

A Troubling, Soft Underfoot

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ii. Abstract

Like the dispersion of life through a liminal pool, mixed orientations are based on non-fixed points; they are active, slippery and non-delineated positions, affected by the influx of shifting entities. Can these porous, non-individualistic and divergent states of being reframe or aid our ability to live in an inconstant, mutable geopolitical existence?

A Troubling, Soft Underfoot delves into the spatiality of complex otherness, and investigates pluralistic, non-delineated and deviant embodiments of place, race, gender, and sexuality through cross-bred processes of drawing, painting and sculpture. Through thin washes of pigment extended onto aluminum, a disquieting exchange is generated amidst thresholds in contemporary drawing, painting and sculpture; the resulting work takes shape between the spaces of control and accident, opacity and transparency, porosity and rigidity, alignment and disruption, seen and unseen. The multiple and mutable optical and physical formations in this work propose a reconsideration of the thresholds between all things, organisms, animals and humans, to uncover the invisible symbiotic entanglements in which we all exist.

Key words: visual art, mixed media art, painting, drawing, sculpture, symbiosis, liminal, geology, ecology, metamorphosis, mutation, geopolitics, queer, feminist, phenomenology, diaspora, migrant, mixed ethnography, intertidal, oceanic, marshlands

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3. Introduction

A Troubling, Soft Underfoot visually examines liminal states of place, race, gender, and sexuality through biological, ecological, phenomenological and art historical contexts. These spatial relations of otherness were investigated through interdisciplinary and emergent research methodologies, culminating in a series of drawings, paintings and sculptures.

This project culminates in the website, atroublingsoftunderfoot.sheachang.com, an online exhibition which offers an interactive and immersive encounter with the work featuring animated images, video documentation and additional creative writing. Positioning the visual work alongside the written word, this website presents the research, process, theoretical, conceptual, formal and technical facets of the project within a holistic and interconnected modality.

Framing this discourse is the intertidal pool, which characterizes the associations between the developmental, conceptual, theoretical and aesthetic facets of this project. Acting as a metaphorical guide through these brackish waters, the natural grotto signifies the elements of “intra-action” that exist between my field research, experimental processes, artistic authorship and practice (Barad 111).

Situated within the contexts of contemporary surrealist and abstract painting, I will delve into how I amalgamate modes of depiction by considering the attributes of architectural follies. These artificial grottos epitomize the strategies of mimicry, repetition and illusion that I merge throughout modes of drawing and painting and sculpture. Liminal and atypical spaces of encounter are then considered in the context of installation and physical configuration, focusing on the spatial possibilities that exist between the physical and optical bearings of my work. Like close observation of biofilms and commingling detritus in a pond, this is a probe into how this body of work was formed, what the impetus behind it was, and how these findings shape contemporary art making within current and future geopolitical climates.

2. Research & Process

The Grotto as an Intertidal Pool: *Processes of Intra-action*

My creative intent stems from a desire to embody a multiplicity of approaches and incorporate more complex, embodied knowledge as a visual artist. I developed non-linear and networked models of creative generation by subverting a traditional sequence of image making, engaging in a looping process of translation and transduction. Through the initial year of creative research for this project, I simultaneously employed three central approaches of *Gathering, Playing and Inquiring*.

In *Queer Phenomenology, Objects, Orientations and Others*, Sara Ahmed describes queer diasporic space as one that is “shaped by object histories” (Ahmed 149). She states that mixed orientations are based on non-fixed points; they are active, slippery and non-delineated orientations which are affected by the influx of shifting entities. To assemble source imagery for this body of work, I gathered inspiration by taking photographs of pieces from my family’s home that represented mixed and skewed object histories. Chinese ink paintings on fan-shaped paper, ceramic vases, opalescent fishing lures, or Saskatchewan braided wheat décor were all items that filtered into the visual world of my bi-racial family home growing up in British Columbia. Whether passed down from my grandmother’s dowry, purchased at a garage sale, or bought from a dollar store in Chinatown, the histories of these objects were murky, obfuscated, with origins entangled between available and adrift. The personal vernacular brought to this project became an amalgamation of references that connected landscape to memory. In my circumstance of inherited culture and migration, a cheap Chinese paper kite became symbolic of the elusive yet intertwined lines connecting origin, migration and the traces of lost or gained cultural lineages between them.

In addition to these personal objects, I amassed photographs that I took in various locales from my field studies over the last two years, including locales from West coast of BC, Southern Ontario, San Francisco, California, and Southern Iceland. Through each encounter, my areas of investigation were focused on symbiotic relationships in geological and biological environments of liminal shorelines. Through these trips, I was presented with both the privilege and physical challenge to experience many of these places through intimate personal encounter.



Fig. 1) Photo-documentation of field research, by the artist, 2017-2020

This embodied research was an integral means of absorbing source imagery which materialized in the final work. The field process of studying these intertidal pools, swampy marshlands and glacier lagoons meant that I was able to experience the slope and incline through my moving body in that place, first-hand by bicycle or by foot. Rather than passively watching from the safe distance of a car window, my body was physically affected by the shifting winds, rain, and terrain, enabling an active engagement with the environment. This mode of encounter was an important factor in agitating and disrupting habituated human-centered perspectives, closing the gap between subject-object power dynamics and allowing a symbiotic exchange to occur.

As such, many of the organic elements, structures and growth patterns that appear in my work are actualized through a process of osmosis. These reference photographs were ever-present in my studio, bleeding into my peripheral vision and subconscious mind while painting. Through this migration of reference imagery from the field to the studio, I became a cohabitant in the diverse lifeforms of these locales and was able to loosen the harsh division between separate

locales and mindsets of research and creation, blurring the lines between stages of artistic process. My creative ecology now operates within a pluralistic and symbiotic relay between maker, subject, physical embodiment and memory in a way I find reminiscent of Lynn Margulis' ground-breaking research on non-individualistic classification in biology (Margulis 75).

Through these personal, external and experiential fragments, I drew together inspiration to begin the next experimental phase of my creative process. In order to generate a new visual language, I played with simple prompts, creative parameters and exercises. Free-associative drawing, expressive mark-making and experimental techniques were the impetus for investigations in charcoal, graphite ink and water-based paint processes, masking techniques, salts on water colour pigments, photocopied distortions, toner and solvent transfers, paper collage and maquettes. I considered everything generated during this experimental period as future fodder for something else, as each piece was saved as a study, later collaged, or incorporated into another piece. As photocopies were hybridized into mixed media drawings, and collages co-opted into paintings, mutations took shape and the work began a process of metamorphosis.



Fig. 2) Early process work and experimentation, by the artist, 2018-2019

This was also an investigation into drawing's capacity to translate the agencies of active landscapes such as rock striations caused by glacial movement. I mimicked rock striations through rolling chunks of charcoal along the surface of paper, tracing the journey of the material across the page. Although this particular technique did not appear in the final body of work, it prefigured connections between material and concept. In the subsequent applications of pigment to absorbent ground, a porous skin was simulated through flecks and traces of dust, brushstroke, drip and wash.

I also researched and tested the forming, shaping, adhesion and absorption capacities of various materials. Water based pigment on heavy paper produced fair results, but I favoured the sculptural and qualities that absorbent ground on aluminum provided. This non-traditional and somewhat contradictory combination of rigid and porous materials offered unexpected possibilities in structure and scale. The necessitated experiments comprised of aluminum forming tests through various thresholds and thicknesses, trying out thermal and pressure-based forming process, and analyzing the adhesion techniques, layering, and drying times of the absorbent grounds. In spring of 2019, I created the installation *soft collisions*, comprising cut and formed aluminum panels painted with water-based pigments. In developing this work, I tested forming and bending limitations of the panel material, as well as simple variations in monochromatic colour palettes.



Fig. 3) Shea Chang, *Soft Collisions*, 2019

Generating migration between these phases of *gathering*, *playing* and *inquiring* were the energies of *alternation (sequence)*, *transduction (recycle)* and *repetition (circuit)*. At various points, I would transfer these experiments into Photoshop and bring in digital overlays, then mimic those visual vernaculars back through analogue brushstrokes, migrating between stages of reference, effect, reproduction and output. Nothing was considered waste, offcuts later became central focal pieces, collages were translated into paintings, even bits of tape become part of the subject matter present in the later iterations. The painting techniques generated through these early experiments led to the development of a signature arrangement of hard and soft edges, as the painted delineation and dissolution prevails throughout the final work.

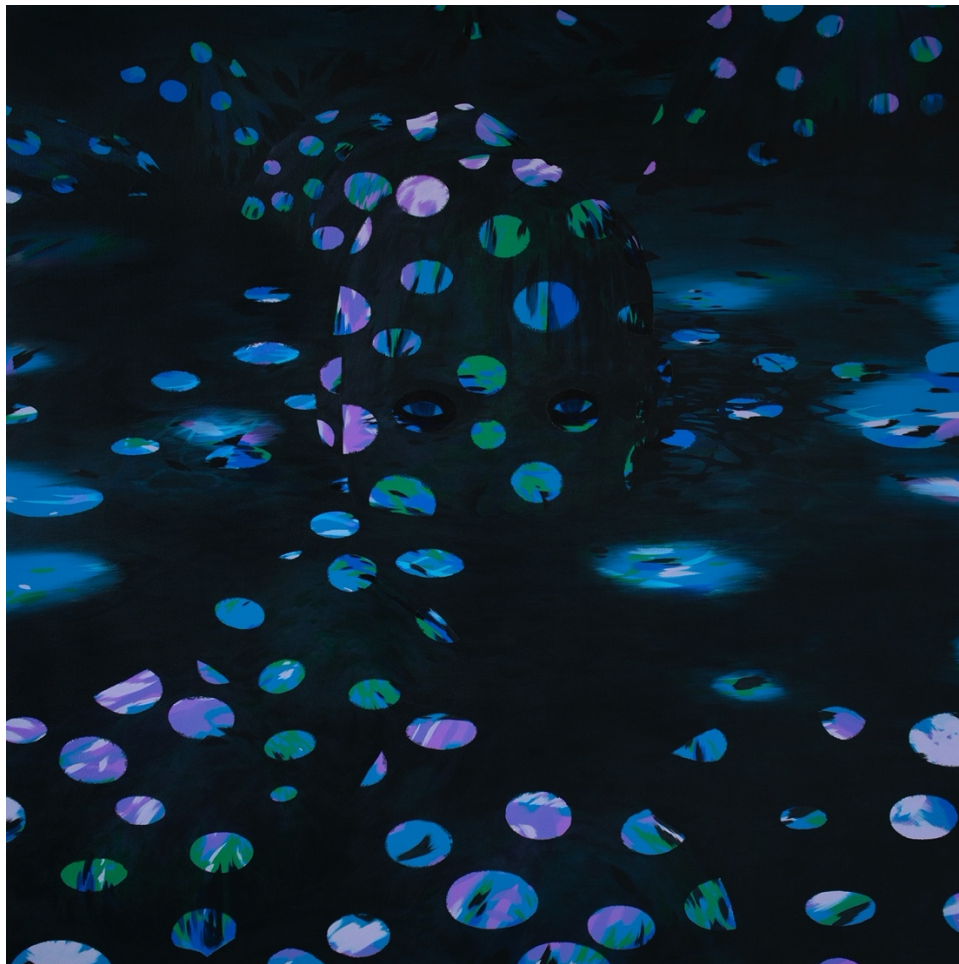


Fig. 4) Shea Chang, *Biofilm*, 2018.

3. Artistic Strategies, Materials & Techniques

The Grotto as a Folly: *Permeable Thresholds Between Visual Vernaculars*

According to Hito Steyerl's essay, *A Thing Like You and Me*, "things are never just inert objects, passive items, or lifeless shucks, but consist of tensions, forces, hidden powers, all being constantly exchanged." (Steyerl 2010). Like a collection of shells and strewn plastic caught in the tide of a watery cave, this interchange of elements and forces is made visible in my work through the entanglement of materials, techniques, and artistic strategies. Through engagement with chance and systems of control, I generate visual worlds through processes of mimicry, mutation, delineation and dissolution, cultivating an uncanny amalgamation between the optical, physical and the material.

What lies between both disciplines of drawing and painting is the practice of mark-making. Gesturing in order to scratch, trace, delineate, impress or effect a surface - either on paper or canvas - is an act which is intrinsic (though not exclusive to) to human expression. According to Timothy Morton, in *Dark Ecology*, the marked expression can also be linked to the act of ploughing, disturbing, even scarring (Morton 50). Our mark on land is specifically tied to the humancentric, agricultural ethos which led to the industrial revolution, resulting in the current disparaging ecological time we find ourselves in now. Morton's *Dark Ecology* calls into question restrictive and failed parameters of viewing the world, in order to reconsider and possibly disengage with what we now understand as the Anthropocene. Loosening our grip on rigid definitions of ourselves, and space and time can open up possibilities in imagining the future, especially if we may not be included in it.

Referencing Morton's *Dark Ecology*, these contradictions of time and place are explored in my painting, *A meadow is also a parking lot*. Through multiple layers of acrylic paint applied onto absorbent ground on aluminum composite, a flickering tension occurs between control and accident, opacity and transparency, porosity and rigidity, demarcated and dissolved. Held within this one picture plane is a combination of illusory space and surface mark-making; within its layered timelines emerges a multifarious place diverging between a singular object or space.

Morton goes further to describe the writing process as a "differential play" of words and ideas until a particular sentence, paragraph or a book is formed (Morton 80). Akin to this process, I

engage in drawing and painting through this differential play of delineating and dissolving forms, light and shadows through an improvisational and intuitive process. Masking techniques provide sharp, initial parameters that later become blurred, interrupted or erased. Wet-on-wet, porous applications of paint are extended on skin-like absorbent ground, revealing a permeable painted record of the traces and stains of its own environmental becoming.

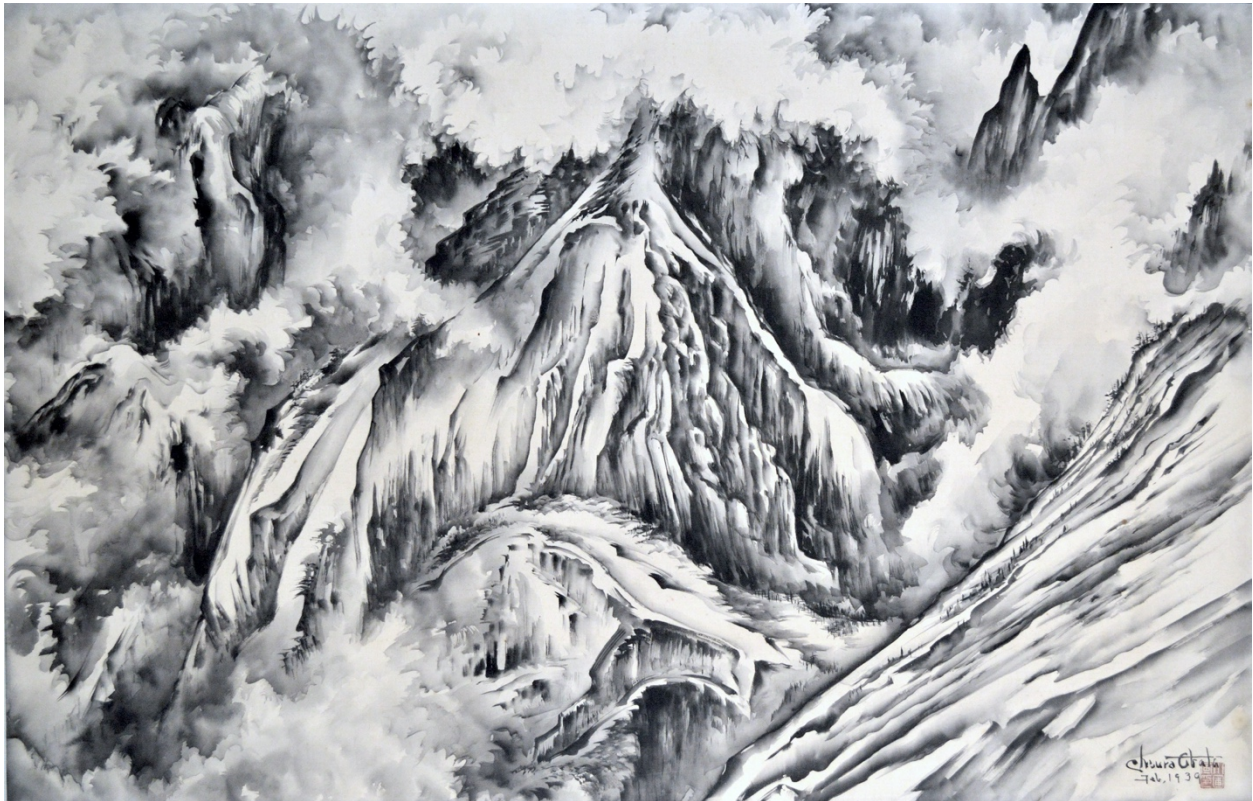


Fig. 5) Chiura Obata, *A Snowstorm Nearing Yosemite Park Government Center*, 1939.

My approach to these water-based mark-making techniques stems from my childhood training in Chinese water colour painting, and from studying the work of Asian-American painters such as Chiura Obata. Within the historically Eurocentric divide between drawing and painting, drawing is often relegated to the margins of a page, as a preparatory sketch, an in-between or incomplete stage, as opposed to painting being a more ‘accomplished finale’. Whereas in many East Asian cultures, watercolour painting is not necessarily seen as separate from drawing since both practices are centred on expression within the calligraphic gesture of the brush and

the subject, while utilizing atmospheric as opposed to linear perspective. Within a Chinese water colour painting, a combination of colour and line, iconographic form and situational landscape, surface pattern and immersive space may all exist at once. Not only does this inclusive view of mark-making and commingling between means of depiction enable my own ability to migrate across boundaries of drawing, painting and sculpture, it creates the specific habitat necessary for fringe, misaligned or marginalized voices to flourish.

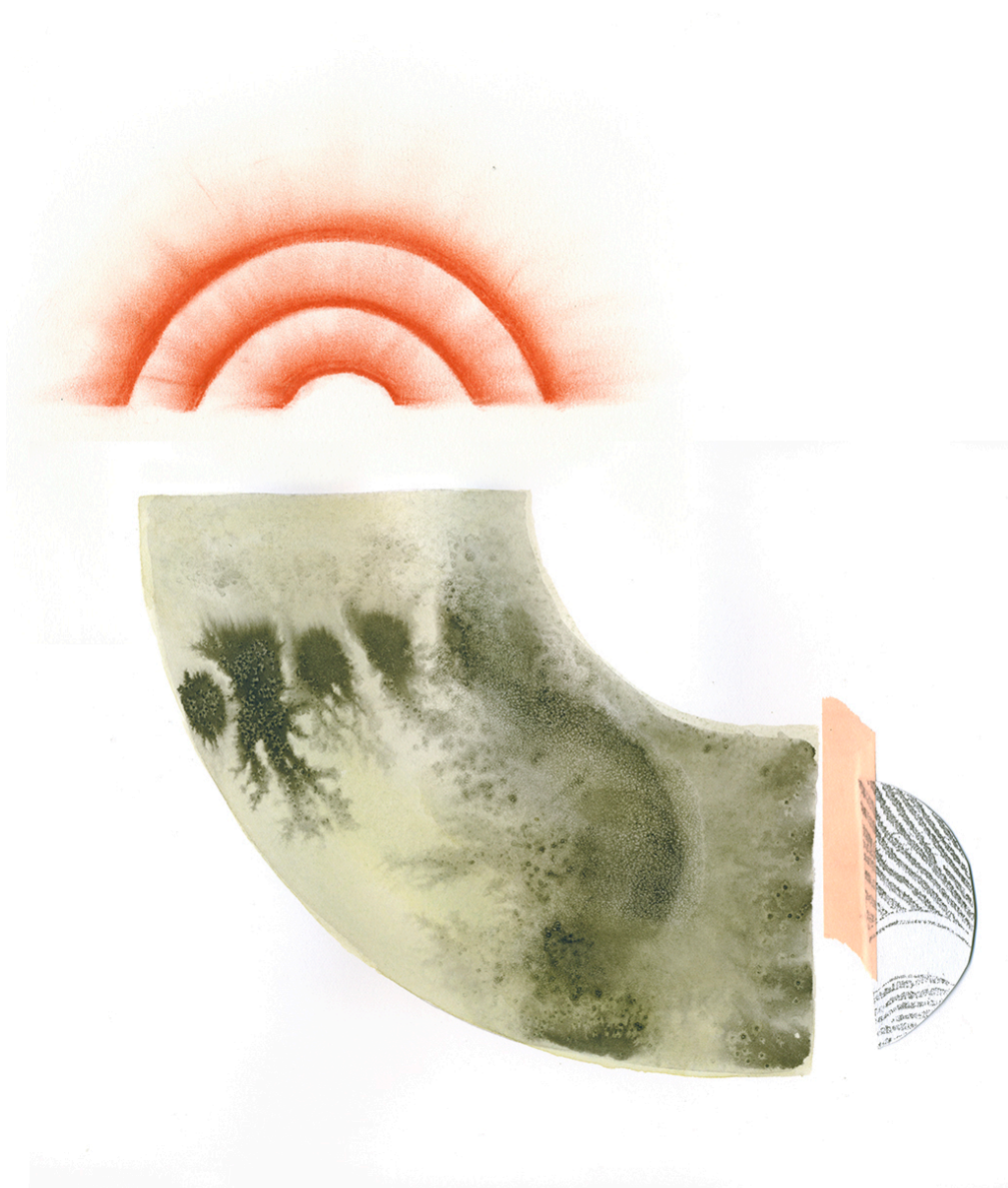


Fig. 6) Shea Chang, *Threshold Index 4*, 2019

Collage is perceived as an even more subversive medium as one that does not neatly fit into one category over another, and I view it as a means to employ diverse references and materials within an arena of chance and non-linear sequence. The improvisational and modular nature of collage is present in my drawing and painting work through the approach in which I combine and recombine source imagery from my photographs, photocopy manipulations, sketches, paper maquettes, and drawings. References to decorative objects and pattern-based ephemera are strewn throughout the visual vernaculars, combined with reoccurring motifs of my own personal cultural encounters within the studio and in the field. Crisp stripes, cuts and shapes reappear throughout the series, indicating both the additive and subtractive gestures inherent of the collage method. This approach can also be seen in the way the pieces on aluminum are intended to be suspended in physical space- as if floating on a wall. The curved and cut substrates float away from the wall on invisible subframes, adding a sense of casual agility that disrupts the rectilinear magnitude of painting's historically heavy load.

Whether on paper or aluminum, the more intimately scaled works in this series act as indexes, or iconic keys which point to the visual language enmeshed in the painted spaces. The use of this personal vocabulary relates to what Andrew Goldstein describes as "symbols from [their] own performative lexicon" or a "recombining akin to word play." (Goldstein 26). Contemporary painter Torkwase Dyson is a key example of an artist who uses a unique set of visual vernaculars in recombined and reappearing modalities. Amidst meditations on the black body in space and in the environment, Dyson's *Hypershapes* traverse form and dimension through small paper drawings to large scale architectural installation and performance.

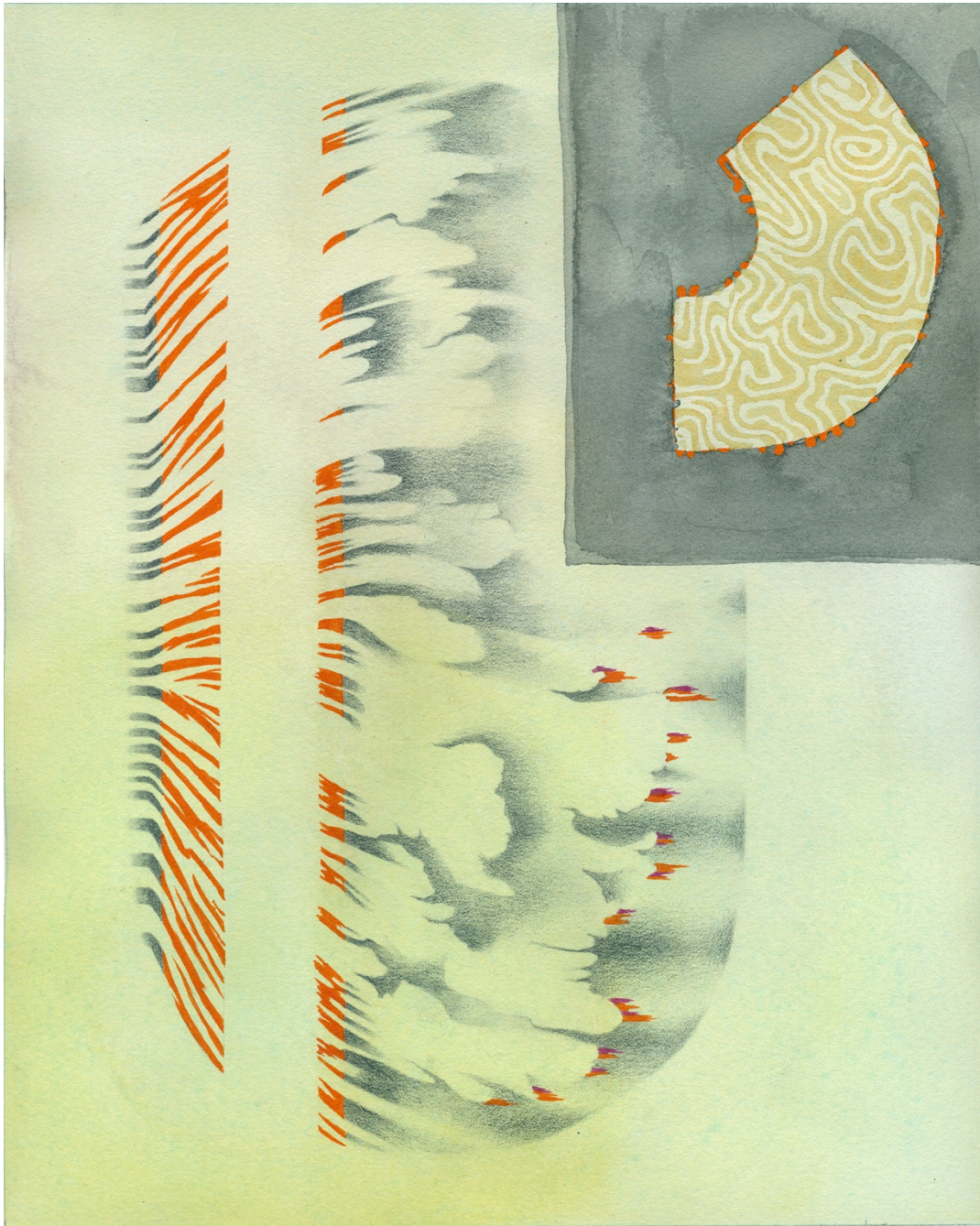


Fig. 7) Shea Chang, *Threshold Index 5*, 2020

Through an interplay between graphic and immersive approaches to depiction, the performative lexicon in my work functions to create context around imagined propositions; at its core, *A Troubling, Soft Underfoot* is about world building from an *others'* perspective. The smaller works can be viewed as indexes of speculative objects, where the larger, more physically immersive pieces can be perceived as spaces that are affected *by* these objects, or perhaps even created by these objects themselves. Like Luigi Serafini's *CODEX* or Annie Besant & C.W. Leadbeater's occultist *Thoughtforms* from 1901, this aspect of my work points to what Jane Bennett describes as "thing power", or a particular animism of objects themselves (Bennett 6). The immersive spaces in the paintings present the viewpoint of these imagined forms as an agent of self-authorship beyond the control of my artistic vision.

As the surrealist architect Frederick Kiesler stated, "any form is incomplete in itself: it is identified by what it emanates, visibly or invisibly, voluntarily or involuntarily." (Kiesler 70). The reoccurrences and reconfigurations within my work provides a certain familiarity and plausibility within an improbable and sometimes dizzying visual space.



Fig. 8) Torkwase Dyson, *Tuning (Hypershape, 200–410)*, 2018.

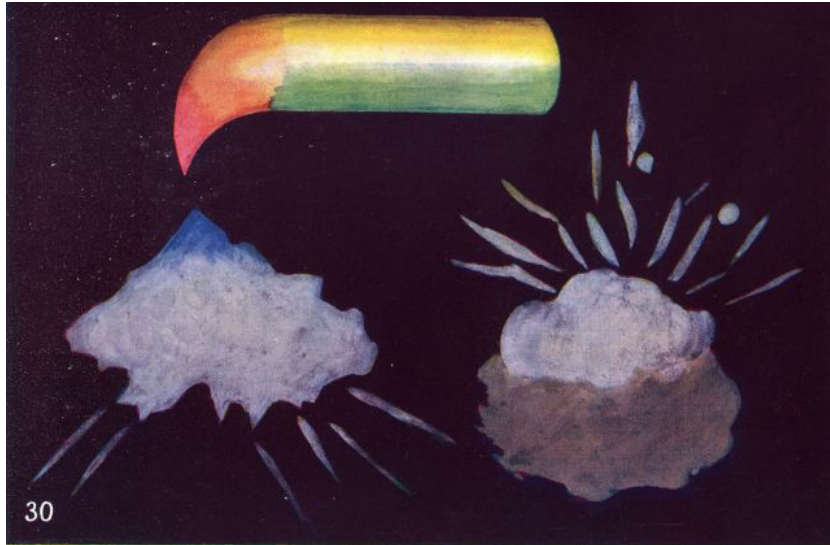


Fig. 9) Annie Besant & C.W. Leadbeater, *Thought-Forms: A Record of Clairvoyant Investigation*, 1901

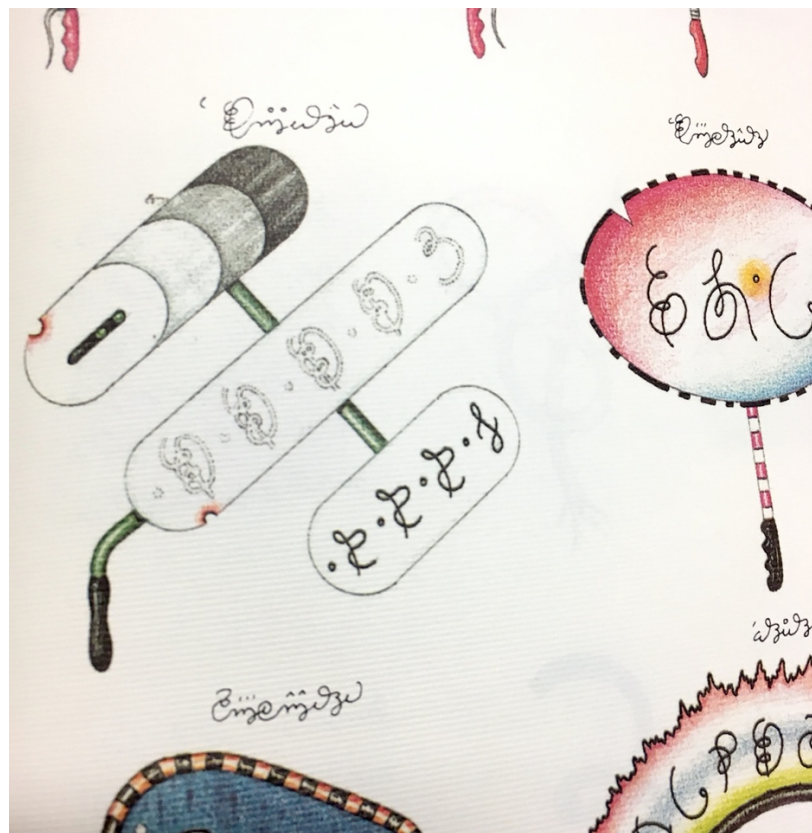


Fig. 10) Luigi Serafini, detail from *Codex Seraphinianus*, 2015.

Like a limestone cave formed over time through contact with acidic water, my artistic practice is activated through the dissolution of boundaries in media, and in means of depiction. Grottoes have a history of being co-opted spaces of devotion, reverence and transcendence, but are also at times associated with hidden debauchery and decadence, even adorned by the ubiquitous, kitschy seashell. In these follies, a mutation occurs between what is made by natural processes and what is mimicked or faked in construction. This definition of folly is analogous to the contemporary painting practice of coalescing the virtually constructed world with the physical through a brazenly baroque combination of ornament and illusion. In Zach Harris' painting, *Sanyo Sunset*, this uncanny blend of structured space and repeated pattern exists in a place between digital and analogue, abstraction and figuration.



Fig. 11) Zach Harris *Sanyo Sunset*, 2014-2015

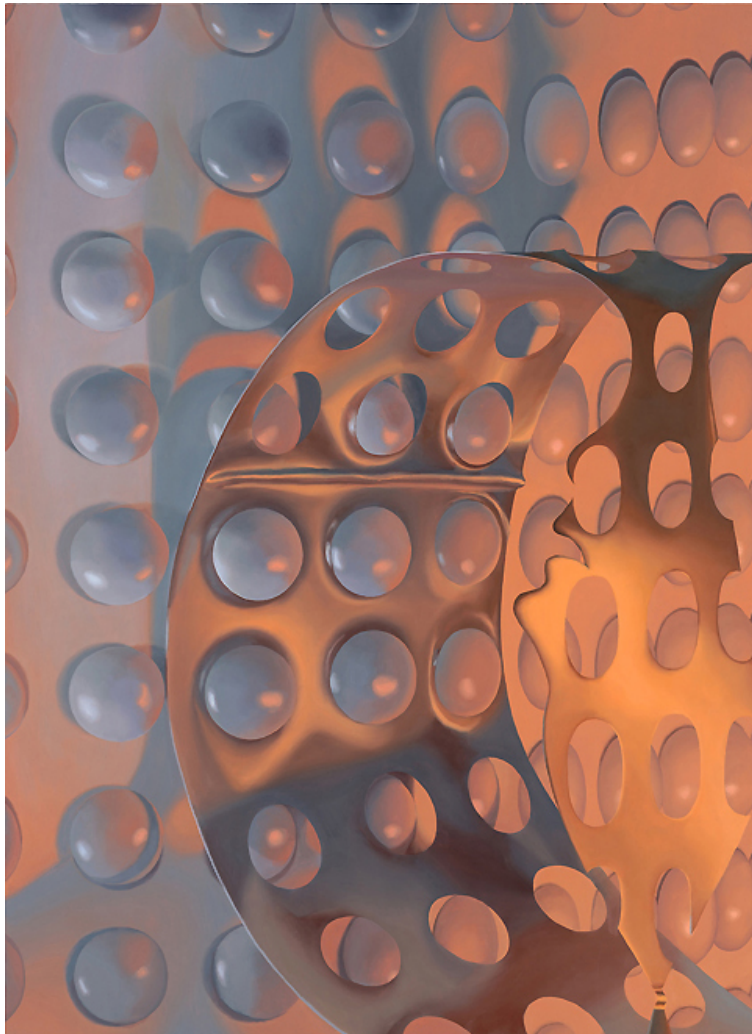


Fig. 12) Sascha Braunig. *Free Peel*, 2016

In order to incorporate both figurative and abstract means of depiction, many contemporary surrealist painters such as Sascha Braunig often employ a “multiplicity of uncanny forms and forces, they play with light and shadow, flexibility and rigidity, fullness and emptiness, push and pull” (De Wachter 44). In her painting, *Free Peel*, Braunig fuses abstraction and figuration to simultaneously point to the complexities of perception, as well as the issues in representation of the female body.

The variant gestures and brush marks made in my work stem from a desire to subvert the notion of a painter’s authentic gesture, or an over-romanticizing of ‘the hand’. This is seen in

contemporary painters such as Alex Olson, where there exists an interplay between the inauthentic and “authentic gesture”, fluctuating between the haphazard and the deliberate mark (Griffin 236).



Fig. 13) Alex Olson, *Screen*, 2015

At first glance at my work, flat brushstrokes commingle in seemingly organic and naturalistic formations. Cutting across these forms are stripes which intersect each brushstroke, where the brushstrokes shift in contrasting colour and value. This positive/negative interplay of the brushstroke interrupts the marked gesture and questions ‘the hand’ as an implicit part of painting; it draws attention to the manipulation that is at work in all painting - that a ‘natural feeling’ of a brushstroke may be constructed, too.



Fig. 14) Shea Chang, *Threshold Index 3*, 2020

4. Installation & Encounter

The Grotto as a Space of Queer Encounter: *Deviations Between the Physical & Optical*

At thirty inches off the floor, the low height of *The Grotto Paradox* invites the viewer into the encounter. It's slick, pink reflective mirror is cut to the exact outer dimensions of the softly bent sheet of painted aluminum panel that sits on top. Beneath the diminutive lime-tinted aluminum ceiling, a circular fresco painted on the ceiling becomes revealed in the water-like reflective surface below. Because of its height and placement, a direct and complete view of the painting itself is unavailable; to view the focal point of the piece, a negotiation with the reflective surface is required. Through the interchange of these materials and surfaces, the lines between the optical and the physical become dissolved and the thresholds between reality and the reflected image become entangled. Within this hybrid encounter of painting, drawing and sculpture, notions of familiarity or categorical belonging become scattered and fleeting.

Much like my personal encounters with the world where categorization of race, sexuality or orientation fail to align, this work is also imbued with the slipperiness of belonging. Two dimensional forms give way to subtle curves into third dimensions, the painted surfaces are thin, sheets of absorbent, papery scrolls, yet in contrast they are made from rigid aluminum composite panel. This presented tension between the painted surface and the form in which they take shape is akin to what Barry Schwabsky describes as “complex structural presences” or “incongruencies to come to terms with” as a key factor in contemporary painting today (Schwabsky 12). Light and reflected colour also play an integral role in creating these tensions. Through luminous shifts radiating on the exterior shell and on the interior chamber of the painted ‘pavilion’, the viewer’s attention is drawn to the fleeting nature of the boundaries between interior and the exterior states. Experiencing this work can be compared to standing in front of a shifty, irresolute architectural structure or an encounter with a “queer object”, as Sara Ahmed describes as “how one approaches the object that slopes away - as a way of inhabiting the world at the point in which things fleet.” (Ahmed 172).

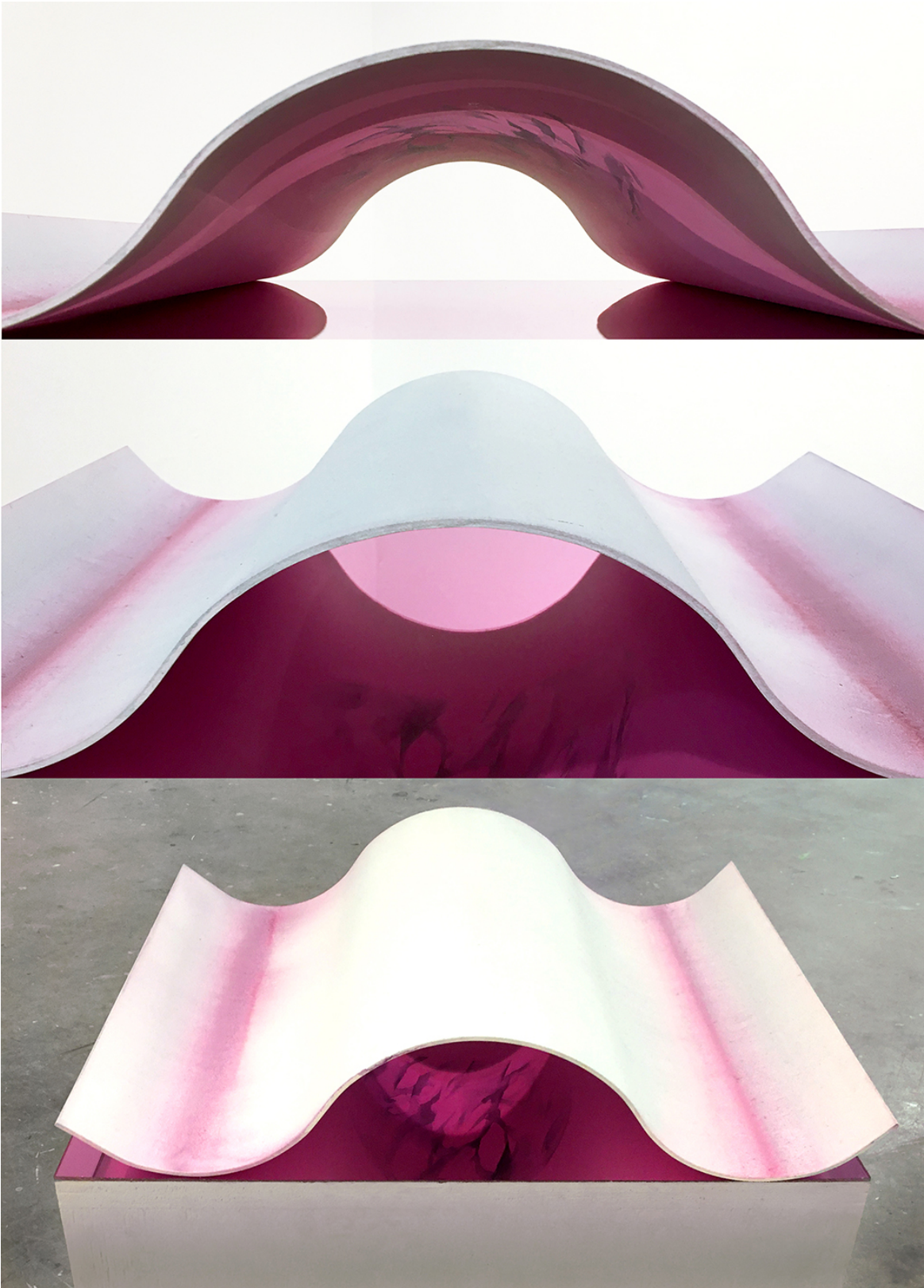
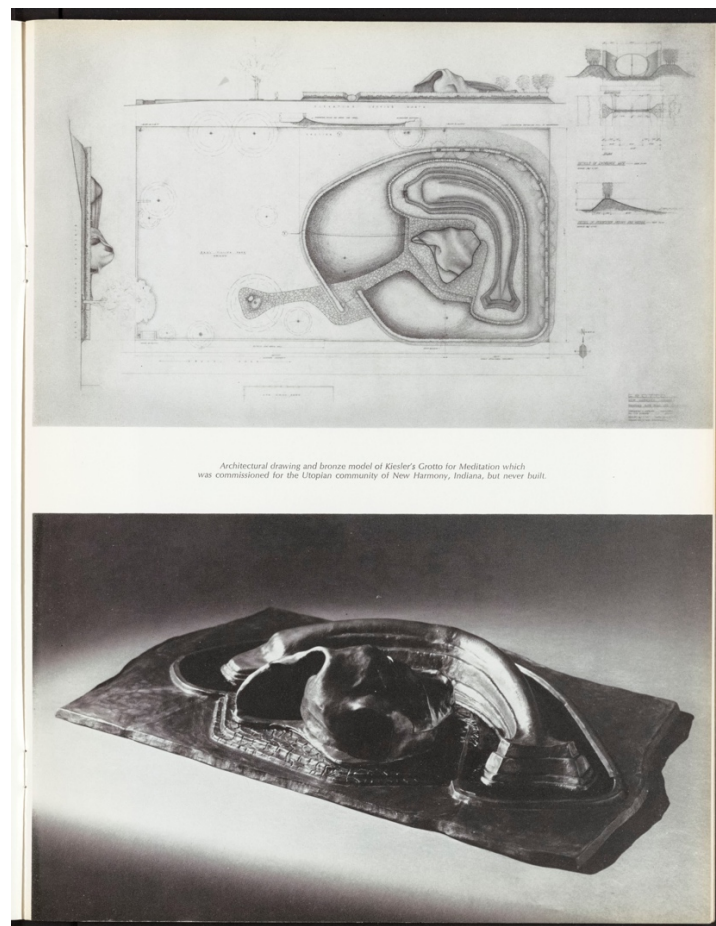


Fig. 15) Shea Chang, *The Grotto Paradox*, 2019-2020

This sense of fleeting alignment is seen through some of the other small shaped pieces in my series, where I also engage with the interplay of flattened two-dimensional cutouts of three-dimensional wave shapes and cylindrical forms. According to surrealist architect Fredrick Keisler, these correlations are a way to create a synergy of “continual interaction of both the total environment on man and the continual interaction of its constituent parts on one another.” (Keisler 64). Where Keisler strived to achieve harmony and congruence, I work with correlated shapes to create tension on the thresholds of alignment and calibration. Amidst these entanglements between the available and withheld, the flattened and the multi-dimensional, the illuminated and the shadowed, my work inhabits and extends the space in which points fail to meet.



Architectural drawing and bronze model of Keisler's Grotto for Meditation which was commissioned for the Utopian community of New Harmony, Indiana, but never built.

Fig. 16) Fredrick Keisler, Architectural Drawing and bronze model for *Grotto for Meditation*, 1966

Beyond scalar dynamics and material contrast, colour is also used to activate liminal spaces within this series. Marginal shadows radiating hyper-natural hues of periwinkle, coral and orange pull the viewer into the crevasses, corners and undersections of each piece. Intended as an affirmation of an others' presence or as a celebratory haunting, these colours signal something that is absent, peripheral and unattainable but ominously felt, nonetheless. In Shary Boyle's 2019 short story *Finissage*, she strikingly narrates this mark of defiance to belong, inciting these very states of in-betweenness:

“Someone picked up a torch, and their shadows grew wild and strange. When the song was over, they drifted together toward the wall. One by one, they held their hands aloft and traced their fingers across the tiles with looted lipstick. They were here.”

5. Conceptual & Theoretical Approach

The Grotto as a Matrix: *Liminal Assemblages & Symbiotic Bodies*

Liminal bodies of water and ecological states of flux are ever present throughout my work, signalling the hidden power dynamics of place and positionality. I am interested in making visible these unseen agencies of land, in order to carve out spaces of possibility where marginalized, forgotten or lost narratives can transcend exclusions or restraints. Delving deeper into the undercurrents of nuanced symbolism in this work, a more interconnected conceptual and theoretical context begins to emerge.

In my personal visual vocabulary, I look at the cylinder tube as a 'hypershape' which points to multiple meanings, one of which being a marker of power. In early stages of research for this body of work, I cycled along many sections of the waterfront trail along the shore of Lake Ontario. I observed the prevalence of metal poles and markers alongside the trail as they redundantly pierced marshland to demarcate the groomed path from the boggy land. Through the days that I cycled within these swamplands, the poles became a recurrent and persistent symbol of human presence and regulation. In *Landscape and Memory*, Simon Schama posits that the history of the Maypole can be traced back to the European practice of trees being planted in sites of conquest, standing as demarcations of colonization, stolen land and the weaponization of nature. The practice spread to the new Western world and was eventually translated into the monolithic structure of erected poles standing as implanted phallic symbols for democratic liberty (Schama 253-4). The tube form in my piece, *Maypole Inherited*, points to this demarcation and delineation of place. However, the shadow cast *from* the tube is the actual focal point of the piece, drawing attention to a world where the forms begin to take on uncanny qualities of their own. The subtle surrealism and the visual activity within this darkened space calls upon the viewer to look deeper into these inherited systems and question our reoccurring habits which contribute to current states of ecological devastation.



Fig. 17) Shea Chang, *The Maypole, Inherited*, 2020

Linking to ancestries of my own personal lineage and trajectories, other hypershapes which reoccur in my work are derived from circular based geometries seen in things like Victorian-era zoetropes or Chinese fans. As vessels of cultural migration, appropriation, and fetishization, 'orientalist' objects are indicators of the hidden frictions in cross-cultural navigation. In the attempt to build a personal visual vocabulary that speaks to these mixed, broken and scattered containers of culture, I examine and employ motifs found in vases, fans, textiles and ephemera into my work.



Fig. 18) Shea Chang, *A Brackish Tendency*, 2020

The difficulty to contain my own biracial narrative is explored in the piece, *A Brackish Tendency*. Through motifs extending from each end of the two-dimensional wave-shaped surface, two distinct patterns fade in subtle gradation towards off-kilter discs in the centre, where the two sides fail to intersect. Stained in leaf-like jade greens and rippled iron oxide reds, this piece characterizes Sara Ahmed's description of the hybrid "body in terms of logic of the double negative: as "not" being white, or black, and as being haunted by all that is not." (Ahmed 144). *Brackish Tendency* asserts this melancholy and stands as an icon of the impossibly grasped.

Additional surface patterns, stains and washes that form the flotsam and jetsam of my artistic lexicon point to another connotation; the detritus of otherness. According to Sadie Plant in *On the Matrix, Cyberfeminist Simulations*, there is everything within the nothingness of a zero:

It neither counts nor represents, but with digitization it proliferates, replicates and undermines the privilege of one. Zero is not its absence, but a zone of multiplicity which cannot be perceived by the one who sees. (Plant 333)

As means of defying the world by which we are bound, Plant proposes that marginalized others can embrace mutation and divergence by "perverting the codes, corrupting the transmissions, multiplying zeros, and teasing open new holes in the world." (Plant 336). Divergences that occur in production processes can in fact be harnessed to affect change, as is subtly present in the artistic processes throughout my work. Shifting from photocopy collage, to accidental water-based processes to tightly rendered and controlled graphite or paint, my hand creates subtle mutations and iterations. Through every repeated and mimicked line or shape, there is an implied anomaly in the process, like a glitch in a matrix.

Throughout my practice, I also look into the active agencies that nature inherently possesses, in order to circumvent a human-centric point of view. The meaning of dust, dirt and non-organic matter can be easily overlooked, as it is tied to the concept of terra nullius, or 'no man's land'. In *No Small Matter: Mushroom Clouds, Ecologies of Nothingness, and Strange Topologies of Spacetime*, Karen Barad calls for a re-thinking of "the void" as "a much-valued colonialist apparatus", viewed as an empty, uncivilized space to claim and control. The emphasis of water-stained spaces and intricate surface debris in my work points to Barad's proposition; by paying attention to areas that were previously overlooked, we can start to see

the effects and intra-actions between all organic and non-organic matter, disrupting our position of control over dominating nature, nonorganic life and even each other.

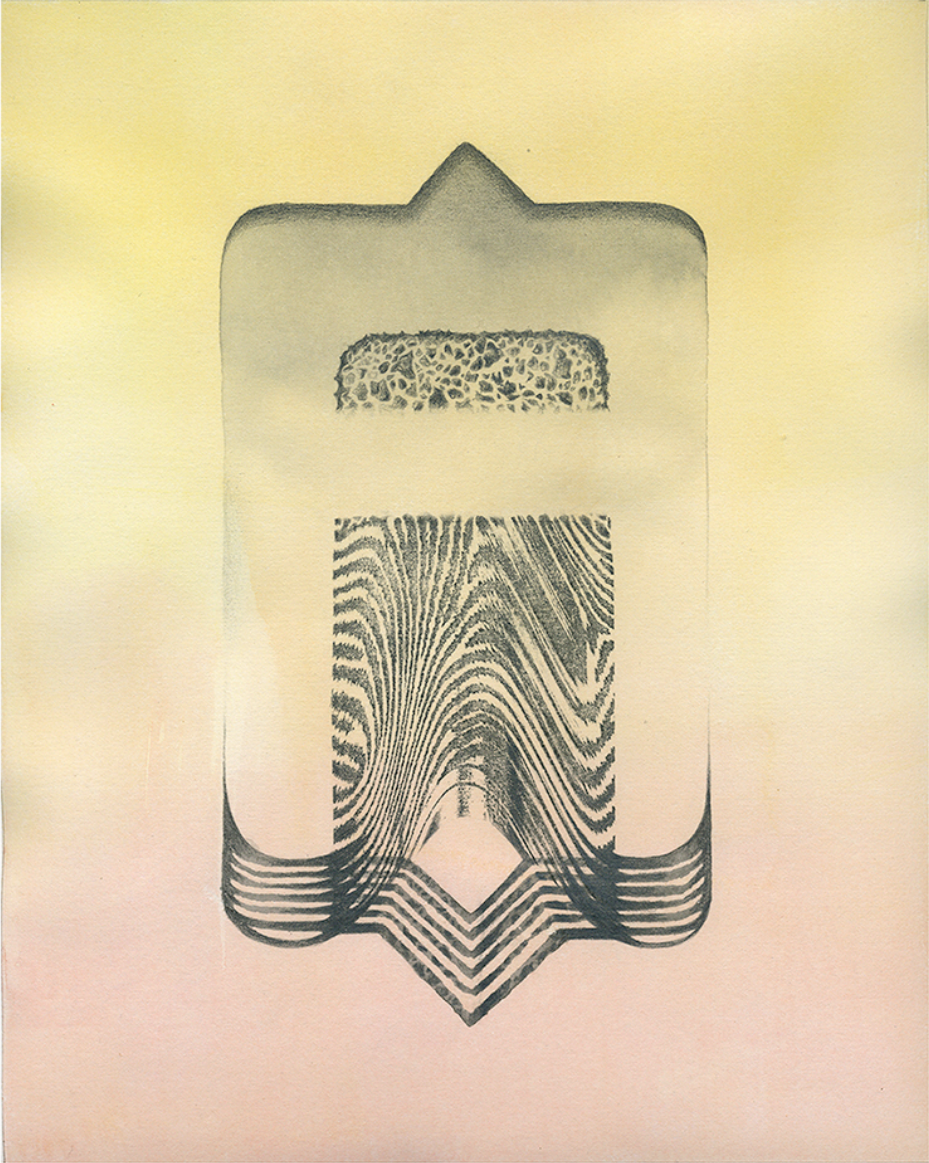


Fig. 19) Shea Chang, *Threshold Index 2*, 2020

Beyond these trace elements of meaning, I also address the void in my work through strategies of abstraction and purposeful circumvention of the gaze. Within this context, I consider abstraction to be a gesture inward, as opposed to outward. In reasserting ones' own agency and self-possession, this form of redaction is also present in the work of American visual artist Torkwase Dyson. Less about resistance, and more concerned with an outright refusal of the gaze, Dyson intentionally subverts drawings' traditional role as an extension of outward expression through her private and withheld narratives. In her work, *In the Ways of Extraction I Believe the Ghost (Slow Violence)*, the context of black environmental survival is provided through both the title and the fluid ink puddling on the paper, yet the individual details of these narratives exist only in the artists mind; their exact stories are unavailable to the viewer.



Fig. 20) Torkwase Dyson, *In the Ways of Extraction I Believe the Ghost (Slow Violence)*, 2019.

In William Pope. L's *Hole Theory*, he writes, "to see is to possess...to engage via these 'containers' is not to know them once and for all." (Pope. L 84). In some cases of naming - or simply even depicting otherness- the distance and power dynamics at play are perpetuated for those who are pointing towards the othered. By deliberately reserving the direct depiction of subject matter, artists such as Dyson can conjure abstraction as a personal and potent means to address exclusion and subsistence within the void, preserving possession over her own narrative.



Fig. 21) Shea Chang, *My Horizon*, 2019-2020

The sculptural piece from this series, *My Horizon* also stands as a turn inwards and away from the gaze; unavailable to the viewer's desire to see behind or within. This redacted object slips away from the see-able reach through its flat blue circle - conjoined to conceal some of the most intricate details of the painting beneath. These concealed, erased and redacted components in my work function to disrupt the traditional power dynamics between the painter, subject, object and audience, giving personal prescience to painting beyond the sake of the spectacle.

6. Reflection & Conclusion

William Pope. L.'s *Hole Theory* portrays a yearning or "longing" as a "favorite material for engaging", and he goes further to connect this desire to a purpose: "My heart is a hole... A receptacle_____, a matrix, a colander and a desalination plant." (Pope. L, 80,101). Here, Pope. L. speaks to something that is othered within a system, and something which functions to clarify or propel. According to Pope. L, those who are othered may have a clearer view from the sidelines; our deviance aids in making better sense of these systems, and our agitations and affects make these changes possible.

The impetus behind my work also stems from a longing to articulate experiences of in betweenness and exclusion, but also to activate and extend these marginalized spaces. As I began my research looking at instances of visibly active landscapes, I was driven by the desire to consider the multiple thresholds that separate *and* bind us to one another. Certainly, my lifelong fascination and access to liminal bodies of water influenced the framing of this artistic inquiry, but the significance of these ecologies truly emerged through the research process and development, proving to be an endless wellspring of conceptual, material and visual inspiration.

A major outcome that came from this research was the nuanced definition of my role as a painter and mark-maker, distinguishing specifically between visual *translator* as opposed to the stringent *inventor* of visual vernaculars. Agitating my position of control over the process and outcome allowed techniques and ideas to bleed into the work organically. Elements brought into the ecology of my studio were viewed as future fodder, where the refuse of one work became a creative seed for another. Through this unearthing, porosity and symbiotic exchange became the undercurrent of the final work.

The artistic production of this project nearly reached culmination when the Covid-19 pandemic set in on Eastern Canada. Recommendations for social distancing and institutional closures meant that we were collectively tasked with pivoting, adapting and come up with new means of connection that transcended physical distance or touch. Meanwhile, global protests ignited by ongoing racial injustices brought Black Lives Matter to the forefront of civil rights movements. As a non-black cis person, this was a time for me to reflect, listen and reconsider my own position and privileges. Through this period of isolation and reflection, I realized that the very

interchanging and transformational energies that propelled this body of work was a fitting analogy for the adaptation necessary in response to these evolving world events.

As stable ground shakes and gives way to the unknown, our geopolitical state is undeniably amidst a troubling, soft underfoot. Staring into the quagmire of my own artistic practice, I imagine myself as a bioluminescent film that proliferates, transforms and emerges *with* the world. Now more than ever before, we are collectively reconsidering how to support the most vulnerable and sidelined, and we are learning to reconfigure communities, practices and systems in ways that enable more mutually beneficial and equitable relationships. Now, the role of contemporary art is not only to bear witness, but to affect change on what remains and what is to come through active participation with every surface, being or space that our practice may encounter. By looking closely at the active agencies that are at play in speculative artistic practices, we can imagine other worlds that may illuminate more inclusive, holistic ways of knowing, making and being.

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