

2016

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Old Wet Paint

BY

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THESIS PAPER

PRESENTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

THE UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA, MISSOULA, MT

December 2016

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Old Wet Paint

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Contemporary living can cause stress that is detrimental to creativity. Most of the world's population has grown dependent on technology to connect us to, and keep track of daily, monthly, and hourly actions. Our plans fill us with the illusion of control over random events. I do not trust technology to help me find my way in the world. I want to find my way in life using limited technology. My art practice is an example of this trajectory and has become my way of embracing random events. The logic I use to employ order in the pandemonium of everyday living is absent in my studio practice. When you experience my thesis research, you are seeing explosions, breakdowns, realizations, and catharsis that are brought on by allowing myself to replace linear, logical practices with non-linear, irrational practices.

Aesthetic properties physically and emotionally move the viewer. I believe this unburdens viewers from socio-political messages instead leaving them open and unrestricted.

Thesis

Contemporary living can cause stress that is detrimental to creativity. Most of the world's population has grown dependent on technology to connect us to, and keep track of daily, monthly, and hourly actions. Technology and schedules fill us with the illusion of control over random events. I do not trust technology to navigate my way in the world. I want to find my way in life using limited technology. My art practice is an example of this position and has become my way of embracing random events. The logic used to employ order in the pandemonium of everyday living is absent in my studio practice. When you experience my thesis research, you are seeing explosions, breakdowns, realizations, and catharsis that are brought on by allowing myself to replace linear, logical practices with non-linear, irrational practices.

About a week after 9/11/2001 my families' house exploded. My father was severely burned and nearly died. As a result we were relocated to a motel. I witnessed my brother save my father's life while getting burned in the process. I saw what my dad's bones looked like as his flesh slid off his arms. I watched all of my families' belongings disappear in smoke and flames. I learned at age twelve that life can suddenly be turned upside down and spun around by random events.

This explosion riveted me to the core. I began seeking unhealthy control over the smallest parts of my life and quickly developed obsessive-compulsive tendencies. I flicked light switches, I fell asleep in doorways, and I counted how many times I swallowed my spit everyday. It was when my habits and compulsions nearly shut off chances for any kind of healthy social interaction, that I started painting. When I painted,

I lost my need for control. I was able to exist fully present in the activity and this brought me emotional relief and it allowed me to communicate with others.

To this day, my practice has not changed: painting keeps me sane. There is a therapeutic element when I interact intuitively and emotionally with my environment rather than analytically. For instance, my working environment has always been a chaotic mess, but a mess in which I am completely comfortable. The mess allows my work to develop in an intuitive way rather than following any set course, separating me from my habitual self.

I intend for my art to communicate to the viewer the emotional and psychological relief I feel through making art in hopes the viewer may also feel freedom from daily stresses. I offer my audience the chance to experience an object that appears to be living, breathing, and sharing their physical space. The painted objects draw the viewer toward a detail but due to layers of color, line, shape, and texture, it is difficult to focus on a single moment and the viewer moves to another zone. Eyes dart from zone to zone, shape to shape, color-to-color until overwhelmed and are forced to step back and look at the painted object as a whole. This micro/macro focus is much like experiencing a patch of woods or foam in the ocean as it at first appears to be random, but upon further inspection reveal intuitive order, adopting and revealing organizational strategies found in the natural world. The patterns of my environment unconsciously find their way into my paintings, affording me the opportunity to reflect on the chaos and order of the universe in a communicable way.

Influences

I have provided a list of admirable artists along with how my practice and artwork is similar and different. Each artist operated in varying periods of history in completely different parts of the world, and each has inspired my studio practice.



Figure 1. Shitao, “*Man in a House Beneath a Cliff*”
Late 17th. Century Album Leaf, Ink, and Colors on Paper



Figure 2. Hansen, “*rim-job handjma danje*”
2015, Acrylic, Latex, Ink, Wood and Staples

Shitao was a painter who lived and worked in China in the 16th and 17th centuries. During his life the Qing Dynasty overtook the Ming dynasty and killed artists like Shitao. His safety in jeopardy Shitao took refuge in Buddhist temples. There, Shitao abandoned the rigid standards of art at the time and developed an expressionistic style thought to convey his frustration with society. Shitao sought freedom and commentary through his painting. I feel both Shitao and I negate the status quo in favor of expression and feeling in hope that this brings us closer to understanding a more true natural order. We differ in that Shitao chose to work stylistically to express natural order while I work non-objectively to express natural order. In Shitao’s work, the viewer can recognize figures, mountains, buildings, etc. in my work, the viewer recognizes the material of society with no images of society.

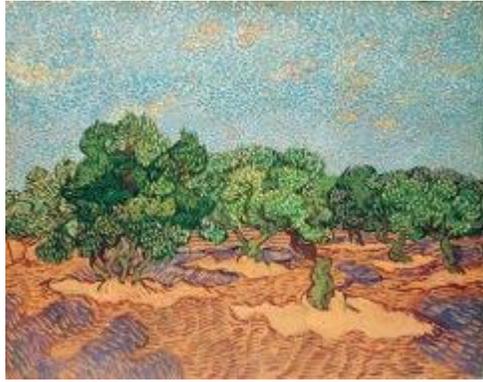


Figure 3. Van Gogh, “*Olive Trees*”
1889, Oil on canvas



Figure 4. Hansen “*fart in my mouth*”
2015 Gouache, Acrylic, Turquoise, Wood

Vincent Van Gogh also found great inspiration in the work of Shitao. Vincent believed as Shitao did, that the vast beauty of nature was impossible to describe and that the closest that we could get to representing it was by expressing one’s “natural” feelings. Van Gogh painted from observation, but I truly think he was depicting how he perceived his environment rather than its image. Similar to Van Gogh, I also communicate my surroundings via perception of the image. This is because I view nature to be a reflection of my internal experience, not the external images of my environment.

Jackson Pollock danced around his canvas, losing his logical self in process. His work was so unfiltered that studies have found examples of fractal patterns in his drip paintings.¹

When painting, Pollock seemed to be more connected with the nature of his subconscious rather than his linear mind. As Pollock said, “When I am in my painting, I’m not aware of what I’m doing.”² Similarly, I also get ‘lost’ while making my work and consider my process as an extension of my subconscious nature.

¹ Jennifer Ouellette “*Pollock’s Fractals*” (*Discover Magazine*) November 2001

² Leonhard Emmerling “*Jackson Pollock: 1912-1956*” (London Tashcen, 2003): 48



Figure 7. Rauschenburg, "Collection"
1954 Mixed Mediums



Figure 8. Hansen, "fart smeller"
2015 Blankets, Tape, Ink, Wood, Metal, etc.

Robert Rauschenberg said, "I am sick of talking about What and Why I am doing. I have always believed that the WORK is the word. Action is seen less clearly through reason. There are no shortcuts to directness."³ Like Rauschenberg, I allow intuition to be a guiding force in my practice. Working instinctively and playfully has helped me develop a language of material and movement that communicates without words. I greatly admire the freedom with which Robert Rauschenberg worked, he did not get bogged down with technique or formality, he worked intuitively allowing an organic process.

In addition to art and artists, I am influenced by Taoist and Zen teachings. I would like to share two short readings. The first of which is a passage from the *Tao te Ching* by Lao Tzu. In it he points at humankind's inability to fully represent universal truths through language. What I seek to communicate with my work operates outside of any established language. I'd hope that viewers are challenged when using language to describe my art.

"The Tao that can be spoken is not the eternal Tao
The name that can be named is not the eternal name

³ Richard Kostelanetz, "Robert Rauschenberg" *Partisan Review* No. 35, 1968, 96-106.

The nameless is the origin of Heaven and Earth
The named is the mother of myriad things

"Thus, constantly free of desire
One observes its wonders
Constantly filled with desire
One observes its manifestations

These two emerge together but differ in name
The unity is said to be the mystery
Mystery of mysteries, the door to all wonders"⁴

This passage reminds me of the futility in trying to express any full truth with language.

In my work I am attempting to communicate things that are beyond linguistic definition.

This passage has released me from the need to explain my work in language.

The second reading is from Thich Nhat Hanh's 21st century interpretation of 9th Century Zen master Linji. This passage has rooted my art practice with freedom and abandon, as it taught me to create without fear.

"Some zen masters are like a new bride who feels afraid in the home of her mother in law. The mother-in-law has the power to kick her out of the house, so the bride doesn't dare to speak the truth. These supposed zen masters just say what people want to hear so people will keep coming to their temple. These masters have their own temples, but they have to use various tricks to attract people so they have enough money to pay the electric bill, the water bill, the telephone bill, this bill and that bill. They are the daughter-in-law of everyone.

These masters are constantly afraid they will be kicked out of the temple. So they don't have peace, and they don't have happiness...Throughout history, people who've had revolutionary ideas and dared to speak the truth have not been trusted and have been sent away. It's better to be shooed away than to always be believed. If you are always believed, you're only saying what people want to hear, not what they need to hear."⁵

Process/Presentation

⁴ Laozi, Gia-fu Feng, and Jane English. *Tao Te Ching*. New York: Vintage, 1972.

⁵ Hạnh, Nhất, and Yixuan. *Zen Battles: Modern Commentary on the Teachings of Master Linji*, 2014

In my time at the University of Montana I have explored a wide range of artistic communication. Driven by a desire to provide catharsis for myself and audience, I began exploring new practices that would provide an opportunity to perceive the world from an atypical perspective. The following three pieces, *SoHaum Hill*, *Beet Tree*, and *Sap 2x 4 x 2*,” vary widely between each other, but are unified by my desire to generate movement and wonder in unexpected places. Sometimes, as in the case of *SoHaum Hill*, I sought emotional catharsis through physical exertion. Digging this hole was strenuous physical labor. During the making I was focused on the dig. When people occupied *SoHaum Hill*, they could not stand up straight and were forced to get closer to the ground. *SoHaum Hill* intended to bring people closer to the ground is the first step in taking them out of their usual conscious thought pattern and become more focused on their physical intuitive experience.



Figure 9. Hansen, “*SoHaum Hill*”
2014 Earth

Another way in which I invited people to think differently about their environment came in the form of creating pink birch trees. Not only did these trees catch viewers off guard, breaking their daily thought pattern, the process of rubbing beets into bark brought me high into trees precariously balancing, focused on the task at hand.

In my series of tree sap pieces, I tediously collected tree sap for months, engaging myself in nature through harvesting. As I collected sap, the space between my conscious thoughts grew wider. I then warmed the sap with candle flame and fixed it to a piece of kiln dried wood.



Figure 11. Hansen, "Beet Tree"
2015 Beet on Tree



Figure 10. Hansen, "Sap 2x4x2"
2014 Sap on Kiln Dried Wood

I was happy with each of my experimental processes. They each brought me closer to my environment while also providing me with a vehicle for physical, spiritual, and emotional release, however, as I worked on all of my these projects I began to sense an absence in my life. Something was missing; I felt I could not properly communicate through these practices. Although each piece was conceived with intuition, each process had become organized. Like someone learning a foreign language, I was not able to communicate as freely as in my native tongue. Almost my entire life has been spent learning to communicate with the visual vocabulary of non-objective painting. I simply did not understand myself within the language of conceptual art. Painting has provided me with the clearest way of communicating with myself and with others.

“The manners and mores of Western civilization force perpetual sanity upon us to an extreme degree, for there is no accepted corner in our lives for the art of pure nonsense. Our play is never real play because it is almost invariably rationalized: we do it on the pretext that it is good for us, enabling us to go back to work refreshed. There is no protected situation in which we can really let ourselves go. If our sanity is to be strong and flexible, there must be periods for the expression of completely spontaneous movement__for dancing, singing, howling, babbling, jumping, groaning, wailing__in short for following any motion to which the organism as a whole seems to be inclined. The function of intervals for nonsense is not merely as an outlet for pent up emotion or unused psychic energy, but to set in motion a mode of spontaneous action, which, though first appearing as nonsense, can eventually express itself in intelligible form. Even these remarks are still too much in the way of rationalization, and IT can never happen so long as it is ground into a routine or respectably justified in the name of mental health, social integration, release from tension, or what have you. It can be done only for IT’s own sake; anything useful or healing that comes as a result is always a by-product, unsought and unintended.”⁶

The work in my thesis exhibition, *old wet paint*, marks an evolution in my artistic path. In my earlier work I was releasing something, doing hard psychological work. *old wet paint* is a celebration. The process was a ritual rejoicing freedom from linear conscious thought and an acceptance of random events- my greatest childhood fear. The thesis project is common in process, material, intention, and audience experience. The works were created in frenzy between December of 2014 and September of 2015. For nine months, I had no intention aside from intuitively assembling materials. I found my materials without knowing what I was searching for. Often materials would simply be found on the street while others were acquired in propitious trips to the second hand store or recycling center. I brought the materials to the constantly rising and falling heap in my studio. I did my best to have as little organization as possible in my studio. I worked in chaos. I had zero critical, pre-emptive intention and found inspiration in chance, instinct, and luck. As I painted, my actions were as chaotic as my environment. I reacted to what was around me in the moment without hesitation. I never second-guessed myself. I worked until the pieces felt complete. An impossible-to-ignore instinct communicated to

⁶ Alan Watts, *This Is It*. (Numerophone, 1963).

me when to work and when to stop. To try to speak with any more detail would be untruthful. This work is sacred to me and beyond words because through its creation I accessed a way of being that I can only summarize as transformational from a conscious, linear reality to a subconscious, cyclic reality.

I recently found myself perusing the galleries of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. As I moved from masterpiece to masterpiece I found myself responding to each work without the constraints of the artists' original intention. I was more interested in aesthetic reactions than the cultural significance. The myriad of patterns, colors, textures and compositions affected me physically, spiritually, emotionally, and psychically. Even though each piece was created at a completely different time and place and influenced by an unimaginable variety of events, without reflecting on original intention, the works resonated emotionally. I would like to think that my art functions in a similar way. I want my work to allow the viewer to engage their subconscious and emotions without narrowing focus on language. Viewers may be struck with the chaotic composition reminiscent of occurrences in nature such as falling snow, or rain on a lake. As people spend more time with the work, they often change their spatial relationship to the painting stepping forward and backward examining the many nooks and crannies. Recognizable materials may come into awareness and fade into the next area of interest constantly refocusing and adjusting until the viewer finds themselves looking through the work of art and aware of their own psyche. I hope that my work catapults the viewer out of their normal, technology-based sense of time, by creating a space for them to react physically, emotionally and psychically.

I ridiculously titled each piece. Rather than steer my audience in any one direction via a title, I chose to solicit a chuckle. Laughter catches people off guard in the often-stoic environment of an art gallery. Humor puts my audience at ease and allows them to loosen up and experience the work on a sensory level I consider deeper than an intellectual level. Titles are the only example where spoken language is intended to be integral. “Why else would Caravaggio paint the beautiful bum of a beautiful boy at the dead center of his *Flight to Egypt*, if not to have a little joke at the expense of solemnity? (Hickey, 100).⁷

Historical Comparisons

My painting, *corn cob, shit balloon*, shares a great deal with Caravaggio. I am bound to Caravaggio both in my attempt at humor and my use of the formal elements of painting such as composition and contrast. His paintings came toward the viewer and into their perceptual space, a clear example being his 1602 painting *The Entombment of Christ*.



Figure 16. Caravaggio, “*The Entombment of Christ*”
1602 Oil on Canvas

⁷ Dave Hickey, *The Invisible Dragon: Essays on Beauty*. Chicago: U of Chicago, 2009.

The figures in this work appear to spill off the wall and into the space of the viewer. Caravaggio extends the Mannerist notion of a window to another reality by confronting the viewer. He brings the subject of the painting into the viewers space rather than providing a window into it. The work, *corn cob, shit balloon*, also comes into the viewer's space physically and optically. The painting sails 13 in. away from the wall and the viewer shares physical and hopefully psychological space with a work like this rather than just looking onto the surface. Viewers form a relationship with this painting, often changing their place in relation to it as they examine the details, anomalies, dead ends, caverns, and appendages. They accept to the painting as an object rather than a surface for illusion. In painting as object, I see a connection to the work of Ellsworth Kelly. His 1963 painting, *Blue Green Red*, is the first painting to get me interested in abstract art.

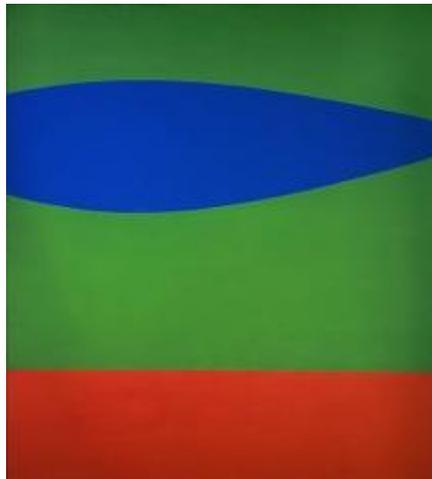


Figure 17. Kelly, "*Blue Green Red*"
1963 Acrylic on Canvas

Kelly's masterful handling of hue and value results in paintings like objects with a living radiance. His simple paintings embrace the viewer and provide an altered state much like I believe mine do, the difference being Kelly's use of compositional reduction

rather than compositional expansion to accomplish this goal. All of the artists mentioned in this paper so far have used color and form to physically engage their viewers. After generations have come and gone and the original intent may be lost, the works remain powerful because of the masterful craft.



Figure 12. Hansen, “*gimmee dem gumflaps*”
2015 Acrylic, Latex, Clothing, Inner Tube, Carpet Padding, Oil, etc.

When looking at a work like, *gimmee dem gum flaps*, the viewer’s mind can go in countless directions. Aside from escorting a viewer in an individual exploration, this work is in conversation with nature and art history. Compare it if you will to Hieronymus Bosch’s painting *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (1510-15).



Figure 13. Bosch, "The Garden of Earthly Delights"
1510-1515 Oil on Wood Altarpiece

Bosch's painting of a biblical scene shares a great deal with *gimmee dem gumflaps*, both strategically and energetically. *The Garden of Earthly Delights* does not let the viewer's eye rest. When admiring this painting one constantly focuses and refocuses as their attention and is drawn to different areas of the painting. No one focal point takes precedence over another. Like watching lightning bugs on a summer day, new bursts of energy draw our attention as our eyes follow the natural rhythm.

Jackson Pollock also masterfully handles all-over composition in *White Light*, 1954.



Figure 14. Pollock, "White Light"
1954 Oil and Enamel on Canvas

It is nearly impossible to focus on any particular aspect of this painting, which encourages viewers to experience the piece with both a micro and macro focus. Experiencing the work as a whole allows viewers to feel the energy that went into the works creation. *gimmee dem gumflaps* also employs an all-over composition with transferable energy. Viewers of this work may be struck by a particular color or texture, maybe even a recognizable object, but it is hard to remain focused on any one point for more than a few moments. My hope is that through a visual all-over composition viewers will lose focus on a specific point, and instead become anchorless, allowing thoughts to wander. It is difficult to watch a single snowflake fall in a blizzard.



Figure 15. Hansen, "*corncob, shit balloon*"
2015 Cassette Tape, Clothing, Acrylic, Latex, Plaster, etc.



Figure 16. Stockholder "Nachst St."

2007 Four cushions, four blue tarps, plastic cups and red measuring cup, broken green plastic, wooden furniture, hardware, acrylic and oil paint, pink plastic markers, light fixture, 40 watt light bulb



Figure 17. Hansen, "eits noda tumor"

2015 Felt, Aquatic Equipment, Latex, Wood, Acrylic, Clothing, etc.

eits noda tumor is a later work in the exhibition. Here the process is no longer encumbered with the need to hang a painting on the wall. This work was not created on a surface but allowed to develop on its own without any traditional flat support structure. Materials were simply acquired and bonded by impulse and paint. I sense a certain

similarity between my process and that of Jessica Stockholder. Both Stockholder and I make recognizable material unrecognizable allowing the color and texture of an object to speak for itself rather than point at an imposed meaning.

Conclusion

I believe that aesthetic properties of my art physically and emotionally move the viewer, unburdening them from linear processes of interpreting socio-political messages. The visual impact of the work leaves viewers emotionally unrestricted and present in the here and now, capable of interacting with the artwork in a broader, more psychological way.

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