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Aporia / Interludes

Claire Melli
The University of Montana

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APORIA / INTERLUDES

BY

CLAIRE MELLI

BACHELOR OF FINE ARTS,
THE UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL FLORIDA, ORLANDO, FL, 2010

THESIS PAPER

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APPROVED BY:
SANDY ROSS, DEAN OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

CHAIR:

KEVIN BELL
SCHOOL OF ART

COMMITTEE MEMBERS:

MARYANN BONJORNI
SCHOOL OF ART

MATT HAMON
SCHOOL OF ART

BETSY BACH
DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION STUDIES

“Aporia” refers to a problem without an identifiable solution. The application of the term aporia to social behavior is essentially the subject of this exhibition; specifically, these paintings react to my personal experience of maintaining outward positivity that frequently disguises less desirable personality traits. The series presents the residue of my own internal frustrations, which are physically recorded through my painting practice. In the process of painting, I am engaged in an act of psychological purging, leaving behind the character and emotional vibrations of experiences that occur on a regular basis. For me, painting is catharsis. The physical act itself is as important as the visual record of the event.

Aporia/Interludes presents an accumulation of raw, harsh marks that coalesce in a language that communicates the reverberation of a tense and chaotic experience. Aggressive color and agitated line suggest urgency and speed, and the submergence of the viewer’s field of vision in this sea of marks generates a sense of uneasiness. I hope to engage viewers not only with the visual aspects of my work, but also with the emotional force that is evident in the texture, color, and marks in the paintings.

FORMAL QUALITIES

The surface of the *Aporia* series is dominated by bright color and jagged line that at times suggests text. The bright colors are both enticing and aggressive, reaching out to the viewer and overpowering their line of vision. Red, pink, and yellow are the dominating colors in the exhibition; these hues have many connotations such as violence, femininity, sexuality, aggressiveness, and caution. As a result, perhaps dependent on an individual's personal disposition or experiences, some viewers may find the work to be happy, others angry or frantic. My working process is improvisational and intuitive, but I deliberately chose hot colors because of their assertiveness- these heavily saturated and attractive hues proclaim their status as vital subject matter while interacting effectively with line and space.

The contradiction in producing a visually appealing painting that contains the record of an anxious experience is also of interest to me. Reflecting upon early canvases and panels, I realized that these works are engaging in their color palette and energetic line. This unexpected quality came to be a major contributor to the viewing experience of the completed exhibition, *Aporia/Interludes*. The vibrancy of the color and harmony of color relationships is enticing, drawing people into the works, which ultimately leads to a deeper exploration of the smaller elements that comprise the surface. Close inspection reveals the frantic, high-velocity marks and splatters that communicate the emotional vigor of the pieces, in effect challenging the color palette.

Many of the marks on the surface of the panels are reminiscent of text. At times, these marks are distorted written language, but scrawled backwards and scattered throughout the composition. They represent disjointed and hectic thoughts speeding

through my mind as I mentally work through my day. The language is illegible so it does not restrict the work to the subject of the word, phrase, or sentence. I feel the incoherence of the marks frustrates or confuses audiences, who instinctively seek to decipher the lines; this increases the tension experienced by the viewer. The contradictory quality put forth by the inclusion of text-like marks relates to the term *aporia* very closely in that the viewer sees a problem in the illegibility but can find no way to decode the marks.

Large, durable panels are able to withstand the more forceful of my swipes and gouges and also provide a surface that does not obscure smaller, more subtle marks. With *Aporia*, I have chosen to work chiefly on a medium-sized panel, which lends itself easily to the formation of bulkier pieces and adaptation to the exhibition space. Acrylic paint, as well as oil paint sticks, cattle markers, graphite, and pastel are the primary working materials featured in *Aporia*. With this array of media, I not only achieve a variety of marks and levels of opacity, but I am able to revise quickly and effectively. Water, paint thinner, and damp rags are powerful means of obscuring and erasing; this act of revision is a natural and significant part of my working process.

PROCESS

As I paint, I am deeply engrossed in the physical act of mark making. My movements are feverishly fast and forceful, and I address the surface from a variety of positions. The panels are rotated multiple times and laid flat on the floor as often as they are vertical. This working process leaves behind a mess on the studio floor and walls and also alters the sides of the panels. In refusing to paint over the smudges,

smears, and splatters that accumulate on the sides of the pieces, I reveal to the viewer the intensity of the painting's history. To conceal these marks would be to eliminate this quiet hint and also dishonor the importance of the hours spent in a trance-like state, swiping at the panel with paint and oil stick. I find a type of healing and self-acceptance in painting, and revising a work when not fully engaged in the process strikes me as dishonest. I do not see the necessity of concealing an integral part of the work, despite outward inconsistency with the surface of the panel.

My work extends beyond the realm of art therapy in that I approach the process with functional knowledge of color and art history. The application of these fields of study is not at the forefront of my mind when painting; the surface of the works is defined by my intuition, while the size of the panels, materials, and color are predetermined. I have been academically trained; my experiences learning and experimenting with fundamental principles such as color, line, shape, and space informs the work on a semi-conscious level that is apparent when viewing these works. Analogous and harmonious color schemes reveal my experiences in higher-level art education. Familiarity with previous modes of painterly abstraction and psychologically grounded work has been a major focal point in my explorations of artist predecessors for the past ten years. It is after a work is completed that I am able to identify these decisions and ingrained influences. I paint instinctively, spontaneously, and quickly, seldom leaving time to make a conscious effort to control the outcome of the painting, but upon reflecting on the work, my experience in the medium of paint is evident in color and line.



Figure 1. Detail, *Aporia XI (Downpour)*, 2013, acrylic, oil stick, pastel, graphite on panel.

PRESENTATION

In displaying the works using traditional gallery conventions, I allow for breaks between panels resulting in a nearly staccato viewing experience in the gallery. Large, singular pieces such as *Aporia 11 (Downpour)* overwhelm the viewer with a broad expanse of color, texture, and line. However, the straightforward and conventional hanging contains the layered chaos and intensity. It was my intention to repeatedly overstimulate and relieve the viewer as they move through the gallery. I found that the utilization of the white gallery walls to frame the energy of the paintings quietly mirrored the act of concealing emotional conditions.

However, piece that stands out in its subtly unconventional hanging is *Aporia VII*. Like several of its compatriots, *Aporia VII* incorporates two panels into one piece. However, the panels are joined at a ninety-degree angle in a corner of the gallery, creating a more unique viewing experience. Due to the architecture of the gallery, *Aporia VII* did not have enough room to hang on a single wall, which fortunately allowed me to include this unorthodox presentation that I had considered before bringing the

works to the space. When standing close enough, the viewer is physically submerged in the active surface of the piece and their experience intensifies due to the protrusion of the painting into their peripheral vision.



Figure 2. Installation view, *Aporia/Interludes*, 2014.
Gallery of Visual Arts, Missoula, MT.



Figure 3. *Aporia XI (Downpour)*.



Figure 4. *Aporia VII*, 2013, acrylic, oil stick, pastel, graphite on panel.

MOTIVATIONS

I am interested in the age-old expectation to conceal one's true feelings in public, particularly those negative attitudes of depression and anxiety. The work in the exhibition *Aporia* reflects the adjustment that we deliberately make to our behavior when in social or public situations. My own experiences with self-misrepresentation are maddeningly thorough- when on my game, I am able to modify body language, facial expression, speech, and tone to present an amiable, organized, and well-adjusted individual, even when I am upset. I view this as a form of deceitfulness, but without repressing the external expression of my anxiety or any form of negativity, I would not achieve material success. To exist comfortably in today's society, I need a job to provide food and shelter for myself, and to secure and maintain a career; essentially, I have to sell my personality to potential employers despite my misgivings in doing so.

The series, *Aporia*, is a reaction to the maintenance of this façade. When painting, I am able to release the tension and frustration that I am not able to express in

my daily interactions and activities. The works contain and present a physical record of the expulsion of anxiety, which stems from numerous sources, particularly social and family interactions, the responsibilities and pressures of academia, and financial strain. The emotional resonance of anxiety-inducing subjects is portrayed through a working practice that is intuitive, spontaneous, and ultimately cathartic.

The painting process extends beyond simple relaxation and dissolution of quotidian stresses. Like a method actor, I submerge myself in the frustration and anxiety that I withheld during the day, working myself into a breathless, agitated, and nearly frantic state before even stepping foot in the studio. Upon entering the workspace, my internal monologue is speeding and shrieking, with thoughts barely making sense. I listen to the same aggressive, fast-paced music for every painting session, and I listen to it as loudly as possible. As I work, I am often out of breath, rushing from panel to paint can and so forth, applying materials at times with my eyes closed and with my bare hands and forearms; I have punched panels and clawed paint off with my nails, stabbed and scraped surfaces with pocket knives, and hurled brushes at panels across the room. I have left the studio with bleeding hands after grinding oil sticks to a smear on the panel without realizing it and continuing to scrawl across the surface. This painting process is urgent, nonverbal, violent, and passionate. By revealing that the pieces come from a place of deep personal anxiety, I am being honest to the point of vulnerability.

In purging tension this way, I am able to release unresolved issues that otherwise would remain in my psyche to fester. This process refers to the concept of *aporia* in that the works represent the release of an anxiety to which I do not perceive a solution.

I have identified self-misrepresentation as a bad thing, but seek out situations that require a masking of my emotions. Painting does not provide a solution, but a means of expelling (for the short term) the deep-seated discomfort of managing a false self-image.

INTERLUDES

The smaller pieces, *Interludes*, were completed at the same time as the *Aporia* series. Though they are small scale and on paper, they are nearly identical to *Aporia* in intention and process. The smaller size and more fragile material bears little effect on my working process; the paper is surprisingly durable and lends itself well to the brutal paint application, and acrylic, oil, pastel, and graphite react to the paper in much the same way as the panel. The only noticeable difference is that I am able to move through these much more quickly than the larger panels, and I typically have four to five paper works in production simultaneously. Because they are singular pieces, there is more of a variation compositionally and in color palette. Their smaller size allowed for a more intimate physicality in the painting process in that I moved around on hands and knees through a mass of paintings, often using forearms and fingers to manipulate paint with my face inches away from the surface. Working in this freer way led to a broader range of composition and color and I rarely spent more than two hours on a piece. I view the *Interlude* body of work as a supplement to *Aporia*. They feature broad bands of color and a wider range of mark and composition but retain the same sense of need to fill the surface with emphatic visual information.



Figure 5. "Interludes IV," 2013, acrylic, oil, pastel, graphite on paper.

INFLUENCE/PEERS

My intimate connection to process and the representation of emotional subject matter is not without precedent. Wassily Kandinsky, as the initial proponent of the attainment of psychological nourishment in making a painting and viewing a painting, launched this movement into the global art dialogue in the early twentieth century. I have always felt a kinship in particular to Kandinsky's *Improvisation* series in which the artist addressed the painting in an intuitive, spontaneous way, much like the Surrealists who so avidly practiced automatism. The desire to reveal subconscious feelings and thoughts is the similarity that unites these two artistic realms. My thesis work is closely related to these early endeavors in that I seek to reveal feelings that are relegated to the subconscious through a similarly intuitive process. However, my work represents a contemporary take on this process in that I am chiefly expressing one specific emotion, which is anxiety. The source of this anxiety is essentially contemporary society and its pressures, responsibilities, and expectations, which further separates my process from the universal, atemporal and acontextuality of Kandinsky and the Surrealists of the early twentieth century.

The Northwest Mystics, a group of like-minded artists working in the Pacific Northwest, continued to develop Kandinsky's ideals of color, line, and form by exalting their own intensely individual methods of meditation and worship and exposing their attitudes and passions to the outside world. Morris Graves particularly emphasizes this trait in his series, "Machine Age Noise." Like his Northwestern compatriots, including Mark Tobey, Ken Callahan, and Guy Anderson, Graves frequently returned to a canon of personal imagery in his painting. Enraged by encroaching developers near his home in Edmonds, Washington, Graves made a series of works titled "Machine Age Noise," which consisted of paintings and drawings that resonated with the artist's frustration and sense of violation. In the startling *Roadside Plants with Machine Age Noise* (1957), Graves juxtaposed delicately rendered leaves and sediment with jagged, brash lines of red and black to symbolize the destruction of a natural landscape as well as a psychological stronghold for Graves himself.



Figure 6. Kandinsky, *Improvisation 31 (Sea Battle)*, 1913, oil on canvas.



Figure 7. Graves, *Roadside Plants With Machine Age Noise*, 1957, ink and watercolor on paper.

Currently, artists are receiving considerable attention for their efforts that effectively blend past work with current concerns. Among the most successful is Tomma Abts, the 2007 Turner Prize winner, and an artist whose intuitive working process is unexpectedly similar to my own. Her subconscious draws her to paint hard geometric forms, revising them as she works and endowing them with human names that suggest a vitality that is perceptible only upon close inspection of the surface. Cecily Brown also works with abstraction, choosing to distort the familiar forms of the body and landscape giving their work a concrete subject that is deeply personalized by her subjective impressions and alterations. These distortions are based on the artist's own emotional and physical perceptions of sexual encounters and represented in an array of exuberant marks and colors. Like theirs, my paintings present an effort to express individual perception but also spring from broad points of departure that relate to the issues of living in the 21st century.

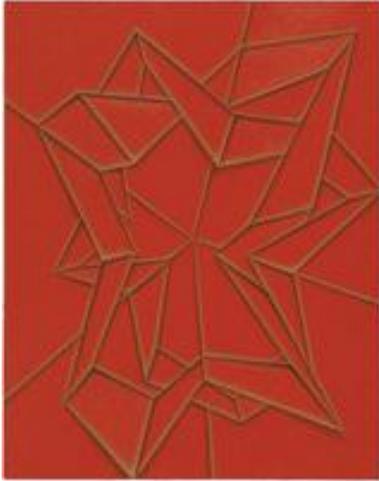


Figure 8. Abts "Fewe," 2005, oil and acrylic on canvas.



Figure 9. Brown, "The Girl Who Had Everything," 1998, oil on linen.

CONCLUSION

The nonverbal, nearly subconscious interaction of an individual with a painting is sacred to me. My paintings contain the record of a potent psychological catharsis that places emotional and psychological content in the forefront of dialogue. Through an automatic and meditative process of painting, my emotions and psyche are relayed to the viewer in the hopes that they do not simply observe, but interact with the painting on a deeper level.

This work reflects the age-old desire of western civilization to examine what is considered insane and place their madness on display to the masses.¹ It builds upon this tendency by presenting the visual record of an episode of panic and mania within the white walls of an art gallery. In situating the work in this institution and displaying it in a clean, professional manner, the emotional chaos is rendered acceptable, interesting, and appealing. This is the aporia that intrigues me. Anxiety is undesired by

¹ Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1965), 65-68.

society but portraying it in this manner effectively communicates and encourages interaction with that psychological condition without incurring distaste or scorn.

The surface of the works is chaotic and intense formally, but it comes from an act that is ultimately positive. The marks represent a release of negativity and a form of psychological healing. In painting, I settle into a nearly meditative state in which I am considering nothing but the emotional resonance of my day, which is all too often overwhelming and stressful. By representing this unexpressed negativity, I am eliminating it from my system and alleviating an unwanted condition. The paintings are therefore a record of both compression and release. This work extends beyond the painting as a simple object, as the process of producing these pieces is as much a part of the work as the visual elements that comprise the surface. It is not my intention to draw sympathy or disdain from viewers in portraying a personal experience of a negative emotion such as anxiety, but to point to the existence of this emotional experience, in hopes that the paintings will spark a personal psychological interaction with the pieces.

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