt comforting to produce a physical representation of how I was feeling. I kept pushing the mysteriously ominous subject matter, unsure where the boundary line was, since I had not seen any other students pursuing the same themes as me. I looked to Bas Jan Ader, although the



The Party's Over, Photo Intaglio, Portfolio of 5 plates printed twice, 2019.



I'm too sad to tell you, Bas Jan Ader, 16mm
Black and White film still, 1971, retrieved from
Simon Lee Gallery.

conception of my work *The Party's Over* (2019) was already created, I studied the way in which he created and produced *I'm too sad to tell you* (1971).¹ In his piece he recorded himself crying and made a three-minute video in black and white documenting himself doing so. The original contents of this silent film was lost, prompting Ader to remake the piece in 1971, the one that survives today. It is hard to tell from video stills alone if his emotions are genuine or that of an act. Regardless, the work exudes an

evocative effect that will leave a lasting impression on its viewers. There is a great sense of ambiguity, between the personal and the uncertain, that I find to be very compelling, leaving the viewer to decide what they think is happening in Ader's film. However, with my project, and unlike Ader's I chose to photograph myself *after* a panic attack. There is no uncertainty that I have been acting, but instead the expression on my face shows my immediate mental state, where I sat on my bathroom floor, staring blankly into the lens of my camera and captured the flat affect and mascara that had smeared down my face. I cropped the images to focus on my eyes as I wanted to push the idea of emptiness and numbness through the presentation of a sad stare. I chose to make this project using a photo intaglio printmaking process. This type of printmaking is a laborious one and picked this specific media within printmaking to make this project of mine because I found that the method that takes the longest, is the one that tends to be the most fulfilling once the work is completed. The arduous routine attached to this printmaking process allowed me to connect with myself on a deeper level physically, mentally,

¹ Ader, Bas Jan, *I'm too sad to tell you*, Mixed Media, 16mm Black and White film, 1971, Retrieved from the Simon Lee Gallery Online

and emotionally. Once the intaglio printmaking project had concluded, I knew there was more to explore within myself but felt compelled to experiment in another medium, as I was entering the second semester of my fourth year of undergrad.

I migrated to painting and from there, began to explore memory and colour concerning my experiences before and after my depression diagnosis. I always had a fond connection to abstract painting, and wanted to see how my personal subject matter could be conveyed through an abstracted lens that stepped away from any type of familiar subject matter. Jackson Pollock and his gestural mark making felt too overwhelming for me and what I wanted to achieve within painting. Mark Rothko's use of multiple colours to evoke emotion still



what the sky looked like when i wanted to go home, Acrylic on Canvas, 2020

felt too much, also. I knew I wanted to put my energy and focus on something simple, but still effective in the sense of guiding and producing emotional thoughts. *what the sky looked like when i wanted to go home* (2020) was the catalyst for my painting practice and allowed me to express my experiences differently, but still in a general way. This way of working and processing my emotions, thoughts, and feelings through painting unavoidably became my primary focus for my practice when I began my MFA. I had felt confident in my ability to translate or archive moments, deconstructing childhood photographs and ultimately create abstract paintings from them; however, during the first term of my graduate studies, confusion and defeat set in, as I was unsure if this way of working was still worth exploring.

I did not realize the level of difficulty I would experience entering an MFA program the same year I completed my BA. Once I set foot in my new studio, in a new city, with a new faculty, I realized that I had no idea what I was doing. The appeal of what I had been creating and working on in the previous months wore off as soon as I left Guelph. Anxiety set in and consumed me, and for the first time, as I sat in my empty studio, I cried from the overwhelming fear of imposter syndrome.

Who Am I? Where Am I? And Colour

Beginning my program at Western, questions like, *do I belong here? What do they see in my art that I don't? How can I make art that is truthful to me?* plagued my brain for days. The previous paintings I created seemed unsuitable and not feasible for the calibre of an MFA. This sense has weighed on me throughout the progression of my Master's, along with the sadness and pain I have carried around pre - and post - depression and ADHD diagnoses. Regardless of how healed I am from both my past and present traumas, I am making the conscious decision to work through my problems a second time because, this time, I am in control. I get to decide what needs to be discussed in order to properly process the object, memory, or emotions, while also investigating how the process of returning to vulnerable experiences makes me feel now. Those feelings of inadequacy and questions followed me for a long time before I felt remotely close to being confident in myself and my creativity, primarily because I have not allowed myself to create art outside of an academic setting.

For me to answer the questions above, and the best place for me to start was to remember what motivated me to create in the first place, and the answer is colour. Colour has always fascinated me because of its ability to reach everyone uniquely and globally at the same time. My

experience with certain colours is personal to me and my experiences because the way in which I receive and respond to colour is not like any other individual. On the other hand, in many ways we can all understand larger human experiences such as the passing of time, whether slow or fast, through colour. Colour could be thought of as an indexical sign for the passage of time. We often *see* the changing of season before we feel it, and that is because of colour. We can also determine the ripeness or rottenness of a fruit or a vegetable because of colour. My point being that colour is a substantial part of our lives that most times is glossed over in our articulations of life because we are used to it always being there: a constant, albeit ever changing phenomenon.

In Zelanski and Fisher's book *Color*, they discuss how inescapable colour is in our society today, not only in art but in everyday life. It is both emotional and informational. "Colour... affects our emotions beyond thought and can convey any mood, from delight to despair".² They also continue,

"In art, color is a vehicle for expressing emotions and concepts as well as information, and it is a very powerful element of design. Its possibilities are limitless. The art of using color well is thus an open-ended, complex discipline which incorporates many different points of view and poses many questions. Scientists have tried for centuries to understand what creates color in our world, and how we see them; yet we still have no absolute answers to these questions".³

I became fixated on the entirety of my painting process, from conception to completion, which includes building the stretcher and stretching the canvas, to curating a colour that at times could take hours to mix, to then spending various amounts of time carefully painting until I felt the work was resolved. Without realizing it, I created a repetitive routine that I engaged in to

² Zelanski, Paul. Fisher, Mary Pat. *Color*, Pearson. 1998, 11

³ Ibid, 12

produce each of my paintings. The nature in which I paint allows for me to work on several canvases at a time, bouncing from one to the other, allowing the paint to dry on a given canvas before returning to it for another layer.

To speak more directly about my process, I begin with a clean palette, take a clean palette knife, and gently pour out a sizeable amount of paint and wet it down with my spray bottle - it is important to note that I use acrylic rather than oil paint because the drying time for acrylic paint is much faster. Nonetheless, working with acrylic can be tricky due to the properties within the paint, specifically the microscopic plastic acrylic resin particles. Whether you are working figuratively or abstractly, layering copious amounts of acrylic paint on top of itself can enhance the plastic look and feel, which I recognize is *not* the ideal outcome for my paintings. Once a painting reaches an intense plastic state, there is no hope of reversing it; and fortunately, this has only happened one time for me. In that instance, my tumultuous relationship I had with this painting really tested my patience and overall succeeded in defeating my abilities to stay away from the *plastic* edge. I could feel the painting starting to turn just from the way the brush sounded on the canvas and the way the paint moved along the surface. The painting helped to resolve itself by letting me know that it was overworked. And once a painting is overworked, that is the end of that painting's life.

Refining my painting process, in fact mastering my painting process, has been very important to me, as I believe it has been for all painters throughout art history. Rothko, as I discuss in my case study, mastered his process where he was able to create a large body of artwork, with individual paintings, that also appear like a series. Each painting is unique but is intimately connected to all the other paintings he created, through his use of colour, composition, scale, and process. Studying Rothko made me realize how similar my approach to painting was to his. Although in the case study I discuss how biography must have influenced Rothko's paintings, as

my biography has very much influenced mine. I appreciate how his mastery of the painted surface, and his strong use of colour is integral to his work, both in viewing it and understanding it in the context of art history. And also, I hope that my paintings also act as both a series, creating context for each other, but also as individual paintings appreciated for the specific colours, I mixed for each.

The way in which a painter approaches a painting could be different every time they start fresh, or it can be a specific methodical 'science'; and I prefer the latter. I have found that working on a square canvas is less daunting to me as I do not have to choose a specific orientation for the work; the painting can decide which way it wants to be displayed since it has four equal sides. The number four, to me, is synonymous with symmetry. I find comfort in that number as it also feels whole or complete. It also coincides with the type of brushes I use, which are the three-inch flats or hake - never round or angled.

With my palette set with paint and my brushes ready to go, as mentioned above, I spray down the acrylic and wiggle my brush through the paint to ensure both sides are coated lightly and evenly. I have my spray bottle in my left hand and my brush in my right, I start at the bottom left corner of my canvas (as I see it at that point) and spray it with water before applying the paint and work my way across the canvas to the right side. Once the bottom is painted, I spray above where I finished off and begin the process again, but this time moving from right to left; constantly spraying the canvas between each added stroke of paint. I will repeat this step two more times until I reach the top of the canvas and it is fully painted with its first layer. Once a layer is complete, I will make a tally mark on the piece of paper I have taped beside the canvas on the wall. Typically, it has the title, but sometimes there are just the tallies. The tally marks represent how many layers I have completed on the canvas and having them in the eyesight of the painting helps for me to

keep track of the progress. After letting the first layer get a little bit tacky, I spray down the entirety of the canvas again, but this time, I do not add any more paint.

As I continue, I take the same brush I was using previously and start at the bottom of the canvas again but this time from the right-hand side and just lightly brush from right to left, lifting the brush at the end, and bringing it back to the right, and repeat until I reach the top of the canvas. It typically takes between fourteen and sixteen brush strokes, depending on the overlap as I make my way upward. I then start at the top right-hand corner and lightly brush down and work from top to bottom, never dragging the brush upward as I do not like how it makes the paint move. As I do this, it feels as though I am undoing what I have previously done by dragging the paint back in the opposite direction. Each brush stroke I make follows what I had previously done. Once I make it to the left side of the canvas, I go back to the top right-hand corner and brush down diagonally and then continue the right side to the bottom right corner and then return to the middle line and work my way from right-hand corner up to the left-hand. After completing the diagonal smoothing, I take my brush and go back to the bottom right-hand corner and go right to left all the way to the top and then once more from top to bottom, always painting in a downward motion and moving across the canvas to the left. Once that is done, that is when I consider a layer to be complete. I will then repeat this process until I feel the painting is finished; this could be anywhere from seven to twenty-six layers. However, what is most important to know about this process is that I only consider it a layer if paint is being added to the canvas. So, although I rewet the canvas once it has been painted on and go back and forth and up and down around five times, that is all a part of that one layer. I do these repetitive *non-layers* to help smooth and remove any sign of my hand. Every monochrome painting, I have created has followed this process and will continue to as now it feels second nature to me.

While studying the likes of painters such as Amy Sillman, Bridget Riley, Helen Frankenthaler, Mark Rothko, and Ellsworth Kelly, I developed quite personal relationships with my paintings, as they were becoming more than a record of surface-level brush strokes. I looked to these abstract painters to ensure that what I was creating would be able to generate a discourse with their work. These artists worked abstractly, focusing their use of colour, and creating self-referential artworks but most importantly wanted to break free from the strict traditional painting past. Their paintings were not about representational images but instead were about the coloured paint they used and how they used that paint to create a surface. Kelly was quite focused on the quality of the colour he mixed and painted with, as he never painted straight from the tube. Whereas Frankenthaler and Rothko used colour as the tool that guided the creation of their paintings, instead of relying on heavy mark making or forced brush strokes. As a result of their work, I have been able to approach my practice, my monochromes, with the same level of dedication, but wanting my viewer to respond to the colour in my paintings emotionally, something these painters were not concerned with as they were ridding their paintings of any connection to the everyday world. I gravitated towards Ellsworth Kelly because of his Monochrome paintings in his 1988 exhibition *colour Alone: The Monochrome as an Experiment*. This exhibition ran for two months at the Musée Saint-Pierre, in Lyon, France.⁴ A collection of eleven works, the exhibition aimed to:

“Show the public the paradoxical historical phenomenon of the emergence and development of a form of painting centered around the use of a single colour,

⁴ Besset, Maurice. *Color Alone: the Monochrome as Experiment* <https://ellsworthkelly.org/exhibition/la-couleur-seule-l'experience-du-monochrome-color-alone-the-monochrome-as-experiment/>

and to encourage reflection on the meaning of colour in painting in general, in extreme conditions that favour concentration”.⁵

Kelly became my motivator to continue to explore this type of painting, although the way I approached creating these paintings falls more in line with the way Amy Sillman and Bridget Riley thought about and used colour. I am captivated by Riley’s paintings and her ability to focus on creating an optical experience for the viewer with colour, and juxtapositions of colour. Although her paintings are optical illusions, they also create a strong bodily connection. An affect that I hope to achieve through my paintings, as it does not have to be just an emotional connection the viewer may have, it could also be bodily. I also admire how Sillman speaks about colour and her extensive knowledge on the topic through painting. In her 2016 essay *On Colour*, Sillman explores her experiences with colour, she states,

“Colour as *object* is earthly material stuff. Colour as *subject* arches over everything...colour is just the tool that a painter wields in making a painting. To deal with colour as a painter is to render these overarching problems as physical propositions, as sensuous experiences synthetically merged under the sign of the hand”.⁶

Having control over what colour I mix and put on the canvas is one of the most important aspects of my painting, the other being what the work represents for me. I am not interested in telling my viewer what to think or feel, but rather I want to leave space for open interpretation or association that can go far beyond my potential intended meaning; after all, my canvases are a physical archive that does not have to be just for me.

⁵ Besset, Maurice. *Color Alone: the Monochrome as Experiment* <https://ellsworthkelly.org/exhibition/la-couleur-seule-l'experience-du-monochrome-color-alone-the-monochrome-as-experiment/>

⁶ Amy Sillman, ‘On Color’ in *Painting Beyond Itself, The Medium in the Post Medium Condition*, Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016 (ed). 105

The Archive

“The body archive is an attunement, a hopeful gathering, an act of love against the foreclosures of reason. It is a way of knowing the body-self as a becoming and unbecoming thing, of scrambling time and matter, of turning toward rather than against oneself. And vitally, it is a way of thinking-feeling the body’s unbounded relation to other bodies”.⁷

The idea of my paintings becoming an archive, stems from Julietta Singh’s book *No Archive Will Restore You*. I have always seen my monochrome paintings as being the physical representation of an act of compartmentalizing. Instead of putting my thoughts, feelings and emotions tied to my depression or ADHD into small boxes and storing them in my mind, never to be thought about again, I have assigned them to a colour that I push powerfully into the canvas. By doing so, I am creating another body separate from mine, within which those thoughts, feelings and emotions can exist.

Singh continues her chapter, *The Body Archive*, saying, “I begin then to compile an archive of my body, an activity that from the start feels uncomfortably intimate”.⁸ When I began to focus my practice on creating these deeply personal artworks, for a moment I feared rejection. It felt almost too personal, a bit *discomfortably intimate*, to lay bare the struggles I was enduring at the time. I was afraid of the reactions of others, of being censured. Although as I continued to develop this body of work, it became easier for myself to talk about depression and suicide, to help bring more awareness to what that looks like for myself, in hopes of it finding and reaching the audience that needs such an encounter. It is extremely uncomfortable to revisit emotionally charged moments that have left some sort of internal scar, whether on my heart or my brain. Still, with

⁷ Singh, Julietta. *No Archive Will Restore You*. Punctum Books, 2018, 29

⁸ Ibid. 29

time, anti-depressants, much therapy and monthly mental health check ins with my Nurse Practitioner, things have gotten easier.

“In the end, we are not bounded, contained subjects, but ones filled up with foreign feelings and vibes that linger and circulate in space, that encounter us as we moved through our lives. We likewise leave traces of ourselves and our own affective states (which are never really our own) behind us when we go”.⁹

As a painter and someone who experiences life the way I do, I hope to effectively communicate my intrusive thoughts or triggering objects and am able to leave them behind in my paintings. They will always be a part of me, but they no longer need to be housed within me.

Feeling, Processing, Creating

I tend to retreat inwards which is what leads to my depressive episodes. When creating my painting about guilt (Figure 7), it was only then that I realized the missing piece was worrying. Guilt and worries are two intangible things we as humans possess or encounter within ourselves and the things that send me into a depressive spiral. They influence each other and battle within my brain, which makes it harder for me if I become the *archive* for someone else; meaning I become for them, what my paintings are for me. My worries feed my guilt and my guilt forces me to shut down; it is an achy awfulness I cannot seem to shake. I have found that it is one thing to be there for your friends in time of need, but it becomes more unbearably challenging to listen and be there for them while you are also going through your own mental health crisis. Which begs the question *how do we understand and operate through pain?* Pain sits with you; it becomes part of you and a constant reminder of a life-altering moment or perhaps a learning experience; the pain

⁹ Singh, Julietta. *No Archive Will Restore You*, 31

of falling and scraping your knee is certainly on a different threshold than the pain of losing a loved one. However, the way we encounter and choose to cope with the pain matters. Even if the pain has subsided, moving forward, and adapting to life after is most challenging. *whoever said time heals all wounds is a fucking liar* (figure 10) is a painting I created in late November of 2022, only days ahead of an anniversary. I know that anniversaries can be hard and sad, but it hits a little bit different when it's an anniversary that *could have been*. The pain of listening to her tell me her fears of not making it to tomorrow felt like a hot knife going straight through my chest. Her recounting the way it *almost* happened that day triggered in me a fight or flight response. I was ready to take her to the hospital, or speak to her parents, just anything other than listening to my best friend tell me the letters had been written and she had a plan to end her life. There is no way to describe the weight of the feeling of being responsible if she did not wake up. I know that I would not have been responsible, but to absorb her pain and to promise not to tell anyone, is what broke me. As Singh describes it best, "I not only *felt* but *heard* myself become other than myself, other *to* myself".¹⁰

The painting I created based on that moment that happened a year prior, is one of my stripped back monochromes. For that painting I decided to stain the stretcher and soak cheesecloth in the same watered-down paint I mixed to resemble a bloody wound. Down the center of the piece, I used a similar colour thread to sew the two pieces of cheesecloth together, like sewing shut a wound. There are intentional gaps throughout the seam to represent the idea that sometimes wounds take longer to heal, but they can also reopen and hurt just as much as the initial impact. December 1st will always be a painful reminder for the both of us. Even though the gravity of the situation greatly affected her, I still experienced thoughts and emotions I never thought I would

¹⁰ Singh, Julietta. *No Archive Will Restore You*. 62

have to process, which was quite triggering for my own mental health. I found creating *whoever said time heals all wounds is a fucking liar* from my perspective, on the *almost anniversary*, as someone who has had passive suicidal ideation, helped to alleviate both the thoughts and feelings I was having leading up to that date. This is especially because painting seems to be the most successful and effective way for me to communicate and process my feelings and or emotions, though seeing my therapist helps too.

While the aspects of ‘the personal’ were introduced into my art, as I have been describing when this happened, it still felt like my paintings lacked ‘my presence’. This is a challenging conundrum, given that I spend most of my time ensuring my hand is not seen. But I have realized that regardless of whether there is some form of dynamic fluidity across the canvas, my presence is still there within the painting, through my concepts and titles.

My titles are quite poetic and very important to me and to encountering my paintings. I consider painting to be my primary medium because of the demanding process I have created for myself. It holds the greatest value for me regarding my process, although sometimes my titles can seem more powerful to someone viewing my work. The words I choose to display alongside my paintings are universal, but the experiences they describe are quite personal. My titles are primary directives for my paintings; they can be blunt and oddly specific at times, but I see them as a way for the viewer to understand where I, the artist, am coming from when creating these monochromes. Sometimes I create the title before the painting is made, but usually the painting comes first. Unless my titles are specifically describing an object, like my sweater, or my car, the remaining titles are pulled from a journal I keep. I find little excerpts that pair with my paintings to help tell ‘their story’. The longer the title, the more personal it feels to me. Although the titles

can be seen and viewed as their own artwork, to me they are merely a supplemental asset to my painting.

However, if the ‘unspoken’ expectation from the artist is wanting to create a mood in which it is appropriate for the viewer to respond in such a way – i.e., Rothko’s desire for his paintings to create a mood of contemplation – would more information provided to the viewer help or hinder their response to the work? Specifically for my own paintings, having the descriptive and sometimes very literal titles allows the viewer to have context for my monochrome paintings. Without them, the personal connection is lost, and I cannot expect the viewer to have some form of emotional response to a painting of a single colour. That’s almost like asking a viewer to stand in front of a wall that has just been painted and asking them to analyze and formulate a deep meaning of the colour chosen, with no available information other than what they see in front of them. Now in a way, yes, my paintings ask to be engaged with and analyzed on a level that is perhaps beyond the intended meaning I have for them, but the titles allow for the imagination to create differing realities, emotions or thoughts that are neither right nor wrong. The titles help to push the idea that a colour can mean more than what its general use is or because we like it. Providing context clues for the viewer does not have to change their opinion on the artwork or further influence them in any way, it is just another way to give a little bit more to those that view our artworks.

There have been several different moments where I have been asked if my process of painting is in some way a form of meditation, and I have always said “no”. Although it could be seen as that, I am *not* trying to enter a peaceful or stable state when I am painting. I am forcing myself to re-enter emotional times or look at specific objects like my medication that I take daily, to see and feel how much these experiences or moments may still affect me. My process is a form

of coping, of trying to survive when I did not think it was possible, to create a home for my anxieties, worries, guilt, memories, etc. It is a form of therapy that involves no talking, but self-reflection, to mark how far I have come since being diagnosed with depression and ADHD - and learning to live without allowing the mental illness or disorder to define who I am as a person or an artist. I am making these paintings for myself as a reminder of where I was and where I choose to go from here. The weight attached to each subject depicted in my paintings slowly lifts every time my brush touches the canvas. Still, the painting does not feel resolved until I feel detached from the subject and comfortable knowing it will live in its own physical archive I am creating, so that originating subject will no longer burden me.

More recently, I have found myself disassociating fairly often. I know it is happening because I sometimes become reticent (something my family is not used to). I am stuck in my mind, constantly ruminating while showing no emotion. I can feel a 'flat affect' on my face, leading my family to ask if I am OK or if something is wrong. Usually, everything is fine, but I also do not know how to express that sometimes I feel numb to most things around me. Emotional blunting or emotional numbing is common amongst those who are depressed and taking SSRI's (selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors), which I am still learning about. I think that this is why colour is important to me. It helps me to associate and explain what I am thinking or feeling by having a signifier for it to grab onto. Culturally, colour can be a signifier of emotion, such as red signifying anger in our western culture. But given how colour is so able to change and is also understood as signifiers so differently, in different cultures, I appreciate that my archive of colour might signify something totally different to viewers.

A Work in Progress

I can confidently say that I am currently in a place where I am content with life and the people, I surround myself with. The non-linear trajectory I have been on for the past four years has been heartbreaking, surprising, discouraging, stimulating, overwhelming, burdensome and anything else you, the reader, might choose to imagine it to be. I expect that there will not be a time in my life when I am not learning about myself, hell, it took four years of therapy to understand that what triggers my depressive episodes is not tangible and is only sometimes situational. Most of the time it is fictional because my brain never rests.

My creativity is not always reliable, but colour is. It is the one thing that both captivates and motivates me to create, along with the question of *am I creating to survive or surviving to create?* That is still something that I am trying to figure out. The sides of the question provoke each other and are interchangeable based on the day.

Chapter 2: Practice Documentation



Figure 1
the colour of the sweater i wear when im sad
Acrylic on canvas
36" x 36"
2021

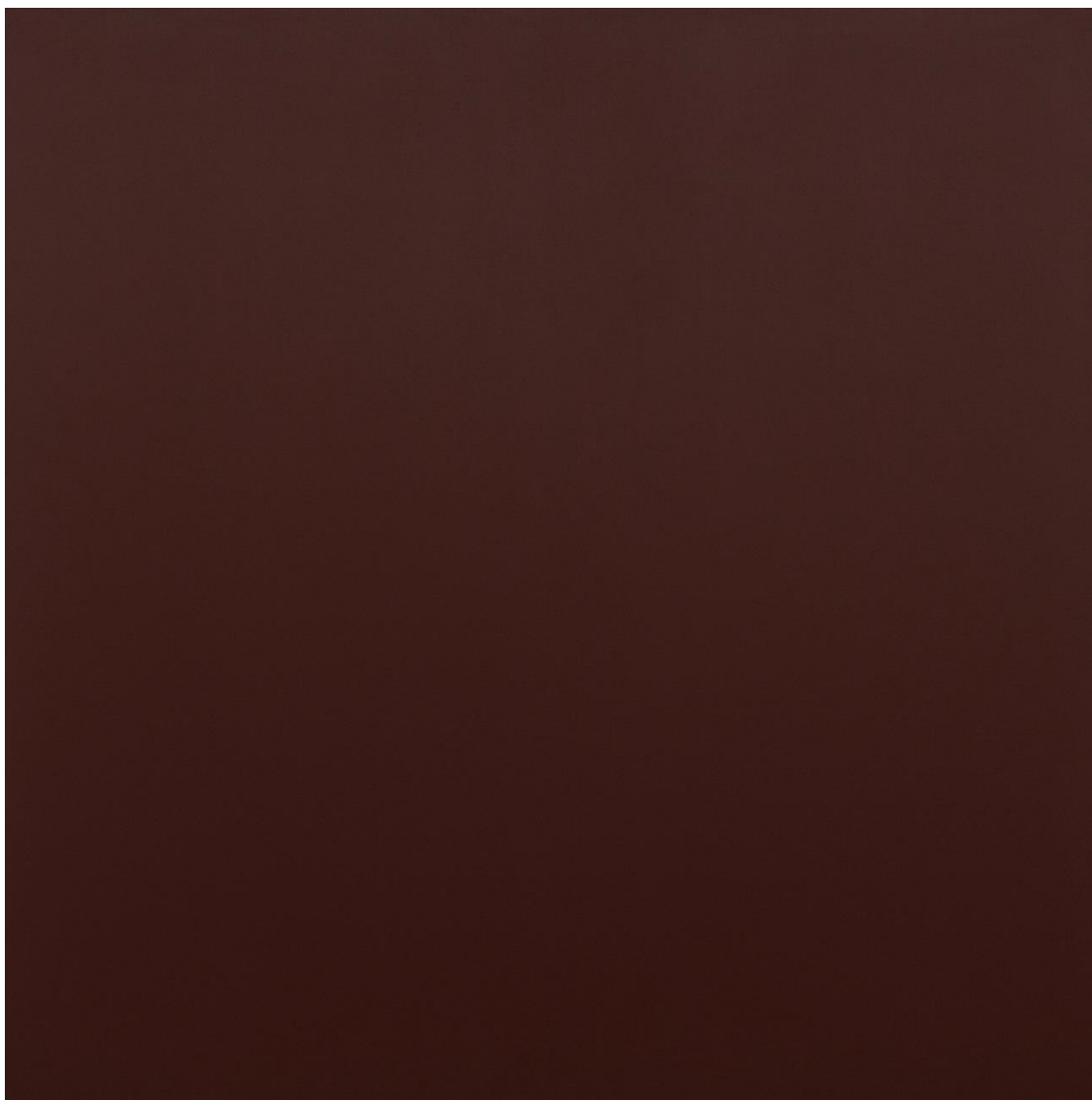


Figure 2
my safe space to cry
Acrylic on canvas
36" x 36"
2021



Figure 3
where feeling isolated and consumed can coexist
Acrylic on canvas
36" x 36"
2021



Figure 4.
when the streetlights come on its time to go home
Acrylic on canvas
36" x 36"
2021

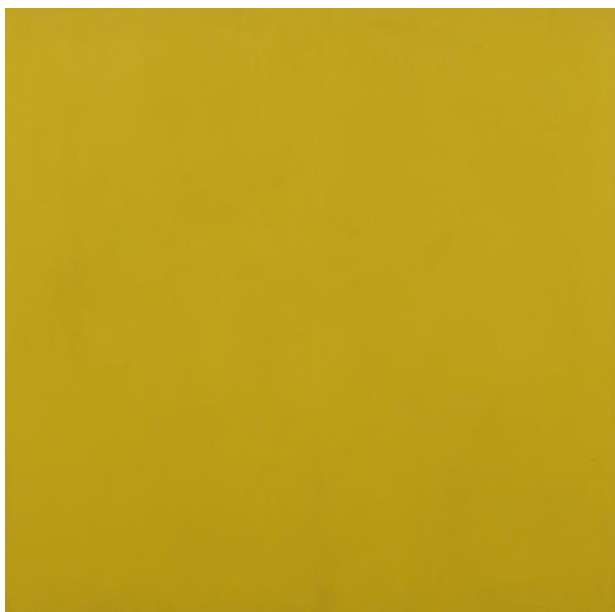


Figure 5.1
25mg Sertraline (175mg)
Acrylic on canvas
36'' x 36''
2022



Figure 5.2
100mg Sertraline (175mg)
Acrylic on canvas
36'' x 36''
2022

Figure 5.3
30mg Vyvanse (50mg)
Acrylic on canvas
36'' x 36''
2022





Figures 6.1 - 6.6
ive loved you since i was two
Acrylic and Cheesecloth on canvas
12" x 12", 5 colours x 4 paintings ea.
2022

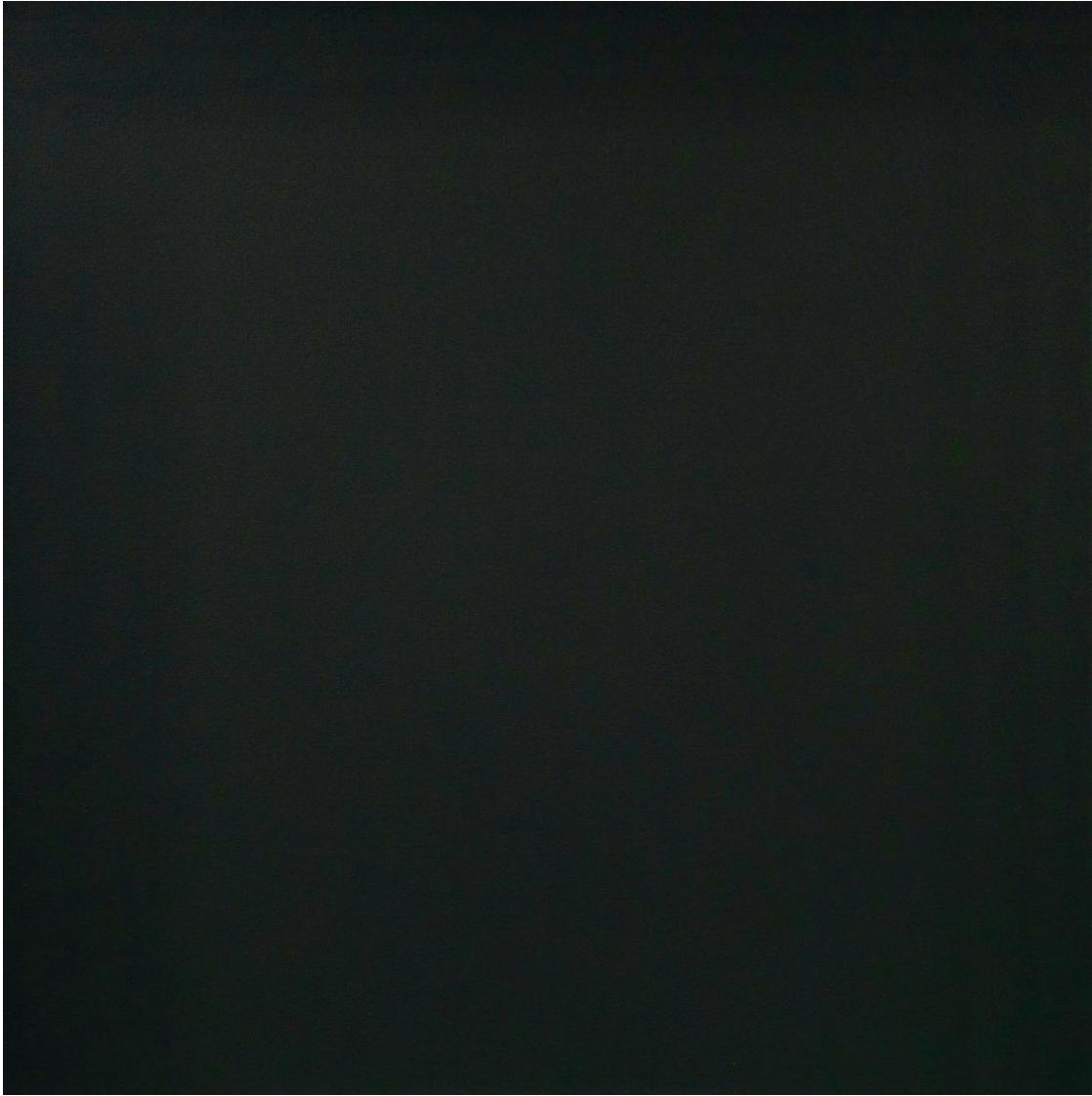


Figure 7
i'm idling in a body that is consumed by guilt
Acrylic on canvas
36" x 36"
2022

i feel guilty, and for what? there's almost never a reason. but im working on it.
my therapist says i've made progress, and if i have, then why do i still feel this way.

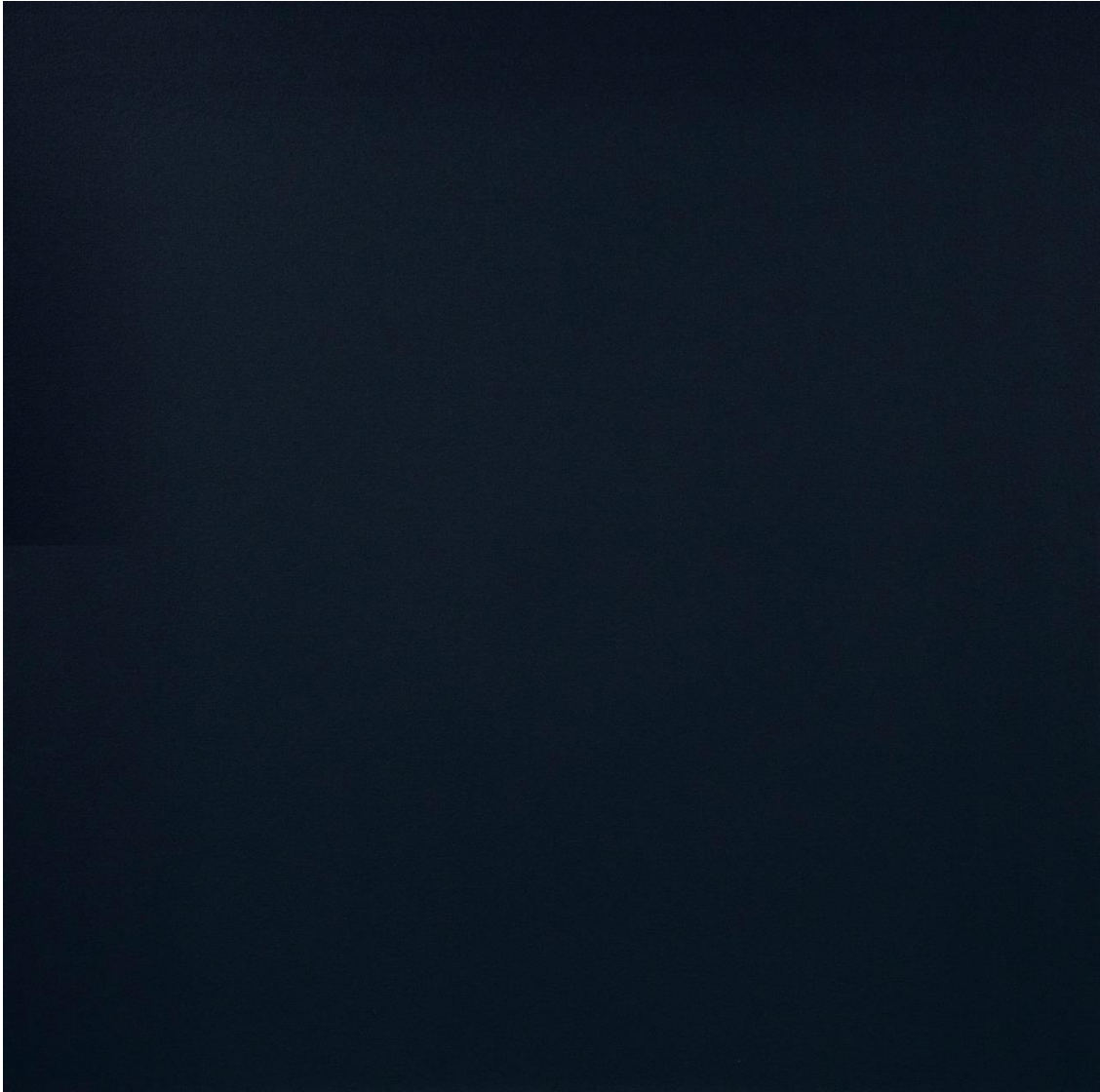


Figure 8
my chest hurts, i can't breathe, i'm sad, and i don't know why
Acrylic on canvas
36" x 36"
2022

i can't sleep because of the living nightmare that is my life. an endless cycle of self-loathing followed by hatred. i just want to sleep, but my brain won't let me. i just want it to stop. but this is my reality, i'm dealing with it. well, i'm trying too. i just have to remind myself that nightmares never last. but dreams do.



Figure 9

i let myself slowly burn out so your flame could burn stronger

Acrylic on canvas

36" x 36"

2022

i want to help but don't realize that i am more of a hindrance. my empathetic heart is not something to be admired. i struggle internally because externally, i care so deeply for those i love. i didn't know my pain could be felt mentally, emotionally, and physically all at the same time.

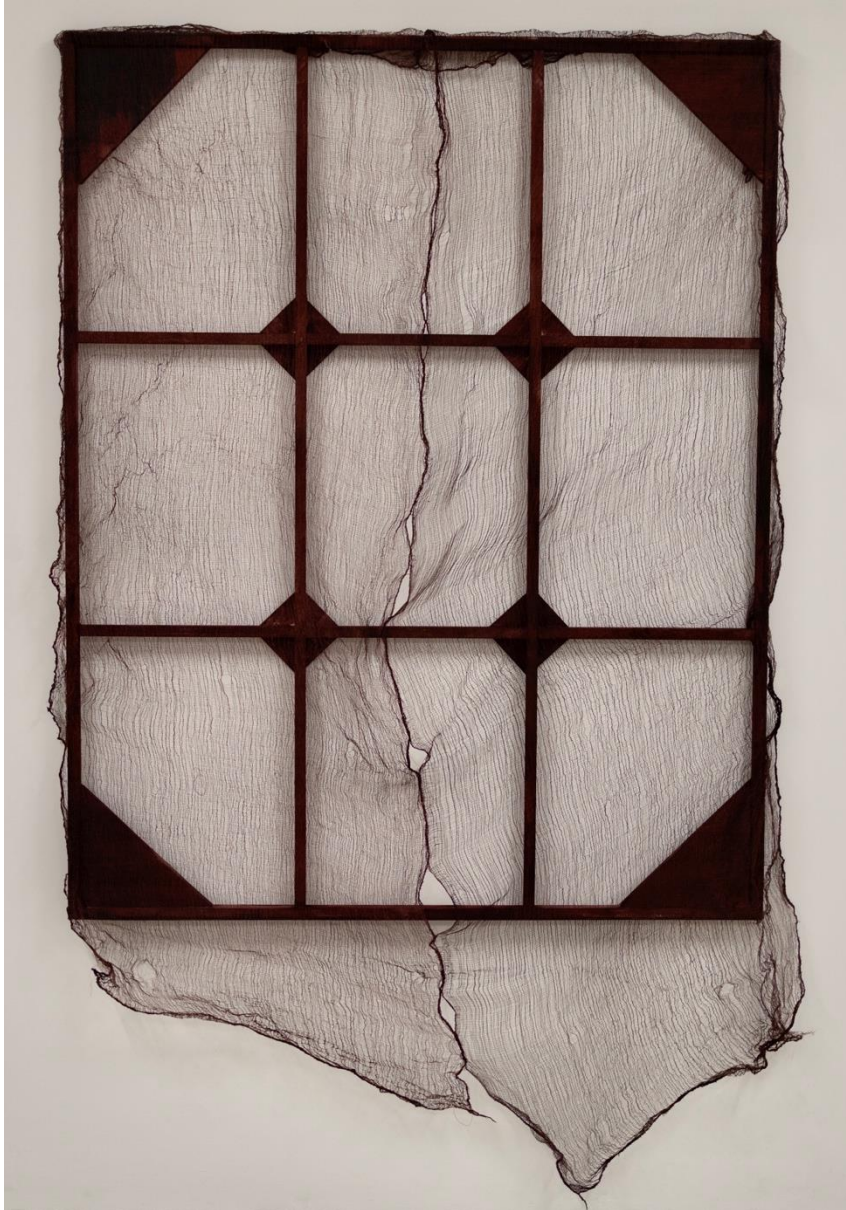


Figure 10
whoever said time heals all wounds is a fucking liar
Acrylic soaked cheesecloth on stained wooden stretcher
36" x 48", with overhang
2022

apparently, it was the bible. psalm 147:3 ***he is mighty enough to heal all wounds no matter when or how they occurred in our lives.*** if he is so mighty, then why won't my wounds heal? why do they constantly get ripped open? what am i doing wrong.



Figure 11
if numb was a colour this is what it would be
Acrylic on canvas
36" x 36"
2023



Figure 12
L2: Psychiatry
Acrylic on Canvas
36" x 36"
2023



Figure 13
it feels like im running in quicksand. im overworked, overwhelmed, and exhausted.
Acrylic on canvas
36" x 36"
2023

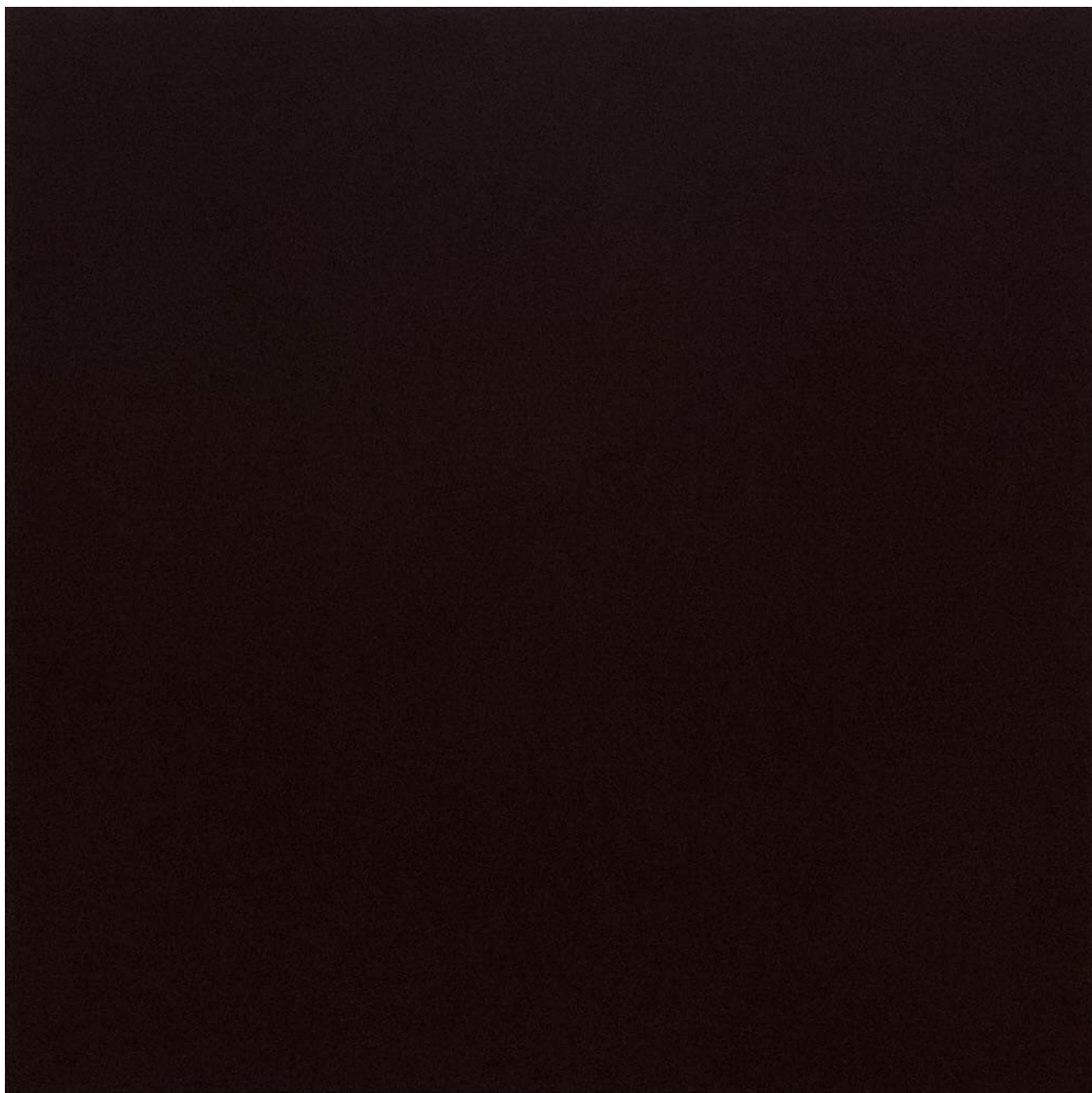


Figure 14

why do i do this to myself, i hate feeling like this, thinking like this, its just a fucking tuesday

Acrylic on canvas

36" x 36"

2023



Figure 15

my worries hang over me like clouds on an overcast, mid-January snow sky

Acrylic on canvas

36" x 36"

2023



Figure 16
when i cry my face goes splotchy and it looks like this
Acrylic on canvas
30" x 30"
2023



Figure 17

exhausted, emotionally numb, my eyes are heavy, my cheeks sting, and my sleeves are stained

Acrylic on canvas

20" x 20"

2023

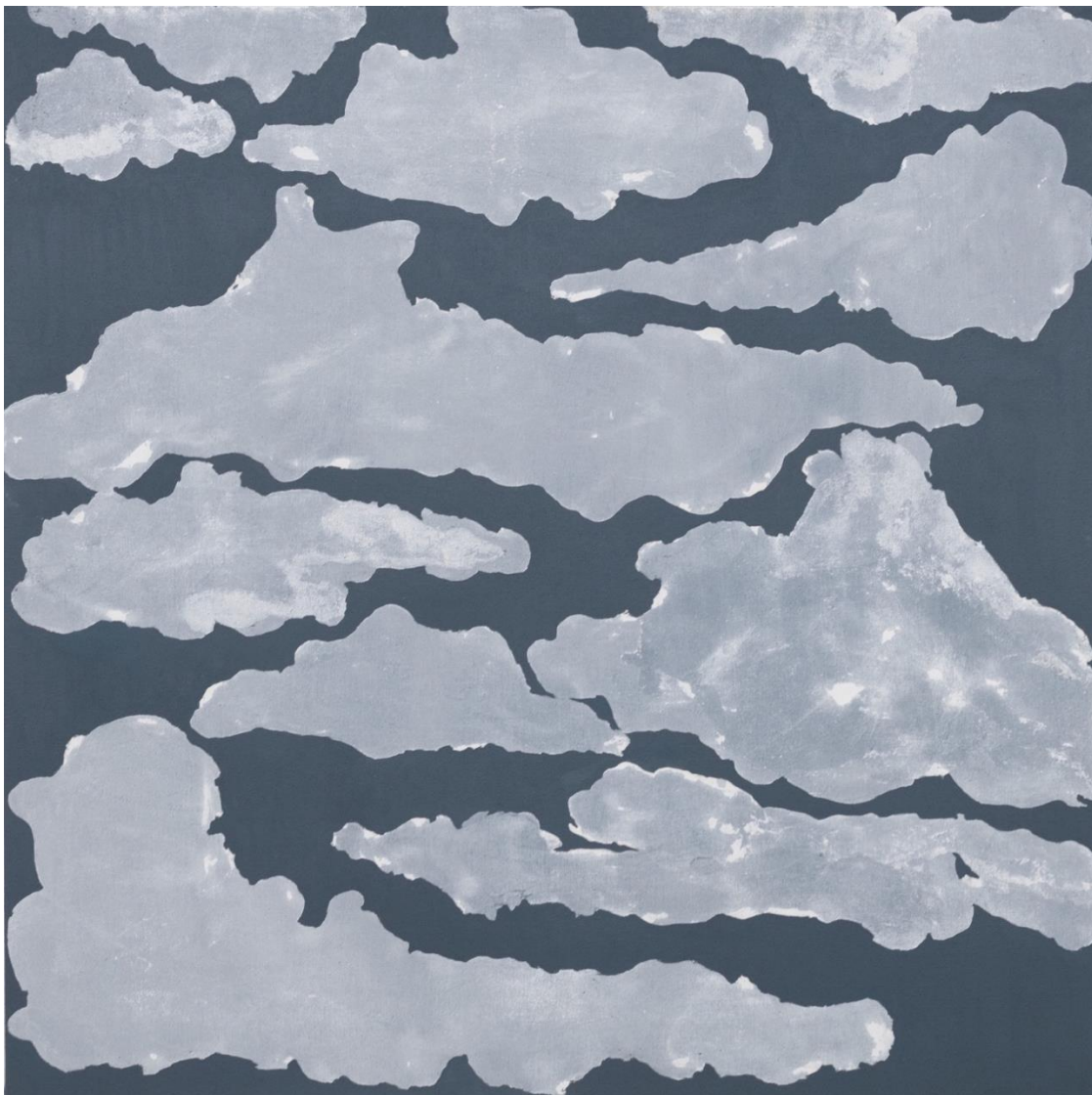


Figure 18
ive been looking for my angels, but theyre too hard to find, I
Acrylic and plaster on canvas
36" x 36"
2023

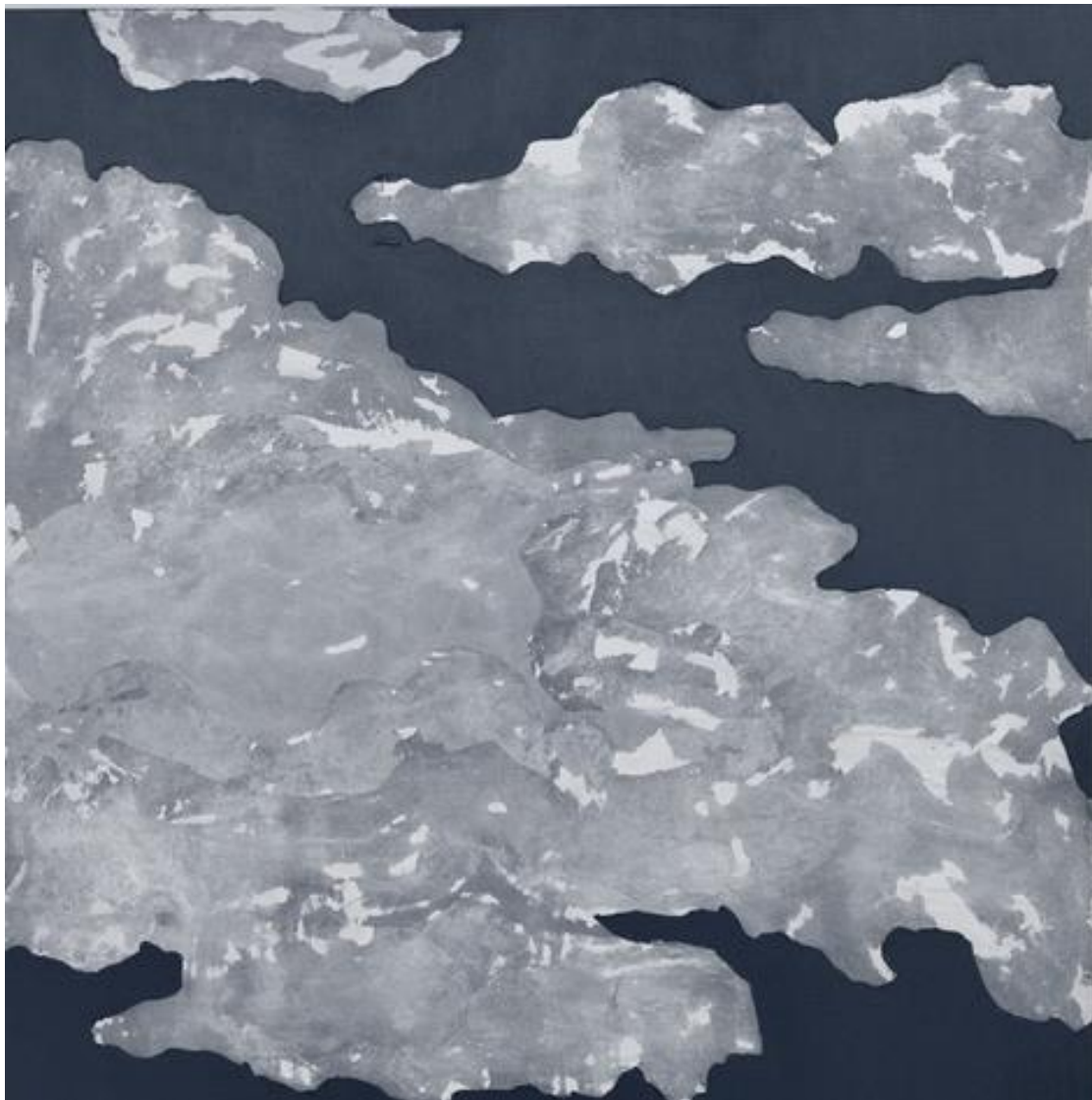


Figure 19
ive been looking for my angels, but theyre too hard to find, II
Acrylic and plaster on canvas
36" x 36"
2023



Figure 20 - 21
Installation View, ArtLAB Gallery
Documentation by Alyssa Sweeney

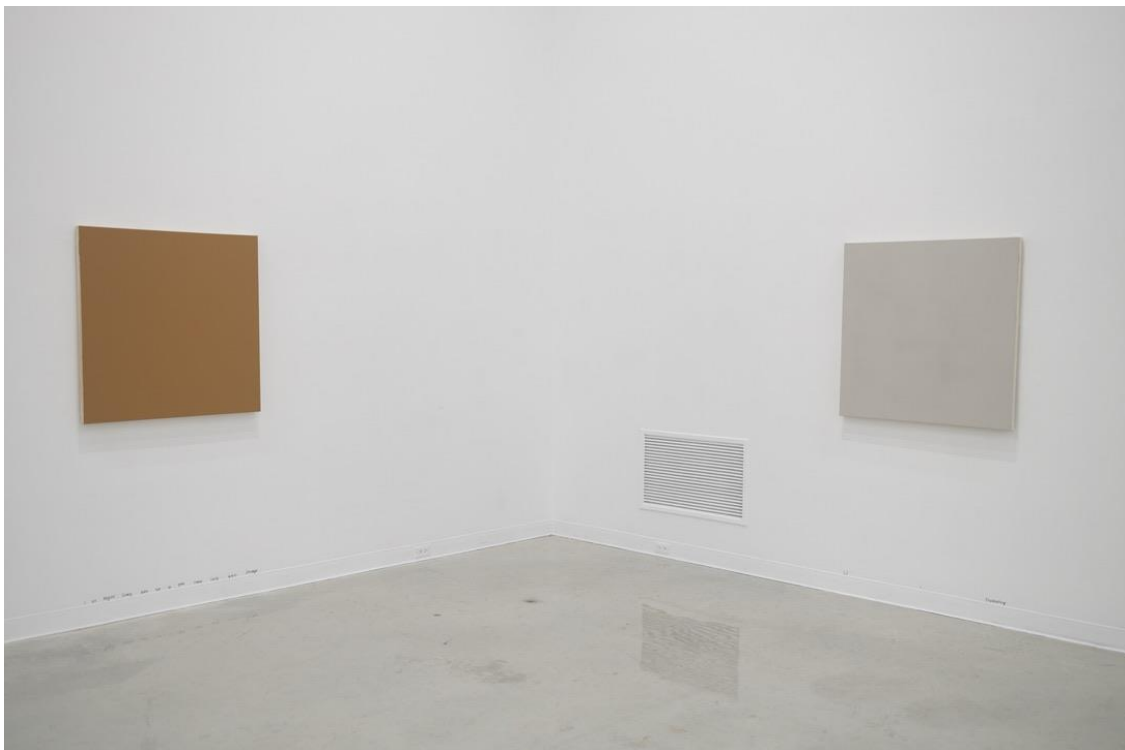
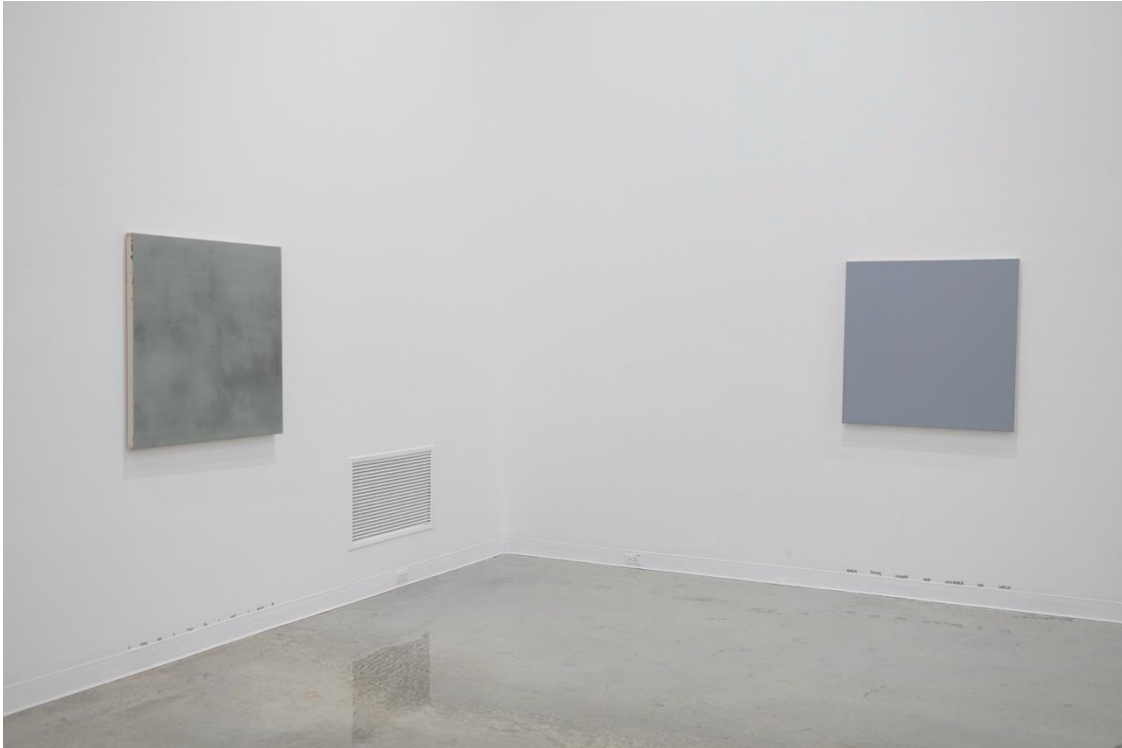


Figure 22 - 23
Installation View, ArtLAB Gallery
Documentation by Alyssa Sweeney



Figure 22 - 23
Installation View, ArtLAB Gallery
Documentation by Alyssa Sweeney

Chapter 3: Mark Rothko and his Journey Towards Abstract Expressionism

Introduction

It has only been within recent years that conversations about Mental Health are more openly discussed. Due to research and technological advancements, and the use of social media, it is easier to have these conversations because of our ability to communicate globally, ensuring our voices are heard; whether that's on making sure we are getting the proper care and diagnoses, or just knowing that we are not alone in this fight. We have seen many great artists succumb to their battle with mental illness, especially during a time when it was not widely talked about. The ongoing hardships Rothko experienced throughout his life certainly had a great impact on his art. This case study is going to look at how Rothko navigated producing art during critical points in our history, and how these socio-economic and political hardships affected how he thought about and approached his paintings, focusing on *what* and *why* within his art.

Introduction to the Artist

The personal burdens Rothko experienced as a Jewish immigrant to the United States was unnecessarily cruel. His Father was the first to leave Russia to establish a new life for him and his family, and once it was safe to do so, Rothko, his mother, and the rest of his siblings immigrated to Portland, Oregon.¹¹ The unaccepting xenophobic classmates and colleagues of Rothko made it more difficult for him to adjust to a new life in a foreign city. This leads me to wonder how much of his childhood and early adulthood affected him as an adult and an artist. With the latter half of his career focusing heavily on the use of colour as a tool, he grew inherently concerned with

¹¹ Cohen-Solal, Annie. *Mark Rothko, Toward the Light in the Chapel*, Yale University Press, 2015

ensuring his paintings created a “mood of contemplation”, but we do not know why.¹² Why is he so concerned with making sure his paintings exude such charged emotions? What is he keeping from the viewer? Does he want the viewer to experience what he is feeling? What I am most interested in is how he got to this place, turning from figurative painting with light colours and wispy mark making, to deep colour drenched canvases forcing the viewer to engage and approach them in a very different way.

Modernism

The beginning of Rothko’s art career saw broad experimentation with different painting media, where he worked in both a realistic and expressionistic manner.¹³ 1928-1939 saw him use gouache and watercolour for several landscape pieces (Figure 1) and oil for more figurative

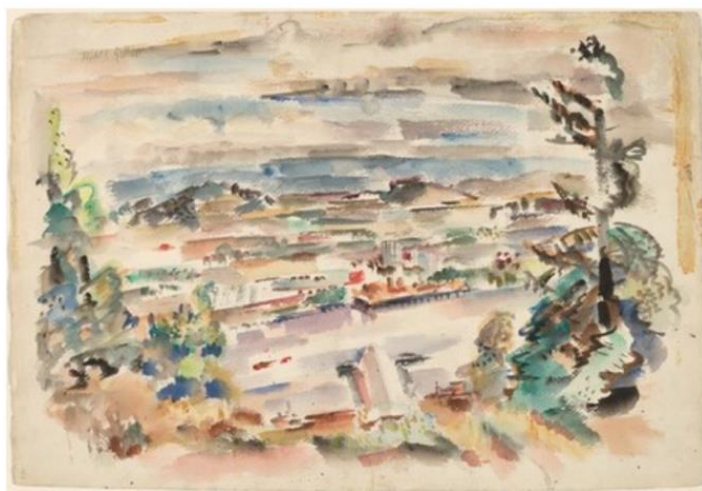


Figure 1 Mark Rothko, Untitled (Portland, Oregon), 1933, watercolor on watercolor paper, Retrieved from the National Gallery of Art website

style paintings, although the figurative works use a more loose, gestural style (Figure 2).¹⁴ These loose style watercolours he painted feel more like studies than actual, fully formed ideas. Maybe it is because the type of artist that we know him to be is drastically different. Maybe creating these landscapes, and specifically Figure 1, are a way for him to freeze time and spaces that are familiar to him and give him a sense of home and belonging. Maybe his paintings are the places he can

¹² Compton, Michael. *Mark Rothko, The Seagram Mural Project*. The Tate Gallery Liverpool, 1988

¹³ Cohen-Solal, Annie. *Mark Rothko, Toward the Light in the Chapel*, 64

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 64

return to like in a dream, where he is in control of that reality. Was he yearning for ‘home’, or was he just trying to make sense of the uncertainty of the Great Depression?

In 1935, Rothko and many of his artist friends created their artist collective, known as “the Ten”.¹⁵ In 1936, The Ten created another art collective called “the American Abstract Artists” to increase both the knowledge and recognition of abstract art.¹⁶ The Ten wanted to challenge galleries and museums that favoured traditional artwork, although Modernism was becoming a more established movement, the group disbanded in 1940.¹⁷



Figure 2 Mark Rothko, *Untitled (three nudes)*, 1933/1934, oil on black cloth, Retrieved from the National Gallery of Art website

During that time, artists who felt their practice did not align with the progressing abstract movement ended up moving towards abstraction by 1943.¹⁸ In nine years, Rothko experimented

¹⁵ Cohen-Solal, Annie. *Mark Rothko, Toward the Light in the Chapel*, 53

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 61

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 62

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 83

with many different media and dabbled in mythology (1940), surrealism (1944), multiform (1946) and abstraction with colour (1949).¹⁹

Surrealism

“To us art is an adventure into an unknown world, which can be explored only by those willing to take the risks... It is our function as artists to make the spectator see the world our way – not his way... It is a widely accepted notion among painters that it does not matter what one paints as long as it is well painted... We assert that the subject is crucial and only that subject matter is valid which is tragic and timeless”.²⁰ – Mark Rothko, Adolph Gottlieb, Barnett Newman.

For Rothko, moving away from the social realist aesthetic allowed him to explore the mythological creatures of the subconscious and begin a new era of painting. This shift in his practice allowed him to break down the gaunt and eerie figures he was painting before to create a more abstract view of them. Below in *Figure 3, Slow Swirl at the Edge of the Sea, 1944*, was part of his solo *Watercolours and Oils* show at the San Francisco Museum of



Figure 3 Mark Rothko, *Slow Swirl at the Edge of the Sea* (Portland, 1944, watercolor on watercolor paper, Retrieved from the National Gallery of Art website

¹⁹ Cohen-Solal, Annie. *Mark Rothko, Toward the Light in the Chapel*, 69

²⁰ Harrison, Charles. Wood, Paul. *Art in Theory, 1900-2000 An Anthology of Changing Ideas*. Blackwell Publishing, (New Edition) 2003, 269

Modern Art.²¹ This painting features two aqueous figures in conversation, surrounded by many free-flowing marks. Rothko kept a neutral background and seemed to have only added bold colours where necessary to help emphasize different parts of these forms, which also prompts the viewer's eyes to dance around the canvas.

While he continued with his transition, his surrealist paintings began to explore biomorphic shapes that float throughout the picture plane. He also used toned-down neutral colours to emphasize some of the curves and create depth, which can be seen in *Figure 4, Rites of Lilith*. This painting could also be seen as a catalyst for scale for his future paintings, as it is 106" x 81".



Figure 4 Mark Rothko, *Rites of Lilith*, 1945, Retrieved from the National Gallery of Art

²¹ Rothko, Mark, Rothko, Christopher, Bishop, Janet C., and Moussa Spring, Jenny, *Rothko: The Colorfield Paintings*, Chronical Books

Abstract Expressionism and Colour Field Paintings

“The role of colour in a painting is difficult to understand because only as it functions emotionally in a composition does its creative meaning become clear”.²² - Allan Leepa

Under the Abstract Expressionism umbrella, there are two classified groups. First, there are the action painters, artists such as Jackson Pollock, Lee Krasner and Joan Mitchell who paint in large, gestural strokes of colour, creating a scene that allows the viewer's eyes to dance around the canvas.²³ Then there is what I like to consider the more passionate painters, like Rothko, Barnett Newman, and Franz Kline. These artists were more concerned about conveying their emotions and interests in a more subtle compositions ²⁴, by using their own experiences, with the help of colour, to “produce a contemplative or meditational response in the viewer”.²⁵ Abstract Expressionist Art has a level of genuineness that, at times, cannot be seen in realism. For emotion to be detached from an abstract painting is uncommon due to the gestural mark making by the painter, the unfamiliar subject matter leaves the viewer with pondering questions that may lead to an emotional response or perhaps some form of contemplation, that Rothko sought after.

Removing the figurative or recognizable subject matter allows the artist to strip down the content they want to depict by relying on just the brush strokes and placement of colour. Consequently, the artist challenges the viewer to spend more or less time with the work to see if they engage with what is presented or become disengaged and move on. The common goal with abstract expressionist painting is yearning for the viewer to reflect internally and see if anything

²² Leepa, Allen. *The Challenges of Modern Art*, Beechurst Press, 149

²³ Tate, *Abstract Expressionism*, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/a/abstract-expressionism>

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ Ibid

occurs because abstract art is subjective and does not tell you what to think; it allows you to reflect and feel.

Moreover, the colour field movement dominated the 1950's. Colour Field paintings were born during the Abstract Expressionist period in New York City and is an emotionally expressive style that follows the "surrealist idea that art should come from the unconscious mind".²⁶ The last twenty years of his life was devoted to pursuing this art form, not for the colour relationships that occurred but rather for the "basic human emotion" that the colours had the potential of expressing.²⁷ One may feel that Rothko was successful in being able to convey such rich and raw emotions through the choice and application of his colour, however, he does not indicate this intention as his work is often left untitled. Without explicit direction from the artist, especially if this is the first time the viewer is engaging with this artist and their work, the viewer may not have the experience the artist hoped for, when engaging with his work. Now, not all art needs to be direct; meaning there does not need to be familiar subject matter in order to make a great painting, however, descriptive titles or other didactic information provided to the viewer from the artist may help the viewer relate to another human experience. However, regardless of the subject, not one person thinks or perceives the same as the next. What may be intriguing for one may not be for the other. The bold, sporadic, and sometimes strategically placed colours will not reach and impress every audience due to the subjective nature of abstract art. Especially when the artist presents the viewer with a work of art that requires time to observe and digest what they are viewing, sometimes the understanding of needing to spend extra time with it can be lost. There are no explicit instructions for viewing and understanding abstract art because it is made for your interpretation.

²⁶ Tate, *Abstract Expressionism*, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/a/abstract-expressionism>

²⁷ Bishop, Janet. *Rothko, The Color Field Paintings*, Chronicle Books. 2017

When transitioning from Surrealism to Abstract Expressionism, Rothko did not lose the intentions or integrity of his paintings. If anything, the most significant change was abandoning any distinct or apparent subject matter, regardless of how abstracted they had become. He began focusing solely on colour and its reaction against the canvas by giving each colour he used its own borderless section, allowing them to breathe.

1947 saw the first few multiform paintings that began the transition from surrealism to Abstract Expressionism, creating a more mature style.²⁸ These paintings that Rothko created over two years introduced the idea of relying on colourful, soft-edged asymmetric shapes to evoke an emotional response in the viewer and abandoning the serpentine motifs (Figure 5). He was not one to explain his work as he did not want his ideas surrounding the paintings to cloud the viewer's thoughts and facilitate a push towards thinking like him.²⁹ Instead, Rothko leaves the subjectiveness and ambiguity of it up to the viewer. Although during his Surrealist era, Rothko along with Adolph Gottlieb believed that artists are to make the viewer see the world in which they – the artist – do. However, when he began to focus heavily on the abstracted colour fields, he pushed the narrative of contemplation. With his practice evolving, it seems as though his thoughts surrounding the viewer and his artwork may have as well, from shifting his ideas about telling the viewer what is happening in the work to leaving room for this mood of contemplation he desired.

²⁸ Waldman, Diane. *Mark Rothko 1903-1970, A Retrospective*, Solomon R Guggenheim Museum. 1978

²⁹ National Gallery of Art, *Mark Rothko*, <https://www.nga.gov/features/mark-rothko.html>

"Shapes have no direct association with any particular visible experience, but in them, one recognizes the principle and passion of organisms... art to me is an anecdote of the spirit and the only means of making concrete the purpose of its varied quickness and stillness".³⁰ - Mark Rothko

Rothko's experimentation with multiform paintings led to what is considered his more famous artwork; the colour-field paintings. Once he was comfortable working in this style and scale, he began refining the shapes he painted on the canvas to include only two to five soft rectangles of colour. From there, he began working with various colour combinations, including different tones, and managed to create a unique painting each time. The only indication of repetition would be in colour but not layout, as



Figure 5 Mark Rothko, No. 9, 1948, oil and mixed media on canvas, Retrieved from the National Gallery of Art website

it is pretty evident in the works made in the early 1950s that he carried one or two colours over from the previous painting into the next (Figures 6 & 7). Both paintings were created in 1952, and they showcase a simplified picture plane with similar colour palettes that both include a dirty lemon yellow.

³⁰ National Gallery of Art, *Mark Rothko*, <https://www.nga.gov/features/mark-rothko.html>



Figure 6 Mark Rothko, *Untitled*, 1952, Retrieved from Rothko: The Colorfield Paintings



Figure 7 Mark Rothko, *Untitled*, 1952, Retrieved from Rothko: The Colorfield Paintings

Throughout the 1950s, Rothko experimented with a bright, bold colour palette that separated from dark and eerie tones. Around 1959 he returned to the sombre palette and began to extensively create paintings that used maroon, black, brown, and burnt oranges³¹. Perhaps he had reached a point in his life where his emotions overruled his thoughts, causing him to feel pressured into abandoning a process that he had been developing that last two decades. This dark change may also have been to prepare for what laid ahead, the simple fact that all life must come to an end. With his new palette, he began to work in a repetitive motion where he would layer the colours until he created a smooth velvet finish.³² Although it is hard to determine texture through

³¹ Ashton, Dore. *About Rothko*, Oxford University Press. 1983

³² National Gallery of Art, *Mark Rothko*, <https://www.nga.gov/features/mark-rothko.html>

photographs, the opaqueness that *Figures 8 and 9* allows us to recognize that he has simplified his canvases, focusing on the dark colours competing against each other.

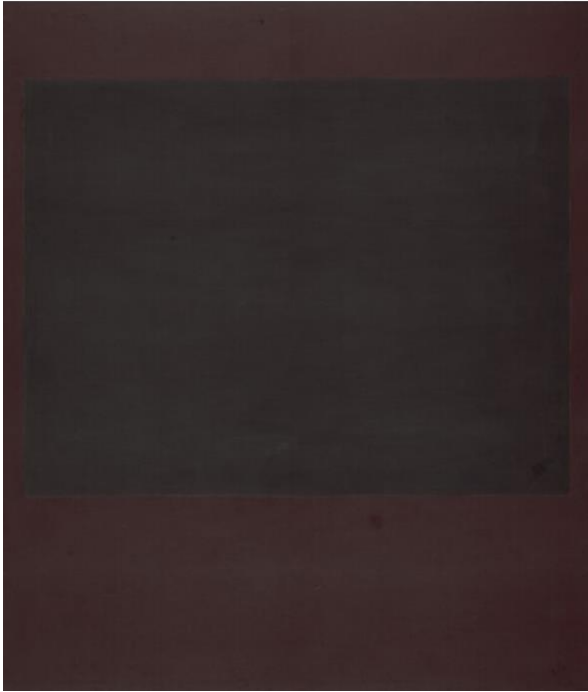


Figure 1 Mark Rothko, No. 4, 1964, mixed media on canvas, Retrieved from the National Gallery of Art website



Figure 2 Mark Rothko, Untitled, 1953, Retrieved from the National Gallery of Art website

Rothko was active in his practice until his untimely death in 1970. Having suffered from depression, he spent his final moments in his studio before committing suicide. Was he creating such emotionally charged paintings because he was trying to project what he felt when he was alone with them? By the time he started to develop the multiform and colour-field paintings, he began to speak less and less on his art as he found that silence spoke louder than any explanation, he could give.³³ It leaves me to wonder if his silence was a call for help.

Although he is an internationally known artist, who inspired and continues to inspire artists today, Rothko hid his reality within his paintings. Which leaves me to wonder if he was using his

³³ National Gallery of Art, *Mark Rothko*, <https://www.nga.gov/features/mark-rothko.html>

artwork to protect parts of himself, he did not want others to physically see? Or was he trying to tell the viewer more by pushing the idea of contemplation in his work? While we can only infer the truth behind his paintings, I believe what he experienced mentally and emotionally throughout his childhood, early adulthood, along with the Great Depression and World War II, significantly impacted whom he became and what he created.

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Curriculum Vitae

Rylee J. Rumble
Ontario, Canada

Education

- 2023 MFA, Western University, London, ON
2021 BA, Honours Studio Art & Art History, University of Guelph, Guelph, ON

Solo Exhibitions

- 2023 *Achy Awfulness*, ArtLab, Western University, London, ON
I've loved you since I was two, Necessary Arts Gallery, Guelph, ON
2022 *Neutral*, Necessary Arts Gallery, Guelph, ON

Duo & Group Exhibitions

- 2022 *Hoop-la*, Necessary Arts Gallery, Guelph, ON
Thresholds & Inventories, ArtLAB, Western University, London, ON
My Newly Formed Title, Cohen Commons, Western University, London, ON
2021 *Chemical Imbalance*, Satellite Project Space Online, London, ON
Gateway, Zavitz Gallery Online, University of Guelph, Guelph ON, in conjunction with Winthrop University, Rock Hill, South Carolina, USA
Lot 14, Boarding House Gallery, Guelph, ON
Juried Art Show, Zavitz Gallery Online, University of Guelph, Guelph, ON
2020 *Repeat Yourself*, Boarding House Gallery, Guelph, ON
Nothing Forever, Anything Now, Boarding House Gallery, Guelph, ON
Persona, Zavitz Gallery, University of Guelph, Guelph, ON

Awards & Bursaries

- 2023 *José Barrio-Garay Memorial Bursary*, Western University, London, ON
- 2022 *José Barrio-Garay Memorial Bursary*, Western University, London, ON
- 2021-2023 *Graduate Research Scholarship*, Western University, London, ON
- 2021 *Directors Choice Award*, Juried Art Show, Presented by Martin Pearce,
University of Guelph, Guelph, ON
- Painting Award*, Juried Art Show, Presented by Martin Pearce, University of
Guelph, Guelph, ON
- 2016 *Entrance Scholarship*, University of Guelph, Guelph, ON
- Arts Trip Award*, St. John's College, Brantford, ON

Academic Achievements

- 2023 *Deans Honours List*, Winter Semester, Western University, London, ON
- 2022 *Deans Honours List*, Winter Semester, Western University, London, ON
- 2021 *Deans Honours List*, Fall Semester, Western University, London, ON
- Deans Honours List*, Winter Semester, Western University, London, ON
- BMO 1st Art Competition*, Nominated by Martin Pearce for Painting, University of
Guelph, Guelph, ON
- 2020 *Deans Honours List*, Fall Semester, University of Guelph, Guelph, ON
- 2019 *Deans Honours List*, Winter Semester, University of Guelph, Guelph, ON
- 2018 *Deans Honours List*, Fall Semester, University of Guelph, Guelph, ON

Teaching Experience

- 2021-2023 *Teachers Assistant*, Foundations of Visual Arts SA 1601, Western University,
London, ON