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Hovering

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HOVERING

A Thesis Presented

by

BENJAMIN BLATT

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

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The Master of Fine Arts Program in Studio Arts

HOVERING

A Thesis Presented

By

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ABSTRACT

HOVERING

MAY 2016

BENJAMIN BLATT, B.F.A. RHODE ISLAND SCHOOL OF DESIGN

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Hovering is an attempt to navigate the contemporary digital environment through traditional means. The imagery created function as paintings, photographs, prints, and drawings. They explore and raise questions about visual perception and sensory awareness, as well as highlighting the modular limitations of the pixelated image and the illusion of reality in the digital landscape.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

My paintings are my attempt to unpack digital vernacular through analog means, focusing on algorithmic color, software compression, image capture, and pixelization. These works combine both digital and hand-application techniques, and situate themselves somewhere amongst disparate mediums. Functioning as paintings, photographs, prints or drawings, they explore and raise questions about visual perception and sensory awareness.

My hand acts as a mediating screen, bringing space and nuance to the algorithmic limitations. Through touch, I grant a palpable depth to my subjects, imbuing a sense of human “soul” back into a coded environment. By layering transparent dye and oil, my intent is to create a microclimate that quivers, fogs, and billows across the surface. The atmosphere created in each individual image adds energy and sensory specificity, creating a dialogue between the elemental and the artificial.

CHAPTER 2

COLLECTING AND DISPLAYING

For me, painting (and before that, drawing) has always been instrumental to the way I experienced, understood, and interpreted the world. It also allowed me to glean a psychological comprehension of what I was seeing. As a child I composed images as a surrogate for my daydreams. I saved the drawings in boxes, glass cases, and terrariums that I used primarily as framing devices. Art was about transcribing the knowledge of a thing and staking ownership of it in my internal and creative life. This need to acquire visual knowledge carried into collecting, curating, and displaying the images in various ways during my early youth.

CHAPTER 3

ADVANCED PRETEND – EARLY ENCOUNTERS WITH THE SUBLIME

Over the years, photographs, magazines, and books became a more economical and automated means of looking, possessing, and collecting. Technological advances in printing greatly improved the availability of color photography when I was young and increased my visual world dramatically. Access to these images significantly informed my visual vocabulary, showing me a world beyond my daily interactions. A photographic image was similar to the experience of drawing, in that for me it had the power of containing or capturing a universe of knowledge. The obsessive need to acquire and display these images dovetailed with my equally intense hobby of creating worlds and maintaining them in aquariums and terrariums. I would spend hours manicuring the moss and designing a physical landscape and curated-image backdrop perfect for my real and imagined environs. These glass boxes created an incredible compression of idealized nature, fantasy, and artificial environment. Composing and building alternate worlds became a skill of mine before I had the ability to recreate them through drawing and painting. I would meditate and become hypnotized by the light and movement of the water around objects. My fish, reptiles, and insects became actors in this surreal theater. My earliest memories of transcendental phenomenon can be traced back to the hours I spent contemplating these glowing glass cubes. It was the act of looking that transfixed me. During these times of contemplation the visible was emptied out and the void in these glass boxes was filled with my dreams and unfulfilled desires. The shimmering artificial light called me into a deep concentration and altered my

thoughts and sense of time. I noticed that the pace and everyday concerns of my world slipped away and my subconscious became activated. These early years of intense absorption in creative play sowed the seeds for my future interest in the surreal, romantic, and sublime. The pane of glass of the aquarium tank was a melting point where I could combine my love of both the natural and artificial visual world.

Today, technology's powerful global interconnectivity has changed my collecting habits. Fiber optic cables and developments in data storage have reshaped my pursuit of imagery and shifted my creative energy and practice as once again I find myself daydreaming through images separated from my body by a pane of glass. This flash point now exists on a computer screen, where I use the thin display to "package" imagery in a digital space of idealized and artificial environments. It is in software's virtual depth where I blur the boundaries of the real, surreal, and ideal, to create new compressed fantasies.

The enthusiastic drive to discover and explore as a collector has been altered by the post-internet age, replaced by exhaustion brought on by overwhelming abundance and excess. Recent technology has enabled the "whole of mankind to become an imaginary museum" (Ricoeur, 278). Through the ubiquity of photography and visual imagery available via mobile phone cameras and social networks nearly all visual culture has been reiterated, commoditized, objectified and uploaded to the web. Access to limitless images from nearly every point on the globe, has created a content overload. It has called into question the role of the artist

in the age of unlimited access to an ever-available world of online images. As a visual communicator I am less interested in image overload and more intrigued by how we now navigate a world of digitization. How are we adapting to, experiencing, producing, and interacting with images through the screen format? It is a format that utilizes an engineered visual platform based on efficiency of data communication and information collection, rather than accuracy or ownership.

These concerns inspired my thesis exhibition, and over the last year and half I questioned how this new digital reality, hyper-active and compressed, has altered our visual perceptions. The paintings trace and recreate the dialogue between light, color, and form, drawing from the virtual world as well as lived experiences. In the imagery I search out a sense of the familiar and unknown. Content and visuals merge at the intersection of time and space, body and nature, mind and technology. In these explorations I have toggled between representational and abstract, digital and analog, the access to and denial of information, and subtractive light as opposed to that which is additive and reflective. By investigating both digital and analog processes, I explore the range of ways in which the digital eye and the human eye record, reconfigure, and represent the same information.

CHAPTER 4

DIFFERENCES IN PERCEPTION

There is a vast difference between how information is perceived when seen first-hand as opposed to being captured and reinterpreted digitally. Traditional image making has largely been a direct and more intuitive experience with the hand, eye, and medium. In the case of an image made by hand through observation, the artist depends on the creative mind filtered by reason. The decisions made during this transcription process are unique and very specific to the observer's physiology, psychology, semiotic, and cultural conditions. An analog image is an individual representation or process of mimesis. It is a record where the choices have very personal explanations and justifications for information transposed or denied. Every mark is subjective to the artist's experience and edited through physical and personal selection.

In contrast, all digital images rely on and are based in rule-bound, complex mathematical algorithms. Apparent in any digital reproduction is a loss of depth and individual material subjectivity. An algorithmic image is "a mosaic assembled from particles" (Merleau- Ponty, 35) created following a very strict set of equations and steps.

It has almost no connection to natural vision. Information is captured and numerically tagged and coded. Colors, romanticized and associated with the sacred, spiritual, and transcendental by the painter's eye, are wiped clean of sentiment. They are replaced by gray-scale numeric placeholders which "bear no *direct* or

essential relation to the event or object they ostensibly depict.” (Kane, 226). What is registered by these numbers is the changes sensed in the captured raw data of the software’s optimization and information systems. The shifts of color, tone, and hue are bundled into ordered modular particles or uniform pixels through economic processes of data reduction. Randomness and subtlety are reversed into a more concrete visual pattern. The information is then processed based on the numbers of the html code, which correspond to safe standards established by the World Wide Web Consortium and the standardized color profile of the monitor or screen on which we are observing the image.

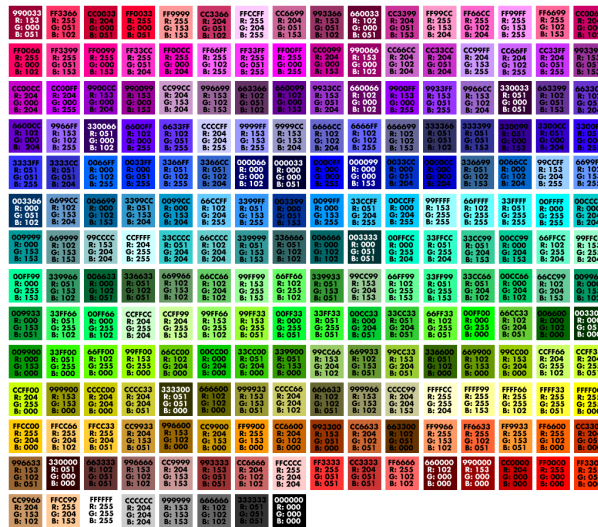


Figure 1: The 216 web safe colors by hue.

All these decisions fit into a consistent uniform template reduced to a “web safe” color palette of 216 colors, tremendously simplified to be the most economical and efficient while being transmitted. Once an object or image has been digitally captured and the file has been formatted into a JPEG, PNG, or TIFF, all time and

space is compressed and smoothed into uniform pixels. All software decisions are automated and nearly invisible to the user so as to easily deliver information as rapidly as possible across servers around the globe. In a digital capture of a painting all nuance, dimensionality, and brushwork is flattened into a bitmap of modular units and monochromatic pixels, which instantly reinterpret the image. There is a tremendous processing speed and integrated efficiency to all of this. Within the modular formatting, images can now be resized and resolution modified with a simple keystroke. It is in the relationship between this developing digital technology and the “deontologizing” capacity of software to reformat or sort a subject image’s original “being” and components that I saw something impressive; the efficiency of technology to abstract at the micro level. I was attracted by the algorithm’s ability to divide and order an image of any size, then rapidly magnify it again and the decisive way in which algorithmic technology not only records but also reconvenes the same information at different magnifications and resolutions.

CHAPTER 5

FINDING A NEW VOCABULARY

The modular aspects of this recording process were inspiring for both their imitative dedication and also their generative capacity. In a digital image, mathematical order heightens the aesthetic experience of color and form. There is an elegant balance between tonal ratios and units of information that resonate a visual harmony of undeniable aesthetic beauty. While observing a close-up of a digital image, my eye is un-rooted, an experience dissimilar to that of viewing a traditional photographic transcription at the same magnification. I catch myself mentally travelling across these ordered calibrations and see a possibility once again to use the compression of light and form as a powerful cerebral instrument. In these algorithmic images I see a chance for the sacred color of the painter and the synthetic color of the digital realm to coexist. There is a transcendental power to the uniformity of space, lack of dimensionality and artifice of light and shadow of the magnified digital image. The forward push of the backlit illuminated screen holds me to the surface of the image. Rarely do I ask myself what am I looking at, but rather, how am I looking?

It is here in the limits of the information, and its exposed DNA, that I find my muse for this recent work. It is in the seams of the digital image that I see the freedom for painting to find a new vocabulary. It lies in plain sight all around us, found in the building blocks of information and the glitch of software limitations. It

is the fungibility of the dot or the pixel to become sheer information or total abstraction. It is a pure energy, a shape-shifter.

CHAPTER 6

MEDIATION

Searching to harmonize these unique differences between analog and algorithmic images, I have allowed automated software to play a dominant role in the compositional construction of my images. Using a program's rules and defined boundaries as my initial parameters, I have created a confined set of automated results in which to operate. Recognizing the limits of the controls available I can choose how far to automate abstraction or create it using analog means.

Within these limitations my eye has become the directing device as I have let the algorithm take command over a large portion of the production process, or as Vilem Flusser puts it when describing the adaptation to working with modern technology, "Previously the tool was the variable and the human being was the constant, subsequently the human being became the variable and the machine the constant." (Flusser, 24)

Within the standardized software results I make active choices about resolution, coloring, capture and cropping, pixel by pixel. Using traditional materials with an emphasis on form and color, I retrofit the digital artifact created onscreen and recreate a lo-fi look, exploring aspects of the moving and still image, and planar and virtual space. This creative desire to push the visual possibilities of seeing is not new - but the playground for me has changed.

There is a purposefully unstable and impersonal way in which I create these paintings. Using everyday randomly acquired digital images I select and zoom in on modular building blocks until the source is deconstructed. At higher magnifications the limitations and individual units of compression are clear, similar to an extreme close-up on a painting where the blur and mush of each individual stroke becomes apparent

I scan over fragments of an image or object until a rhythm emerges, a color levitates or a shadow vibrates. Once zoomed in I choose whether to blur or fragment the objects beyond recognition. Focusing on the relationships of form, scale and color I select and source this from observation, a skill acquired through years of traditional drawing practice. I let my right brain take over, concerning myself only with edges, harmony, and positive and negative spaces, casting aside metaphor, the recognizable, and clear narratives.

Generative illusions begin to surface as I scan for information. Possibilities for utilizing a deceptive sleight of hand can be found everywhere in this new visual information. It reveals itself the closer one looks. I zoom in on the artificially cast shadows created by multiple windows overlapping on my screen and find a hypnotizing minimal moment which sings chords that echo of Rothko and Malevich but also diverge into modern day. This 90 x 100 pixel Screenshot smaller than half an inch became the basis for a 40" by 40" painting titled "Meridian"

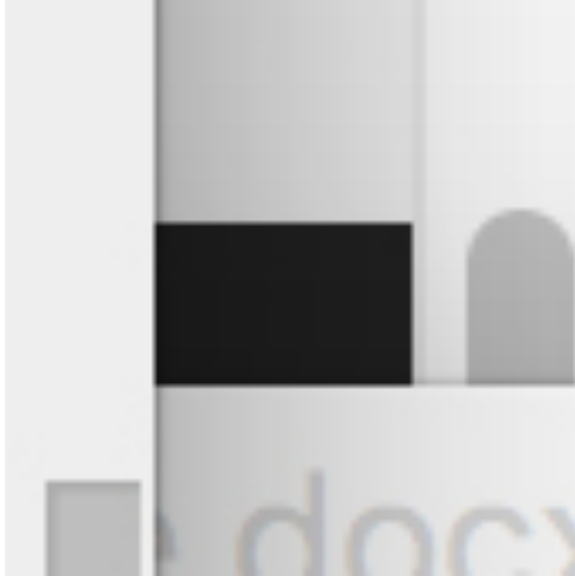


Figure 2: Benjamin Blatt, *Screenshot*, *Basis for Meridian* 2016

CHAPTER 7

A SENSORY DRIFT

The power to transcend the surface and move past the aesthetic enjoyment of the image lies in the ambiguity of the digital image's modular framework. When the image is magnified to an extreme there is a beautiful contradiction and irony in the software's flawed dedication to simultaneously mimic and obfuscate a representational image. I hope to affirm the limitations of our senses via our relationship to technology, which has drastically altered how we interact with the natural world around us.

These paintings are not committed to flatness or depth but hover in between through transparent application masquerading as modular pixels. At their most effective they split time between the earthly pleasure of the painting's surface and induce a temporal inhibition of spatial awareness. This is achieved by the meditative glazed illumination produced by a methodical and exacting use of material. The imagery has been born of rational ordered coding but inspires the senses far beyond the limited color charts and strictly ordered divisions on the screen. The paintings slowly burn away my reasoning, grounding and self-understanding as they seduce me slowly to glide off a mental cliff only to be sustained by an unknown invisible force. I believe these approach the sublime, which as Kant described was a failure or temporary disruption of one's own reasoning to understand what our senses were presenting to us. "Sublime is what even to be able to think proves that the mind has a power surpassing any standard of sense." (Kant, 99).

These paintings drift between the traditional idea of the enlightened sublime and a contemporary iteration which the historian David Nye calls the “consumer sublime.” (Nye, 39). It has assumed qualities associated with postmodernism where depth is replaced by surface, and technology is used to simulate an artificial representation of nature or enact fantasy. I would argue however that this work is not merely a shallow form of visual entertainment. It challenges the subjective boundaries and affirms the powers of reason and the supremacy of the mind. The paintings encourage a romantic variation of the sublime where complete self-dissolution is possible: an experience with the *infinite* induced through form. I have personally recognized these powerful effects in several of Rothko’s large canvasses where the forms seem to hover above the surface of the canvas and serve as a gateway for the viewer to interact with an indescribable beyond. Or Malevich’s *Black Square* in which one contemplates the infinite void created by pure material, leaving the viewer with a sense of connection to the divine. I believe these paintings modernize this connection further by eliciting the sense of a higher knowledge not just bound in nature or religion but in technology as well. Critic Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe describes it as a post-human beyond, “where the technological is seen to have become the origin” (Gilbert-Rolfe, 127).



Figure 3: Benjamin Blatt, *Meridian* 2016



Figure 4: Mark Rothko, *Untitled (Black on Gray)* 1970

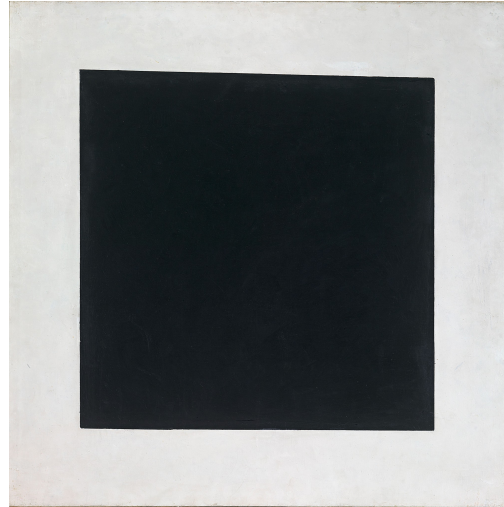


Figure 5: Kasimir Malevich, *Black Square* 1915

In *Meridian* (Figure 3) the context of the sublime and digital psychological landscape is explored, the matte black exerts a sense of denial in contrast to the depth and softness of the grey. The horizon, is the intersection of the infinite and the finite. It references the history of horizon in painting, and grounds our perception of space.

The painting also doubles as a psychological landscape and the double or multiple lives experienced by many in the fragmented nature of our contemporary existence. This painting explores the intersection of the sublime and the mundane, the poetic and the prosaic.

It subverts the visual parameters of this intersection by deliberately keeping the trace of the digital to a minimum. This subtlety is key to the reading of this painting – like the moments of silence in an expansive symphony, it gives the eye a place to stop and question what comes next.

CHAPTER 8
SCALE AND ATMOSPHERE

Scale has played an important role in this recent work but must be addressed in tandem with atmosphere. Both informed each other and developed as ideas of sensory dissolution and abstraction became dominant concerns. The paintings function by moving color and form across box-like squares. I compressed the space of the images to a very flat shift in tonal and chromatic ranges and this followed suit for each individual object or form. The artificial luminance and aerial illusion of depth were achieved by using binaries of color. I employed a technique of applying complimentary colors layered in stippled glazes and full spectrum hazes utilized in the Romantic Expansionist paintings of the Hudson River School. In other paintings the palette and tone was restricted to only subtle gradations like those seen in traditional Japanese painting and western painting examples like the Nocturne's of Whistler.

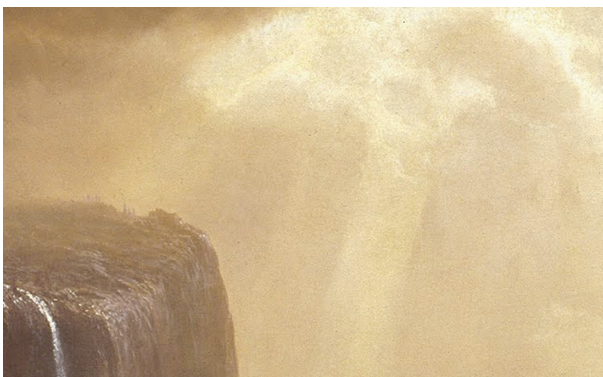


Figure 6: Albert Bierstadt, *Among the Sierra Nevada Mountains* (detail) 1868

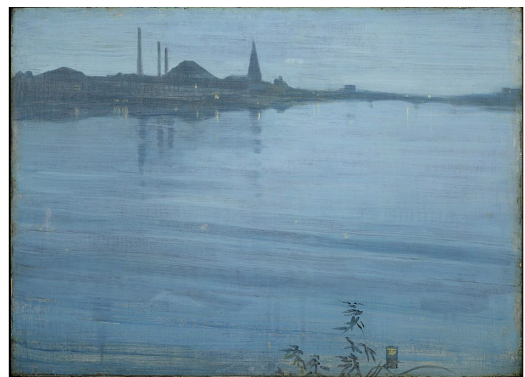


Figure 7: James Abbott McNeill Whistler, *Nocturne in Blue and Silver* 1871

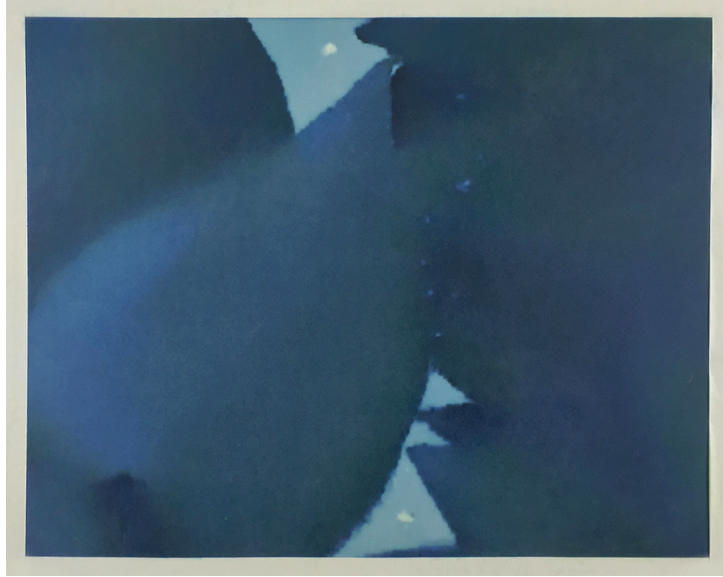


Figure 8: Benjamin Blatt, *Untitled - Blue Velvet* 2016

The handling of the atmospheric effects was done with cosmetic sponges and dye to emulate the crackle of a backlit screen. The modulated dot matrix I laid down on the surface created a velvet layer. It shimmered and masqueraded as dots, an effect similar to high definition rendering like that of a reflective LCD screen. As the paintings progressed the space demanded to become more ethereal which meant enlarging the composition. The colors shifted to opaque primaries as I became more interested in what a physical scale could deliver both emotionally and conceptually. The forms became more ambiguous and/ or minimal as the scale doubled and I grew more confident in the visual delivery of imagery. I wanted the surface and light to emanate, to open out of the compositions. This was achieved by increasing the painting's scale and by using layers and soft transitions of color that blurred the focus of specific shapes and induced a chromatic meditative vibration, a microclimate of sensation.



Figure 9: Photograph of studio with various works created by the artist illustrating scale and individual atmospheres. 2016.

CHAPTER 9
SPACE, COLOR, RHYTHM

The spatial optical effects I explored are a tribute to the experimental pointillism of the Impressionists. But In many ways my use and understanding of modern pigment printing has changed the mark of my hand most significantly. I emulated the digital printer's head as I slowly banded across large areas with toned ink holding my hand and wrist at a distance to create a similar uniform screen. I adjusted tones cooling and warming slight shifts in the image, dotting across a surface, pixelating edges and softening forms. The result resembles fragments of a recognizable world often fracturing and coming apart at the seams.



Figure 10: Benjamin Blatt, *Chromatic Velvet* 2016

In *Chromatic Velvet* , (Figure 10) the imagery of meditative color fields rise to the surface but there is a feeling of change in the air, an interruptive buffering. The

paintings backlit warmth is not of this physical world but pulses with the strength of a dying LCD screen caught just at the moment it was powering off. In this painting and several others the compositional planes are animated under a thin, shimmering veil of brushwork and transparent layers. The whole surface is worked with an energetic hand. Space and recession are dealt with through changes in color and value. The palette in large areas is similar in hue, keeping the surface forms from receding with the weight of deep contrast or shadow. Abstract shapes shift and blush in tone, cool and warm from moment to moment as if activated by touch, air or electricity. The surfaces are stroked with tight dots, uniform touches varying between matte and glossy. The directional brushwork and the strokes rarely leave uniform lines that run long sprints across the image. Instead I “sew” a uniform dappled weave of “living” surface that energizes the eye across the imagery. The stippled texture calms the retina and a meditative quality can be felt as the eye focuses and loosens to the visual noise of a humming soft screen. A lullaby akin to white noise.

Depth emerges without horizon lines and the correctional suggestions of perspectival orthogonals have all but disappeared. Space instead is investigated by the arrangement of forms, which cast subtle diffused shadows, energize and blur and marry one another with the careful adjustment of related tones and hues. Shapes emerge and recede without disturbing the stable arrangement of their environment.

Even though the flatness of my imagery is important, atmosphere is always a key concern and I shift my reverberating color to the prismatic optical conditions of the sky. The palettes are alive and pulse with bright yellows and reds, loamy greens and oranges, but are also somber and cool with lavenders, grayish blues, and muddy ochers. Throughout this process I was concerned with creating a surface that enhanced the movement of color. Each painted section created a shimmering vibration of colored light directly modulated by hand in varying ways across the surface of the painting. I saw the same nervous staccato mark in works of other artists such as the frenzied crackling surfaces of Reubens, Constable, Turner, Delacroix, and Seurat, and the metaphysical unifying haze of Morandi.



Figure 11: Benjamin Blatt, *Sunset Park* 2015

In the painting entitled *Sunset Park*, Primary colors: pinkish reds, yellows, oranges, greens and blues often shift away into tones of a backlit almost heavenly lightness. This new focus on saturated coloration exemplifies a further step away from realism.

A hypnotizing rhythm emerges as edges blur and then re-focus. Atmospheric spaces verge and radiate between the shallow and deep like an optometrist shifting through lenses during an examination. The perspective is limited but the space is increasingly complex as in the painting *Chromatic Velvet* the contrasting hue and tone of large areas are activated by stippled modulated complimentary color. The dynamic heat and frenetic visual tempo of daily life is recognized but seems to be succumbing to the cooling of circulating air. There's a sense of movement that does not disrupt the formal balance of the image but animates it. Rectangular wells of color start to take over the structural order of the painting, closing out larger areas of the underlying imagery. The natural organic quality of a form's curves mutate into harsher angles, and pools of color disintegrate into a cellular structure. Even in empty spaces in the composition there is great activity and turbulence. An unseen energy sorts and filters the dense emptiness of conflicting temperatures in millions of unique moving dots.

CHAPTER 10

CONCLUSION

In this body of work I have paired my traditional training with digital tools, creating images that question space and form in a modern environment unable to separate itself clearly from the technology with which it coexists. I have been guided by and have guided software in the creation of these paintings. The compositional constructions are formed from the mass collection of contemporary image environments, and through them further associations and imaginative iterations are layered and experienced.

Through the use of paint, ink, and dye I have layered atmosphere and form into virtual and planar digitally created environments. The sensory perception of space is further explored as several paintings double as psychological landscapes.

The series of paintings share common elements of a velvet-like surface, shallow rendered depth, bold coloration and abstraction, but each can be considered its own world, operating in its own time and space. The compressed vitrines challenge the subjective boundaries of perceived reality as our lived experiences continue to fragment among the digital and natural world.

Working in an additive way between analog and digital techniques, ideas recalibrate and morph quickly. They fuel and build a new conceptual architecture that plunders a millennia of visual history both stylistically and in source imagery. I am interested in the intersection of the formal traditions and their digital reinterpretation. I find an exciting opportunity presents itself to produce work

through automation, iteration, and rapid repetition using digital means. This type of artistic creativity is embedded in the spirit of free-flowing overlapping information systems, ever circulating objects and images. The artwork does not proclaim a defiant unique perspective, but is rather a softening of an independent voice and a full awareness and acceptance of one's immersion in a culture where all has been reconfigured by digital systems.

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Figure 12: Photograph of the artist at work 2016