

Edges Are a Shared contour: A Formalism for Future Collaborations

Maegan Elise Harbridge

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Abstract

Edges Are a Shared Contour: A Formalism for Future Collaborations explores abstract painting as a critical field of inquiry and a method for entangled, more-than-human perception. Departing from the modernist framework of aesthetic autonomy and medium specificity, this dissertation proposes an *expanded formalism* rooted in embodied, processual, and reparative forms of attention. Engaging thinkers such as Karen Barad, Gilles Deleuze, and Daniel Neofetou, it considers how painting might operate not only as a visual language but as a practice of knowledge-making that resists closure, extractivism, and representational finality.

Drawing from my own research-creation practice, this dissertation grounds its arguments in formal analysis of material processes: layering, erasure, gesture, and provisional mark-making. These techniques are explored as methodological refusals of hierarchy between form and content, surface and depth, viewer and object. Through engagement with the works of Amy Sillman, Mark Bradford, Julie Mehretu, Joan Mitchell, Helen Frankenthaler, and others, I argue for abstraction as a site of critical friction—a space where affect, history, and subjectivity fold into one another.

The project introduces *care/full* looking as a reparative mode of perception that values slowness, uncertainty, and mutual responsiveness. Abstract painting becomes here not a retreat from meaning but an opening into multiplicity—where attention is shaped by what resists immediate comprehension. In theorizing edges as shared contours, this dissertation reimagines form as a relational threshold—a fractal curve—suggesting that painting can act as a collaborative interface between human and nonhuman, body and environment, past and future. Ultimately, it positions abstraction not as a formal tradition to preserve but as a continually unfolding terrain of speculative and collective inquiry.

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Glossary of Key Terms

expanded formalism

A practice-based and theoretical reorientation of formal analysis that departs from modernist autonomy and anthropocentric mastery by introducing a decentered mode of visual analysis attuned to the relational quality of form. Connecting to Rosalind Krauss's critique of medium specificity and the limitations of medium purity, and informed by posthumanist theory, *expanded formalism* approaches form as an emergent, relational field of "intra-action." A concept introduced by theoretical physicist Karen Barad, "intra-action" describes how human and more-than-human forces come into being through their entanglement.

care/full looking

A mode of attentional ethics that resists quick interpretation or extractive viewing. It emphasizes duration, attentiveness, and relational responsibility, drawing on feminist materialisms and posthuman critique to treat visual analysis as an embodied and situated practice. To look as a practice full of care is to become attuned to the iterative entanglement of material-discursive bodies as they shape one another in the ongoing becoming of the world.

difference-relating

This term emerges from an assemblage of event, text, and studio practice to describe a visual and conceptual approach to thinking about difference. Rather than reverting to the binary logic of sorting or categorizing oppositions, difference-relating attunes to the co-constitutive network of relations that make up a composition. The term's kernel first took shape in an encounter with a Post-it note on the studio wall of a fellow artist. The note, *difference without separability*,

positioned amid an installation of drawings, paintings and other reference materials, directed me to Denise Ferreira da Silva's text "On Difference without Separability." Over the course of writing this dissertation, Ferreira da Silva's evocation of an "elementary entanglement" took root and developed into my own formalist term, which now describes how disparate things shape the face of one another and affect each other from a distance. Ferreira da Silva's text lives within the term *difference-relating* as a conceptual hinge to bring decolonial theories of relationality into conversation with artistic processes.

more-than-representational painting

More-than-representational painting derives its meaning from the way that representation exceeds the bounds of signification in painting. The term draws conceptual lineage from Erin Manning's notion of "the more-than of experience," which foregrounds the preconscious and affective dimensions of sensory experience. It also resonates with the "more-than-human" turn in posthumanist and Indigenous ontologies, which insists that knowledge and agency are relationality distributed across human and nonhuman actors, challenging the epistemological boundaries set by Enlightenment humanism. Both frameworks unsettle representational logic as the primary mode of meaning-making. The term "more-than-representational" also has a specific history in landscape theory that emerges from cultural geographer Nigel Thrift's theories of non-representation, but in the framework of *expanded formalism*, it denotes the prioritization of attunement to interdependence in compositional structure. *More-than-representational painting* embraces ambiguity and the excess of affect to challenge traditional dichotomies between abstraction and representation.

extra-aesthetic

Extra-aesthetic marks a continuation of my MFA research on affect and the social significance of abstract painting. The term is used to name the surplus quality of an artwork beyond both its representational content and its formal attributes. The *extra* is in dialogue with Simon O’Sullivan’s writing on art, where he describes the “excess” of aesthetic experience as the affective quality of an artwork that enables its “effectivity.” *Extra-aesthetic* builds on O’Sullivan’s discussion by providing a noun that encapsulates the schism within aesthetic experience in which perception is both a solitary encounter—through which the invisible becomes perceptible—and an opening into the social realm, where meaning stirs within painting as a latent relational force. *Extra-aesthetic* describes how painting enables both an affective encounter and how this encounter exceeds itself.

Introduction

This dissertation introduces a mode of art theory and criticism I have termed *expanded formalism*, which is a theoretical, conceptual, and process-based approach to creating and interpreting contemporary abstract art. It is not simply a category of form; rather, it is a philosophical orientation—one that reimagines formal analysis as a method of inquiry into relationality, perception, and world-making. Developed through a combination of scholarly research and experimentation in my own studio practice, *expanded formalism* grows out of the self-critical spirit of aesthetic modernism. Where it departs from aesthetic modernism is in its rejection of the notion that form is a function of individual or autonomous qualities. Instead, *expanded formalism* understands form as an interaction of relationships.

As modernist artist Josef Albers taught us, honing a sensitivity to colour allows us to see how colours are not independently constituted but instead interact with the colours around them to produce their effect.¹ Similarly, I argue that an expanded approach to form necessitates a decentred exploration of not only colour but of the interrelationship between all forms. Here, *expanded formalism* redeems formalism as a practice of critical perception—or of what I call *care/full* looking—that tunes our attention to a relational conception of form and, further, to the affective forces within and between social, political, ecological, and material bodies. To look with care is to attend to the undulating, rather than static, nature of materiality itself. In this way, *expanded formalism* both recoups a useful criticality from aesthetic modernism and proposes its expansion.

The word *expansion* also indicates the term's alignment with the expanded humanities. In that my approach to visual analysis takes a relational lens, it decentres dominant Western approaches to knowledge-making. As such, I situate this project in dialogue with recent calls to rethink the humanities beyond humanist paradigms. Expanded humanities scholarship—as does

expanded formalism—acknowledges the broader constellation of postcolonial, feminist, Indigenous, posthuman, poststructuralist, and science and technology studies that reconfigure what counts as the human, and by extension, the humanities. For my purposes, to erode classical, perspectival habits of seeing within visual analysis is to erode a humancentric, reflective lens, thereby challenging the hegemonic, hierarchical notion of the human, especially in and through artistic creation.² My aim in challenging the dominant paradigmatic lens through which humans engage with the world is to disrupt the subjugating and extractive model that such a humancentric frame of reference produces and reproduces.³

While Clement Greenberg, an important figure in modernist thought, did not mount a critique of humanism as such, I reveal in this dissertation that key aspects of his thinking stand in tension with humanist paradigms. My dissertation develops a contemporary analysis of abstract painting that acknowledges the insights of Greenberg, Albers, and others, and reaffirms the relevance of formalism as a vehicle for the critique of humanist thought within and beyond the humanities. Alongside engaging with a series of artworks and critical texts conceptually underpinned by the history of Western abstraction, this research-creation project explores my own painting practice as a site to engage with the history of abstraction. My practice is both a site that is generative in engaging with the nuances of human sense experience and a self-critical position that intertwines with and extends the work that aesthetic modernism began. By exploring examples of modern, contemporary, as well as my own artworks, this dissertation reasserts contemporary abstract painting as an aesthetic activity fit to counter still dominant hierarchies of humanist rationality, autonomy, and exceptionalism.

My account of formal painting sits in parallel to three relating accounts of modernist painting. These diverging yet connected histories include the seminal thought of art critic

Clement Greenberg, artist Josef Albers's contemporaneous project on the pedagogy of colour, and art theorist Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois's later counter modernism. In 1961, Greenberg wrote the seminal text "Modernist Painting." It was here that Greenberg upheld modernist painting as the ultimate gesture of Kantian self-criticism. Through its autonomous forms and its "orientat[ion] to flatness," Greenberg argued that formalist painting "criticized from the inside," performing a critique of mimesis through disavowal.⁴ "[P]urity meant self-definition," and self-definition was once a radical position of alterity.⁵ For Greenberg, formalist painting was the perfect embodiment of the modernist spirit, as he saw the flatness of the canvas as the ultimate self-critical gesture to emerge from the Enlightenment. Due to its ability to critique from the inside, he believed modern art was liberated from the meta-narratives of totalization and progression subsumed under capitalism.⁶

The medium specificity central to Greenberg's high modernism—emerging as the aesthetic manifestation of Kant's critical self-reflexivity—was instrumental in shaping the aesthetic refinement of abstract painting and the formalism it produced. Greenberg's notion of opticality reinforced the autonomy and consequent purity of the art object. Although Greenberg is often known primarily for his emphasis on formal purity, it is important to recognize that his theories are in fact underpinned by a number of nuanced governing assumptions. For instance, even the concept of relationality—foregrounded in this dissertation—was integral to his aesthetic framework. Medium specificity was simply the highest value. The all-over approach in Jackson Pollock's paintings, for example, depended fundamentally on the interplay between surface and its delimitation.⁷ Similarly, Greenberg's emphasis on figure and ground dynamics reflects the inherent relationality of his formalism. While this dissertation does not seek to exhaustively examine the complexities within Greenberg's theories, it is important to note that an effort to

reimagine formalism beyond mere formal purity and autonomy resonates within the very relational dimensions of Greenberg's own thought.

What in Greenberg remains a latent relational structure becomes in artist Josef Albers an explicit perceptual practice. In 1963, Albers wrote *Interaction of Color*. What he showed us through a series of process-led experiments is that a sensitivity to colour allows us to see how colours interact with the colours around them to produce their effect. In other words, the power of one thing is dependent on its placement in relationship to other things. In later chapters, I invoke political theorist Jane Bennett's non-anthropocentric understanding of the *thing*—which takes a Materialist lens for discussing matter—as part of my project of expanding Albers's relational concept beyond colour.⁸ For Albers, though, colour was a pedagogical tool that opened the door to critical perception—a teachable skill that honed visual attention to the nuanced interconnections of form. This is another example, contemporaneous to Greenberg, of modern aesthetic formalism that valued relationality.

In 1993, postmodernist art theorist Rosalind Krauss wrote the *Optical Unconscious*. Breaking from Greenberg, her once mentor, she tells an alternative history of modernism that “brush[es] against the grain” of “pure” vision.⁹ For Krauss and her colleague Yve-Alain Bois, as they explain in their subsequent co-authored publication *Formless: A User Guide*, the formal attributes of modernist art cannot be assessed without accounting for the role of the unconscious in perception. Krauss and Bois found the dominant emphasis on “pure vision” throughout modernism, championed by Greenberg, restrictive as a conception of modern art.¹⁰ Krauss and Bois criticized Greenberg's opticality for reproducing the Enlightenment's ideological pretense that Man (and his vision) was a “master of all it surveys.”¹¹ Reason, rationality, and “regimes of truth” came under scrutiny by central figures within poststructuralist and postmodern thought.¹²

Focusing on artists such as Max Ernst and Marcel Duchamp who were peripheral to Greenberg's modernism, Krauss and Bois's alternative vision passes through a "Freud-Lacanian filter" to exchange the formalist rhetoric of "pure vision" for a peripheral modernism of the "formless," or *l'informe*.¹³

This predominantly Dada and Surrealist approach to visual analysis was dismissed throughout Greenberg's modernism and so left previously unexamined in the history of modern art. In contrast to Greenberg's emphasis on opticality, which presented a logical, rational, and hierarchical position of vision, the virtue of modern art for Krauss and Bois was "a space of resistance to rationalization."¹⁴ Following philosopher Georges Bataille, the stakes of their project was to unravel Greenberg's interpretation of modern art, which they felt was in keeping with a disembodied humanist approach to perception: "[It was] humanism above all that [Bataille was] after and thus all systems."¹⁵ For Krauss and Bois, then, Surrealism and the readymade were both artistic strategies that countered high modernism's aesthetic preoccupation with formal integrity. Surrealism and the readymade were abstractions of the low, of the body, of the unconscious. In its connection to the embodied viewer, this peripheral modernism performed a formlessness—a "slippage"¹⁶ of undoing "boundaries."¹⁷ And formlessness was an operation meant to erode the binary logic between figure and ground, form and content, subject and object; it was a conceptual operation to challenge the hierarchy of Man and his elevated vision.¹⁸

In light of Krauss and Bois's critique, in a recent, nuanced rereading of Greenberg, art theorist Daniel Neofetou provides an account of Greenbergian aesthetics that runs counter to its many "revisionist" iterations since Krauss and Bois's counter modernist project. In contrast to humanist interpretations of Greenberg's ideas as promoting a disembodied "pure" vision, Neofetou contends that Greenberg's push for visual purity in modern painting could be better

understood as a push for what he calls “conceptual unsaturation,” or a hastening towards the affective experience of the viewer.¹⁹ This move towards “somatic” and “affective” experience, Neofetou contends, was for Greenberg, as for Leon Trotsky, precisely the radical engagement with “feelings and moods [that were otherwise] stymied by capitalism.”²⁰ To this end, the formal qualities of abstract painting that Greenberg paid such careful attention to did not so much counter the embodied viewer of Krauss and Bois’s “formlessness” but were, according to Neofetou, “emphatically inextricable from the corporeal.”²¹

Expanded formalism follows such re-readings of aesthetic modernism that prioritize and recoup modernist painting’s commitment to self-criticality and confrontation with the status quo. Whether or not a challenge to humanism as such was their stated aim, I argue that Greenberg’s, Albers’s, and others’ projects implicitly established modern art as a discipline to challenge humanist thinking.²² *Expanded formalism* can therefore be understood as both an extension of and a critical divergence from the traditions of Greenbergian formalism and Albers’s exploration of perception. Greenberg’s emphasis on medium specificity and the internal logic of form laid important groundwork for thinking about painting’s autonomy. While *expanded formalism* indeed retains the importance of form, what it embraces is its permeability—its openness to contingency, environment, and material agency. Albers’s *Interaction of Color* shifted attention to relational perception, demonstrating that colour’s meaning is never intrinsic but always dependent on context. *Expanded formalism* inherits Albers’s insight but radicalizes it: rather than treating relationality as a phenomenon bounded within human perception, it understands form, colour, and matter as co-emergent with nonhuman forces. And even while Krauss and Bois’s notion of *l’informe* dismantled modernism’s taxonomies, *expanded formalism* moves beyond

critique toward a generative ethics of entanglement—an aesthetic practice not of collapse, but of continual becoming.

As such, while drawing from both modern and postmodern critical theory, this dissertation engages closely with posthumanist thinkers such as Donna Haraway, Karen Barad, Cary Wolfe, and Sylvia Wynter to develop formalism as a critical approach capable of performing an aesthetic critique of the humanist subject. Cary Wolfe in *What is Posthumanism?* distinguishes the divergence of the critical posthumanities from transhumanist narratives, to highlight the problem of the idea of the human as a unified, independent, rational, subject. This concept, rooted in Cartesian thought and tied to colonial histories, continues to shape our thinking today, especially in postcolonial settings where the figure of “Man” has long been treated as a universal standard.²³ This resonates with what theorists such as Rosi Braidotti—as well as Wolfe—describe as the expanded or critical humanities. Sylvia Wynter’s decolonial reorientation of the category of the human through her critique of “Man” as a colonial construct likewise provides a crucial framework for this project. Wolfe explains that this inquiry into the history of the subject “engag[es] directly the problem of anthropocentrism and speciesism and how practices of thinking and reading must change in light of their critique.”²⁴

Building on these interventions, I frame abstract painting as a form of visual thinking that can unsettle normative modes of representationalist thought. Through the lens of *expanded formalism*, I understand painting as capable of establishing aesthetic slippages that effectively decentre the categorical sovereignty of atomic individualism, and I argue that such an operation of undoing boundaries constitutes a practice of engaging the manifold entanglements of the viewing subject. For the very notion of entanglement, as Barad suggests via quantum physics, implies a world that is tangled and iteratively differentiating. Hence there is no “radical

separation” of centred subjects (in painting, or otherwise) but rather a world that emerges through its constitutive relations.²⁵ In sum, I situate my contemporary investigation of abstract painting at the intersection of formalist theory and these critical posthuman discourses, extending the anti-humanist impulses identified by Krauss and Bois in their analyses of Dada and Surrealist art to the very operation of formalism itself.

The term *expanded formalism* emerged gradually through my research-creation practice, first through painting, then through writing. Before I developed this name for the framework, I published an essay of my first inquiries called “A Line is an Edge, is a Colour, is a Shadow: Towards a Posthuman Account of Painting.” Published in *Ecocene: Cappadocia Journal of Environmental Humanities* in 2023, this article explores a posthuman account of painting through what I call *care/full* looking—a perceptual methodology grounded in embodied attention, relationality, and affect.²⁶ At the time, I was trying to articulate how formal elements in painting—colour, line, shape, composition—do not exist in isolation, but materialize through relations. I developed *care/full* looking to name a process of tuning our critical perception towards not only a relational conception of materiality, but likewise, towards the relationality within and between all bodies. I propose *care/full* looking as a mode of visual engagement that contrasts with methods of decoding meaning, as an attuned, embodied practice of perceiving form as an ethical and relational event. Following scholarship in the critical posthumanities, *care/full* looking acknowledges the social, political, and ecological necessity of reimagining our current, Western, anthropocentric gaze. This essay (the opening essay of this dissertation) marks a pivotal shift in my thinking: it allowed me to see formalism not as closed or self-referential, but as something processual, ethical, and entangled. Although I had not yet coined the term, the conceptual foundations of *expanded formalism* were taking shape.

Since then, I have worked to stretch those practice-led insights into a broader theoretical framework. *Expanded formalism*, as I now use the term, speaks to both the history of formalism and its potential reorientation within contemporary humanities discourses. Whereas *care/full* looking refers to an immediate form of engagement that takes place in the temporal present, *expanded formalism* names a framework that looks both forward and back—a framework through which to experience both the novelty of Julie Mehretu’s paintings and the legacy of Helen Frankenthaler’s work. In effect, the term *care/full* looking has come to denote a practice as part of the broader framework of *expanded formalism*, and the term *expanded formalism* marks both a convergence and refinement of formalism beyond aesthetic modernism. Aligning with a critical, decolonial, and ecologically attuned posthumanism, *expanded formalism* seeks not to transcend embodiment, but to deepen it—not to perfect the human, but to decentre it within a broader entanglement of human and more-than-human relations. The term’s specificity lies in its capacity to resist anthropocentrism without relinquishing the aesthetic, affective, or material complexities that make painting a potential site of ethical and embodied encounter.

Throughout this dissertation, I introduce several additional conceptual terms that I developed at the intersection of theory and studio practice. Adding to *expanded formalism* and *care/full* looking, I evoke *difference-relating*, *more-than-representational*, and *extra-aesthetic* not as a rigid lexicon but to serve as working concepts for rethinking formal analysis within contemporary discourse. Each term arises from specific artistic and theoretical inquiries, functioning as part of my broader project to reorient aesthetic attention in a way that resists anthropocentrism, embraces material and affective complexity, and foregrounds relationality. *Difference-relating* names the process of enacting relationality in art, *more-than-representational* refers to the results of disrupting the modernist binary between representation and abstraction

(which I discuss in detail in Chapters Two and Three), and the *extra-aesthetic* acknowledges the affective dimension of painting (which I explore in Chapter 4). Together, these terms contribute to the evolving framework of *expanded formalism*, offering tools for practicing *care/full looking*.

This dissertation takes the form of six pieces of writing that, in conjunction with one another, perform—rather than simply inform—relationality. Some essays are written as artistic experiments, while others take a more expository approach. Navigating the diverse positions, contradictions, and intertwining narratives that shape a research-oriented inquiry into abstraction, this project offers both a critical and aesthetic contribution to formalist theory and the expanded humanities. Each chapter poses questions that address key tensions within contemporary visual practice—tensions that resonate with ongoing debates across contemporary critical humanities discourses.

Chapter One: “A Line is an Edge, is a Colour, is a Shadow: Towards a Posthuman Account of Painting” is part manifesto, part poem, and part experimental performative text. It marks the emergence of my interest in how abstract painting today might occupy a critical position within an expanded humanities and how a relational approach to visual analysis might intervene into a humancentric orientation in the world, beginning by asking what a posthuman account of painting can offer. Developed out of my own artistic experiments, Chapter One explores the colour, line, texture, shape, and subject matter of painting through their ever-shifting contingencies. Both my artistic practice and this performative piece of writing co-emerged through a process of experimentation. In the context of this dissertation, this chapter acts as a poetic introduction that performs language, cadence, and resonance to tune the reader’s critical perception towards relationality: line is the architecture of form that makes shapes both positive and void, simultaneously corporeal and implied, a theatre of relations that form and inform on a

knot of topography in formation. The chapters that follow unpack many of the motifs evoked in this essay. I chose to direct the reader's understanding in this sequence—poetic-to-expository—in part as a way to lift form from a hierarchical humanistic order that puts mimetic understanding first.

Chapter Two: “Always Beginning” approaches my painting practice as a site of inquiry into form, matter, and relational meaning—an exploratory process that catalyzes the evolving framework of *expanded formalism* and the *care/full* looking it invites. Rather than illustrating a fixed theory, this chapter unfolds hand-in-hand with my studio practice, representing an integrated research-creation project where the practice of painting becomes a method of embodied investigation. Through exploring formal techniques such as layering, collage, overpainting, and the recurrent presence of certain motifs, this chapter argues that the formal elements within visual composition can act as a generative field for attuning to the entanglement of perception, materiality, and thought. What begins as an encounter with formal decisions opens onto a broader set of questions: What happens when abstraction is understood as an action rather than a category? Might it then function as an aesthetic method for rethinking subject-object relations? Can a process-based, improvisational approach to painting reorient formal analysis toward contingency and responsiveness, rather than cohesion or control? These questions do not aim for resolution but instead sustain the inquiry that an *expanded formalism* invites—a formalism that does not reduce but relates.

Chapter Three: “Affirming the Unknown” extends the inquiry initiated in “*Always Beginning*,” this time shifting the focus from formal techniques to questions of content, situating contemporary painting as a site for negotiating the unstable boundaries between representation and abstraction. Building on the analysis of Amy Sillman's paintings presented in my MFA

thesis “Affect as Effect: Towards the Social Significance of Abstract Painting,”²⁷ this chapter places my current painting practice in dialogue with Sillman’s work to examine how the integration of personal and anecdotal content within abstraction can function as a feminist critique of formal purity and autonomy. Rather than reinforcing medium specificity or privileging what is already known, painting emerges here as a dynamic mode of inquiry—one that materializes embodied negotiation and reconfigures abstraction as a site of affective, contingent meaning-making. Borrowing from and extending earlier research-creation inquiries, this chapter asks: How can painting disrupt inherited binaries such as nature/culture, representation/abstraction, or mind/body? And, in what ways might this disruption contribute to an aesthetics grounded in relationality? By rethinking these dichotomies, the chapter explores what is at stake when contemporary painting shifts from representing content to performing it—where the plasticity of form becomes a way of engaging what is unknown.

Positioned midway through the dissertation, “A Formalism for Future Collaborations” is a one-page poetic reflection that serves as a hinge between the embodied, practice-led chapters and the more conceptually analytical one that follows. It bridges the material intuitions of the studio with the more expository inquiries into theory that frame *expanded formalism*, offering a moment of speculative clarity and aesthetic conviction.

Chapter Four: “Painting Beyond Humanism: A Lexicon for an *Expanded Formalism*” elaborates the conceptual scope of *expanded formalism* and *care/full* looking through three interrelated concepts that either stem from or are taken up by posthumanist theory: intra-action, diffraction, and affect. In Section One, I raise Karen Barad’s concept of intra-action—which posits that entities do not pre-exist their relations—to inform my argument that Albers’s theory of colour relationality can be extended across formalism more broadly. In Section Two, I call on

Barad's and Haraway's conceptions of diffraction—an approach to knowledge that attends to how differences are produced and relate to one another—to further elucidate my contention that form in contemporary abstract painting can act a site of contingency. In Section Three, I examine Brian Massumi and others' theories of affect—the pre-personal intensities that arise in relational encounters²⁸—to better understand how matters of perception and ethics coalesce. When applied to contemporary abstract painting, together, these concepts inform the theoretical lens through which I understand formalism as relational, entangled, and ethically responsive. These concepts help reframe abstraction from a withdrawal from meaning to a material practice of sensing, becoming, and world-making within a distributed field of perception. By integrating insights from posthuman and allied critical fields into the study of visual art, *expanded formalism* thus reclaims formal analysis as a critically generative method—one capable of attending to the sensory, affective, and material operations of artworks without reinscribing human exceptionalism or universalizing claims to aesthetic judgment.

Chapter Five: “To be a Narratively Constituted Being / And Expanded Formalism” is a final speculative, poetic essay on the possibilities that *expanded formalism* and *care/full* looking hold. Following the theoretical groundwork laid in the preceding chapter, this essay turns to the delicate, unruly force of narrative as a mode of inquiry within formal analysis. Echoing the manifesto style of writing in Chapter One, this essay proposes that through *expanded formalism*, abstract painting can stage a posthuman intervention into Western anthropological origin stories. This chapter draws on decolonial theorist Sylvia Wynter and feminist, posthumanist thinker Donna Haraway to explore how painting—long entangled in the project of human exceptionalism—might begin to tell different stories, ones that unsettle the boundaries between self and world. Wynter reminds us that the human is itself a story—a fiction produced through

colonial, racialized, and gendered logics.²⁹ Haraway's notion of "speculative fabulation," a mode of worlding through imaginative, experimental storytelling, is animated in her figure of the cyborg and offers a method to understand narratives that do not close but open, that weave memory, sensation, and thought into new, unfinished worlds.³⁰ Using an *expanded formalism* framework, I propose not to abandon narrative but to inhabit it differently: to treat it as a site of critical invention. *Expanded formalism* invites us to feel narrative as an instrument of drift, revision, and ethical re-worlding—as formal to the human condition.

Each chapter of this dissertation weaves together a diverse range of critical theory from the visual arts and the expanded humanities to realize a systemic shift to Western practices of looking. *Expanded formalism* is an aesthetic intervention that acknowledges form as iterative and relational and thus reimagines what it means to be human. In painting, this might emerge through motifs that refuse to settle into fixed meaning, through gestures that evoke atmosphere without resolving into scenes, through disruptions that keep memory vibrating at the surface. Or this might appear through narrative, which within an *expanded formalism* is not a return to origin but a detour—a speculative movement away from inherited truths toward unfinished, relational ways of becoming. Like the function of personal anecdote in contemporary painting, narrative takes on a fugitive quality, evading capture by dominant systems, refusing resolution, and opening a continual negotiation between meaning, matter, and memory.

Thinking with art historian David Getsy, I propose abstract painting as a practice uniquely situated to "stage relationships" that run "against the grain" of popular belief.³¹ *Expanded formalism* understands abstraction as an aesthetic approach that unfolds through elision, operating in a non-normative, non-mimetic mode of signification. Through its misalignments and formal disjunctures, my non-linear approach to abstract painting decentres

normative modes of looking, thinking, and feeling. In dialogue with the expanded humanities, I propose that approaching contemporary painting through an *expanded formalism* lens reorients formal analysis towards unsettling habits of seeing that position humans as the pinnacle of evolution, a conceit amplified today by the proliferation of technological images such as the screen. Such modes of representation render legible homogenizing constructs—individual, nation-state, identity, freedom, and humanness itself—revealing them as the aestheticization of politics under capitalism.³²

Working against humanist assumptions of autonomous subjects and “anthropological universals,”³³ I posit that an *expanded formalism* renews the socio-political significance of formalism through reflection on the relational quality of form. This contention stems from the question, Might the emphasis on visual purity at the heart of Greenberg’s modernism—long seen as a limitation—be reimagined through the concept of “conceptual unsaturation” as a performative method, where *expanded formalism* and *care/full* looking open contemporary painting to think with and through the entangled agencies of the expanded humanities? *Expanded formalism* thus offers a bridge: it honours the vitality of form while simultaneously unsettling the hierarchies that once defined it. Accordingly, formalism—retooled by contemporary critical and posthumanist theory—traces a lineage through Greenberg, Albers, and Bois and Krauss, yet unfolds towards a wider ontology. My conception of *expanded formalism* understands form not as a fixed aesthetic category but as a dynamic threshold—a site of encounter between materials, bodies, and temporalities, human, and more-than-human alike. In this way, *expanded formalism* does not simply revise formalism; it rethinks it. In recognizing the co-constitution of worlds through materiality and stories, *expanded formalism* becomes an aesthetic event that shifts our gaze towards the interrelationality between all forms of/and life. I argue that to rethink the formal

boundaries of what constitutes edges, borders, and bodies is to generate new forms of social and interspecies praxis. This begins with—to invoke a foundational metaphor for *expanded formalism* and the title of this dissertation—noticing how edges are a shared contour.

¹ Josef Albers, *Interaction of Color: New Complete Edition* (Yale University Press, 2013), 1–2.

² Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Duke University Press, 2007), 88.

³ Walter D. Mignolo, “Sylvia Wynter: What Does It Mean to Be Human?” in *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*, ed. Katherine McKittrick (Duke University Press, 2015), 117.

⁴ Clement Greenberg, “Modernist Painting,” *Art and Literature* 4 (Spring 1965), 193–201.

⁵ Greenberg, 193–201.

⁶ Clement Greenberg, “Modern and Postmodern,” *Arts Magazine* 54, no. 6 (February 1980): para. 19–21.

⁷ Clement Greenberg, “‘American-Type’ Painting,” in *Modern Art and Modernism: A Critical Anthology*, 1st ed. (Routledge, 1982), 208–229 for an exploration of the all-over.

⁸ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Duke University Press, 2010), 2. In her philosophy of vital materialism, political theorist Jane Bennett’s understanding of the *thing* conjures the “metaphysics of the object, or, more exactly, a metaphysics of that never objectifiable depth from which objects rise up toward our superficial knowledge” (2).

⁹ Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (MIT Press, 1993), 16.

¹⁰ Joan Hugo, “L’informe: mode d’emploi,” *Frieze* 31, (1996), 1.

¹¹ Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (MIT Press, 1993), 180.

¹² Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (Pantheon Books, 1980), 131–133; see also Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

¹³ Hugo, “L’Informe: mode d’emploi,” 59–61; Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious*, 127–130.

¹⁴ Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious*, 142.

¹⁵ Yve-Alain Bois, and Rosalind E. Krauss, *Formless: A User’s Guide* (Zone Books, 1997), 17.

¹⁶ Bois, and Krauss, 15.

¹⁷ Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious*, 157.

¹⁸ Bois, and Krauss, *Formless: A User’s Guide*, 15–18.

¹⁹ Neofetou, *Rereading Abstract Expressionism*, 5.

²⁰ Neofetou, 9.

²¹ Neofetou, 9.

²² Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," 193–201; Albers, *Interaction of Color* (Yale University Press, 1963), 1–2; Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious*, 127–30.

²³ Cary Wolfe, *What Is Posthumanism?* (University of Minnesota Press, 2010), xiii.

²⁴ Wolfe, *What Is Posthumanism?*, xix.

²⁵ Karen Barad, "Nature's Queer Performativity," *Qui Parle* 19, no. 2 (2011): 150, also see 121–58.
<https://doi.org/10.5250/quiparle.19.2.0121>.

²⁶ Maegan Harbridge, "A Line is an Edge, is a Colour, is a Shadow: Towards a Posthuman Account of Painting," *Ecocene: Cappadocia Journal of Environmental Humanities* 4, no. 2 (2023): 143, <https://doi.org/10.46863/ecocene.88>; see also the essay's earlier iteration, Maegan Harbridge, "A Shadow is a Colour, a Body is a Shape, an Edge is a Line: Towards a Posthuman Account of Painting," Parts 1 & 2. *Borderland*, November 14, 2022. <https://espaciofronterizo.com/borderland/a-shadow-is-a-colour-1/>.

²⁷ Maegan Harbridge, "Affect as Effect: Towards the Social Significance of Abstract Painting" (master's thesis, The University of Guelph, 2015), 2–18.

²⁸ Brian Massumi, preface to *Politics of Affect* (Polity Press, 2015), x.

²⁹ Sylvia Wynter, "Unparalleled Catastrophe For Our Secies? Or to Give Humanness a Different Future: Conversations" in *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*, ed. Katherine McKittrick (Duke University Press, 2015), 23–32.

³⁰ Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Duke University Press, 2016), 105.

³¹ David J. Getsy, "Ten Queer Theses on Abstraction," in *Queer Abstraction*, edited by Jared Ledesma (Des Moines Art Center, 2019), 66; See Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious*, 127–28.

³² See Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Zone Books, 1994); and Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (University of Michigan Press, 1994).

³³ Wolfe, xiv.

Chapter One: A Line is an Edge, is a Colour, is a Shadow: Towards a Posthuman Account of Painting

This is a poetic essay that predates my development of the term *expanded formalism*. As such, the term *care/full looking* should be understood as a stand-in for *expanded formalism*. In later chapters, I refine the term *care/full looking* as a component of the broader framework. I invite readers to experience this chapter as a performative act of creation in the process of developing this research-creation.

Introduction

A line is simultaneously a colour, a texture, and a tone: it is the abutting edge of positive and negative, the breaking up and adjoining of two planes, the touching point of autonomous bodies. To see form as relational is an undoing of the human—no longer at the centre, or with a centre, from which to establish single stories of origin that articulate and mark the stakes of (human and non-human) freedoms;¹ a fraying of peripheries, an unravelling of mind, a suspension of perspectival lines of sight for the extension of multidirectional lines of flight.

Following posthumanist scholars such as Sylvia Wynter, Karen Barad, and Cary Wolfe, this essay proposes a collection of aesthetic insights on composition (line, colour, texture, shape, and subject matter), gathered in an abstract painter's studio as fieldwork towards a posthuman conception of abstract painting. In contrast to much creative and scholarly work since the 1960s, this conception affirms the importance of formalism in painting, though it does so through a methodology of *care/full looking*, which traces the contingency of formal relationships so that a more robust ethico-onto-epistemology emerges.² In posthuman painting, I consider form relationally and iteratively, so that it axiomatically establishes an ethical entanglement between being and knowing. Developed through practices of critical perception, a posthuman account of abstract painting decentres notions of human exception through reflection on the relational, rather than fixed, quality of form.

To look with care is to observe the dissolving line between independent things—figure and ground. It is to witness the peculiarity of form as it erodes an idea of autonomous bodies.³ These formal observations decentre subjects from the very form that they appear composed of. Stable representations are destabilized as single “agential cuts” where the observer necessitates the observed and not the other way around.⁴

A studio practice of *care/full* looking revives abstract painting from the reductive and essentializing tendencies evoked throughout modernism to attend to the fluctuation of heterogenous forces that manifest a composition—acknowledging the queerness of form itself as a non-conforming shapeshifter.⁵ “Can we really afford not to think about composition now,” contemporary painter Amy Sillman asks, “when we seem surrounded by the decomposition and deformation of bodies and social structures?”⁶ Line is the architecture of form that makes shapes both positive and void, simultaneously corporeal and implied: a theatre of relations that form and inform on a knot of topography in formation.

In a posthuman context, abstract painting is retheorized as a practice of radical care that, through critical perception, disrupts normative conceptions and reproductions of Western constitutions of bodies and being. It is a reimagination of the “purity” of Greenbergian formalism from static manifestation to shimmering contamination, an ethico-onto-epistemological position on matter that illuminates not only a relational conception of composition, but, likewise, the relationality within and between social, political, and ecological bodies.⁷ Ethico-onto-epistemology is an ethics of indeterminacy—a body of knowledge that acknowledges the dissolution of the body for relations in flux. There is reparation at the foundation of such observations. *Care/full* looking dispenses with exceptions of autonomous bodies, the ascetics of borders and barricades, to acknowledge bodies as variegated, heterogenous configurations. To

tell a story of composition as an interlinking extension of seemingly independent forms is a Copernican leap of centres to peripheries.⁸

Composition: Fieldwork Towards a Posthuman Conception of Abstract Painting

I. Line

A line is a punctuation between light and shadow, the division between wake and sleep, an expanse of fracturing planes, an uneven topology of exterior facades, the flow of water, a break in the ice, an advancing coast, an intersection of decomposition and regeneration. Line is the delicate containment of life, a registering pulse, a walking path for bodies, eyes, and hands in the dark, the bones of drawing,⁹ the architecture of thought—a habit, a direction, a pattern of behaviour.

A line is a sentence, a circumference, a shifting cartography of imperial control. Animated by elation and fatigue, lines are the expansion and contraction of skin—a scratch, a stretchmark, a tear, the folding of inside and out, a mobius strip. A line is the crossing of territories and personal boundaries, the persistent impression of things unsettled yet bound together in an uneven distribution of form. It encloses possibilities of perception, a subjectivity that refines an object of attention to a singular position of fact, but this line of thought is porous—malleable and inconclusive. It is a sociogenic trace of enclosure that is historically drawn,¹⁰ a fiction systemic yet radically contingent to differentiation, mutation, and dissent.

Line evokes the impossibility of two forms touching; it is an edge between bodies that marks a contoured shape of relation—of love, or hate, or reciprocity. Line is a carving out of space, a reversal of ground, a break between forms that does not solidify separation but illuminates an entanglement of interrelation. On one scale a line is a border, but on another scale

a line is a field—open to vast microbial networks, chemicals, UV rays, words, and shadows. A line is never only a line; it is a manifold event—a ripple of relations across a field in flux.

II. Colour

Colour is relational, and these relationships, these fluctuations of form that illuminate a shape's surface, are primary sources for re-storying the world.¹¹ Formalist theory—seemingly esoteric, enigmatic, historically coded disciplinary knowledge—is a toolkit for a posthumanist paradigm, an attentional prosthetics for critical perception, a sharpening of senses as the arming of oneself against a brutally insensitive present.¹² Colour is biologically and socially constituting: a matter of perspective—stable and symbolic, concrete, associative, and transparent. It is a mirage of micro-expressions and macro-aggressions—a social construction of stop and go, the crushing tone of watching an oil spill grow. Colour defines the shifts between nuance and void. It is an economy of taste—both toxic and intoxicating, a resource for capital and control, light and dark, cool and warm, a division of boundaries that both disrupts and integrates wholes.

Colour is the advancing and receding of atmospheric lines of sight and its ever-increasing absence is the technophilic capture of all the wavelengths of light. It maintains implicit and explicit relationships, simultaneously translucent and opaque. Hue is an “existence without standing,”¹³ wavering between loud and nuanced, tangible and sensed. It is the oscillation, absorption, and differentiation of light.

Two pieces of paper overlap—one Cobalt blue, the other a Cerulean hue. Two bodies touching, their boundaries of colour informing one another. The attraction and repulsion of analogous blues, of varying temperatures and intensities, imply depth and distance. This “push-pull”¹⁴ of pictorial space, a founding tenet of modernist abstraction, is not a modernist reduction but a metaphysics of interconnectedness that produces emergent forms¹⁵—of intensity and calm,

illusion and fact. A discrepancy of value, temperature, and tone, two blues together relay depth perception and fluctuate as a performance of their own.

III. Texture

Texture is both corporeal and implied, solid and unstable. In painting, it can be touched as an impasto of cracks and crevices, a pocked surface of ridges and ravines. But also, it is an illusion—a mimetic device, a self-referential phantom of thought that brings forth worlds.¹⁶ Illusion is painting's most formidable texture to reflect and infect knots of knowledge formations through a seduction of surface, soft and sinuous as silk. Porcelain-like paint stirs the intangible, inequitable experience of embodied understanding.¹⁷

Texture is a legibility, a proof of both the witnessed and sublime; it is an index of temporality, a collection of beats. Texture is a lattice-like skin, a barrier and a sponge: it is both the impression of a tightly fitting watch and the striations of liquid as it sets to solid over centuries of otherwise unmarked time.

Texture, a perceptual phenomenon, is sensed as a haptic event with affective power.¹⁸ We touch it like a wool blanket, with “fingery eyes,”¹⁹ and its many associations live in our body. In painting, it moves us to its surface and substance, its silhouette and swell. Painting recalls texture so vividly that it is an actant, a thing, that contains its own vibrancy, its own liveness, “enmeshed in a fortuitous assemblage of other (especially nontext) bodies.”²⁰ Flat and voluminous, attractive and repulsive, texture is everything and nothing—solid and space. Texture becomes line, becomes shape, becomes shadow; within an iterative effect appearance is fixed (as a single, fragmented cut).

IV. Shape

Speaking is the domain of figuration, but the shape of shape²¹ is a silence, an abstract painter's punctuation for reflection: stiff, solid, delicate, and indefinite—an offering of space for unarticulated bodies of historically underrepresented forms. A synchronous occupation of multiple terrains, shape is full with “quantized indeterminacies”²²—emptiness, and void. Shape is an ever-expanding inconsistency of associations, a simultaneity of faces and spheres—a singular yet archetypal gesture of emotion, a contour, and a dimension in motion. A shape radiates exquisite rage and fear, disquiet and delight. It is the face of chaos, a virtual trace. Stoic yet never fixed, shape is a transfiguration; a protrusion and collapsing of configuration; a constellation of colour, planes, and positionality; a chimera of absolute definition in an ever-unfolding state of variation.

Shape is the holding of tension between friend and foe, a temporal surface and substance of ebb and flow—non-talk, “unthought,”²³ a contesting of the logic of chronological time.²⁴ Shape flattens observation into a plane of smooth space, animating the possibilities of an excess of form, an accumulation of forces, a strange topology in flux. Everything that exceeds representation is a shape and a shape is the delineation of everything representable. It is a borderline of difference, texture, colour, and tone that is a surface facade of the most enigmatic matter, an active ambiguity of anchored physicality. Shape is a carrier of opinions and feelings, indifferent of their texture, colour, and tone. It is a suspension of stance to hold space for exception, mutation, and change. Shape flickers the unresolved emergence of matter, an architectural intensity of internal and external fluctuations, a reaction of what Barad terms, the “intra-action” of objects in space.

V. Subject(s) Matter

Whose eyes were the original meditators of taste, of bodies, of boundaries, and the natural world? Icons of a Western humanism proliferate as Cartesian cuts where representations, “words and things,” systematize all.²⁵ Eden and evolution conflate into a single story of origin, a massive narrating apparatus, as a doctrinal view: a weapon of a mass destruction in the expansion of a two-dimensional Man, a program always primed to enact a hierarchy of truth.

In painting, abstraction is a space unique unto itself. It is present and full with pictorial and sensorial content but is simultaneously empty and relays no concrete information. It is a battleground of subject matter where matters of subject become matters of sovereignty. A hotly contested concern in the history of abstract painting, subjects matter only as actors of creation and consumption—for their transactions of cognitive exchange. Bodies of representation make up bodies of information, institutions in their international stakes. They are the manifestation, the machination, of capital and control—of Man1 and Man2 that breed and actualize as the becoming of intentions, ideas, and effects.²⁶ Subject matter moves as an infection of ideas. These embodied epistemologies are resolutions of bodies of knowledge that emerge in micro and macro effects.

A subject is a formulation of form conforming to the force of human will. An intention made manifest through plastic materiality that sculpts the plasticity of the human brain. Subject matter is built up as surface on/to support as a text within the human imaginary; it infiltrates bodies as concentrations of collected and recollected thoughts, as contagions—the concatenations of human will.

Perspectival space seems a “deep fake past,”²⁷ where the colouring of history translates as a linear lens of volumetric MAN—an autonomous view, an aggression of form—reproducing

conceptions and receptions of human exception. What would dissolve if linear perception unravelled? If representations of God, Evolution, and Capital ceased to exist, could figures of authority still authorize force in the dark? A grand fracturing of an enlightened eye is a mutation of perspective that unsettles the definition between volume and void.

Can abstract painting be the technology that undoes an underlying philosophy of representation in the circulation of global consumptions and control? This undoing might work at the incongruencies of our molecular machinery, wriggling into our genetic code, infecting and affecting knots of knowledge formations, modes of linear perception—disrupting normative thinking that might give way to heterogeneous, intersectional modalities of being, or new cosmologies of seeing.

Can abstract painting be an “unthought” that interrupts the linearity of conscious causality—a narrative of human exceptional actors? Can it be a technology to address, with a viral pervasivity, the carelessness of a technological Metaverse in its ever-advancing capture and capitalizing of attention? Can an unravelling of representational regimes become a stop in the circulation and flow of homo oeconomicus?²⁸ A counter emergence of ontological in/determinacy?²⁹

Working from the understanding that we are always, first technological beings, I imagine abstract painting as a piece of technology that is a culturally constructed tool for critical perception, a prosthetic for looking that enables access to the relational quality of form. *Care/full* looking is a practice that develops a posthuman conception of abstract painting as a “first-aid kit” to address the carelessness of “our current technocultural way of being.”³⁰ It is a practice of looking that attends to the intra-action between formal relationships within composition in order to reconnect self and other through a focused attention to the troubled matter of subjects and how

they matter (materialize) as migrations of form. This act of care—a political act of repair³¹—disarms our current foothold of representational perception, so that one might discover an ethics of entanglement embedded within a performative conception.

***Care/full* Looking**

Art history aside but inside the vectors of Western abstraction is an “epistemicide” of peripheral thought³²—line, colour, texture, and shapes pillaged from “philosophical terrain[s] already occupied by indigenous epistemologies.”³³ To reconceive abstraction as a becoming across boundaries, as a becoming with many, is to confront the colonial legacy of practices of appropriations; it is to repatriate stories of form, once sworn to the galleries of the European avant-garde, back to the worlds that originally brought them into being.³⁴ To trace the lineage of abstraction is to surrender stories of Western autonomy, authorship, and innovation for a prehistory of abstract lines of sight that were always already “radically quiet”³⁵ yet radically full, teeming with a spaciousness for something else to arise.

To hone the “situated knowledges” of a painter’s studio is to expand on formalist concerns of composition and embrace making kin of all kinds—to, in fact, become “oddkin” with the animate materiality of edges, colours, and shadows.³⁶ Looking with care illuminates an ethics embedded within line, colour, texture, and shape as the iterative motion of a world manifesting. It is an ethical practice that is its own call towards stewardship and reciprocity.

Care/full looking is to see the secrets that a painting gives away on the surface of its support: it is a posthuman pedagogical tool that articulates, through differentiation, how the form of an abstract painting reveals the flatness of representational philosophy—an epistemological system of knowledge that is both linear and exceptionalist, developed from “cartesian habit[s] of mind.”³⁷ To encounter the world through a representationalist lens is a mode of classification that

cuts up and divides entities through “the ontologically closed domain of consciousness, reason, reflection, and so on.”³⁸ It is a philosophy that emerges from Descartes’s theory of evolution where Man is the sole inheritor of the world and whom, through his capacity to form rational thought, contains the soul of the world.

These are the “fantasies of disembodiment and autonomy inherited from humanism.”³⁹ Such fantasies form an epistemology of relata severed from relations, a taxonomy of individual entities, an origin story that crowns the human exceptional, which seems a rather dangerous position to proceed from, one might conclude, in our rapidly ascending conclusion.

These accumulations of insights are an accelerating force; a gestation of marks, time, pigments, and horse hair; comprising tempers of varying intensity that mutate from subject matter to matters of subjecthood that “uncouples from itself, shades or snaps into something else.”⁴⁰ Human flesh, teacups, trees, independent bodies of autonomous things are sets of assumptions in play—performing an ethics of bodies, the touching of territories, the violation of boundaries, a differentiation of form where the edge of darkness dissolves into patterns of diffracted light; cartographic distinctions of figure and ground dissolve.

“Why do we think that the existence of relations requires relata?” asks physicist Karen Barad.⁴¹ The erosion of independent bodies’ “epistemological ruptures” wear at the strongholds of a humanist exceptionalism, giving way to an ethics woven into the interactivity of lines and planes, shapes and their shadows.⁴² To observe with care is to enquire into the relational nature of bodies that affect and effect one another, that are the result of their ongoing autopoietic manifestations. Without relata, the independence of exceptional bodies natur/ally disappear, where qualities are the allies of configuration. To pause and be critical of aesthetic relationships is a practice of *care/full* looking that can be applied to more complex situations.

Divisions are concepts, but I still have to navigate sharp edges in the dark. The contours of property are drawn between self and other, policed in institutions of love and war. The curve of my body is a border contingent to the chemical, biological, social, architectural, political, and poetic context that it touches. We are bodies closed off only at a meter-scale reality.⁴³ Seduced by the idea of possessive individualism, bodies are translated into the division of boundaries: private property, state and nationhood, subject and object, land and sea, earth and sky. As if what pollutes the land cannot touch the sea or what is buried in the earth will not infiltrate the sky. As if my fence line seals off my plot of land, the worms and birds and everything that falls between. As if somehow a cartographic distinction can be made while crossing through a rocky mountain ridge or trails of Swiss and Italian Alp terrains.

To see with care is to register the mercurial quality of appearances as they shimmer, an entanglement of figure and ground. To render with care is to attend to this oscillation, addressing with equal attention both the continuation between positive and negative, light and dark (iteratively this informs what things are composed of). The warmth of skin curves into space via a palette of shadowy violet. An edge is articulated only through its abutting plane. To see a still-life with *care/full* looking is to observe the relationship from vessel to table, table to wall, wall to shadow—a methodology for critical analysis that can be extrapolated outside of the exercise.

The shadow of a tree informs (performs) the quality of the soil—a shape and its shadow cannot be divided. What grows in the shade of the tree affects the ecology of the tree and this shape is contingent to the rotation and spinning of the earth, the volatility of the wind, the cycle and the labyrinthine nature of mycelium networks knotted within its roots. The representation of a tree speaks only of a single, fragmented cut—a momentary fractured snapshot of an enigmatic web of constituents.

In attuning ourselves to the compositional attributes of form as they flicker between the concrete and the indeterminate, bodies are revealed as variegated, uneven, and speculative topologies. But what is gained through this honing of critical perception? And how can practices of looking play a role in a yet unrealized egalitarian future? Perhaps, simply, formal analysis through *care/full* looking reveals bodies as non-singular entities “contiguous and co-constructed,”⁴⁴ situated within and in relation to other bodies. This is an insight that erodes the anthropocentric perspective of possessive individualism, which divides and conquers, privileges and paves over, everything outside its purview.

To show meaning as relational, to link between hand and shadow, self and other is to hone in on “the rich multiplicities and topologies of a heterogeneously and non-teleologically connected world.”⁴⁵ Learning to look with care is “a non-linear [re]making,”⁴⁶ where what might seem fugitive to matters of subjects are discursive not in their separability but in their relationality. To observe actively through *care/full* looking is to account for nomadic relationships on the periphery of a single field of vision. Chiaroscuro is but one of many ways that visual artists see and teach others to see relationally, however there are multiple ways that abstract painting makes this legible.

To see form as a multiplicity is to widen the scope of engagement with the world around us, where singular perspectives and normative attitudes butt against the performative materiality of stable ground. This investigation is essential not only to practices of looking but also to practices of representation, where “rendering is a practice of ‘worlding’” that collapses “metaphor and materiality.”⁴⁷ The crucial acknowledgement here being that those representations “secure some kinds of objects, meanings, and forms of life, to the exclusion of

others” and are seductive enough to illuminate entire fields of knowledge while extinguishing the possibility of others.⁴⁸

To divide the world into relata is to rely on habits of representational determination that focus on individual entities such as atoms, Man, nations, and corporations as single matters of concern. For Barad, representationalism occupies a disproportional amount of importance in our determination of meaning, where an emphasis on “words and things” do not account for the motion of “material-discursive forces” shaping and reshaping an evanescence of being.⁴⁹ To hone in on materiality as an interwoven phenomenon is an insight that erodes the pathology of an “autonomous self-possessed subject.”⁵⁰ It quantifies the generative aspect of difference through illuminating the diffractive capacity of composition. Shaping through difference is the touching of autonomous forms, a delicate dance between virus and host—a liveliness of mycelium and trees, an overlapping of boundaries, an unravelling of form, a queer unfolding of a scalar field where every difference is an iterative shifting of shapes between line, colour, and the texture of form.

Being pressed to visualize the contours of an ethico-onto-epistemology is to live and tell a story of living as a set of relations. This is a story that interrupts the narrative of my own exceptionalism. It is a story that emerges by way of lines to paper, paint to canvas: an exodus of the everyday that is not an escape but a concentration of care. To reinstate form as a formulation of “interactive ecologies,” “process-oriented ontolog[ies],”⁵¹ is an act—a critical resource—that inspects the “overrepresented” conditions and reproductions of bodies and being;⁵² it is but one aesthetic possibility for “how we might give humanness a different future.”⁵³

Conclusion

Abstract painting matters as a socially constructed tool for seeing. It is a technology for looking at the relational qualities of a mercurial world. *Care/full* looking is a way of thinking with Barad's exploration of the indeterminacy and queerness of quantum scale reality and is about putting language to the indeterminate and intra-active nature of a painter's studio and beyond. Like line, the colour, texture, and shape of an abstract composition exist not as independent bodies but inform as a compilation of relationships: the coming together of component parts, as the materialization of emerging matter. But this topology is not fixed. As a line wavers between contour and edge it displays the indeterminate nature of its body. Learning to see relationally, through a posthuman practice of *care/full* looking, decentres representational modes of passive possessivity that have been integral to the sustainment of the "profitable brutalities" of Man2 at the expense of everything else.⁵⁴ To see form as relational is an emergence from a haze of representational narration. It is to acknowledge a radical otherness—yet interconnectedness—of all things, simultaneously fashioning and refashioning a temporal present.

Care/full looking entails a realignment of perception from habits of subject/object differentiation to an attentiveness towards the allied nature of form, which is to observe a continuation, an integration, between bodies as they manifest an entanglement of being. This is a cultivation of ethics through perception where a sensing body is confronted with the stakes of its own contingency. To see form as iterative, connected, and in relationship to everything else, reveals the instability of autonomous bodies and illuminates their alliance. Practices of *care/full* looking stimulate response/ability towards a critical awareness of the entanglement of being—a

self-consciousness that is, in itself, a response to Barad's call for matter's ability to respond. To see the companionship of form is to see connections between animate and inanimate materiality.

The simplicity of a line within an abstract painting mobilizes a simultaneity of sight, where a line is always itself and other: an edge, a colour, a shape, or a shadow. This is not a modernist reduction but a fluctuation of form, the wavering of visual perception as it advances and recedes, expands and contracts. To see the contingent quality of composition through *care/full* looking is a "learning to learn"⁵⁵ the companionship of form, where interdependent kin of all kinds animate the multiplicity and entangled topology of a heterogeneous world: a process-orientated ontology that can't help but evade the possibility of representation. Posthuman painting rethinks a modernist, formal sensibility of purity to contamination, activating an alternative lens for perception that reveres a display of disparate forces mixing, and manifesting as a continuous performance of relations.

¹ Katherine McKittrick, "Unparalleled Catastrophe For Our Species? Or, to Give Humanness a Different Future: Conversations," in *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*, edited by Katherine McKittrick, 9–89 (Duke University Press, 2015), 12. This point builds on Katherine McKittrick's exploration of Sylvia Wynter's writing on narrative and its relationship to ideas of humanness.

² Karen Barad, "Intra-actions," interview by Adam Kleinman, *Mousse Magazine* 34 (2012): 77. Ethico-onto-epistemology is Karen Barad's term, which denotes the inseparability between ethics, ontology, and epistemology.

³ I use the word bodies here in the broadest sense to include all human and non-human, animate and inanimate, form and formless bodies.

⁴ Karen Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28, no. 3 (2003): 815. "Agential cut" is distinguished from "cartesian cut" in that the former infers relata are the ongoing result of particular relations where the latter infers the inherent separability between subject and object, 815.

⁵ Karen Barad, "Nature's Queer Performativity," *Qui Parle* 19, no. 2 (Spring/Summer): 147. Following Barad's discussion of, "nature's queer performances"—in the context of posthuman painting—queerness refers to the unfixed quality, or appearance, of formal attributes within composition. A line "gives empirical evidence that identity is not fixed and apparent, but performative" as it wavers between an edge, border, colour, shadow, and back again 143.

⁶ Amy Sillman, *Faux Pas: Selected Writings and Drawings* (After 8 Books, 2020), 51.

⁷ Barad, "Nature's Queer Performativity," 147. This point is further articulated in Barad's investigation of "queer

quantum ontological performances” of “macroscopic entities” to develop an appreciation of queerness “across divisions of scale and familiarity” (147).

⁸ McKittrick, “Unparalleled Catastrophe For Our Species?” 46. This reference to a Copernican leap thinks with Wynter in her exploration of Frantz Fanon’s “new Copernican leap” instigated through the “self-reflexive” conception of W.E.B. Dubois’s “double consciousness” (46). To see form as relational and not independently constituted, I argue, is a “self-reflexive” consciousness of the doubling of form as both solid and unstable, particle and wave.

⁹ Sillman, *Faux Pas*, 91. Line as the bones of drawing is an idea building on Amy Sillman’s investigation of Abstract Expressionism where she likens drawing to “the bones of thinking itself.”

¹⁰ Zimitri Erasmus, “Sylvia Wynter’s Theory of the Human: Counter-, not Post-humanist,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 37, no. 6 (2020): 9. The idea of a line as the refinement of fact thinks with Fanon and Wynter’s concept of “sociogeny” where lines of experience, thought, and sight impress into the psyche of the colonised and colonizer as “psychopathologies” (“ways of knowing and seeing”) that are precarious and can be interrupted.

¹¹ Katherine McKittrick, “Yours in the Intellectual Struggle: Sylvia Wynter and the Realization of the Living,” in *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*, edited by Katherine McKittrick, 1–8 (Duke University Press, 2015), 4. McKittrick suggests that what Wynter’s most recent insights give us is the possibility of using narrative to reimagine humanness as a verb rather than a noun.

¹² Nicholas Fox Weber, “Forward,” in *Interaction of Color: New Complete Edition*, ix–xi (Yale University Press, 2013), xi. Webber explains that Donald Judd’s contention is that the most crucial point of Albers’s *Interaction of Color* was the establishment that an increased sensitivity and awareness of colour gives us a “weapon against forces of insensitivity and brutalization.” Weber, P.

¹³ Fred Moten, “Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh)” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 112, no. 4 (2013): 738.

¹⁴ Sillman, *Faux Pas*, 48.

¹⁵ Simone Bignall, and Daryle Rigney, “Indigeneity, Posthumanism and Nomad Thought: Transforming Colonial Ecologies,” in *Posthuman Ecologies: Complexity and Process after Deleuze*, eds. Rosi Braidotti and Simone Bignall, 159–181 (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2018), 164. Following Simone Bignall’s and Daryle Rigney’s exploration of indigenous knowledge paradigms, formalism, as explored in my essay, accounts for the fluctuation of heterogenous forces that manifest as matter rather than the reductive or essentializing tendency towards form evoked throughout modernism.

¹⁶ Cary Wolfe, *What Is Posthumanism?* (University of Minnesota Press, 2010), xxii.

¹⁷ Jacques Rancière, “Politics Equals Aesthetics: A Conversation Between Jacques Rancière and Mark Foster Gage,” in *Aesthetics Equals Politics: New Discourses Across Art, Architecture, and Philosophy*, ed. Mark Foster Gage, 9–25 (MIT Press, 2019), 11. Embodied understanding, suggested here as inequitably experienced, builds upon Jacques Rancière notion of the “distribution of the sensible.” Rancière’s distribution of the sensible refers to the opportunity an individual has for sense experience and the correlation of that capacity to their assigned class. He illuminates this correlation by referring to Plato and the worker’s role in politics. Rancière questions who can participate in politics if the worker does not have the time. He determines that politics is actualized in taking time that is otherwise not available to take. In an interview with Rancière where these ideas are discussed in the context of art, Mark Foster Gage terms the moment where there is a disassociation of the eyes from the working body and the worker reclaims agency over sensory experience as the “retribution of the sensible” 11. This is a pivotal moment in emancipation for Rancière, where sensory equality precedes social equality, which suggests that an aesthetic revolution would proceed a social revolution.

¹⁸ Isabelle Graw, *The Love of Painting: Genealogy of a Success Medium* (Sternberg Press, 2018), 20.

¹⁹ Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet*, (University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 249.

²⁰ Jane Bennett, "Systems and Things: A Response to Graham Harman and Timothy Morton," *New Literary History* 43, no. 2 (2012): 232.

²¹ Sillman, *Faux Pas*, 76. *The Shape of Shape* was the name of Amy Sillman's 2019 curated exhibition at the Moma in New York. I use the phrase here in the same way that Sillman evokes the conception of shape.

²² Karen Barad, "On Touching: The Alterity Within," conference presentation, Amsterdam, Netherlands, March 2018, posted by Stadium Generale Rietveld Academie, June 27, 2018, YouTube, 23:15. <https://youtu.be/u7LvXswjEBY>. Karen Barad evokes the space of the void with an explanation of virtual particles, which are quantized indeterminacies-in-action. That is to say, the space of the void is never empty but brimming with possibility.

²³ Katherine Hayles, *Unthought: The Power of the Cognitive Nonconscious* (University of Chicago Press), 1. Katherine Hayles makes reference to Ursula Le Guin's 1969 science fiction novel *The Left Hand of Darkness* as a gesture towards the space of knowing that precedes consciousness. For the fictional religious group in Le Guin's novel the Handdarata, this space is "unthought."

²⁴ Rosi Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge* (Polity Press, 2019), 126. *Chronos* is the conception of linear time upheld by the "Royal" or "Major" sciences as posited by Deleuze and Guattari and then taken up by Rosi Braidotti in *Posthuman Knowledge* as contrasted to *Aion* time, which she attributes to peripheral and "minor" knowledge formations integral to an ethical transformation of the Critical Humanities.

²⁵ Karen Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity," 812. Barad contests the representational reliance on "words" and "things" that fails to adequately account for the fullness of nature, bodies, and materiality in the process of becoming.

²⁶ McKittrick, "Unparalleled Catastrophe For Our Species?" 10. Wynter uses the figures of Man1 and Man2 as the embodiments of Western foundational origin stories—narratives deeply embedded within contemporary conceptions of the human. Man1, first developing out of a pre-Renaissance theological order derived from medieval Europe's Latin-Christian knowledge systems, later evolves into the figure of Man2, an eponymous figuration of the Western bourgeoisie's *homo oeconomicus*.

²⁷ Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, "Discriminating Data," Lecture filmed at Simon Fraser University Public Square, Posted by Kampnagel Hamburg, August 14, 2021, YouTube, 11:08, <https://www.sfu.ca/publicsquare/events/2021/wendy-hui-kyong-chun.html>. In her talk "Discriminating Data," Chun refers to the digital archive of algorithmic "histories" as a "deep fake past" that by virtue of its over representational capacity has the potential to erase peripheral and alternative versions of history and epistemologies.

²⁸ McKittrick, "Unparalleled Catastrophe For Our Species?" 10. *Homo oeconomicus* (or Man2 as imagined by Wynter) is a "Macro origin" figure that evolves from Man1 into the embodiment of a Western bourgeoisie justification for "accumulation in the name of (economic) freedom" 10.

²⁹ Erasmus, "Sylvia Wynter's Theory of the Human," 2. The notion of counter emergence builds on Wynter's idea of the "Third Emergence" and "counter cartography" as explored by Zimitri Erasmus, where there lays in waiting the possibility of a reconstitution of origins of human life and the world as non-linear.

³⁰ Marcel O'Gorman, *Necromedia* (University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 25.

³¹ Jenny Odell, *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy* (Melville House Publishing, 2019), 23. Odell proposes via activist Audre Lorde that self-care is "an act of political warfare" 23. Here, *aesthetic criticality* as a honing of one's own perceptibility, is positioned as an act of self-care in the sense that Lorde insists.

³² Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemicide* (Paradigm Publishers,

2014), 92. Epistemicide is a term coined by Boaventura de Sousa Santos that refers to the intentional erasure of knowledge systems as a cognitive act of warfare in European expansion and genocide.

³³ Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge*, 160.

³⁴ Juanita Sundberg, "Decolonizing Posthumanist Geographies," *Cultural Geographies* 21, no. 1 (2014): 35. Sundberg uses the notion of performance to account for how knowledge is produced. She says, "I identify two performances enacted in posthumanist theories that work to constitute posthumanist geographies as Eurocentric: silence about location and silence about Indigenous epistemes" 35. This essay acknowledges the appropriation of abstract form by early European modernist artists to locate a formalist investigation first in the relational ontologies of Indigenous epistemologies, rather than becoming an account of only the Western canon of abstraction.

³⁵ Sillman, *Faux Pas*, 88.

³⁶ Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Duke University Press, 2016), 4. To become "oddkin" with the formal attributes of painting is to think with Haraway's invitation to "become-with" "...in unexpected collaborations and combinations, in hot compost piles" (4).

³⁷ Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity," 807.

³⁸ Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism*, xxv.

³⁹ Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism*, 48.

⁴⁰ Stefan Helmreich, "What Was Life? Answers from Three Limit Biologies," *Critical Inquiry* 37, no. 4 (2011): 694.

⁴¹ Barad. "Posthumanist Performativity," 812.

⁴² McKittrick, "Yours in the Intellectual Struggle," 1. McKittrick refers to Wynter's ability to draw attention to epistemological ruptures that impede narratives of Man.

⁴³ Joshua Dicaglio, *Scale Theory: A Nondisciplinary Inquiry* (University of Minnesota Press, 2021), 26. Meter-scale reality is how Joshua Dicaglio terms the scale at which Homo sapiens perceive their whole "lifeworld."

⁴⁴ Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge*, 127.

⁴⁵ Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 27.

⁴⁶ Erasmus, "Sylvia Wynter's Theory of the Human," 2.

⁴⁷ Natasha Myers, *Rendering Life Molecular: Models, Modelers, and Excitable Matter* (Duke University Press, 2015), 181.

⁴⁸ Myers, 181.

⁴⁹ Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity," 810.

⁵⁰ O'Gorman, *Necromedia*, 16.

⁵¹ Bignall and Rigney, "Indigeneity, Posthumanism and Nomad Thought," 159. Bignall and Rigney question the extent to which the "new Humanities" include long pre-established Indigenous conceptions of interconnectivity between human and nonhuman, animate and inanimate materiality within a new materialist ethics, 170. Through a becoming aware of form as relational, this essay attempts to resituate humans as form and in relation to form—entangled within a process-oriented ontology.

⁵² Denise Ferreira da Silva, "Before Man: Sylvia Wynter's Rewriting of the Modern Episteme," in *Sylvia Wynter:*

On Being Human as Praxis, ed. Katherine McKittrick, 89–105 (Duke University Press, 2015), 101. Overrepresented refers to “the human—overrepresented as Man—that is now ruling the global symbolic reservoir and humanity” (101).

⁵³ McKittrick, “Unparalleled Catastrophe For Our Species?” 9.

⁵⁴ McKittrick, “Yours in the Intellectual Struggle,” 7.

⁵⁵ Sundberg, “Decolonializing Posthumanist Geographies,” 40. Sundberg distinguishes learning to learn from simply learning as the gathering of knowledge from being in the world, as a *walking with* or “participatory reciprocity, which frames knowledge as a social activity and entails learning to perceive and receive Indigenous epistemes as part of the geopolitical present” (40).

“The world needs togetherness and not separation. Love not suspicion. A common future, not isolation” –Etel Adnan (Obrist; Grosse 1:04)

Chapter Two: Always Beginning

Introduction

My artistic practice takes a process-orientated approach to painting, developed over a decade of experimenting with materials, motifs, and techniques. My paintings emerge slowly and are composed of interspersing compositions assembled through a collage-like method of layering paint. Rather than conveying information through practices of representation, my approach develops formal relationships through a process of abstracting. In this chapter, I discuss the role of process and artistic techniques in my methodology as I seek and find new visual relationships not through a process of knowing but as an exercise in attuning towards the entangled quality of form.

I am a painter that brings earnest political inquiry to the tracing of visual relationships. In this chapter, I discuss how I conflate techniques and motifs of personal and historical significance through the formal disjuncture of “overpainting” to create patterns of difference: deviations that produce textural intensities of variation, nuance, and surprise. As I explain in this chapter, this aesthetic approach takes note of a materialist perspective on how differences matter, and how matter manifests as the particularity of difference. Following modernism’s emphasis on formal relationships, my paintings in fact extend the utopian spirit of a modernist avant-garde, where the front line is ever-advancing in a search for novel modes of apprehension and being. As I paint and layers build, I am always beginning in a game of motifs and techniques that dynamically changes again and again. This is a practice of looking at differences together—a form of aesthetic resistance to an ever-increasing instrumentalization of division. For me, a

formalism of relationships is not a hedonistic indulgence of facades but a contemplative act that looks *care/fully* towards the way things appear. I position *care/full* looking as both a methodological approach for formal analysis that allows us to see how edges are a shared contour, and a contemplative act that in noticing such a thing we are forced to contend with its ethical, philosophical, ecological, and social consequences.

With a longstanding interest in formalism yet a critical view of its purist rhetoric, I aim with this research-creation project to unsettle the binary between abstraction and representation inherited from modernism. While I discuss this aim with more detail focusing on the stuff of content in Chapter Three (such as anecdote and personal stories), here I discuss it from the perspective of form (at the risk of creating an artificial division of my own between form and content for the sake of organizing chapter topics). In a Venn diagram, I imagine abstraction and representation as sites of artistic engagement that overlap. Rather than treat them as entirely separate aesthetic approaches, this thought experiment sees a shared plane between them. This plane of interference could perhaps signal literary critic and philosopher Fredric Jameson's once thought lost autonomous space of art—a passage between form and content that disrupts the symbolic order of the status quo. I use the word abstraction with this overlapping of genres in mind as I attempt to name things entangled in and beyond language, and I return to the process of abstracting less as a genre of painting and more as an aesthetic approach that denotes “a mode of relation in the world.”¹ To abstract, for me, is an aesthetic activity that decontextualizes and recontextualizes associative content through relationships. While it draws from the history of formalism, this approach to abstraction serves to entangle form and content, to contaminate bodies with words, and ultimately to “destabilize and redistribute sensible information.”² In challenging the binary between representation and abstraction, I position contemporary painting

as a *more-than-representational*³ method for thinking relationally—thinking with and through matter, perception, and affect.

Throughout this dissertation I refer to many modern and contemporary artists as contextual points of reference for my own artistic practice. In this chapter, I discuss Mary Weatherford, Julie Mehretu, Mark Bradford, Per Kirkeby, and Max Ernst—alongside my own works—who, as historian David Getsy might say, “queer” the distinction between abstraction and representation, developing an aesthetic approach that explores the overlapping of space, sociality, and subjectivity. This hybrid approach to artmaking is a “critical suspension of normativity and of assimilations into it.”⁴ These artists are abstract painters but not in a “purist” Greenbergian sense. Evoking the “impurity of abstraction as a strength [which is] often allied with, rather than mutually exclusive with, figurative and other representational practices” is to rethink modernist binaries beyond the purity of categorical distinction and situate formal painting as a particular and nuanced mode of “being and relating.”⁵

My project is thus aligned with other contemporary artists and philosophers’ renewed interest in composition, as it is a formalism to address some of the larger existential dilemmas of our time. An impending ecological collapse, the destabilization of social and political structures, and the terrifying frontier of rapidly advancing information technologies are crises that cannot be disassociated from one another. Treating the world’s problems as hierarchical and categorically distinct reinforces a modern pathology of epistemological division. Fostering perceptual acuity towards sites of intersection, however, might better attune us to the shared ground between “states of affairs.”⁶ There are no economies without a livable world, no citizenry without a polis, no technologies without civilizations. Art cannot exist without a viewer. In this chapter, I explore

how my research-creation project approaches formalism in a way that expands its disciplinary boundaries—as a mode of relating in the world.

I argue that by attending to the complementarity of form, painting provides alternative ways of looking and thinking about the world. To see colour as relational rather than as an autonomous form is what I call a *difference-relating* approach to looking that attunes perception to the simultaneity of things, where materials, ideas, and spaces manifest as the result of one another. Like the asymmetrical equilibrium achieved in the deeply saturated and mottled palette of a knotted Berber rug (an art form so revered in early modern art), variation in composition shows an aesthetics of relationships—a critical position from which to think through the relational aspect of oppositions. While I discuss the details of some of the motifs in my painting practice later in this chapter, what is important to note here is that, to abstract, for me, is to make space for my own embodied understanding of the world as it intersects with the land and other subjectivities. To play with figure-ground relationships is my mode of association in the world; it is a way of exploring where my edges overlap with others, and when my identity becomes a plane of shared experience.

Drawing on various conversations of entanglement theory within the expanded humanities, in this chapter, I discuss how my project looks at art—specifically the material-discursive domain of painting—to explore what Karen Barad calls a relational ontological understanding of the world. Beginning with form as a material and relational narrative embedded within modernism, I extend the discourse of modern art and formal analysis into the broader constellation of postcolonial, feminist, Indigenous, posthuman, and poststructuralist thought. Then, in the latter half of this chapter, I unravel my painting process and explain the way non-linear, improvisatory compositions borrow strategies from collage to set up several series of

unlikely relationships. My artistic process draws from the history of abstraction to ask, what is the significance of painting today? From this point of departure, I consider how we might understand formalism beyond modernism and how it operates as a contemporary art strategy. Dissolving centres into peripheries, contemporary formalism here becomes an expanded site of encounter where matter and meaning emerge as entangled processes.

From Empty Space to Entanglement

Today, in the wake of debates around the Anthropocene and new materialist philosophies, artists are increasingly turning to hybrid strategies that foreground interconnection over autonomy. As Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing writes, “the time has come for new ways of telling true stories beyond civilization’s first principles. Without Man and Nature, all creatures can come back to life.”⁷ Contemporary artists conflate genres as a powerful tool against the homogenizing constructs of modernism’s grand narratives. Working across disciplines and with unconventional materials, they subvert the binary classifications that once marked earlier generations of art, reimagining painting as a field of relational encounter that collapses boundaries and connects subjectivities. Following artists such as Mary Weatherford, Julie Mehretu, and Mark Bradford my paintings likewise straddle landscape, abstraction, and collage as a post-genre approach. This hybrid strategy foregrounds the material-discursive entanglements of painting, eroding the barriers between nature and culture, form and content, matter and ideology.

In her recent essay “Elements of a New Landscape,” art critic and historian Rebecca Solnit asserts that up until the early twentieth century, landscape painting was almost explicitly rendered as a backdrop for human drama. She says that “the ideal world of the pastoral is always in the past and [consequently] has its parallels in Eden.”⁸ Although it has its roots in the

Christian Genesis story, the narrative of an Edenic wilderness was picked up during the Enlightenment by Jean Jacques Rousseau and buried within an anthropological “foundational story” that continues to persist today.⁹ The idea of the pastoral became positioned against the progress of modernity and consequently became a subtext for much of the cultural production during the twentieth century. The Eden narrative played a role in the development of twentieth century abstract painting as a story that underpinned the modernist assumption of a nature/culture divide.¹⁰ The autonomy of abstraction was an Edenic counterpoint to the harshness of industrialisation that marked the postwar period.¹¹

Postmodern and decolonial critique dismantled the once totalizing narratives of autonomy and empty space in modernism, opening a crevasse of hybrid artistic approaches. Without man and nature, minority subjectivities and stories from the periphery began to repopulate the discipline. In this spirit, Weatherford uses the language of abstracted landscapes in her large-scale paintings in combination with industrial materials, such as neon tube lights, to present alternative stories about humans and their connection to the material world. Both Mehretu and Bradford complicate the vernacular of postwar abstraction in their densely layered abstract compositions with geographically significant vestiges of their own identity. Contaminating its familiar materials and motifs with aspects of their own subjectivity, the artists reimagine contemporary painting as a site to deal with the entanglement of place and personhood.

In the face of the claim that painting traversed from a closed and hermeneutic past, reaching the height of sovereignty with aesthetic modernism, this chapter contends that all painting is foremost a medium of relationships. It uniquely enfolds space, time, and subjectivity as an interconnection between past and present, material and touch, subject and object, identity and place. By foregrounding formal relationships, in painting, indeterminacy surfaces as subject

matter: a refusal to resolve contradictions too quickly or to smooth over complexity becomes an ethical position emphatic to the operation of the medium. This ethic honours the unstable, entangled nature of experience itself—where rough edges evince relation, as constitutive becoming. In this sense an *expanded formalism* draws on insights from feminist, posthuman, and ecological thought as it resituates formalism as a practice of care and risk: a mode of attention that embraces relational process over aesthetic mastery. It is within this framework that composition emerges not as the ordering of discrete elements but as an interworking of forces—a point that becomes clearer when approached through the notion of assemblage.

Assemblage Theory: Naming Entanglements as Affects in Effect

My research-creation project is motivated by a practice-based interest in the workings of composition. I speculate that, like the philosophical structure of assemblage (as philosopher Jane Bennett differentiates from merely a collection of things), aesthetic composition is contingent upon the interworking of its formal relationships and their ambiguous connection to the viewer's embodied relationships beyond the canvas. In Weatherford's assemblage-like paintings, for example, gestural swaths of colour form the ground for the illuminated neon tubes that protrude from the compositions. Resonant with modernist painter Helen Frankenthaler's luminous colour field paintings, Weatherford's dynamic surfaces complicate painting's capacity to "feel" nature through the insertion of industrial materials. In both Frankenthaler and Weatherford's work, allusion, references, and material motifs intertwine in ways that produce assemblage in Bennett's sense—an active constellation of forces rather than a representation of discrete things. Yet Weatherford's hybrid forms extend this logic further, emerging as reconciliations of a nature-culture divide and as agents that draw out entanglement with manifest force. This understanding of the relational aspect of composition—where form is constituted as both a material and

discursive force—connects to larger debates on materiality that extend across the humanities, social sciences, and philosophy.

Emerging conversations with the so-called new materialisms bring together disparate voices in science, art, and critical theory to rethink the anthropocentric narrative of human-world relations, attempting instead to decentre the human and foreground the dynamic interrelations among “things.” Bennett, for example, proposes “assemblage” as the structure through which objects not only materialize but also exercise agency, repositioning them from the periphery of social and political life to central actants in the production of effectivity.¹² Thus, Bennett uses assemblage theory to decentre humans in causality and show how a more nuanced network of human and non-human bodies affect and ultimately effect one another. She defines an assemblage as the coming together of component parts in the formation of finite systems that work together as a temporary whole.¹³ These systems or assemblages, she says, are socially and politically significant, accounting for the unexplained power of objects. Assemblage theory challenges humancentric notions of will and conceptualizes an “animated materiality” that iteratively interacts to “enact real change.”¹⁴ In other words, the way we perceive reality is not fixed but rather iterative and constantly in flux. We comprehend through “assemblages” of heterogeneous parts with meaning that is fragmented and dependent upon the context in which it is encountered.

Object Oriented Ontologists (OOO) contend that all objects (a term that denotes everything from a coffee cup to global warming) exist within an “aesthetic dimension.”¹⁵ For philosopher Timothy Morton, politics is not only aided through the space of aesthetic experience but also originates from it. He claims that causality takes place within the “aesthetic dimension” and that sense experience is the condition that propels action into effect. Morton argues that all

objects contain “charisma,” a concept he likens to the Force in the popular film franchise *Star Wars*. For Morton, charisma is an identifiable aspect of the quantum energy field, particularly evident in the experience of art appreciation.¹⁶ For Bennett, this same force is what she terms “vitality” or “thing-power” where, for her, affect is the sensible and relatable quality between all bodies (human and non-human; animate and inanimate).¹⁷ Affect is the quality that enables touch between things; it is the force that moves affect into effect. Both philosophers reposition political action as a phenomenon that does not occur solely within a sphere of social relations but rather begins in the sensorial, or aesthetic dimension of the material world.

Movement takes place through sense experience, and this is a manifold event. The sensory impels consciousness, and consciousness impels action. Although in the humanities we tend to resist the idea that art—especially apolitical, or abstract art—is political, Morton argues that the aesthetic dimension is precisely the realm of causation.¹⁸ Both OOO and Bennett’s “vital materialism” arise from new understandings in quantum mechanics. The latest research in quantum field theory provides new insights into the materialization of matter—matter materializing iteratively and intra-actively “as the materialization of relationships.”¹⁹ For physicist Karen Barad, matter forms only through the network of relationships onto which it is exposed. Form is not a diverse range of individual entities but materializes as a result of the relations it takes part in. Therefore, form is never static but always in flux. For Morton and Bennett, not only does form manifest iteratively but all effectivity in fact results from an iterative interrelating mattering. For Morton, it is the energy field, now identifiable through particle physics, that enables the connector between objects; and for Bennett, affect is the sensible quality between things that adjoins them. A vast network of affective bodies is always in formation,

shaping the material world we know. For both Morton and Bennett, causality emerges from the relational affinities that matter has with other matter.

New materialist philosophers, scientists, and artists are rethinking the collective narrative regarding inert materiality to shift the once humancentric notion of will and causation beyond social and political institutions of power. The liveliness of materiality is an often-debated question in the discipline of the visual arts. Why does looking at art move us, and what are the larger social and political consequences of this affective experience? These are questions I return to later as I discuss my own artistic practice in more detail, but the broader significance of new materialist discourse to the visual arts in general is in the repositioning of aesthetics as a social and political matter. Assemblage theory articulates affect in effect. It theorizes the spaciousness of relationships where affect is an iterative quality of effectivity that makes things happen. For Barad, “entanglements are not a name for interconnectedness of all beings as one, but rather for specific material relations of the ongoing differentiating of the world.”²⁰ For myself, I see the viewer as entangled in an artwork’s assemblage, so rather than reproducing a set of ideas intended to mediate truth about the world, art’s openness becomes a touching of form. It enacts a kind of “vicarious causation” between things—a space between stories, between fixed ideas, where affect moves into effect.²¹

A Formalism of Relationships

In his treatise on postmodern culture, Jameson laments that nature and the unconscious were the final “footholds of critical effectivity” eroded in the break from modernism to postmodernism.²² For Jameson, the type of distance the concepts of nature and the unconscious provided, as separate from culture, were necessary binaries for a critique of modernist progress. He laments the loss of critical distance with the break from modernism to postmodernism, noting

that his contemporary moment flattened the possibility for the distinction between consumer culture and a critique of it. For Jameson, the break away from traditional ideologies meant everything merged to become flat and homogenized, marking the end of any possibility for space in the most literal sense.²³ But what if contemporary painting as a practice that explores nature and culture as one *is* its own semiautonomous space? What if it lives the type of space that Jameson feared might disappear altogether with the erosion of modernity's grand narratives?

For Jameson, the eroding distance between art and life meant that there could be no distance from culture and therefore no critique of it; however, today, painting that brings together a heterogenous array of references from both nature and culture into a single composition necessarily critiques the popular romanticized versions of an Edenesque wild. Painting that evokes the space of landscape is no longer indicative of the desire to reduce and behold nature; rather, it is an aesthetic strategy concerned with conflating categorical distinction. Artists addressing landscape today no longer imagine the genre as strictly referencing geographical terrain but are concerned with theoretical, embodied, and poetic space as well. This expanded evocation of landscape transforms the abstract atmospheric space of Greenberg's "opticality" from a reductive practice of essentializing form into an expression of an interconnectivity between things, closer, I contend, to what Bennett describes as the vitality of the "thing-power" of matter.²⁴ For philosopher Gilles Deleuze, abstraction enables the simultaneity of possibility rather than the flatness of homogeneity. In Greenberg's modernism, painting has nowhere left to go but to eventually be reduced to nothing, whereas for Deleuze, abstraction is "something with us and before us," where the possibilities for new ways to proceed are potentially infinite.²⁵

The intersection of genres in contemporary painting offers an opportunity to address interconnection rather than autonomy. My recent painting *Errant Drift* (2025) incorporates the

atmospheric space of landscape painting, the geometric forms of abstraction, and the evocation of personal gestures to present a semiautonomous space to address the overlapping of my own subjectivity with a heterogeneity of physical and discursive systems. I employ layering as a technique to explore the way material and discursive or (semiotic) edges both contrast and coalesce. Disparate formal and pictorial elements such as allusions to both organic and architectural space, cut-outs of palms, and the striations of paint are superimposed within the composition to make proposals and create new visual alliances. Contemporary painting is a site to address the simultaneity of my own experiences as they intersect with the world.

Entanglement, as framework for thinking about matter, intervenes into the modern narrative of binary relationships—of a nature/culture opposition. For Solnit, contemporary artists no longer approach landscape with the nostalgic lens of empty space but rather consider, through painting, the interrelationship between the “spaces and systems we inhabit.”²⁶



Fig. 1. Maegan Harbridge, *Errant Drift*, 2025, acrylic on canvas, 114cm x 130cm. Artist's collection, Toronto.

The Greenbergian framework that rhetorized Jackson Pollock's work epitomized the notion that the artist's job was to establish “order *against* inevitable chaos [a sentiment that has]

found comparable expression in so much American art predicated upon an Edenic landscape that in reality had long since been tilled.”²⁷ This view finds somewhat of an exception in the artistic practice of modern artist Helen Frankenthaler, who associated the feeling of abstraction with the feeling of nature: “I think art itself is order out of chaos,” she says, “and nature is always fighting the same battle.”²⁸ First using oil paint and then later transitioning to acrylic, Frankenthaler explored her “soak-stain” technique to arrive at forms that allude to rocky coastlines and towering trees, but she never articulated the forms as such. Her paintings are foremost spaces of material experimentation.²⁹

For Frankenthaler, this work evoked the “atmosphere of landscape” but never referenced nature itself. The loose interplay of colour fields in her paintings suggest spaces that appeal not to an idea of nature but to a sense of it. Frankenthaler associated the feeling of her abstraction with the feeling of nature. In this sense, Frankenthaler’s work seems less concerned with the division between form and content—nature and modernity—and more with treating painting as an investigation of their intersection. Frankenthaler did not romanticize nature as separate from humans but equated the atmosphere of landscape painting to the atmosphere of an abstract window, showing how as a sensation they elicit the same response. Her paintings reference the vastness of contemplative space while at the same time evoking the body through their delicate painterly touch.

Frankenthaler’s entangled terrains are fields of colours, textures, and moods that coalesce as assemblages—less about “truth or fact” than about what Eldritch Priest describes as “what it feels like to feel oneself affecting and being affected by and as an occasion of experience.”³⁰ Painter Joan Mitchell maintained that she carried her landscapes around with her. For Mitchell, painting had a particular relationship to time and the remembered impression of place. Like

Frankenthaler, her paintings were not of nature but of the feeling that the natural world elicits and the memory of that feeling, as “both continuous and still...like one word, one image...a means of feeling living.”³¹

Likewise, my paintings are formal experiments that resolve as compositions that foremost elicit sensory experience. Like Mitchell, the techniques that I use in my paintings are not rooted in what can be named or categorized but evoke my internal landscapes—shaped in the ebbs and flows of time and experience. Masking out obscures a painting’s sense of time, so that paintings keep their own time. Like artist Katharina Grosse suggests, “unlike any other medium, painting allows one to see different moments in time coinciding.”³² These layers, the cutting in and out of figure and ground, is a non-linear process for exploring the working and unworking of composition—it is a seeing, thinking, and feeling event. For me, the canvas is a window of temporal and atmospheric space that enables alternative modes of thinking and feeling relationality—a space to poetically engage with the particularity of my own subjectivity as a mode of intersubjective address in an otherwise heavily mediated world.

Just as Frankenthaler’s work merged the idea of nature and culture, so too do Mary Weatherford’s contemporary landscape paintings. Her paintings have been characterized in terms of their hybrid approach to composition making, where the lineages of modernist abstraction and postmodern feminist critique conflate within a single methodology.³³ Termed “atemporal painting” by curator Laura Hoptman, this approach to contemporary composition making aims to dismantle the hierarchical practices that result from modern abstraction’s impetus to arrive at essentialized forms.³⁴ Through its reduction and perceived purity, Abstract Expressionism was once thought as something that might touch the equivalence of Eden—a utopian vision of culture imbued with the same position of privilege as Man’s anointed beginnings in paradise.

Weatherford's particular approach to space in painting, in contrast, brings together nature and culture, land and technology, to arrive at a form of post-genre landscape painting that does not essentialize her subject matter but rather addresses them as entangled.

Through her assembled approach to picturing space, Weatherford implicates herself within the landscape she references rather than simply inhabiting it. The non-specificity of her atmospheric screen in *Empire* (2012), for example—its merging of painterly landscape space with the urban aesthetics of neon—illuminates the entwinement of environment and industrial products. Romanticized versions of empty space are quite literally contaminated in Weatherford's work, revealing the shifting terms of landscape painting from modernism to postmodernism. Assembling the atmospheric qualities of large gestural brushmarks, often associated with the genre, with lights that carry a commercially specific history conjures the infringement of urban economies into so-called wild space. Such self-consciousness denotes the interrelationship between her practice and the land and upends the genre's roots in a single subject of reverence in favour of a manifold view of the world. This approach to representing space has less to do with an idyllic vision of nature and more to do with articulating the interconnection between ecologies. Suzanne Hudson refers to Weatherford's practice as, "underwritten by a liberal, manifold curiosity: about the natural world, pictures, and the stories that have been told about them, and a sensible apprehension of one's place and one's implication within it, most intimately, but also most broadly."³⁵

Artist Julie Mehretu is a contemporary painter that engages with the historical discourse of landscape painting as a meditation on the relationship between subjectivities and space. Born in Ethiopia and raised in the United States, Mehretu's heterogenous paintings develop from her own self-ethnography—less as a mourning of displacement, but rather as an assertion of the

acquired resiliency found in the estranging force of the unfamiliar.³⁶ Referring to her lexicon built of personal stories, media sources, architectural drawings, cartographic maps, city grids, and weather charts, Mehretu describes her paintings as “psycho-geographies.”³⁷ The artist repurposes and conflates signs—of personal and collective significance—from the visual field to reimagine painting as a medium to translate the intertwining of form and content. In their simultaneous reference to both inner and outer worlds, the artist’s large-scale abstracted compositions are “visual neologisms” for the accelerated itinerant modernity of twenty-first century life.³⁸ “How do you recall Addis Ababa from Berlin?” the artist asks, with a response of notational marks layered in paint.³⁹

Mehretu’s artistic practice explores the inseparability of politics and the land. From “the violent expansion of the American West, colonialism, war, abolition, through to more recent race riots and social protest,” Mehretu reengages the narrative of monumental landscape painting, by layering gestural brushwork on top of pixelated images of historical and political events. Here, Mehretu shifts empty space to a discursive field brimming with the networked exchange of constituent matter.⁴⁰ In Mehretu’s “unhomed geographies,” the artist straddles genres of painting to reimagine painting as a site to contend with the complexity of experience. This methodology visually abstracts references by conflating disparate source material into a single painting. The paintings present scrolls of information that do not relay single truths but evoke an experience of situated identity.

This approach to painting entangles content and form to translate the overlapping of embodiment and place. Mehretu’s layering technique connects material and meaning; the work is visually abstract, yet it is not of the variety of medium specificity that marked twentieth century abstraction. Instead, Mehretu approaches painting as an ideal medium to stage contingency and

the incongruity of heterogenous relationships. These entangled topologies are psycho-geographical configurations that contend with the body's inability to ever fully become deracinated from its sociological beginnings. Painting distills meaning into form "when language isn't enough" to make tangible the scalar enfolding of meaning and things that travel through history to mark our contemporary present.⁴¹

Artist Mark Bradford is another contemporary painter "reframing abstraction" by infusing it with content.⁴² Bradford's large-scale compositions use the language of abstraction and collage to both parse the specificity of the artist's biographical history and engage in larger socio-political conversations. "Being an abstract painter [for Bradford is] a political act," one that avoids the overdetermination of what it means to be black, gay, or an artist from South Central Los Angeles.⁴³ The artist's chosen materials—first the paper and dye from his mother's hair studio and later the merchant posters of his local community—function as a way of embedding "political subtext in the work."⁴⁴ Abstraction, for Bradford, no longer conveys a purity of form but rather the vastness of its networked relationships. For historian Micheal Auping, what Bradford achieves is the "reinvest[ment of] content into abstract painting while still allowing you to believe in formalism."⁴⁵ Bradford and Mehretu are both artists of colour that straddle the genres of landscape painting, collage, and abstraction to engage the messy intermeshing of identity and place. Emerging "from a longstanding modernist discourse," their work develops from their own positions of experience in order to engage social and political debates.⁴⁶

Like the recontextualizing operation of Mehretu's and Bradford's motifs, my paintings involve the compiling of disparate source material—of both personal and social significance—as a technique to evoke the interplay of bodies and place. My painterly motifs coalesce to supersede

the bounds of their own signification. Motifs such as houses, palms, and mountains are “unhomed” from my own subjectivity to create new associations through painting. Recognizable pictures intermingle, contaminating each other’s edges, and performing associations beyond their



Fig. 2. Maegan Harbridge, *Memory House*, 2018, acrylic and ink on paper, 30cm x 40cm. Artist’s collection, Cape Town.

formal construction. These associations are not fixed but waver in the interaction between painting and viewer. This interplay of motifs, drawn from my own subjectivity and the history of painting, bring something of a cyborgian vision of culture with it, where disparate references are brought together to transcend their original meaning. As opposed to evoking empty space, my paintings abstract the genre of landscape as a staging of space that is full: full of “noisy” systems and heterogenous *things* that are fragile and in tune with one another. The visual strategy of layering paint presents a new story for the medium, where materials speak about the intersection of matter, where origins do not begin and end in paradise but are in an ever-present state of becoming.

Entangled Techniques

Layer upon layer, my paintings emerge as superimposed formal relationships in which partial representations abut through processes of masking. Fragmented forms intersect as “chance meetings,” where competing marks generate tension and resonance. Each work unfolds as a succession of compositions that conceal and reveal one another, allowing initial marks to effervesce through the opacity of subsequent layers. Painterly motifs—drawn from both personal experience and historical techniques—overlap to unsettle conventional pictorial space. By developing motifs tied to my own embodiment, I explore the intersection of memory, perception and matter, so that the paintings arise through a dynamic complementarity of content and form.

Superimposing disparate compositions through masking various layers is a process of abstracting that explores the interaction of formal disjuncture, where colour, texture, line and form simultaneously contrast. Overpainting, as a historical layering technique, antecedent to collage, provides a vast toolbox to stage novel relationships that generate unconventional

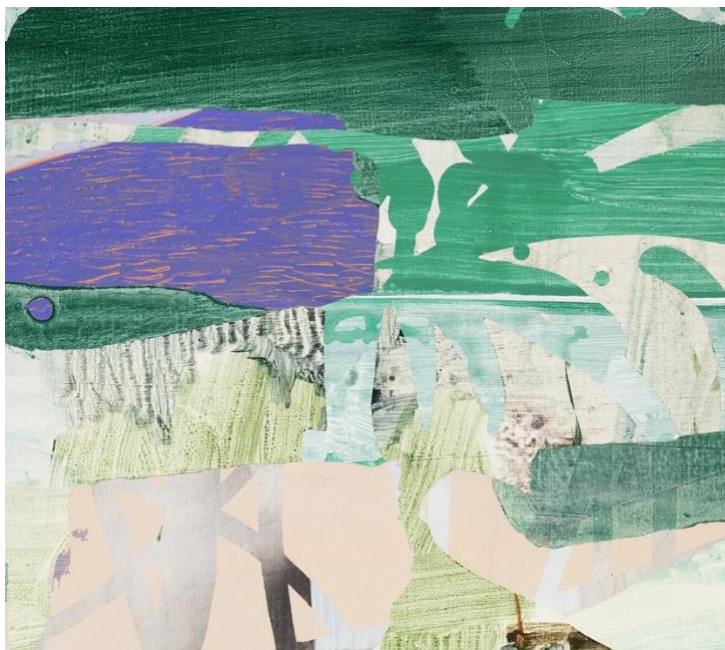


Fig. 3. Maegan Harbridge, *Entangled Terrain* (detail), 2023, acrylic and ink on canvas. Artist's collection, Toronto.

compositional possibilities. Overpainting, or “pentimenti,” is an artistic approach where an image is painted over top of another image while retaining parts of the original composition to create visual depth.⁴⁷ This overpainting technique intervenes into the rationality of perspectival space by creating emphasis through opaquing out. Through layering, the compositions become saturated with the liveliness of visual relationships. The visual field is no longer coherent but mottled with signs and signifiers that coalesce in their misalignment. Form and content are contingent and perform a “formlessness” of relations like “the flickering up and passing away of consciousness in the process of perception.”⁴⁸

This process of “subtractive” painting borrows strategies from the collage work of Max Ernst to develop non-linear, decentred compositions that translate the layered and fragmented quality of memory and perception. Through collage, Ernst created structural models of Sigmund Freud’s concept of “condensation,” which denotes “the pushing together of two or more elements into a new word or phrase so that each element retains its own character while effectively interacting with the others.”⁴⁹ Collage not only uses juxtaposition to create new meaning but also to hold onto bits of the original source through this condensing of information. Condensation was particularly important to Freud in explaining why dream images appear as they do. Freud explained the mashing-up and condensation that takes place while we are sleeping as the way in which our brains process our waking experiences; thus, the compositional oddity of collage appeals to our sensibilities because of this familiar process of decontextualization and recontextualization that happens through subconscious thought.⁵⁰

Like Ernst, I employ my artistic technique to disrupt the representational logic of familiar motifs and perspectival space in the fracturing and condensing of form. A process of layering brings differences into relation. Variation is not an all-over-technique in my work; it is an ecology of form animating form. Cut-outs of amorphous shapes simultaneously come forward and recede, illuminating one another through variation in mark-making, scale, and hue. Juxtaposing differences is a formalism to expand on modernism's preoccupation with aesthetic relationships.



Fig. 4. Maegan Harbridge, *Memory House in Red, Green, and Blue*, 2025, acrylic on canvas, 51cm x 61cm. Artist's collection, Toronto.

Ernst's cut-and-paste aesthetic underpins my own artistic approach, as a methodological framework to explore the layered and incongruous experience of perception and meaning. Not only do my paintings contend with the way perception elicits meaning, but their fractured surfaces, misaligned forms, and overlapping compositions also produce images that decontextualize and recontextualize signs and signifiers from the visual field. Freud's process of subconscious condensation was evoked in Ernst's collage through his subtractive overpainting and "frottage" of "leitmotifs." Through this subtractive, textural, and repetitive practice, Ernst

destabilized images from popular culture as subversions to the symbolic order of representation. Likewise, the combinatory approach in my paintings draws from personal experience, popular culture, and the history of abstraction as a contemporary methodology for translating the decentred and relational quality of perceptual experience.

Painting is my way to assimilate the tangled and elaborate world around me. Before collage became integral to my artistic process, my paintings were translations of landscapes—scenes of forests or thickets of brush—that were evocations of my experience growing up in rural Canada. The structure of these images provided a framework to explore ranges of marks, colour combinations, and spatial relationships that simultaneously relayed something of my own experience, while also suggesting the density of things beyond my subjectivity. My current body of work still engages with the genre of landscape, not as actual places but as terrains that explore interrelationship. They explore the weight and profile of sense experience affected by and affecting the perceptual field. Collections of marks of varying texture, speed, and intensity convey the complexity of aesthetic activity—the way that personal impressions, discursive fields, and political tides synchronically press on one another in the entanglement of perceptual encounter.

The canvas is a consistent surface—with structural limitations—that I explore as a pictorial space of relationships. Through layering, the paintings set up a series of visual tensions that touch and obscure one another. Colour, texture, line, and form misalign and coalesce to translate the stratification of sense experience. The formal relationships of painting show the simultaneity of things: how a line is both contour and edge; how colour is both mood and space; how the personal folds into the material. Every mark affects other marks, and this entanglement

displays the excess of mimetic legibility that necessitates a *more-than-representational* field of inquiry into perceptual experience.

Like Bradford's use of personally significant and local materials to gesture towards the larger socio-political context of his work, my own use of liquid latex, as a masking fluid, eschews the precision of hard-edge techniques in favour of creating awkward and organic forms that reference the body. Through the use of liquid latex, my artistic methodology recalls artist Eva Hesse's feminist sculptures of the 1970s. Hesse used the same material in her "bodily engaged, psychically affective work" to critique the rigid and male-dominated minimalist practices of the 1960s.⁵¹ The awkward and organic forms within my work overlap and misalign, as a feminist and posthuman gesture against the rigid patriarchal structures that continue to exercise agency over women's and more-than-human bodies. My subjectivity, informed through situated experiences of place, gender, and motherhood spills onto the canvas in fluid contours and curvilinear forms that criss-cross and bleed into one another.

Interference is the object of my attention in this work. Layering the compositions through a process of masking out is a strategy that allows me to connect disparate reference materials so that signifiers are condensed and expanded. The layers of the composition are not blended but are suspended through a collage-like strategy of superimposing separate compositions together. Landscape artist Per Kirkeby, for example, used overpainting to intervene in and add to artist friends' work, and eventually adopted the technique to "create structures based on memory and form."⁵² Through a process of masking, my paintings become woven together so that bodies—of water, land, furniture, and flesh—are entangled within the compositions. A face divided by a landscape becomes a particular kind of mark; the quality of its contours, texture, and colour of light holds the memory of its original form. The texture of gesturally painted trees butts up

against a flatly painted figure—disfigured in a process of unmasking. Trees are fractured when the frisket is removed, leaving cuts of foliage among other gestural marks. This concealing and revealing produces different kinds of marks, with different speeds, opacities, scales, and volume that retain different signifiers. It is a strategy to both record and conjure the spectral tensivity of perceptual experience. Like Kirkeby, my overpainting technique contends with the structure of memory and form in its opacities and intersections.

My paintings are amalgamations of disparate marks, composed of a range of actual and implied textures. As the surface quality of the canvas changes—as it becomes layered with paint—so does the quality of the mark. Each brushstroke retains a memory of what is underneath. In an initial transparent wash, the paint shows the tooth of the canvas. The brushstrokes gather like lace as I swish a large brush across the surface of the painting. I then mask out to create the next layer. Titanium white paint is applied over the dried masking fluid,



Fig. 5. Maegan Harbridge, *Dream I*, 2024, acrylic on canvas, 51cm x 61cm.
Artist's collection, Toronto.

hiding the first and subsequent compositions. This step is both pragmatic and improvisational. The undiluted white paint seals the masking fluid, assuring a crispness between the layers. This

flat, white surface erases the previous painting; its content; its quality. A subsequent composition is created with only a reference to the memory of what is underneath. Working on multiple paintings simultaneously makes this especially the case. Canvases shift around the studio, are turned on their sides, and fall out of order. When I attend to the consecutive layer, the day is different, my mood, and perhaps even the season, has changed. This overpainting technique results in layers of varying temperaments that stretch across days, months, and sometime years.

My painting entitled *Wintergarten* (2023–2025), for example, has developed over two years and remains in a state of incomplete. If I rush the process, I most certainly will ruin the painting. It is easy to add too much to a surface, to push a work too far, which somehow only closes its possibilities. The more the painting contains, the less it says. Too few marks, however, do not say enough. When the painting doesn't speak about anything, it is merely a "collection of things." Finding a resolution for an artwork is a mysterious process; it happens in an oscillation between thinking, looking, doing, and seeing. Eventually (hopefully) the formal properties of a painting cohere to create a network of visual and associative relationships. Painting is a slow process that happens over large stretches of time and requires a certain type of attention (perhaps a disinterested type of attention?). The slowness of thinking, looking, doing, and seeing is an act of resistance, a fissure to the efficiency of capital production where disinterested attention creates a rift in the easy flow of an attention economy. Painting belongs to the messy domain of feelings and sense experience. It is an act of "checking out of preconditioned patterns" to connect with a lively and unquantifiable domain of material and associative affects.⁵³

Aesthetic affect, often referred to as aura or beauty, is still a widely debated topic in art. A long history of philosophical debates perseverates on the allure of sensual objects. Why does the painting haunt me? If it is only of superficial concern, why am I so moved by an artwork? In

his recent book *All Art is Ecological*, Morton further grapples with aesthetic presence. Art, Morton says, is an area of life where the idea of objects affecting one another is on display. A painting emits a force that connects with a viewer, and this aesthetic exchange provides access to a particular aspect of reality.⁵⁴ Morton goes on to explain:

Art is actually a tiny but still recognizable fragment of the kind of larger world, the mostly nonhuman world of influences and designs that go beyond us and violate our idea of who “owns” what and who is running the show, such that causality seems to have something animistic or paranormal about it. It’s not a glue that falsely fixes bourgeois dichotomies such as subject and object. I’m talking about a substance that is a dangerous toxin to anthropocentrism.⁵⁵

Developed from Immanuel Kant’s position of aesthetics, where beauty is described as “a fantastic ‘impossible’ access to the inaccessible,”⁵⁶ Morton defines beauty, or an experience with an art object, as evoking a feeling of—rather than understanding of—truth. This middle ground is a place not (as Morton quotes Heidegger) of “truth” or “untruth” but of “truth-feel,” as Morton calls it—a lively experience of the mysteriousness of life, of objects, and their push and pull on one another.⁵⁷

Making a painting is somewhat akin to searching for an experience of “truth-feel,” where the materiality of an artwork becomes active and elicits a vicarious affect. It is a sensory experience that has little to do with logic and everything to do with feeling. Making a painting is searching for a point when an assortment of materials, techniques, and motifs transforms into an assemblage. Somehow when a painting contains enough, it becomes open; it becomes relational; It enables action without touching.

Assemblage theory is useful to provide a framework for thinking and writing about studio processes, but ultimately, the process of painting has little to do with language. In fact, as Morton's term "truth-feel" implies, the mystery of all objects is that they communicate outside of language. It is well-recognized among painters that painting belongs to the domain of feeling, not logic. Artist Amy Sillman, for example, describes painting as a "nonlinguistic activity that at some level is foiled by language."⁵⁸ This makes the task of writing about my own work challenging; tripping over imperfect adjectives, I draw conclusions that lose their weight the moment they're drawn. Writing about painting also influences the work itself; it predetermines or pre-resolves outcomes in a way that is contradictory to my improvisatory approach. I think assemblage is a useful term to describe the shift between in-process and complete when there is a mysterious transition from variation to relationships. When an artwork is in-process, it can still be reduced to the sum of its parts; it has yet to reach the *je ne sais quoi* of "truth-feel."

Wintergarten is a visually complex painting that teeters on the edge of a feeling but does not quite contain enough to create an "affect." Before approximating an explanation as to how or why, I will first describe the painting as it is now. An architectural shape emerges from a



Fig. 6. Maegan Harbridge, *Wintergarten*, 2025, acrylic on canvas, 122cm x 122cm. Artist's collection, Toronto.

variation of textures as the most present mark. This ambiguous shape suggests the frame of a house. It is a mark that has a particular relationship to the other marks in the painting. It is a graphic, negative shape that reveals the layers underneath—previous marks that have otherwise been covered over. Not only is this shape different from the other marks (hard-edge and graphic—unlike most of my other visual vocabulary), but it is also a mark that defines a space. The area inside the house-like shape has a different quality than the space beyond it. The marks become smaller and more densely organized; there is less room inside for the eyes to wander.

There is a visual tension inside and outside the shape, but a traditional distinction between figure and ground is complicated in the painting. The figure is defined in relation to a landscape-like space, but the figure is also ground; it is one of the only visible initial layers remaining in the work. Rather than composed through the traditional methodology of painting (composing a figure in relationship to a ground), figure and ground are superimposed in the act of masking out and layering paint. The paint builds up in opacity where paint covers paint, but the areas of the composition that have been preserved (through masking) create gaps of varying viscosity to look through. I intentionally develop this overpainting technique to complicate the surface of the composition. It is a technique to disturb the linearity of time and perspective in painting, to reach for a closer approximation of the layered and fragmentary quality of sense experience.

The surface of the painting is stratified; its lattice-like textures with sharp cuts and misalignments are visually similar to the cut-and-paste aesthetic of collage, where intersecting forms are not objective lines of sight but evoke the slippage between figure and ground—opticality and embodiment. The line of the house is a shape, which is an absence to put differences into relation. Textural variation conflates and overlaps in the painting, creating

moments of push and pull. Up close, *Wintergarten* is visually rich, containing many formal and associative relationships. From a distance, however, the painting does not quite cohere as a composition. The parts are still fragmentary, and viewing the work from a distance reveals its incompleteness. Finding a resolution for a painting is not an easy task. Many historical and contemporary works of art, arguably, never find a point of finish. They become the minor works of an artist oeuvre, contributing in part to its larger significance; they are visual addenda, tangential asides, tunes that never become songs.

Many unfinished paintings linger in the studio with me as part of my process. Through a sustained practice of thinking, looking, doing and seeing, I arrive at ways to resolve the work. Although I continually revisit a toolkit of techniques and motifs, there is no formula in my methodology for resolving the work. When I over plan the paintings, they become programmatic and lack “truth-feel.” In fact, the most invigorating aspect of my practice, its *raison d’être*, is precisely its lack of procedures. Painting is a game to continually exceed the edges of my own expectations, and this process is exhilarating.

Conclusion

Abstracting is my methodology for translating the compound intensity and precarity of embodied understanding—an improvisatory act that sublimates the immanent contradiction of a lively existentialism. The paintings are composed through the nonlinear accumulation of relationships, subverting the logical configuration of a narrative or idea. This variation generates movement in looking, evoking a simultaneity of things. History swells and touches the present as a folding of space and time. Memory becomes a palimpsest imprinted on vision, a veil of subconscious condensation that interfaces with the now. My subjectivity meets the objectivity of

the world through these abstracted compositions. Just as bodies of water and politics imprint on one another, looking is a touching that shapes the way that things appear.

It is through the masking out and building up through erasure, repetition, and retrieval I discuss in this chapter that each painting enacts an *expanded formalism*: a process-based, *more-than-representational* aesthetic that resists mastery and instead honours relational emergence. The work unfolds from *care/full* responsiveness—the continual negotiation between intention, material agency, and affective resonance. Paintings are made and unmade, fractured and reassembled, staging the possibility for dynamic visual encounters. When a composition exceeds the edges of consciousness—when it begins to look back at me—I consider it complete. Painting is my well-travelled path of chance encounter. An endless event of always beginning.

As the following chapters unfold, this logic of relational emergence—of always beginning—extends outward from my own studio practice to address broader questions of contemporary abstraction, material ethics, and perception. The next chapter engages an expanded field of women painters whose works similarly negotiate material agency, political resonance, and more-than-human entanglement. A one-page interlude then follows, creating a pause before Chapter Four, which develops the theoretical grounding for a contemporary approach to formal analysis by tracing the burgeoning concepts of intra-action, diffraction, and affect.⁵⁹ The final chapter speculates on the narrative potential of painting, reflecting on how a disciplinary shift might tell stories differently—through drift, opacity, and the unfinished.⁶⁰ In this way, the intuitive, processual work of the studio becomes a conceptual throughline: a method for thinking otherwise, where painting enacts—rather than represents—the conditions of a shared and unfolding world.

¹ Michael Young, “The Aesthetics of Abstraction,” in *Aesthetics Equals Politics: New Discourses Across Art, Architecture, and Philosophy*, edited by Mark Foster Gage, (MIT Press, 2019), 130.

² Young, “Aesthetics of Abstraction,” 139.

³ More-than-representational painting derives its meaning from the way that representation exceeds the bounds of its signification in painting. The term draws conceptual lineage from Erin Manning’s notion of “the more-than of experience,” which foregrounds the preconscious, relational, and affective dimensions of sensory experience. It also resonates with the “more-than-human” turn in posthumanist and Indigenous ontologies, which insists that knowledge, agency, and relationality are distributed across human and nonhuman actors, challenging the epistemological boundaries set by Enlightenment humanism. Both frameworks unsettle representational logic as the primary mode of meaning-making. The term “more-than-representational” also has a specific history in landscape theory that emerges from cultural geographer Nigel Thrift’s theories of non-representation, but in the framework of expanded formalism, it denotes the prioritization of attunement, interdependence, and situated co-constitution in painting. More-than-representational painting embraces ambiguity, excess, and affect, challenging traditional dichotomies between abstraction and representation. See “Erin Manning, “Artfulness.” In *The Nonhuman Turn*, edited by Richard Grusin, 45–79. United States: University of Minnesota Press, 2015, 48; Also, see Emma Waterton, “More-than-representational landscapes,” in *The Routledge Companion to Landscape Studies*, Edited by Peter Howard, Ian Thompson, Emma Waterton, and Mick Atha, 2nd ed., 91. Routledge, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315195063-7>.

⁴ David J. Getsy, “Ten Queer Theses on Abstraction,” In *Queer Abstraction*, edited by Jared Ledesma (Des Moines Art Center, 2019), 65.

⁵ Getsy, 66–68.

⁶ Bruno Latour, “Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern,” *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 2 (Winter 2004): 232.

⁷ Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton University Press, 2015), vi.

⁸ Rebecca Solnit, *As Eve Said to the Serpent: On Landscape, Gender, and Art* (University of Georgia Press, 2001), 48.

⁹ David Graeber and David Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021), 2.

¹⁰ Rebecca Solnit, *As Eve Said to the Serpent*, 48–49.

¹¹ Suzanne Perling Hudson, *Mary Weatherford* (Lund Humphries, 2019), 12.

¹² Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Duke University Press, 2010), ix.

¹³ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 24.

¹⁴ Emily Apter et al., “A Questionnaire on Materialisms,” *October* 155 (Winter 2016): 3; and Jane Bennett, “Systems and Things: A Response to Graham Harman and Timothy Morton,” *New Literary History* 43, no. 2 (2012): 231.

¹⁵ Timothy Morton, “Use the Force,” in *Aesthetics Equals Politics: New Discourses across Art, Architecture, and Philosophy*, ed. Mark Foster Gage (MIT Press, 2019), 65. See also Graham Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything* (Pelican, 2018).

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- ¹⁶ Timothy Morton, “Use the Force,” in *Aesthetics Equals Politics: New Discourses across Art, Architecture, and Philosophy*, ed. Mark Foster Gage (MIT Press, 2019), 66–78.
- ¹⁷ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 3, 20.
- ¹⁸ Morton, “Use the Force,” 69.
- ¹⁹ Karen Barad, “Intra-actions,” interview by Adam Kleinman, *Mousse Magazine* 34 (2012): 76.
- ²⁰ Karen Barad, “Nature’s Queer Performativity,” *Qui Parle* 19, no. 2 (Spring/Summer): 150.
- ²¹ Timothy Morton, *Realist Magic: Objects, Ontology, Causality* (Open Humanities Press, 2013), 72. <https://doi.org/10.3998/ohp.13106496.0001.001>.
- ²² Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Duke University Press, 1991), 49.
- ²³ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 9.
- ²⁴ Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Beacon Press, 1961), 86–87; Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, ix–x, 24.
- ²⁵ John Rajchman, *Constructions* (MIT Press, 1998), 61.
- ²⁶ Rebecca Solnit, *As Eve Said to the Serpent*, 47.
- ²⁷ Hudson, *Mary Weatherford*, 12.
- ²⁸ Helen Frankenthaler, interview in *Frankenthaler: Toward a New Climate*, directed by Perry Miller Adato (WNET/Thirteen, 1978), film.
- ²⁹ In 2019 I visited the Museo di Palazzo Grimani, Venice, to see the Helen Frankenthaler exhibition *Pittura/Panorama* on display with the 58th Venice Biennale *May You Live in Interesting Times*.
- ³⁰ Eldritch Priest, *Earworm and Event: Music, Daydreams, and Other Imaginary Refrains* (Duke University Press, 2013), 9, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv2782dds>.
- ³¹ Joan Mitchell exhibition text in “I Carry My Landscapes Around With Me,” David Zwirner New York, accessed September 24, 2025, <https://www.davidzwirner.com/exhibitions/2019/i-carry-my-landscapes-around-me>.
- ³² Katharina Grosse, “Artist Talk with Katharina Grosse,” in conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist, Switzerland, October 2023, Posted by Fondation Beyeler, January 17, 2024, YouTube, 50:40.
- ³³ Hudson, *Mary Weatherford*, 132.
- ³⁴ Laura Hoptman, *The Forever Now: Contemporary Painting in an Atemporal World* (Museum of Modern Art, 2014), 12.
- ³⁵ Hudson, *Mary Weatherford*, 132.
- ³⁶ Sarah E. Lewis, “Unhomed Geographies: The Paintings of Julie Mehretu,” *Callaloo* 33, no. 1 (2010): 219–222. <https://doi.org/10.1353/cal.0.0591>.
- ³⁷ Lewis, 221.

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- ³⁸ See “Politicized Landscapes: Julie Mehretu,” Art21, September 13, 2017, <https://art21.org/watch/extended-play/julie-mehretu-politicized-landscapes-short/>.
- ³⁹ Lewis, 219.
- ⁴⁰ See the video published on Art21, “Politicized Landscapes.”
- ⁴¹ See the video published on Art21, “Politicized Landscapes.”
- ⁴² Mark Bradford in “Mark Bradford: In Conversation,” Tate Talks Artist’s Talk with curator Michael Auping, posted November 18, 2019, YouTube, 29:09, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G4isoSmHKiU>.
- ⁴³ Mark Bradford in “Getting to Know Mark Bradford,” Troy Middle School, YouTube video, February 24, 2021, 7:12, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kQqacPOilmU>.
- ⁴⁴ “Getting to Know Mark Bradford,” 14:04.
- ⁴⁵ Mark Bradford in “Mark Bradford: In Conversation,” Tate Talks Artist’s Talk with curator Michael Auping, posted November 18, 2019, YouTube, 30:42, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G4isoSmHKiU>.
- ⁴⁶ Mark Bradford in “Mark Bradford: In Conversation,” 3:03.
- ⁴⁷ Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (MIT Press, 1993), 46.
- ⁴⁸ Krauss, *Optical Unconscious*, 57; Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, *Formless: A User’s Guide* (Zone Books, 1997), 32.
- ⁴⁹ Charlotte Stokes, “Collage as Jokework: Freud’s Theories of Wit as the Foundation of the Collages of Max Ernst,” *Leonardo* 15, no. 3 (Summer 1982): 199.
- ⁵⁰ Randy Cutler, “As Beautiful as the Chance Meeting . . .” lecture, Art History 333: Interdisciplinary Forums: Studies in Contemporary Praxis, Emily Carr University of Art and Design, September 20, 2012.
- ⁵¹ Helen Molesworth, “How to Install Art as a Feminist,” in *Modern Women: Women Artists at the Museum of Modern Art*, ed. Cornelia H. Butler and Alexandra Schwartz (Museum of Modern Art, 2010), 509.
- ⁵² Per Kirkeby, *Overpainting*, Michael Werner Gallery, New York, Exhibition text, <https://www.michaelwerner.com/exhibitions/per-kirkeby-overpainting>.
- ⁵³ See Maria Lind, “Preface,” in *Abstraction: Documents of Contemporary Art* (Whitechapel Gallery and MIT Press, 2013).
- ⁵⁴ Timothy Morton, *All Art is Ecological* (Penguin Books, 2021), 75.
- ⁵⁵ Morton, 76.
- ⁵⁶ Morton, 4.
- ⁵⁷ Morton, 5.
- ⁵⁸ Amy Sillman, “To Abstract: Amy Sillman,” Art21, June 12, 2024, <https://art21.org/watch/extended-play/amy-sillman-to-abstract>, 8:11.
- ⁵⁹ Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Duke University Press, 2007), 89.

⁶⁰ Brian Massumi, *Semblance and Event: Activist Philosophy and the Occurrent Arts* (MIT Press, 2011), 27. See also Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003), 7.

Maybe artists fussing over shapes are not the same people we first think of when we think of political art. But they make lumpen form that registers protest, they make gestures of care and repair, or they merely try to beam out an electrifying personal and strange signal that wakes up the receiver for a moment—one weird moment that could shift the sense of things, and thereby alter the world, even if only slightly. This sounds urgent to me. –Amy Sillman

Chapter Three: On Affirming the Unknown

Introduction

Painting offers an aesthetic and affective encounter that begins in the act of making and extends into the experience of looking—a recursive, embodied dialogue between gesture, matter, and perception. Historically, abstraction emerged as a response to the traumas of global conflict and the destabilization of meaning, offering a material immediacy that resisted the instrumentalization of thought. As I have argued, Clement Greenberg’s championing of medium specificity, often caricatured as formalist purity, can also be understood as an attempt to safeguard the sensuous, nonconceptual immediacy of material encounter—a moment where knowing gives way to feeling. Today, this lineage is reactivated and deepened through feminist, posthuman, and postcolonial interventions that reclaim the picture plane as a site of embodied criticality and epistemic humility. Contemporary painters like Amy Sillman push this tradition forward, treating painting not as a vehicle for mastery or resolution, but as a living, recursive negotiation between hand, surface, and world—a site where unknowing, provisionality, and material agency are affirmed as vital. In this spirit, my own practice embraces the opacity and contingency of abstraction, foregrounding how making and looking co-compose new affective spaces, where subjective experience, relational entanglement, and the affirmation of the unknown become central to aesthetic and ethical life.

In this chapter, I focus on how content—or allusions to it—figures into *expanded formalism* through a discussion of how Sillman’s work embodies a commitment to unknowing as a generative force. Her paintings oscillate between abstraction and figuration, calculation and accident,

foregrounding that, as an active, felt experience, meaning is unstable. Sillman reframes the studio as a site of experimental process rather than resolution, where gestures accumulate, collide, and mutate without fixed destination. Crucially, she treats the anecdotal not as narrative closure but as a fugitive trace—a way of marking memory, relationality, and embodied experience without subsuming them to linear storytelling. In this chapter, I trace affinities between Amy Sillman’s practice and my own, where fragments of lived experience surface within abstraction as a feminist strategy to trouble the binaries inherited from postwar modernism. I embrace making and looking as mutually constitutive acts, attuned not to the closure of interpretation but to the continual unfolding of relational, affective, and material possibilities. Working with liquid latex as a masking agent to layer and excavate surfaces, I allow chance operations, material resistance, and painterly intuition to guide the work’s emergence. The anecdotal, for me too, becomes a mode of relational mark-making: a contingent thread, a partial memory, a flicker of encounter embedded within the fabric of abstraction. Here, the unknown is not a void to be conquered, but a vital, lived space for reworlding through painterly thought—extending Greenberg’s material immediacy beyond opticality toward a more relational, and speculative formalism.

Amy Sillman: A Politics of the Small

Amy Sillman mines the language of Abstract Expressionism to critically reimagine the discourse of the medium. Her variation of lyrical abstraction employs drawing to introduce anecdotal asides that resist settling into stable meaning. Sillman’s paintings emphasize embodiment through a diverse range of mark-making techniques and extend a historical thread of abstraction preoccupied with evoking the experiential. She engages abstract painting from a feminist perspective, attentive to the political potential of small, personal gestures. To register protest through the formal attributes of paint is a means to make a gesture speak of discontent or to create an interconnectedness that can have a significant ripple effect. Sillman notes that “any

little thing, impure as can be, can change your life.”¹ In this divisive moment of knowing and truths, Sillman uses painting to hold fast to the trouble of difference in aesthetic terms.

Although Sillman does not attempt to position painting within the realm of activism, she does explore how form is a way of communicating emotion and how emotion can register protest. In her recent essay “Further Notes on Shapes,” Sillman considers painter Patrick Heron’s writing on composition to contemplate how abstraction activates an intersubjective field of meaning. Heron was invested in the “politics of the personal” and its relationship to composition as an “ethical process” tied to “the realm of intimacy, care and feelings.”² In 1953, Heron wrote that colour is both “the form and the content: the image and the meaning in my paintings today.”³ Heron likened artmaking to resistance; the rendering of awkward shapes is how the form of a composition becomes its content. For Heron, abstract painting harnessed the social potential for intimate insights to be shared as an intersubjective address. Like Heron, Sillman side-steps definitive positions in her own work to make space for small personal gestures. Sillman frames abstraction as a feminist, personal gesture that negates a realm of fixed positions in favour of traversing the messiness of emotion.

In “Absolutely Small: Sketch of an Anarchist Aesthetic,” art historian Roger Rothman explores the political potential of “minimal acts of resistance...whereby small affirmative acts are linked one to the other in an expanding network of relations.”⁴ These affirmative gestures connect people through sites of shared experiences. Rothman recalls Benjamin Buchloh’s reconsideration of “reductivist criticality” to animate how the autobiographical operates in artistic practice.⁵ Buchloh contends that “the aesthetic capacity to construct the mnemonic experience [is] one of the few acts of resistance against the totality of spectacularization.”⁶

For historically marginalized artists, or artists on the periphery of this once male-dominated milieu, the autobiographical or “mnemonic experience” reclaims subjectivity and situated knowledge as a feminist and postcolonial intervention into otherwise hermetic truths about the medium. Through painting, Sillman affirms her own subjectivity as an act to resurface the dialogue between form and content—materials and embodiment forgotten in the shadows of Greenbergian critique. Rather than opposing Greenberg’s legacy outright, her work draws out its overlooked possibilities—particularly its investment into material immediacy and affective intensity. In dialogue with artists like Lee Krasner, Joan Mitchell, and Helen Frankenthaler, Sillman positions abstraction as a vehicle for embodied reflection, where formal decision making carries the weight of memory, mood, and sociality. Sillman continues their legacy, positioning abstract painting as a mode of resistance to the depersonalization of pure formalism.

Sillman’s iterative and varied approach to painting subverts the seriousness of aesthetic modernism’s autonomous forms. The work is developed out of a practice of illustration that produces connections between personal narrative and gestural abstraction. Sillman is interested in revisiting modes of modernist expression through a feminist lens that aims to disrupt hierarchical positions underexamined in the history of modern art. Following the Post Minimalist generation of artists, Sillman uses an improvisational approach to collapse dualisms within the discipline. In *P&H* (2007) and *Junker I* (2009), for example—which I discuss in detail later in this chapter—Sillman conflates abstraction and representation, drawing and painting, form and content to translate the fractured and hybridized condition of a contemporary present.

Clement Greenberg’s formalism, while often framed as an apolitical aesthetic doctrine, was shaped in the shadow of profound historical upheavals: the rise of fascism, two world wars, and the slow unravelling of colonial empires. Rather than an attempt to escape from these

realities, his defense of aesthetic autonomy was a response to them—a wager that the sensuous immediacy of form could resist the instrumentalization of culture by totalitarian and imperial regimes. Inheriting Kant’s notion of non-conceptual judgment and Trotsky’s commitment to cultural freedom, Greenberg envisioned abstract painting as a site where material immediacy could safeguard human autonomy against ideological capture. As Daniel Neofetou has argued, Greenberg’s emphasis on what he calls “conceptual unsaturation” sought not pure opticality but a form of embodied, affective immediacy—a direct, pre-reflective encounter between artwork and viewer.⁷

In light of Neofetou’s rereading of Abstract Expressionism, Sillman’s emphasis on the autobiographical mark offers fertile ground for reframing the movement, especially in the wake of earlier women abstract painters. In the work of Krasner and that of Mitchell, for example, we see formal immediacy not simply as a matter of optical engagement, but of an embodied negotiation with matter. Krasner’s densely fractured compositions, with their bold mark making and synergetic colour relationships emerge from a practice of physical responsiveness, where gesture, surface, and material resistance co-produce form. Her paintings embody an ongoing attunement to the unruliness of materials as opposed to their mastery. Mitchell’s vast gestural fields, simultaneously ferocious and lyrical, refuse to resolve into stable structures; they invite the viewer into a durational, affective mode of looking, where meaning arises not through comprehension but through immersion and movement.

Frankenthaler offers a different inflection of embodied practice. Her soak-stain technique, allowing diluted pigment to seep and migrate across raw canvas, stages a relinquishment of control—a collaboration with the nonhuman agency of paint, gravity, and absorbent surface. In contrast to a modernist impulse to omit the significance of materials, Frankenthaler’s work

foregrounds material vitality; the artwork becomes an event rather than a product of autonomous design. Critical narratives of optical purity have historically subsumed the material liveliness of Frankenthaler's work—somewhat obscuring its link to Greenberg's affective immediacy.

Sillman continues to push the discipline further while reflecting on this historical thread. In dialogue with art historian Erin Kimmel and curator Helen Molesworth, Sillman discusses Mitchell's contribution to Abstract Expressionism, not within the framework of medium specificity, but as a language—a visual syntax particular to, and emerging from, the “five-hundred-year tradition of oil painting” that evolves abstraction as “a one-to-one referent for experience”⁸: “The form is the content” in Mitchell's paintings, where the expressionistic quality of the paint stands in for the “fullness of perception.”⁹

Through iterative acts of layering, drawing, erasure, and revision, Sillman's large, diagrammatic, abstract paintings respond to her predecessors by foregrounding the discipline as a living, temporal process—a field where mind, matter, and gesture entangle. Her use of unconventional tools—sponges, scrapers, sticks—extends this ethos; whereas Jackson Pollock deployed similar objects to channel a modernist ideal of immediacy and sublimity, Sillman reclaims them to resist mastery. Her gestures interrupt resolution, exposing rather than transcending the messiness of process. These marks are not grand declarations but moments of friction. In this respect, Sillman's works resist closure, instead inviting viewers to engage the painting as an unfolding archive of decisions. Making and looking blur into one another in Sillman's paintings, drawing the viewer into the accumulated tempo of gesture and revision.

A Strange and Beautiful Thing

During her 2013 artist talk and exhibition *One Lump or Two* at the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) in Boston, Sillman discussed how feminism is foundational to her

artistic practice. Rather than connecting the work to feminism in a theoretical sense, she offered a personal explanation of what feminism means to her and how that definition enabled her to create the work that she does. Initially deciding to study illustration at The School of Visual Arts (SVA) in New York, Sillman quickly discovered that she was most drawn to the discursive way of thinking about and making art in the painting department. One of the discourses surrounding this discipline in the late 1970s was feminism—a discussion that demanded a re-examination of hierarchical structures. During her lecture, she recalled thinking at the time that “I must do a thing that I desperately want to do and I must change that thing rather than accept it.”¹⁰

Feminism gave Sillman the tools to question authority and challenge archetypal modes of thinking. Sillman connects her artistic practice to feminism in its capacity for authoritative disobedience. She reflected in her lecture that feminism gave her the permission to not always have to be a “nice girl,” to not always have to conform to the decisive type of “pledge that the very term politics would seem to demand.”¹¹ Thus, Sillman has followed her own creative intuition to arrive at a practice on the bounds of what we have come to expect, not always with obedience—in painting or otherwise—to what she has been told.

For example, her painting titled *P&H* (2007) flirts with this ambivalence as an overt gesture that points toward the fractured nature of human experience. The structure within the composition—where a tilted rectangular shape teases the viewer with three of its four corners almost inside the frame but not quite—refuses to resolve itself as either existing wholly within the frame or outside of it. The painting’s texture, line, and form—a deep red competing with a deep blue of the same value, and lines that begin to imply figure before flipping into background—all refuse to cohere to a logical depiction of space.¹² Sillman describes this sort of “estrangement” existing formally within her work as a “kind of discomfort or complexity that

makes the object troubled.”¹³ She locates the opportunity for discourse in this instability. Sillman puts forward, in conversation with Molesworth, that “the positive emotions are nice; it is the negative emotions that are discursive.”¹⁴ In painting, Sillman reflects, she can take all those negative emotions—anger, hatred, and disgust—and literally manifest those feelings; “to take the whole of aggression and negativity and anger in your hand . . . is highly charged and I would call that feminism.”¹⁵ Sillman acknowledges that her paintings are not directly political as a mobilizing social force; however, her debt to feminism lies in allowing herself and her paintings to be genuine. The pleasure one derives in experiencing *P&H* perhaps may be associated with its refreshing insistent refusal.

Sillman’s paintings do not complete themselves in a plausible spatial depiction of the world. Like *P&H* (2007), the painting *Junker I* (2009), as Sara Hetherington describes, confuses the boundaries of figure and ground.¹⁶ Here, the viewer is asked, psychically, to enter an alien structure and determine its logic. This type of spatial arrangement unfolds into a simultaneity of possible configurations—a function of abstraction that Franco “Bifo” Berardi describes in the work of Francis Bacon as “trans-visibility.”¹⁷ This model of perception depends on subtler forms of knowledge than what can be ascertained with the eye. It depends on a more intimate, material knowledge of the world.¹⁸ The flatter colour field areas that sit on the surface of *P&H* evoke a map-like cross-section, whereas the predominant central structure of the painting recedes back to a quasi-room-like space. The luminosity of the green commands attention, creating tension with the haphazard geometry that occupies the centre of the composition. The hearth of the structure is animated by the warmth of its cadmium core, but the scale of the colourful flat terrains (occupying the outer edges of the composition) argues with the material dominance of the red. The painting exceeds the edges of its frame yet simultaneously collapses inwards in a non-linear

enfolding of form. Here, the viewer is asked to consider not only the logic of the painting's enclosure but "what kind of body [might] inhabit it? Is it like our own?"¹⁹ This complicated series of negotiations that the viewer is asked to consider produce an estranging affect.

Sillman's paintings challenge the hierarchies of form and content, subject and object, as well as painting and drawing, that were reinforced during the era of medium specificity. Rather than positioning gestural abstraction as emblematic of "the absolute, truth, and the universal,"²⁰ Sillman sites a crystalline form (overtly in *P&H*) to evoke a multiplicity of relationships tied to any given image or event.²¹ Molesworth notes that "each [of Sillman's paintings] is both bounded and unfinished" and possesses a type of simultaneity that is associated with postmodernism.²² She links Sillman's work to feminism through its explicit dialogue with "unknowability," the "most important thing that feminism put on the table," especially with respect to feminist art.²³ For Molesworth and Sillman, affirming uncertainty "imagine[s] a way of knowing that is not authoritative."²⁴ While Sillman continues the legacy of postwar abstraction through her engagement with the improvisatory methodologies of the generation of formalist painters that preceded her, through an embodied approach to painting, Sillman refuses to stabilize meaning. Instead, she embraces ambiguity as a generative space where knowledge emerges relationally, rather than through fixed authority.

While continuing to maintain emphasis on the body and subjectivity through her own gesture, Sillman's added hesitancy takes on a new criticality.²⁵ Her paintings draw attention to the indeterminacy of her process by revealing—through the opacity and transparency of layers—their own making. According to Molesworth, this "unknowability emerges as a kind of virtue" that arrives out of a feminist critique "of mastery and power [that otherwise] historically led to

violence.”²⁶ Using a provisional style of drawing to emphasize figuration in abstraction, Sillman’s paintings undermine a systematic order of things—within and beyond the discipline.

P&H is a painting that resists submitting to any one hierarchical structure. This denial of clarity within the composition asks the viewer to contemplate its complexity. The fragmented composition of *P&H* articulates the virtually unknowable condition of reality. One that, Sillman suggests, is certainly not conceivable through the reducible units of modernism. Feminism gave Sillman permission to extend the recognizable vocabulary of Abstract Expressionism to a place where it is once again rendered unfamiliar. Through refusing to systematically resolve her compositions, Sillman’s paintings present a bifurcation of meaning and perception, rendering things strange, complicated and beautiful. Sillman thus confounds binary categorizations to achieve a remarkably integrated practice that refuses to come to neat resolutions.²⁷ It is this type of decision making that, Molesworth claims, “opens [up] onto questions of an ethical nature.”²⁸ Sillman’s method operates with an intentional measure of volatility to embrace both desire and disgust, beauty and trouble, to discover new potentials for the medium. Contextually postmodern, Sillman’s painterly strategies extend past an axiomatic ruleset to reconsider a position that embraces multiplicity and the unknown.²⁹

In this critical provisionality, Sillman not only reclaims subjectivity as a site of meaning but also subtly challenges the critical frameworks that have historically codified abstract painting. Many artists associated with the New York School—Pollock, Mitchell, de Kooning—spoke of uncertainty in their processes and often expressed that they were unsure of when a painting was “finished.”³⁰ Yet much of mid-century criticism, particularly the formalism of Greenberg, sought to stabilize meaning by framing painting as a self-contained medium, evaluated through its internal visual logic and flatness.³¹ Even Harold Rosenberg’s notion of

“action painting,” which emphasized the artist’s gesture, still relied on the romanticization of individual expression and heroic resolve.³² Sillman engages this legacy not to negate it, but to expose how interpretation often disavows the doubt, irresolution, and contingency at painting’s core.

This approach resonates with Walter Benjamin’s concept of “brushing history against the grain,” wherein he advocates for a historiography that challenges dominant narratives and highlights suppressed or marginalized perspectives.³³ Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois adapt this notion in their exploration of the “formless,” seeking to “locate operations that brush modernism against the grain,” thereby disrupting established aesthetic hierarchies and embracing ambiguity.³⁴ Sillman’s practice does just that as it unsettles conventional art historical narratives by foregrounding provisionality and anecdote as sites of critical engagement in painting.

Working With and Through the Historiography of Painting

Like Sillman, my paintings position the personal as a gesture to move beyond the categorical frameworks of gender and mastery to affirm the complexity and contradictions inherent within subjectivity. The 2021 exhibition *Women in Abstraction* at the Centre Pompidou reengaged with narratives regarding the concept of “women artist” to locate a conversation “that integrates the history of feminism in the 1970’s” into an emerging discourse on abstraction and the autobiographical.³⁵ Although Sillman’s work was not included alongside the work of Krasner, Mitchell, and Frankenthaler in this exhibition, I believe her paintings masterfully engage with the mnemonic as an intentional provocation towards institutionalized forms of knowledge. For Sillman, the unfathomable and complex terrain of personal experience is more generative than prescribed conceptions of identity, gender, and class.

Similarly, my artistic practice uses the evocative quality of paint to explore the nuances and opacity of subjectivity. My paintings are about existential unease, the grief of loss, the divorce of my parents, the discombobulating quality of constantly moving house, the contradictory joy and agony of having a child. They are about poverty and abundance, about privilege and self-contempt. My paintings employ anecdotal references to contaminate the historical genre of abstraction as they make space for myself and validate the situatedness of my own lived experience.

My work learns from feminist critiques of hard-edge abstraction, where the geometrical forms and flat pictorial space in the work of Frank Stella or even Tomma Abts, for example, leave little room for associative play and subjectivity. Instead, I use soft edges and organic forms with closer approximation to artists such as Frankenthaler or Sillman to create slippages between form and content. Improvising with a personal lexicon of techniques and motifs is an exercise in exorcising fixed categories of identity, where cut-outs of my own subjectivity lose their specificity to become associative as they compile in layers of marks. This contemporary formalism necessarily critiques the reductive and essentializing rhetoric often associated with aesthetic modernism, as it uses a combinatory approach to question fixed positions and established norms. Through this process, I ask, what alternative forms of understanding might emerge in a state of “not knowing”? How can one simultaneously not know and understand? To abstract, for me, is to wrestle with a tension between apprehension and the unknown, where painting becomes a discursive site that retains embodied knowledge without committing to the decisiveness of facts.

Growing up in rural Canada, I spent much of my childhood outdoors. Wandering through long grass, thickets of brush, and densely populated woods facilitated a rich spectrum of

perceptual experience. As a child, I spent a lot of time looking at things. Up close I examined the various surface quality of objects, and from a distance I admired richly layered scenes veiled by fences, foliage, and trees. I soon noticed, however, upon returning to a previously admired site, that it was no longer the same—the light had shifted, my mood had changed, and the object of interest was different. This early perceptual predicament preceded my interest in the pictorial space of painting. What at first seemed like a simple observation over time wore at the strongholds of my capacity for objective understanding—a position that the world (and especially Western institutions) seem ever-invested in reinforcing. For me, the evocative materiality of paint relays the non-objective quality of experience—a quagmire of incomplete thoughts and recollections substantiated in an indeterminate palimpsest of hue and texture. Consciousness is contended with within the opacities and transparencies of erratically distributed plateaus and depressions of paint on ground.

Through the associative and relational pictorial space of painting I recall some of my most intimate observations. Azure blue is the Mediterranean Sea, spaciously set back from an impenetrable stare of cobalt hue. An analogous palette is a mnemonic device to mark moments and scenes that surface in present perceptions as the weight of feeling forever tethered to comprehension. My early practice of looking, noticing the ephemeral, was formative to my investigation of painting today. Through abstracting, my paintings superimpose disparate techniques and motifs to translate an always percolating interference and reminiscence in the process of perception. Bodies overlap with other bodies; memory veils the present like an imperfect silhouette of a chain-link fence.

Like Heron, I use the associative capacity of paint as a type of communication rooted in empathic relationships. Line, colour, texture, and shape act as mnemonic devices that unsettle the

binary between form and content; materials become anecdotal asides. In painting, this is how matter matters. Wrestling with composition—creating impressions of moods and experiences—is a way of putting something into the world that is deeply personal, awkward, and unresolved. It is a visual language for the messiness of sense experience, holding both clarity and its uncertainty.

Cut-Outs of a Subjectivity

I started making this series of work while living in Zürich, Switzerland. After visiting the Zentrum Paul Klee I became interested in Klee's small works on paper that were part of the Centre's collection. They seemed so intimate—the epitome of making manifest a process of thought that was about reconciling the world around him. Work on this scale suggests a type of mental processing comparable to a diary entry, a personal exercise that perhaps initially is not even meant to be shared.

My own series of work started as small, straightforward compositions on paper, but with the birth of my son, I had a desire to make more complex paintings. While maintaining the conservative size of the works, I started using casting latex as an inexpensive masking fluid to create compositions with various layers. Casting latex provides a reliable seal between the layers of paint but is otherwise a thick substance that is difficult to control. I use the latex as a drawing material to produce veils between the layers. The variable consistency of the material produces soft edges that make bodily associations. Applied as an opaque film, the material has a skin-like quality when dried. The combination of the corporeal quality of the latex and the fact that the latex delicately protects sections of paintings underneath makes the process of removing it a visceral experience. As I peel back the layers of latex, I disrupt the structural integrity of the surface plane. This process is admittedly gratifying in its volatility. Somewhat violently, I destroy the face of a composition, a composition that often reflects many careful hours of

concentration. Harmonious palettes of brightly coloured or complementary hues are in tension with the scared reliefs of paint. The misalignments between surfaces condense to create the appearance of a coherent composition while retaining evidence of this compulsive act. The unpredictability of latex and its suggestive quality provides an inexhaustible technique to discover new mark-making and compositional possibilities while also providing a strange cathartic release of any preestablished conceptions of beauty.

Layering with latex is a method of abstracting that purposively sets up compositions that have an estranging affect. In his essay “Sensing Beauty,” Berardi contends that an aesthetic



Fig. 7. Maegan Harbridge, *untitled (Wintergarten)*, 2018, acrylic on paper, 30cm x 40cm. Artist's collection, Toronto.

encounter that evokes “estrangement” and “surprise” manifests “new constellations of meaning.”³⁶ Berardi links this type of aesthetic estrangement with the ways in which we experience beauty, claiming that sensing beauty is a process by which we take aesthetic pleasure in not what we find to be rational or symmetrical but that which maintains “a distance from the predictable order [of things].”³⁷ He suggests that elements of surprise invite the viewer into a state of contemplation. What strikes one as existing outside a normative order causes occasion to

reflect. Berardi locates this phenomenon where a sign deviates from its conventional meaning.³⁸ When predictability is diminished, a fissure creates a moment of indeterminacy—one that allows for the consideration of multiple perspectives.

Although I have been working with liquid latex for over a decade, the results of masking with this material still feel novel. Like tape, the latex creates a reverse mark in the painting but because of its fluidity, the quality of the mark resembles the gestural feeling of paint. This aspect of the material makes the process less identifiable than other hard-edge techniques. Through layering, the paintings become opaque. As the paint comes forward, the layers recede, and the temporality of the compositions are confused. This technique invites the viewer into a tangle of layers that are only partially decipherable. The compositions evolve over long stretches of time, so that the sequence of their layers become indecipherable even to me. To my mind, this process mirrors the entanglement of memory and perception that infuse subjective understanding, so that this cumulative method becomes the content of the work. Repetition and congruencies across compositions perform a measure of conscious consideration; however, their opacity prevents me from ever recreating a painting in full. Like a game of time, I cannot move backwards but only proceed onwards, with iterative uncertainty.

Edges intersect to create visible fissures that fracture the paintings. This weaving of paint and absence produces an unruliness that registers the spectrum of emotion within any given facet of subjecthood—such as motherhood. The layers are not assimilated into a singular composition but persist in simultaneity. Lines become edges that interrupt other shapes, generating a superimposition of perspectives. Abstraction, enacted through this crisscrossing of strata, stages an attempt to translate the estranging force of feeling in form.

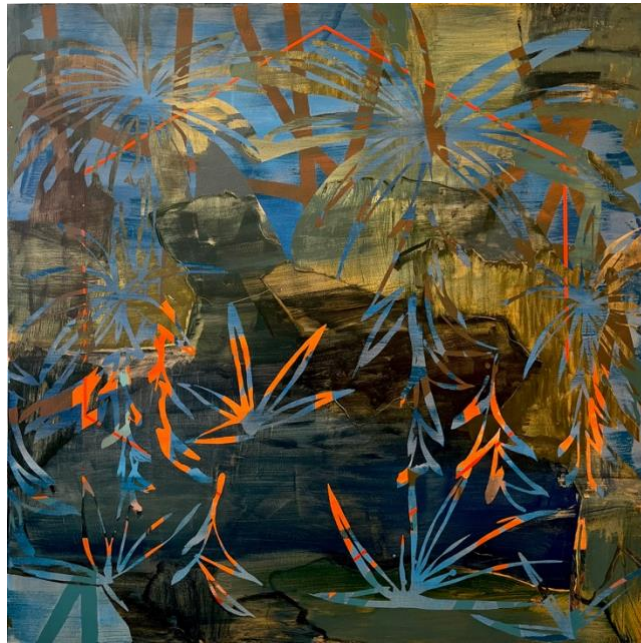


Fig. 8. Maegan Harbridge, *Night (Gymnopédie No 1)*, 2025, acrylic on canvas, 122cm x 122cm. Artist's collection, Toronto.

While this work develops slowly over a long period of time, my working procedure also corresponds to the short burst of time available in a mother's schedule. Layers are painted and covered over, preserving varying emotional states over multiple studio sessions. Because the work is constructed partially blind, it can take many layers to find a resolution for a composition. Jan Verwoert reflects on the duration of painter Tomma Abt's process as a rigorous and timely practice that resists the frenetic pace of the world beyond the studio.³⁹ Verwoert links the duration of her process to a type of refusal—one that resists the efficiency of capitalist labour.

Just as Verwoert equates Abt's practice with a type of temporal resistance, I consider my own methodology as crafting an artwork that resists the mass and pace of capitalist production. These paintings are small and slowly constructed. They cohere in the flow of mothering time; they manifest painting as a practice, much like mothering itself.

Navigating the plasticity of the medium and the embodied decision making that goes into constructing a composition shares a methodological relationship to becoming a parent. Since transitioning to this layered method, my artistic process has become mostly improvisational, just as motherhood has forced me to adopt an improvisatory approach to life. No previous knowledge—acquired through information—feels relevant to the actual experience of having a child. Improvisation as a performative practice of remaining in the flow of things continues to teach me how to be a better parent. It is a practice of not knowing, that “brushes against the grain” of objective truths. To borrow Sillman's words, it is a “process of trying to figure something out while doing it.”⁴⁰

Spatial Folds and a Place of In-Betweens

My paintings engage with multiple types of painterly space. Holding the capacity for both illusion and flatness, this layering method joins early modernist explorations of painting's pictorial possibilities in the oscillation between four types of space; adding to modernism's illusionistic, formal, and cubist notions of space is a fourth—achieved using the masking technique—which I call a manifold space. This manifold space is a disciplinary evolution of the interior/exterior juxtaposition of the window motif in historical painting, where the interstices of layers draw the gaze beyond the traditional pictorial space of the canvas (foreground, mid ground, and background) into a virtual space analogous to the dominant scene. I place things—formal and symbolic—into these constructed spaces to refer to the intertwining of place and

sensation that compound in the process of perception. Perspectival cues are interrupted through layering, causing the painting's depth to recede into a labyrinth of multiple spaces instead of the horizon.

The experience of looking through layers positions the viewer's perspective (in its own multitudinous stratification) in relation to the multifaceted space of the canvas. In this dynamic, the viewer and viewed become a unique arrangement of affective layers that compile in relation to one another. This spatial fold does not allow for an interior/exterior juxtaposition but creates simultaneity between the contextual veils; conscious (and unconscious) space converge with painterly space. In my painting practice, the surface operates as a site of continual inflection, where gesture, material, and memory are not layered in sequence but folded into one another—forming a topological field of affective density. Drawing on Deleuze's notion of the baroque fold, I approach painting not as a bounded composition but as what he calls “a labyrinth of continuity” where “the inside is nothing more than a fold of the outside.”⁴¹ The baroque, as Deleuze insists, “endlessly produces folds,” not to conceal, but to generate new modes of perception and relation.⁴² This folding logic reflects my own approach to form as an ongoing negotiation between matter, memory, and motion. Rather than pursuing resolution or wholeness, my use of liquid latex and iterative layering techniques enacts what Deleuze describes as “a field of immanence,” where materiality itself thinks, moves, and deviates.⁴³ Each inflection in the surface becomes a hinge between sensation and idea—a way of holding space for contradictions, for affective interruptions, for what Amy Sillman calls “the not-knowing” at the core of abstraction.

Like Sillman, rather than use anecdotal fragments to assert narrative, I allow narrative to flicker at the edges of form—never fully legible yet always present in the folds of the visual

field. Architectural structures within my paintings, for example, autobiographically allude to childhood memories of my grandmother's greenhouse while also gesturing towards my ongoing learning of the connection between colonialism and private property. Thus painting is a medium that I use to inquire into the layering of consciousness and perception. My collage-like processes of abstracting uses multiple types of pictorial space (that engage with the history of painting) to create translations of my own subjective experience. In this sense, the Deleuzian fold offers not only a formal strategy but a conceptual map for thinking through, in this case, the entanglement of spatial memory, colonial histories, and embodied perception.



Fig. 9. Maegan Harbridge, *A Problem of Alignment*, 2025, acrylic on canvas, 100cm x 100cm. Artist's collection, Toronto.

Cartographies of Itinerancy

In my early twenties I spent four years living in Woodstock, an area bordering the edge of Cape Town, South Africa's District Six, a neighbourhood dismantled as result of settler colonial rule. This empty plot of land, a once lively neighbourhood, haunts the city as a spectre

of its recently violent past, and is incidentally adjacent to the studio from which I now write my dissertation. This desolate plot of land is only a conceptual stone's throw away from my native Canada, where the luxury of empty space has been championed as a settler's dream while rows of cookie-cutter houses occupy the once sacred terrain of Indigenous lands. A house is simultaneously a palace of mnemonic remembering, while also a mark of colonial occupation.

I belong to a generation of digital nomads, where much of my adult life has been marked through a veil of itinerancy. The structures in my paintings present multiplicities of associations that hold together different places and things at once—separate but without separability.⁴⁴ South Africa's apartheid was predicated on Canada's own. Two places overlap; identity and space intertwine and co-establish one another, so that one terrain reminds me of another.

Walking in the woods I notice a break in the canopy; a shape of mottled blue and yellow sky sparkles against a frame of foliage. Figure-ground becomes a cutout face—an almost sphinx—the missing gaze of Lions Head. Looking is a phantasmagoria; objects of attention transform into subjective experience; subjects and objects coalesce. This fleeting scene, reminisced in the Canadian wilderness, is tangled in Cape Town memories. In my paintings, masking functions like a canopy—not as cover, but as a shifting veil that filters texture, form, and meaning, allowing glimpses to emerge and recede in a slow choreography of seeing, where vision is delayed, redirected, and layered in time—requiring the viewer to dwell, to return, to look again.

Conclusion

Layering is a painterly technique to straddle a place of in-betweens where disparate scenes intersperse to create complex perceptual frameworks of looking through, on top, and in between. The basis of my practice reveres the sense intelligence that exists in my body prior to

language. Through materials, I recall the complexity of perceptual experience and assimilate the discomfort and bewildering affect of contemporary life. Abstracting through masking out uses the language of historical abstraction to expand a conversation of formalism into a discourse of manifold postmodernity. The painterly references are not distilled into a single lexicon but pull from many genres to carve out a new space for itself—deterritorialized, my paintings embrace the instability of unknowability.

Chapters One, Two, and Three have reimagined formalism as a site where form preforms content, where composition becomes entangled with the world. The one-page poetic interlude that follows this chapter is meant to offer a brief pause, grounding the dissertation in the aesthetic conviction that motivates my research-creation project. Chapter Four, then, takes a more speculative, theoretical approach to explore three terms from the expanded humanities that, when applied to painting, update the toolbox of modern formalism for a contemporary present. Finally, Chapter Five engages decolonial theorist Sylvia Wynter to reenvision narrative as formally constitutive of human subjectivity and world-making.

¹ Amy Sillman, *Faux Pas: Selected Writings and Drawings* (After 8 Books, 2020), 130.

² Sillman, 89.

³ Ruth Guilding, “The Image and the Meaning: Colour, Space and Equilibrium: Patrick Heron’s Work—and His Own Assessment of It,” *Times Literary Supplement* (2018): Gale Literature Resource Center. <https://go.gale.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA634285078&sid=googleScholar&v=2.1&it=r&linkaccess=abs&issn=0307661X&p=LitRC&sw=w&userGroupName=anon%7E67211724&aty=open-web-entry>

⁴ Roger Rothman, “Absolutely Small: Sketch of an Anarchist Aesthetic,” in *Aesthetics Equals Politics: New Discourses Across Art, Architecture, and Philosophy*, ed. Mark Foster Gage (MIT Press, 2019), 171 and 176.

⁵ Rothman, 170.

⁶ Buchloh quoted in Rothman, 171.

⁷ Daniel Neofetou, *Rereading Abstract Expressionism: Clement Greenberg and the Cold War* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022), 5.

⁸ Helen Molesworth in, “Program: Joan Mitchell,” Conversation between Amy Sillman, Helen Molesworth, and Erin Kimmel. 4:26. Posted on the David Zwirner website, accessed November 9, 2025, Video, <https://www.davidzwirner.com/news/2023/program-joan-mitchell>.

⁹ Amy Sillman in, “Program: Joan Mitchell,” 26:39–26:48.

¹⁰ Helen Molesworth and Amy Sillman, “One Lump or Two,” Lecture, The Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, November 21, 2013.

¹¹ Sarah Hetherington, “Painting as Amy Sillman,” *Women’s Studies* 41, no. 8 (2012): 980.

¹² Helen Molesworth, “Amy Sillman: Look, Touch, Embrace,” in *Amy Sillman: One Lump or Two*, ed. Helen Molesworth (The Institute of Contemporary Art, 2013), 51.

¹³ Molesworth, 51.

¹⁴ Molesworth and Sillman, “One Lump or Two.”

¹⁵ Molesworth and Sillman, “One Lump or Two.”

¹⁶ Hetherington, “Painting as Amy Sillman,” 988.

¹⁷ Franco “Bifo” Berardi, “Sensing Beauty,” *Antique Magazine* 1097 (October 2006): 44.

¹⁸ Berardi, 46.

¹⁹ Hetherington, “Painting as Amy Sillman,” 988.

²⁰ Maria Lind, “Preface,” in *Abstraction: Documents of Contemporary Art* (Whitechapel Gallery and MIT Press, 2013), 23.

²¹ Molesworth, “Amy Sillman,” 51, 107.

²² Molesworth, 52.

²³ Molesworth, 52.

²⁴ Molesworth, 53.

²⁵ Mark Godfrey, “Statements of Intent,” *Artforum International* 52, no. 9 (May 2014): 297.

²⁶ Godfrey, 299.

²⁷ Anne Ellegood, “Third Person Singular,” Amy Sillman, accessed September 11, 2013, https://www.amysillman.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/200803_Third-Person-Singular-TangHirshhorn-Anne-Ellegood.pdf

²⁸ Molesworth, “Amy Sillman,” 51.

²⁹ Maegan Harbridge, “Affect as Effect: Towards the Social Significance of Abstract Painting” (master’s thesis, The University of Guelph, 2015), 2–18. This section expands on my MFA thesis discussion of Amy Sillman’s paintings *P&H* (2007) and *Junker I* (2009), both of which were included in *Amy Sillman One Lump or Two* (Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, 2013–2014). I visited the exhibition and attended Sillman’s public artist talk in November 2013.

³⁰ Maurice Tuchman, *New York School, the First Generation: Paintings of the 1940s and 1950s* (New York Graphic Society, 1971), 25–37.

³¹ Clement Greenberg, “Modernist Painting,” in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Beacon Press, 1961), 103.

³² Harold Rosenberg, “The American Action Painters,” in *The Tradition of the New* (Horizon Press, 1959), 22.

³³ Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (Schocken Books, 1968), 257.

³⁴ Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind E. Krauss, *Formless: A User’s Guide* (Zone Books, 1997), 16.

³⁵ “Women in Abstraction,” Exhibition description, Centre Pompidou, accessed April 1, 2024, <https://www.centrepompidou.fr/en/program/calendar/event/OmzSxFv>.

³⁶ Berardi, “Sensing Beauty,” 44; Maegan Harbridge, “Affect as Effect: Towards the Social Significance of Abstract Painting” (master’s thesis, The University of Guelph, 2015), 11.

³⁷ Berardi, 44; Harbridge, “Affect as Effect,” 11.

³⁸ Berardi, 44; Harbridge, “Affect as Effect,” 11.

³⁹ Jan Verwoert, “The Beauty and Politics of Latency: On the Work of Tomma Abts” In *Tomma Abts*, edited by Laura Hoptman, Bruce Hainley, and Jan Verwoert (Phaidon Press Inc. 2008), 92. Published in conjunction with the exhibition of the same name, shown at New Museum, New York, April 9 – November 2, 2008.

⁴⁰ Sillman, *Faux Pas*, 151.

⁴¹ Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, trans. Tom Conley (University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 3.

⁴² Deleuze, 227.

⁴³ Deleuze, 157.

⁴⁴ Denise Ferreira da Silva, “Difference Without Separability,” *Philosophy Today* 61, no. 1 (Winter 2017): 63.

A flat mark, a voluminous mark, an opaque mark, a translucent mark, a confident mark, a tentative mark, a textured mark, a smooth mark, a compliant mark, a layered mark, a reverse mark, an absent mark, a spontaneous mark, a considered mark, a fast mark, a slow mark, a resistant mark!

A Formalism for Future Collaborations

I want to make paintings that are contradictions. I want to use colour both wildly and gracefully. I want to use the texture of paint to speak about the nuances of bodies—to say everything specific about me that might overlap with other's specificities. I want to make paintings about my hometown and strange lands as if they were the same place. I want to share the landscapes I carry inside me, without ever letting any of them go. I want to paint a window that looks out to the sea but is also a mirror—dirty, layered, and drawn into with traces of me.

I want to make paintings about modernist forms, in reverence of their brevity and institutional critique. I want to lean into the medium specific—not for paint's sake, but for what is aesthetically at stake. Because what is sensible has become the frontline. Because who can participate in politics, if the worker does not have the time?

I want to take time otherwise not available to take. I want to find the space to disassociate my eyes from the working body. I want to engage in beautiful conundrums—to feel the blue of the sky and the weight of a mark. I want to get lost in the recesses of disciplinary fringe, to hear others speak about affirming the unknown, and the value of wasting time. I want trace relationships as if it is a serious political pursuit—because I am the worker, and so are you, and we need a formalism for future collaborations.

Chapter Four: Painting Beyond Humanism: A Lexicon for an Expanded Formalism

Introduction

This dissertation has traced the evolving contours of abstract painting as a critical field of inquiry, and proposed *expanded formalism* as a mode of engagement that resists disciplinary closure while attending to form as a site of embodied, entangled, and situated knowledge. While Chapters Two and Three derived their conclusions from examining my own and other artistic practices, this chapter is driven by the task of clarifying a method of visual interpretation for art, rooted in the self-reflexivity of contemporary painting, to extend a mode of visual analysis that supersedes the medium's disciplinary specificity. In dialogue with theorists including Donna Haraway, Karen Barad, Daniel Neofetou, and Gilles Deleuze, and through close readings of artists such as Helen Frankenthaler, Julie Mehretu, Mark Bradford, Amy Sillman, and others, I have argued that abstraction's vitality today lies not in its self-referentiality but in its capacity to mediate between the perceptual and the political, the material and the speculative. Central to this claim is the concept of *care/full* looking—a mode of attention I propose that takes seriously the composition of a work without reducing it to a simple meaning or message. This kind of looking is reparative in its refusal to foreclose complexity, offering a practice of attentive and open-ended perception.

This chapter highlights the intersection of aesthetic theory and contemporary humanities discourses—especially those shaped by feminist, decolonial, and materialist interventions—to put forward a strand of formalism that foregrounds the relational quality of form as its primary mode of inquiry. This contemporary formalism emerges in the wake of postmodernism. Departing from the dualistic approaches of modernist formal analysis, a relationally focused mode of visual interpretation seeks to address a representational impasse in contemporary art

discourse, where form is too often understood as either politically inert or conceptually overdetermined.

By bringing the legacy of modernist formalism into productive tension with relational and materialist theories, this chapter reframes form as a site of material relational thought and affective encounter. Reimagining both traditional mimetic practices and modernist abstraction through the co-constitutive and affective excess of paint, I propose contemporary painting as a formal practice of knowledge-making—one that unsettles hierarchies of rational humanist thought. I argue that attuning to painting's inherent relationality—its iterative, compositional liveliness and the social and subjective contingencies embedded within its making—disrupts notions of autonomy, and categorical sovereignty. For example, my own artistic practice returns to the early modernist withdrawal from narrative in painting to explore the latent possibility of materiality found in the rhizome-like quality of aesthetic experience. Here, I make conceptual space for my work and that of others by updating the vocabulary of what contemporary painting does, how it mediates novel modes of thinking and feeling through form.

Central to contemporary humanities discourses is a critique of the representational lens that developed with Enlightenment humanism and became paradigmatic within the humanities.¹ In contrast, rather than treating the world as a set of pre-existing, knowable entities awaiting objective description, relational and posthumanist theories reframe knowledge as entangled. In so doing, these theories offer new tools that can then be brought to contemporary painting to engage it as an expanded site of encounter. I argue that contemporary painting, as it inherits the legacy of modernism's self-reflexivity, approaches form as an emergent and relational field, and thus shifts aesthetic inquiry away from the centre of formal analysis toward its peripheries—those sites of relational exchange where human and more-than-human forces meet. In this

chapter, I explain how contemporary painting foregrounds the vitality of materiality and expands the perceptual framework of formal analysis into a broader ontology—one that offers a performative method for thinking painting otherwise, across the threshold of an expanded humanities.

To explore how painting performs a critique of the humanist tradition, I turn to three key terms—intra-action, diffraction, and affect—which together provide a vocabulary for framing materiality and meaning as relational. Although distinct in origin—emerging respectively from quantum physics, feminist epistemology, and affect theory—these concepts converge within the framework of contemporary painting to cultivate a more robust approach to formal analysis. Rather than treating abstraction as a genre, they reposition it as a methodology that enacts material and semantic complexity.

Intra-action, a term coined by Barad, describes how entities do not pre-exist their relations; rather, they emerge through their encounters.² In painting, this resonates with how gesture, surface, and medium co-constitute one another, as entangled agencies materializing through practice. I use the term to draw out how the brushstroke is not only a mark laid upon the canvas, but a site of relation where painter, material, and context intra-act.

Diffraction, which I borrow from the feminist science studies of Haraway and Barad and apply to the interpretation of contemporary painting, offers a method of reading through difference—not by tracing sameness or reflection, but by attending to how differences matter.³ Abstract painting, when approached as a diffractive practice, can be seen as a material-discursive field that resists linear narratives or fixed meanings. Instead, form becomes a site of contingency and interference, where visual and conceptual traces inform, and disrupt perception.

Affect, especially as developed by theorists like Brian Massumi, reframes sensation and intensity as pre- or non-conscious forces that move across bodies and materials. In painting, affect arises through colour, texture, density, and rhythm—qualities that exceed interpretation yet nonetheless shape experience. When affect is understood not as the expression of a subject but as the circulation of intensities⁴ between human and nonhuman actors, painting becomes an “affective ecology”⁵—a charged surface where response, and meaning are composed. In this chapter, I engage with the relationality of affect by bringing a more precise attention to painting itself in order to speak about the affect generated through form. Here, I term the affective quality of painting *extra-aesthetic* to update the critical toolbox of formal analysis with language that can discuss and interpret the circulation of intensities that arise from an encounter with painting. Thus, the *extra-aesthetic* becomes an “affective ecology” in Alexa Weik von Mossner’s terms, where such an encounter is an entangled ecology of perceptual, and environmental relationships, highlighting how the *extra-aesthetic* as a sensory experience is shaped across human and nonhuman fields.

Expanded formalism is not merely a theoretical proposition but a practice: a way of working with and through these terms to cultivate a performative and relational mode of visual analysis. This chapter uses intra-action to reconceive form as relational emergence; diffraction to shift the methodological lens of formal analysis; and affect to foreground intensity over image. Together, these concepts retool formal analysis in ways that depart from the modernist tradition and gesture toward interdisciplinarity. This *expanded formalism* extends critiques of medium specificity and medium purity to contribute to a broader effort to dismantle the legacies of humanist traditions within the contemporary visual arts.

Intra-Action: Formalism's Ontological Shift

I. Modern Formalism & Reframing Albers's Relational Pedagogy through Barad

Although the relational aspect of composition is well documented within the Western canon of painting—often via artist-led reflections⁶—the contingent quality of form (how colour appears only in relation to other colours, or the oscillation of figure-ground relationships) was historically of minor importance to the dominant narrative of modern formal analysis. It seems increasingly plausible to suggest, however, that a more relational approach to formalism that acknowledged the instability of perceptual phenomena was in fact present but largely overlooked during the modern period because it conflicted with the dominant belief in human rationality and scientific objectivism. Human rationality and scientific objectivism, grounded in Enlightenment thought, was often expressed through optical analogies⁷—or what Karen Barad describes as visual metaphors that emphasize observation over entanglement—for the sake of reduction, classification, and autonomy rather than relationships.⁸

Albers's *Interaction of Color* (1963) is one notable example of modernist discourse that runs against the grain of the rhetoric of purity and formal autonomy in aesthetic modernism. Following a throughline from Michel Eugène Chevreul's *The Principles of Harmony and Contrast* (1839) to Impressionism and the Bauhaus and later American abstraction, Albers's book offered a refined version of Chevreul's ideas and thus laid the foundation for a pedagogy centred on the relational qualities of form, especially colour. Throughout his oeuvre, and particularly in his *Homage to the Square* and *Adobe* series, Albers developed an instructional method to teach students about how colour functions not in isolation but through relational dynamics. His exercises, often involving colourful paper cut-outs, trained students to perceive how colours shift in context—how their “actual” appearance, distinct from “factual” colour

theory, is conditioned by surrounding hues. For Albers, it was only through perceptual experimentation that one could learn to “see” colour’s affective interaction, or what Chevreul termed—and Albers described—as simultaneous contrast.⁹ In these exercises, colour was treated not as static form but as an event, an emergent relational property apprehended through situated, intersubjective observation.

Although grounded in modernism’s commitment to medium specificity, Albers’s colour theory offered a subtle challenge to the reductive binaries of modern formalism. While much of modernism’s legacy has come to be understood in pursuit of a rationalist ideal of purity¹⁰—exemplified in the geometric abstraction of Russian Constructivism, De Stijl, the International Style of architecture, and the critical theory of high modernism—Albers’s project, influenced by Chevreul, emphasized sensitivity, contingency, and perceptual nuance. His pedagogical distinction between “factual” and “actual” colour signalled a move away from the concrete and toward relational becoming. In this way, Greenberg’s call for medium specificity, which often treated composition as a system of autonomous elements governed by universal laws,¹¹ remained in tension with the relationality embedded in much of modernism’s own formal play.

As such, Albers’s work exemplifies the more entangled understanding of form that permeated modernism. To further deepen this relational perspective, I call on Barad’s theory of intra-action. While Albers spoke of interaction, Barad replaces this idea with intra-action (a term that suggests entities do not pre-exist their relations but instead emerge through them). She differentiates between empirically driven notions of interaction, notions that suppose the separation of individual entities, from what she terms “intra-action,” an alternative quantum understanding of causality where matter is always forming as a variable of its situated spatial, temporal circumstances.¹² Intra-action accounts for causality as an event within a field of infinite

other possible events—a flux of relationships that produce emergent forms. Putting this together with Albers’s work, colour does not precede its relationships but is actualized in their intra-action.

Although Albers did not use Barad’s terminology, I argue that his pedagogical emphasis on the interdependence of colour perception presents the quantum logic Barad later articulates. By augmenting Albers’s colour theory with Barad’s relational ontology, we gain a more precise language for understanding how form materializes through iterative co-constitution. This conceptual shift reorients painting from visual illusion to ontological entanglement (a point I explore with more specificity in the following section on diffraction). A brushstroke is not only a perceptual effect but also an event where pigment, tool, light, surface, and history intra-act. My discussion of colour, line, texture, and shape in the context of quantum field theory underscores painting as a plural system of relations. Here, Albers’s perceptual colour exercises become material-discursive enactments of form’s relational emergence.

In my own studio practice, this relational dimension emerges through direct, embodied engagement with materials—a form of experiential learning in which perception and composition co-evolve in real time. My paintings are fields to explore the thick quality of vision—how perception links the internal and external, where subjects and objects shape one another in active, reciprocal touch. Layers of opaque and illusionistic paint effects collapse into non-Euclidean space, opening windows onto competing and complementary visual fields, each possessing its own presence and interdependent resonance. The simultaneity of looking through and looking across these layers generates a dynamic push/pull between flatness and illusionistic depth. This hybrid approach—where abstract and representational forms are entangled as a strategy for translating sense experience—eschews both the binary logic of aesthetic modernism

and the narrative-oriented approach of postmodernism. Instead, it homes in on the relational quality of composition that Albers alludes to via his exploration of colour.

This iterative process also echoes Albers's pedagogical emphasis on learning through making, a process in which knowledge arises from sustained encounters with material variability. Here, the act of composing becomes an inquiry into relationality itself, where form is discovered through responsiveness to shifting perceptual and material conditions. Moving from interaction to intra-action reframes this studio-based inquiry as a form of research-creation: a practice where making is an ontological investigation into the co-constitutive dynamics of matter.

II. An Ontological Shift in Form

Rethinking Albers through Barad's quantum ontology shifts interaction to intra-action and reveals how a retooled formalism can revisit modernism without reaffirming its humanist metaphysics. While Albers remained within a modernist framework, his pedagogy pointed beyond it—toward a world where form arises not from the isolated will of the artist but from the entangled play of perception, and matter. While Albers did not frame his pedagogy in ontological terms, his exercises foreground a foundational insight: that form is not a self-contained essence but arises through relations.

Albers's emphasis on the perceptual interdependence of colour—on how we only see a colour in relation to another—intuitively gestures toward a more expansive material logic. Barad's concept of intra-action gives theoretical precision to this intuition, extending it beyond perception into ontology. Where Albers shows that colour behaves differently depending on context, Barad asserts that meaning and matter themselves emerge through entangled relations. In this light, the relationality demonstrated in modernist practice becomes a generative source for rethinking form as an ontological event. This alignment also clarifies my assertion that

contemporary painting is a critical site for practicing perceptual and ethical attunement. A colour does not merely shift because we see it differently; it becomes different as an event—with other colours, surfaces, materials, and bodies.

My expanded reading of Albers dovetails with a broader critique of the humanist subject that underwrites modernist aesthetics. Drawing on Bataille's notion of *l'informe*, where the hierarchical categories of art are dissolved, Krauss and Bois mobilize the formless to dismantle the binary oppositions that structured modernism's claims to purity—subject/object, form/content, vision/body. While *l'informe* offers a crucial critique of the closed logics of modernist formalism, my conception of an *expanded formalism* both extends and reconfigures this project. Where Krauss and Bois foreground formlessness as a logic of negation—a dismantling of categorical oppositions—*expanded formalism* extends this ethos to move beyond negation toward material and relational affirmation. In this model, form is not a structure only to be deconstructed but an emergent, contingent process co-produced through the intra-action of human and nonhuman forces. Whereas Krauss and Bois still situate the disturbance of form within the anthropocentric field of human perception, *expanded formalism* foregrounds matter itself; paint, surface, gesture, and environment all exert agency, generating meaning beyond the human. An *expanded formalism* not only critiques the autonomy of form but also reimagines painting as an ethical site of becoming—one that affirms the unknown through continual relational unfolding.

Krauss and Bois's critique of the humanist subject is aligned with Jean-François Lyotard's and Fredric Jameson's rejection of totalizing narratives in that they reveal the ideological scaffolding beneath formalist claims to universality. Similarly, I argue, Albers's emphasis on relational perception—while not explicitly ontological—also quietly destabilizes

these binaries. His pedagogy privileges difference as generative and irreducible. Thus, formal analysis retooled through intra-action, as inherited from Albers's relational pedagogy, becomes a method of critical and ethical engagement. Colour, for example, becomes more than a compositional element; it becomes a site where bodies, histories, and materials meet. Albers's advancement of Chevreul's colour theory demonstrates a lineage of relational formalism that quietly undermines the logic of purification conventionally thought to be at the heart of modernist discourse.¹³ As opposed to imposing an anachronistic lens on Albers, I argue that rereading form in this way simply recognizes the already existing vitality of a pedagogical thread within modernism—a vitality that, by shifting attention from centres to peripheries, resonates with broader cultural calls to think and create beyond human exceptionalism.

III. Representationalism and its Critique

To fully grasp the implications of intra-action within painting, it is necessary to contrast it with the dominant representationalist paradigm it challenges. Representationalism frames knowledge as the reflection of pre-existing truths, as if knowledge could achieve a one-to-one mirror reflection of phenomena. This model privileges the factual over the actual, to borrow Albers's terms, or reflection over event, in Barad's formulation. This orientation is fundamentally incompatible with Barad's ontology of emergence, where meaning arises through relational, material entanglements. Intra-action thus shifts perception from representational habits of seeing to a mode of relational looking, where seeing itself participates in the becoming of what is seen.

In her 2007 book *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, Barad theorizes that, rather than a detached activity, knowing is an intra-action between materials and discourse: "practices of knowing are specific material engagements that participate in (re)configuring the world."¹⁴

Contrary to her relational ontological approach, representationalism, she explains, is the philosophical presupposition that “the world is composed of individuals—presumed to exist before the law, or the discovery of the law—awaiting or inviting representation.”¹⁵ This Cartesian practice of knowing—foundational to Western systems of knowledge—that divides subjects and objects into “individually determinate entities” is increasingly unsettled by a range of critiques: feminist analyses of subjecthood; postcolonial examinations of knowledge and power; Indigenous articulations of more-than-human epistemologies; and posthuman theories of relational ontology.¹⁶ Together, these perspectives trace the histories of how knowledge has been organized and how it functions in the formations of subjectivities, while also foregrounding the ways discursive practices materially co-constitute the world.¹⁷ Representationalism, as a mode of knowing, operates from a presumed distance, reflecting on the world from the outside.¹⁸ It underwrites habits of thinking and looking that grant humans a disproportionate sense of agency and autonomy.

Barad, who takes her inspiration from theoretical physicist Neils Bohr, recalls that “the heart of the lesson of quantum physics [is that] we are part of that nature that we seek to understand.”¹⁹ Barad challenges the basic premise of reflective representationalist thinking: the idea that meaning exists first and gets represented after (as a reflection). Rather, she sees meaning as coming into being through the very entanglement of materials and practices. In this light, what can an intra-active perspective of material and pictorial form teach us about visual culture? How do images of the world contribute to it? Here, I turn to painting as an artistic form that recursively informs itself, while also acting as a discursive practice that participates in the world’s unfolding.

If images are world-making—if they participate as agents in shaping how we become in and with the world—then how might representational practices of thinking and knowing reinforce a logic of epistemic isolation? As Bruno Latour reminds us, representation is of course never a simple mirror; it also mediates the translations between bodies and meanings.²⁰ To that extent, representational forms can both reinforce and unsettle the hierarchies they appear to sustain. Still, the dominance of Western individualism—reproduced through certain representational habits of knowledge-making—has contributed to the epistemic and ecological conditions underlying our present planetary crisis. This social, political, and ecological emergency feels, at once, overwhelmingly complex and oddly locatable. At its core lies a human-centred mode of knowing—one that positions and represents the human as separate from and above a more-than-human world. Thus, representational practices are never neutral: they shape discourse and enact material consequences.

In this sense, my journey through the relational aspects of form (experienced in the act of making) considers painting as one aesthetic possibility to redefine what it means to be human in relationship to the world. This proposition is not limited to my personal practice; rather, it suggests that painting as a medium can enact a broader epistemological shift by performing an entanglement of perception, matter, and meaning. By parsing the particularities of formal interactions—as intra-action—within the studio, I attend to how composition manifests *through* its relationships, not in spite of them. I speculate that such attentiveness might enable novel modes of looking—ones attuned to simultaneity—which, in turn, opens new ways of telling stories beyond the confines of a humanist worldview. By engaging the relationality of materials and the contingency of composition, I extend modernism's inquiry into aesthetic relationships toward an expanded horizon—where greater attention is given to the formation and deformation

of material relational systems. Within an *expanded formalism*, both the act of painting and its experience through analysis can become sites of relational inquiry—a space where the human is embedded within a field of iterative co-constitution.

IV. *More-Than-Representational* Painting

For Barad, since reflective representation plays out only as “iterative mimesis,” it is important to find means of thinking in the creation of knowledge that are non-representational.²¹ Contemporary painting by such artists as Charline von Heyl, Julie Mehretu, Sandra Brewster and Mark Bradford—whose work I discuss in detail in the following pages—employ non-representational aesthetic strategies that I argue signal, in fact, a *more-than-representational* approach. Here, artists put disparate references in relation with one another to supersede the reductive logic of modern reflective thought. Especially in its hybrid forms, contemporary painting increasingly resists categorization within traditional aesthetic or disciplinary genres. As I explain in Chapter Two, *more-than-representational* painting is a term I use to describe this genre-defiant practice—one that, rather than abandoning representation, exceeds its conventions by mobilizing abstraction, illusion, materiality, gesture, and affect in tandem. This kind of painting operates in the space where figuration and abstraction, narrative and texture, objecthood and event no longer oppose one another but coalesce. *More-than-representational* painting unfolds across multiple registers—visual, haptic, didactic, temporal, atmospheric—and draws the viewer into its web of relations.

Such work is “more-than” not in the sense of superseding representational strategies, but in extending their logic into other perceptual and affective domains. It entangles language and material process in ways that cannot be reduced to either symbolic meaning or mimetic illusion. This “more-than” hybrid positions contemporary painting as a relational interface—a site of

intra-action between social, ecological, and more-than-human forces. To call painting *more-than-representational* is to mark a shift in how we understand both the function of pictures and the epistemological stakes of visual art within the expanded humanities.²² I argue that it is through a *more-than-representational* approach that contemporary painting unlearns humanist habits of bifurcation that separate mind from body, subject from object, and human from world. In the context of visual art, moving from interaction to intra-action contributes to broader efforts to dominant practices of knowing that privilege the human above all else. In this way, expanding formal analysis to attune to the intra-actions of studio practice shapes how we look and in turn transforms how we think.

V. Transformation as Intra-Action in Contemporary Painting

Artist Charline von Heyl's work exemplifies a contemporary practice in which intra-action becomes overtly methodological. Through layered painting that draws across art historical references, von Heyl superimposes incongruous visual systems, forging new connections and agitations between otherwise discordant forms. By recontextualizing signs and signifiers from the visual field, von Heyl suspends and transforms their symbolic associations. These formal convergences intra-act through a continual oscillation of looking and thinking, interrupting and reshaping established habits of thought.

Recent works from her 2023 exhibitions at Petzel gallery, New York, and the ongoing exhibition *The Giddy Road to Ruin* currently at the George Economou Collection (through March 2026), continue to build upon the work of one of her most noteworthy predecessors: Albert Oehlen, who "sought to create work that defied categorization and refuted the artistic status quo."²³ Oehlen is a generative touchpoint for encountering von Heyl's practice. With her now tightly refined approach to visual discovery, she exceeds the historical inclination to

reinvent the medium—insisting instead “that her painting is not about painting [but is rather] in pursuit of a ‘new image.’”²⁴

Oscillating between abstraction and representation, von Heyl displaces the conventions of modernist abstraction such that the “expanding and contracting forces” of Hans Hoffman’s push-pull technique are reconfigured as just one motif among many.²⁵ Her painting, *Tondo* (2017), included in the exhibition, for example, acts as a kind of semiotic crucible. It undoes the pictorial space of mid-century abstraction through a fragmented pastiche of art historical references, graphic design tropes, and popular culture kitsch. The Oehlenesque gestural haze is interrupted and infused by the pop art-like spotted hares—figures that seem determined to destabilize historical ties while existing in tense visual flux with early Greek and Renaissance tondo painting. This visual cacophony signals von Heyl’s reach for a transformative kind of image-making—one that strives to remain “ahead of language.”²⁶ Her practice, acutely aware of its own references yet vitalized by the intra-acting force of material and motif, dwells in the generative ineffability of difference itself.

Von Heyl’s layered compositions often lack visual continuity yet remain iterative through the recurrence of her compositional strategies. Bearing a visual kinship to printmaking, she acknowledges that her earliest relationship with art was through her family’s regular acquisition of prints.²⁷ Following printmaking’s constructive logic of assembling motifs, the artist’s paintings conjure shallow, atmospheric spaces, achieved through an additive processes and the careful negotiation of formal relationships. Although figurative elements sometimes emerge, her forms become abstracted through their formal juxtapositions, converting iconography into sensorial excess. This improvisatory approach has its own rhythm, moving both erratically and languidly through the rhizomatic pulse of unexpected associations. What appears as Warhol-

esque rabbits, graffiti scrawl, and dancing ticket stubs conjure a popular culture aesthetic, but the forms are dislocated from their original contextual relevance. In describing her assemblage-like impulse, von Heyl often cites philosophical and literary sources, quoting Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* when she invokes a "model that is perpetually in construction or collapsing, and a process that is perpetually prolonging itself, breaking off and starting up again."²⁸

Like many of her contemporaries, von Heyl approaches painting as a processing machine for the visual field—grating its vast lexicon against itself, pulling anarchically from the "junk space" of disparate image worlds to create works without "direct indexical referents."²⁹ Immersed in the act of combining heterogeneous sources, her subject matter becomes the *more-than-representational*³⁰ play of painting's intra-active potential. In subverting the medium's representational capacity, von Heyl's practice is decidedly intra-active in a performative, Baradian sense: a creative act of finding the complementarity among divergent forms.

VI. New Materialism, Care/full Looking, and Ethical Visuality

Albers's situated and responsive style of looking and von Heyl's continual transformation of visual forms illustrate how intra-action leads to the transformative potential of *difference-relating*, where form does not precede relation but emerges through it. To name the process or activity of noticing how composition emerges through the intra-action of relationships and Baradian complementarity I describe above,³¹ I use the term *care/full* looking. *Care/full* looking is a practice of attunement. This form of attunement extends beyond the purely formal to engage the micro- and macro-scale entanglements of visual, social, political, and ecological systems that artists like von Heyl evoke. As a situated and speculative form of attention, I assert that *care/full* looking enacts a mode of relation between thinking, looking, and making that necessarily

requires ethical engagement. In that it favors a sensibility that is immersed and open to material and affective intra-action, *care/full* looking is a practice to acknowledge that to look is to be implicated.

The ethical nature of this mode of involvement becomes evident when contrasted with modernity's most entrenched assumptions about knowledge and agency—assumptions I have discussed in this chapter with respect to representationalism and Cartesian humanism. In our post-colonial moment, the inherited truism of humanism is certainly under renewed scrutiny. In “Shape: A Conversation” published in *October* (2020), Amy Sillman, David Joselit, and Michelle Kuo discuss the urgency of redefining the relationship between art and politics.³² A recent turn toward materiality in contemporary art is one way this redefinition is taking place. Sometimes dismissed as a marketing tactic,³³ engaging with new materialisms in contemporary art is, I contend, just the opposite: it is a deeply political practice grounded in reverence for the field in which all affective bodies exist and intra-act.³⁴ Intra-action, as I explain earlier in this chapter, comes out of new materialist thinking, which, as a vital current within the critical posthumanities, challenges the humanist assumption of discrete entities. Thinkers such as Barad, Jane Bennett, and Rosi Braidotti reconceptualize matter as active and entangled, offering a philosophical foundation for rethinking art as an ethics beyond anthropocentric paradigms.

If humanist paradigms consider the human as a perceiver standing over a field, new materialist approaches consider the human as part of that field. This philosophical shift transforms the world into something more sacred, more intimate. A meadow, for example, is an assemblage of affective bodies that touch and are touched by one another.³⁵ The soil needs the earthworm to support the oak that shades the fox. All are the meadow, from the micro to the macro, co-constituting one another. When new materialists speak of the field, they invoke a

dense web of relations that make each thing political. As Bennett insists, a philosophy of “vital materialism” is also a “green politics”—one that “slows us down in [the] over consumptive, ecologically disastrous society we inhabit.”³⁶

I propose *care/full* looking as a scholarly tool for the visual arts to move beyond humanist habits of critical perception to instead access the ethical implications of a field of intra-active relationality. Alongside feminist materialisms and theories of entanglement (Barad), I draw on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s concept of reparative reading—an affectively invested, hopeful mode of interpretation that seeks to assemble and nourish rather than expose³⁷—to understand *care/full* looking as a matter of seeing-with rather than seeing-through. In that it resists extractive or paranoid habits of perception and instead foregrounds relationality, *care/full* looking, as a form of soft witnessing, echoes feminist repair-focused perceptual attention tending to half-hidden meanings in opposition to models of totalizing, detached observation.³⁸ In the context of *more-than-representational* painting, then, *care/full* looking functions as a formal analysis that holds space for uncertainty, welcoming gestures and forms that might otherwise evade legibility. It affirms partial understanding and honours the artwork as a site of encounter rather than resolution. It is a looking that repairs. It repairs not in the sense of restoring meaning but by allowing meaning to remain unfinished in a space of intra-action. By reanimating a discussion of the relational quality of form within formal analysis, I position contemporary painting as a *more-than-representational* practice of material thinking, and *expanded formalism* as a method of reorientating oneself in a relational field.

I contend that what contemporary abstract painting brings to critical thought is not just pictorial but methodological: it brings a new materialism that shows form as an iterative frequency—a relational vibration within a field of ongoing mattering. Against the notion that

painting is merely an object commodity,³⁹ a retooled formalism positions painting as a unique assemblage with underrecognized pedagogical potential. To broaden the discourse around contemporary painting by reinvigorating a discussion of formalism is to awaken a more sensitive critical awareness toward interrelationality. By looking across peripheries—attending to patterns of variation and how they interfere with one another—formal analysis is transformed into a practice of decentring the sovereign subject and attuning to the intra-active frequencies of relations. As a conceptual extension of formal analysis, *care/full* looking dislodges form from modernist autonomy and reimagines aesthetic attention as a relational and ethically entangled practice attuned towards intra-action. Emphasizing instead modernism's permeability, and contingency, *care/full* looking offers a mode of attentiveness that is responsive to these very conditions. It favours a sensibility that is open to material and affective intra-action. As a mode of critical perception, then, *expanded formalism* takes note of not only how the painting looks but how the painting becomes. In the next section, I further elaborate on how attention to difference renews the importance of formal analysis, through a process of reading painting diffractively.⁴⁰

Diffractive Practices: Thinking Looking Beyond Representation

I. From Individualism and Reflection to Relationships and Diffraction

Two planes touching erode an idea of autonomous bodies as they actively shift the face of one another. To see the simultaneity of profiles and vase is not an optical illusion; rather, it is looking at differences together as co-determinate allies of matter, where lines are the architecture of planes with surface texture both granular and smooth⁴¹—bodies that push and pull across scalar fields through sharp reversals of figure and ground. To make categorical distinctions between subject and object is a Western epistemological habit of mind—an inherited logic of

separation sustained through traditions of detached, objective representation.⁴² But what might it mean to bring forward *difference-relating* as a visual practice, one that foregrounds the interplay of disparate forms as a site of activation? One that sees edges as a shared contour? Can decentring perception towards the co-constitutive demarcation of boundaries in painting attune looking to a complementarity of form?⁴³

This section takes up diffraction as a key methodological and conceptual term within the framework of *expanded formalism*. Building on the preceding exploration of intra-action—how Albers teaches us to read through difference and Barad reconfigures matter from static substance to dynamic event—diffraction, as pursued here, investigates how difference—visual, material and ontological—does not precede relation but emerges through it. In painting, composition is a network of intra-actions in which form materializes through ongoing entanglement. To locate and name these phenomena is to shift visual analysis toward a decentred mode of looking. Whereas representational thinking classifies and fixes meaning from context, diffractive analysis offers a counterapproach—one that reads through differences, tracing how distinctions are generative and come to matter as a result of their incongruities.

Diffraction, as an optical metaphor that attends to difference, enables a critical reorientation in visual analysis toward a more situated and relational mode of attention. Within an expanded formal analysis, I contend that abstraction and representation can be read diffractively as interconnected processes within a broader relational field: abstraction as the bifurcation point of representational inquiry, and representation as perpetually collapsing back into abstraction. In that *care/full* looking is a mode of attention, attending to how artworks hold tension to reconfigure perception, it effectively traces diffraction. With regard to contemporary

painting, diffraction reconfigures formal analysis itself to attune to the excess of form as a means of rethinking binaries.

II. A Modernist Gaze: Rethinking the Binary Between Abstraction and Representation

Optical analogies have long played a central role in thinking and talking about knowledge production. As discussed in the preceding section on intra-action, reflective thinking is a mode of thought rooted in the privileging of human observation—an epistemology of individualism that presumes a subject-centred paradigm of knowing.⁴⁴ Painting historically functioned as both a discipline and economy of reflection: a canonical index of Western thought that simultaneously mirrored and shaped meaning as human-centred “matters of fact.”⁴⁵ Traditional modes of representation in the visual arts, though inflected by the situated and nuanced sensibility of the artist, typically operated at meter scale—a human-scale register of perception that privileges a singular, stable vantage point from which to distill and reflect information about the world.⁴⁶ From dogmatic religion to dogmatic humanism, painting has served to visualize and materialize regimes of belief—God, class, technology, gender, and justice as truths made tangible through illusionistic surfaces that posed as archives of Western linear time.

In the twentieth century, abstract painting broke from these representational logics. It became a site for exploring spirituality and political disillusionment, a visual platform for artists resisting the limitations of social realism in the face of fascism. As Daniel Neofetou notes, “Abstract Expressionists rejected Social Realism not because it was too politically radical but because, in the face of modernity, it was not politically radical enough.”⁴⁷ In this way, the critique of representational binaries that the expanded humanities puts forward finds a historical resonance in the visual strategies of modern painting. Modern artists scrutinized the human impulse toward mimetic image-making, asking what role representation should play in the ethics

of art and politics. Yet abstraction itself, as a visual language, was also quickly assimilated into dominant ideological frameworks. At the height of postwar abstraction, formalism became aligned with modernist values of objectivity and autonomy, representing the West's commitment to individualism and human rationality.⁴⁸

Viewed through the reflective paradigm of the modern era, postwar abstraction—particularly in its American context—came to symbolize freedom and innovation. Accordingly, Abstract Expressionism became strategically positioned during the Cold War as a cultural emblem of democracy and artistic autonomy, serving U.S. soft power interests through exhibitions funded by the CIA and institutions like MoMA.⁴⁹ Abstraction, once aligned with rupture and refusal, was easily reframed for representational ends, serving as a subtle yet powerful form of cultural propaganda in the ideological battle of cold war politics between East and West. Here, reflective paradigms set the conditions for abstraction to be pulled back into the very representational regime it once resisted.

III. From Reflection to Diffraction: Shifting the Paradigm of Practice

Reflection—understood both literally and ideologically—has long underpinned dominant art histories. But art, rethought beyond the dichotomies of humanism, proposes a mode of *care/full* looking untethered from representationalism, so that art's "slippage" ties a knot between subject and object, where perception is not an act of detached observation, but a diffractive phenomenon—of form feeling form; a matter of touching that touches back.⁵⁰ As a response to paradigms of reflection, Barad and Haraway developed "diffraction"—a counter-optical metaphor for thinking. For both theorists, methodological diffraction as a form of knowledge-making in the humanities turns attention towards difference, orienting vision to peripheries as sites of knowledge production. Informed by feminist standpoint epistemology,

Haraway critiques reflexivity as a mode of thought that “invites the illusion of essential, fixed positions,” while diffraction, by contrast, emphasizes “the processing of small but consequential differences.”⁵¹ Barad expands on this by using “quantum understandings of diffraction phenomena” to conceptualize a methodology that attends to patterns of interference and the entanglements of matter and meaning.⁵² This framing offers a way of engaging with visual and material culture that does not *reflect* the world from a distance but rather *notices its patterns of diffraction*. It notices how matter is iterative—shaped by and shaping the very phenomena it seeks to understand.

When abstraction is approached diffractively—as a material and conceptual mode that foregrounds relationships—its very performance of form challenges the notion of autonomous entities and stable meanings. It invites us to perceive through entangled difference; by destabilizing meaning, abstraction shifts our ontological framework from mimesis to co-constitution. Barad and Haraway’s diffractive framework invites not only a philosophical reorientation but a practical one—particularly in the realm of aesthetic production. When art itself is taken up as a diffractive methodology, attuned to relationality and the ethics of entanglement, it becomes a mode of knowledge-making attentive to how differences make differences. For Barad, how we configure the tools of observation—scientific, philosophical, or artistic—shapes what can be known. Diffraction, as a methodology for artistic production and analysis, does not assume fixed boundaries between subject and object, knower and known; it foregrounds the sites of intra-action through which those distinctions are enacted. The artwork emerges as an intra-action between subjects and objects, where meaning is constituted through discrepancies—through the entangled relation of world and embodiment.

Instead of holding the world at a distance, a diffractive methodology for formal analysis insists that knowing is a material engagement—one that participates in the ongoing becoming of the world. It is a knowledge-making practice that, in its attentiveness towards differential emergence, does not describe the world but helps shape it—a proposition that resonates powerfully with aesthetic production and its critical potential within the visual arts. *Expanded formalism*, here becomes a critical viewing strategy to counter reflective paradigms of thought that conflate knowledge and representation. Both representationalism and diffraction, then, as modes of engaging with the world, shape what counts as reality—but they do so from fundamentally different ontological assumptions. As a methodological approach to visual analysis, diffraction opens space for painting to be reconsidered as an ethical engagement with relationships at both an aesthetic and ontological level. In this sense, the *more-than-representational* of contemporary practice does not leave representation behind but entangles it within perception.

V. The Crisis of Legibility: Identity, Capital, and Commodification

Representationalism, as Barad argues, is not simply a neutral practice of depiction; rather, it is a regime of separation. It assumes entities exist in advance of their relations, ready to be described, classified, and interpreted. This logic aligns with what Trinh T. Minh-ha locates as an “apartheid-based, segregational type of difference,” where difference is constructed through division and hierarchy rather than entanglement.⁵³ In visual art and political discourse alike, this “segregational type of difference” manifests through the categorization and reification of difference—particularly in identity-based art in which the politics of visibility often align with a representational demand to make difference speakable, and extractable. As identities are translated into recognizable signs, their lived complexity risks being flattened into a regime of

recognition that privileges clarity and legibility over opacity and contradiction.

Cultural theorists such as Walter Benjamin warned against the aestheticization of politics, a strategy he associated with fascism's spectacular manipulation of form to obscure and consolidate power. In contrast, he advocated for the politicization of aesthetics: an approach that exposes the mechanisms of representation and opens space for critical rupture.⁵⁴ In the context of abstraction, this warning remains prescient. The same visual strategies that once signalled refusal and rupture risk being reabsorbed into institutional apparatuses that aestheticize politics—transforming resistance into spectacle, and identity into brand. In other words, the reflective, legible image becomes a vehicle not for transformation but for capture. The flattening of difference into legible identity underpins not only dominant visual practices but also the binary logic that separates representation from abstraction. I contend that maintaining this binary reinforces a metaphysics of individualism, positioning representation as a vehicle of political legibility and abstraction as a retreat from the social realm.

Much critical theory has addressed the politics of representation and its ties to ideology and propaganda, as well as the politics of abstraction and its associations with individualism and critical distance from real-world current events. Yet, as Andrew Stefan Weiner argues, the distinction between representation and abstraction has “become radically undecidable, such that their relation becomes something like a quantum entanglement rather than a dialectical contradiction.”⁵⁵ To hold abstraction and representation together—troubled and impure—as part of a shared aesthetic continuum reveals them as co-constituted translations of affect across varying scales. As Getsy suggests, abstraction does not escape representation; it performs something else.⁵⁶ This conceptual shift reshapes how we engage with painting's formal qualities, while also reverberating through broader questions of representation and identity in

contemporary art. In the following paragraphs, I examine the cultural stakes of this shift—particularly in how institutions have instrumentalized identity-based practices, and in how artists continue to resist the regime of representational exploitation.

Weiner draws a distinction between representation as an artistic strategy and philosophical representationalism, while also exposing their points of intersection within contemporary visual culture. He defines representationalism as “any instance in which the conceptual and/or sensate complexities of art and politics are effectively weakened into dogmas or formulae.”⁵⁷ For Weiner, questions of identity and capital are central to the critique of philosophical representationalism within art. He identifies the 1993 Whitney Biennial as a pivotal moment in contemporary culture, marking the rise of what he calls “aesthetico-political” representational art practice. In the decade that followed, institutions rapidly embraced agendas of “multiculturalism, inclusion and diversity” increasingly supporting practices such as video, body art, performance, and what would later be termed “social practice.” While these shifts initially expanded visibility for historically marginalized voices, they also paved the way for a predatory form of cultural extraction, in which identity became a resource for institutional capital. As Weiner notes, “artists marked as ‘other’ were typically tokenized, singled out as the privileged representative of their class and expected to act as a kind of model minority... becoming an active site of seemingly automated value-production.”⁵⁸ This mode of artmaking, he argues, is often reduced to a commodified form of “overly legible, weakly political art.”

This collapse of representation into legibility echoes Benjamin’s enduring critique of the aestheticization of politics. For Benjamin, aesthetic form becomes dangerous when it renders political conditions too easily consumable—when aesthetics gilds the political rather than ruptures it. Weiner’s analysis of identity as a legible, extractable commodity within institutional

frameworks mirrors this logic: under the guise of visibility, politics is disarmed. Representation becomes a mode not of resistance but of assimilation, flattening the radical potential of aesthetic expression into a recognizable, marketable form. In this sense, the institutional embrace of “diverse” representation may do less to challenge structures of power than to aesthetically reinforce them.

Curators like Sohrab Mohebbi have pushed back on what they call this “fracking of particularities” by presenting LGBTQ+ and BIPOC artists in ways that highlights the kinetic, self-differentiating nature of minoritarian identities—qualities that resist the extractive logics of value capture. Exhibitions like Mohebbi’s “Searching the Sky for Rain,” as noted by Weiner, refuse to reduce identity to easily packaged narratives. What is labelled abstract painting today is never purely formal; it is always embedded in context.⁵⁹ It operates in what Linda Goode Bryant terms “contextures”—spaces where an artwork’s sensate formal qualities and its social situatedness can be perceived simultaneously.⁶⁰ This dynamic between representation and abstraction, narrative and materiality, resonates with tensions across the humanities. As Evelien Geerts and Iris van der Tuin note, Trinh T. Minh-ha’s work models a relational, diffractive approach to identity—one that refuses hierarchical separation and instead affirms complexity, partiality, and entangled specificity.⁶¹ In a similar spirit, many contemporary painters strategically leverage both abstraction and representation and the contextual embeddedness of materiality to create aesthetic experiences that are at once formally engaging and socially entangled.

VI. Holding the Tension: Representation, Abstraction, and Affect

To resist legibility—exceeding or blurring the representational frame—is to stage a different kind of politics. Diffractive, *more-than-representational*, or impure strategies (to

borrow Getsy's term) refuse easy consumption in that they do not illustrate political positions so much as perform contradiction and unresolved tension. Abstraction here is not an escape from representation but a resistance to its capture. This reorientation has been explored in other recent writing on contemporary art. Getsy, in his work on "queer abstraction," argues that the "impurity of abstraction [and] mimesis" enables forms of relation that move beyond how the world merely looks.⁶² For Getsy, "queer," is a self-chosen stance marked by a "critical suspicion of normativity" that abstraction can enact by exceeding familiar tropes of humanist representation.⁶³

Simon O'Sullivan similarly positions affect—forms of relation that operate beyond appearance—as the force that propels art beyond representation, locating aesthetic intensity in "extra-discursive and extra-textual" registers. Following Alain Badiou, he frames art as a virtual site in which affect displaces representational logic.⁶⁴ Michael Young, writing on abstraction's estranging capacities, foregrounds how decontextualization can disrupt the "background" of habitual perception. Through "devices of abstraction," he argues, art destabilizes the automatic and habitual—rerouting attention toward affective and conceptual potential.⁶⁵ Taken together, these theorists reclaim abstraction as an active strategy of refusal and transformation. Rather than setting them apart as oppositional terms, then, we might hold abstraction and representation together as affective portals: interwoven, contingent systems for sensing, expressing, and translating the complexities of embodied experience.

The abstraction/representation dichotomy in visual culture extends a modern trajectory that no longer suffices to describe experience beyond the bounds of humanism. We need new language to account for simultaneity: how all art both abstracts and represents; how abstraction augments representation as a more nuanced form of translation. *Expanded formalism* is my attempt to articulate this simultaneity in contemporary painting. A diffractive approach to formal

analysis entertains the Deluzian position that abstraction was never a nihilism reduced to nothing⁶⁶ but rather a threshold of possibility—a *more-than-representational* field that mediates the boundlessness of affect.⁶⁷

VII. *Difference-Relating*: Towards a Diffractive Visual Methodology

In her book *Matters of Care*, María Puig de la Bellacasa insists that “[w]e need new styles of thinking, new notions to name what we are thinking, to heal from the manic drive to dissect the togetherness that we perceive.”⁶⁸ In the visual arts, this extends to novel styles of looking. My discussion of what diffraction is, does, and enables in the visual arts is meant to inform my conception of *care/full* looking, which foregrounds difference not as opposition but as relation. The edge of a shape is also a line of direction in painting—a site where vision moves and halts, a seam of contact and void between bodies. Surfaces of colour and texture interfere as a networked call and response of visual forms woven together in a cadence of associations. This interplay, when observed *care/fully*, sharpens perception towards the entangled and overlapping texture of materiality. Attention to difference in formal analysis evolves into a mode of tracing the intra-active, diffractive quality of composition itself. *Difference-relating*, a concept that emerges from a practice of *care/full* looking, I propose, serves as a mode of aesthetic attention specifically attuned to the generative potential of difference. This novel style of looking offers not only a shift in critical perception—one responsive to formal relationships—but also a reparative potential: a way to care for what is “other” or peripheral, whether formal, social, political, or ecological.

At the same time as it traces how form emerges, this mode of analysis implicates the viewer as a participant in its becoming, positioning looking itself as a practice of response-ability.⁶⁹ Attention is a material engagement: perception both shapes and is shaped by the world

it encounters. In other words, to attend to matter's co-constitutive character is an act of accountability, wherein one is called to recognize one's own embodied role in a differentially constituted world. In this way, approaching painting through diffraction invites a mode of visual analysis that holds contradiction and opacity as a form of care integral to its structure. As Puig de la Bellacasa writes, "[t]he letting go of the controlling power of causal and binary explanation comes with an immersion in the messy world of concern."⁷⁰ Building on Latour's reworking of empirical epistemology, she reconceives fact as a "matter of care"—a site where meaning emerges through situated practices of attention and responsibility in collective world-making.⁷¹ Drawing from Bellacasa, my use of diffraction as a methodology for reading painting looks across differences to attune to the entangled relations within painting. It treats composition as a network of interferences that matter (manifest) as an ecology of asymmetrical relationships.

While traditional painting emphasized mimetic representation, and modernist abstraction sought to distill form to its idealized limits, contemporary painters such as von Heyl and Mehretu who I discuss earlier in this chapter mobilize non-representation as a strategy for engaging entangled relations. Contemporary painting thus reorients looking toward a diffractive mode of visual analysis—an attunement to contrast that makes kin of difference. In Chapter Two, I discuss how in my own painting practice, the logic of collage—of decontextualization and recontextualization—has played a key role in informing my exploration of difference as a generative force. Here, to rehearse some of the main themes of how I see diffraction functioning in *care/full* looking, I will take a moment to discuss how diffraction comes to bear on collage.

To me, the cut of collage is an ontological rupture whereby meaning emerges in the space between disparate forms. Here, misalignment is a visual fissure igniting affective possibility through the friction of divergent marks. The advent of collage visually articulated Sigmund

Freud's theory of condensation, wherein disparate contexts are brought into relation to generate new trajectories of meaning. While Freud's theory of condensation opened a generative account of how meaning can be assembled through displacement, slippage, and compression, his broader representational paradigm sought to recuperate this multiplicity into singular, decipherable truths. I argue that collage—particularly as taken up by modern artist Max Ernst as I describe in Chapter Two—activates the logic of condensation but refuses its interpretive closure, foregrounding fracture and ontological rupture as conditions of visual knowledge.

From a feminist perspective, scholars such as Griselda Pollock and Jacqueline Rose have critiqued Freud's representational commitments for reinscribing normative accounts of subjectivity and gender.⁷² These critiques open space for reading the visual as a dynamic field of affective and conceptual potential. The rupture at the heart of collage thus contradicts Freud's own drive toward hermeneutic mastery, instead aligning with practices of knowing that are situated and provisional. In my own artistic practice, formal misalignments invite diffractive modes of reading. By shifting the scale, intensity, or direction of texture in a painting, for example, two planes emerge—not through discrete delineation, but through discrepancy. This diffractive methodology, informed by collage, then becomes a practice of abstraction that disrupts the binary habits of representational thought. Attuning my gaze to peripheries allows me to trace how relational dynamics compose the visual field. Here, form and content, figure and ground, abstraction and representation twist together as co-constituting forces entangled in continuous fluctuation. As a mode of reparative looking, diffraction resists simply reflecting on objects or phenomena as “matters of fact”; rather, it attunes to the variegated dynamics of composition. It perceives how matter and meaning co-emerge through interference patterns within the visual field.

What this approach is meant to cultivate is a sensitivity in visual analysis, training art practitioners and theorists to look across relations rather than extract meaning from isolated subjects. Adopting a diffractive, rather than reflective, mode of perceptual thinking in visual art practice invites a formal analysis grounded in relationality rather than boundary-making. Following Puig de la Bellacasa's call for "new notions to name what we are thinking," I propose that a diffractive mode of looking can shift how we perceive artworks and how we structure exhibitions, pedagogies, and critical discourses around them. These can be conceived as material-discursive environments for encountering difference in its ongoing, relational unfolding. By focusing on relational dynamics, visual literacy becomes a practice of re-sensitizing perception to the nuanced material ecologies of form. To perceive difference in unison is a perceptual habit that, as Puig de la Bellacasa writes, "divides but relates."⁷³ Holding oppositions together as matters of care, then, becomes a reparative act—a way of seeing-with that enacts ethics in attention. In what follows, I address the ethical dimension of seeing-with that is prompted via affect.

The *Extra-Aesthetic*: Painting as Affective and Ethical Openness

I. Sensing Affect

As the preceding sections have explored, the formal complexity possible in painting has the potential to stage a relational, material, and conceptual openness that resists totalization. Composition is a field of attunement where the perceptual and the ethical coalesce in the form of affect. In this section, I introduce affect as a third conceptual strand within an *expanded formalism*, joining intra-action and diffraction. In this context, affect is a force that animates composition through intensities that ripple across surface and subject alike. While some might interpret affect as an emotional overlay upon form, I see it here as an immanent force that

emerges through the material conditions of perception. Reading affect invites the viewer to sense and stay with the provocations and tensities of painting.

Aesthetic theory, feminist philosophy, and contemporary humanities scholarship have taken up affect as a way of accounting for forces that operate beneath or beyond representation. Drawing on theorists such as Massumi and Bennett, I understand affect to refer to pre-cognitive intensities—bodily forces of sensation that precede conscious thought.⁷⁴ In the context of painting, affect shifts analytic attention away from compositional closure, emphasizing instead how formal elements generate an embodied response. It is within this affective surplus that I locate what I call the *extra-aesthetic*: the dimension of painting where sensation and relational intensity accumulate beyond symbolic meaning. In the expanded humanities, affect operates as a theoretical lens for rethinking relationality beyond humanist subjectivity, foregrounding how matter and meaning co-emerge through ongoing encounters. For my purposes, the term *extra-aesthetic* names the felt registers of painting that exceed representation, opening the work to an affective field of interpretation.

II. On Affective Charge and Material Force

The term *extra-aesthetic* refers to the way affect operates within painting's formal and discursive conditions as a relational surplus that arises from compositional interplay. This relational surplus both exceeds representation as transcendental resonance and remains grounded in painting's immanent material intra-actions, where perception and sensation are activated beyond symbolic meaning. This quality of activation beyond meaning—recently described by Neofetou as the “conceptual unsaturation” and “affective immediacy” of Greenberg's legacy—marks a crucial hinge between modernist formalism and my expanded reformulation.⁷⁵ While Greenberg championed abstraction as a purified expression of medium specificity, what lingers

in his theory is a kind of withholding: an unfinishedness that refuses semantic closure. Reframed this way, Greenberg's formalism becomes generative, opening painting to affective mode of ethical interpretation.

The "conceptual unsaturation" of formalist painting, I argue, opens the work to precisely this *extra-aesthetic* field of indeterminacy, where affect circulates not as content but as force. Jane Bennett aptly describes affect as a relational force. As I explain in Chapter Two, in the context of discussing formal elements of abstract art as a process, Bennett positions affect as a vital intensity that pulses through assemblages, binding disparate elements into temporary coherence while never fully stabilizing them.⁷⁶ In painting, this might manifest formally in the friction between colour fields or the atmospheric tension between layers. These formal relations are animate; they catalyze response. I see a similar formal liveliness in the idea of "conceptual unsaturation" where painting's "affective immediacy" disrupts the epistemological certainty of rational, humanist thought. Through the relationship between artwork and viewer an interference pattern of non-linear visibility catalyzes as affective force. Read through Bennett's sense of assemblage, painting becomes a network of potentials where causality ignites as a friction between things. This affective field is where meaning percolates as endless possibility incited through form. The *extra-aesthetic* affect of a painting, therefore, can be understood as an energetic threshold where form makes matter perceptible, and matter in turn touches the sensing body.

At the heart of the term *extra-aesthetic* is the idea that such a field of affective intensities precedes and exceeds cognitive recognition in painting. In this sense, I use *extra-aesthetic* to describe what Massumi calls the "virtual realm of potential": the virtual forces that shape perception and meaning before they solidify into form.⁷⁷ Here, painting is a practice of rendering

the more-than-visible, drawing attention to the entanglement of bodies and environments without clear centre or edge. It is an aesthetic touchpoint between subject and object—a patina of tangential, tangible, and transcendental affects. These co-constitute the internal and external, the sensed and the unspeakable. The *extra-aesthetic* is thus not supplemental but vital: it is where painting leaks into life, where form becomes an interface for attunement and care, for sensing the relational density of the world. As something the body registers, the painting is a zone of attunement, where perception becomes a site of becoming. Greenberg’s unsaturated image, then, was full of unactualized potential, brimming with what Massumi might call the excess of experience.⁷⁸

III. The Micropolitical Intensities of Painting

The *extra-aesthetic* emerges in the entangled encounter between the viewer and the work. In Barad’s terms, this is an intra-action: a relational event where the subject and object co-constitute the visual experience. Read diffractively, the *extra-aesthetic* is the material relational excess that circulates within the painting and catalyzes a viewer’s response. Colour interferes with line, texture disrupts surface, and spatial relations generate perceptual schisms. These material interferences reverberate across scales of perception, producing what Massumi calls “micro-awarenesses” or “micro-perceptions” or the subtle, often unconscious bodily sensations that precede thought—moments of affective registration that shape how we relate to the world before cognition catches up.⁷⁹

Jan Verwoert has provocatively suggested that abstraction, like beauty or love, cannot be quantified; it resists capture by conceptual frameworks and instead operates through intensity and relation.⁸⁰ Verwoert understands abstraction as presence in excess: something that presses against the limits of what can be said yet is deeply felt. This affective surplus, understood

expansively, aligns with Massumi's account of affect as a field sensed through micro-perceptions. Through colour, texture, and spatial inference, painting generates a surplus of sensations that precede and exceed meaning and are registered as an *extra-aesthetic* experience. The painting's unresolved form—its refusal to close—sustains this affective field of virtual potential, allowing it to be inhabited, returned to, and transformed across time. A key ingredient in both Verwoert's conception of abstraction and Massumi's pre-cognitive micro-awareness is the openness of uncertainty.

Verwoert draws on Emmanuel Levinas's notion of the face to describe how abstract art can act as an ethical provocation rather than a visual resolution. He suggests that "abstraction functions like a face," confronting the viewer not with clarity but with a demand—an affective address marked by uncertainty and relational intensity. Verwoert's turn to Emmanuel Levinas is particularly illuminating. Levinas writes that the face of the other is not a sign to be interpreted but a call to ethical relation. Verwoert connects this idea of "faciality" to abstraction, suggesting that the abstract form, like the human face, communicates through affective intensities—suspending concept into sensation, idea into feeling.⁸¹ This form of expression, then, addresses the viewer through a quality of impenetrability. Following Verwoert, Levinas, and Levinas scholar Benda Hofmeyer, I contend that a painting—one that evokes a state of unknowing—is an affective address and a call to ethical action.⁸² The affect of a painting touches the viewer by way of the bodily senses that it conjures, especially when its conceptual purpose is not entirely legible.⁸³

As explored in an earlier chapter, Amy Sillman approaches uncertainty in her paintings as a material and conceptual openness that foregrounds doubt as a feminist and political gesture to contest rationality and mastery. In her case, Sillman mobilizes anecdote and narrative fragments

in her work to trouble the legacy of painting's purity and resist aesthetic mastery. In doing so, her compositions become sites of ethical engagement that destabilize the aesthetic authority of the autonomous art object. To experience her work in this way is to be moved by something in formation, to be drawn into relation without resolution. The magnitude of painting, then, resides in how it engages us as a bodily and ethically-intersubjective site to linger in affect. In Sillman's work the presence of uncertainty is a shared experience; its "micro-perceptions" generate micropolitical affects—small moments in which political possibility begins to take form.

Painting's capacity to conjure meaning beyond discursive capture—to activate a form of knowing that exceeds representation or signification—echoes what Erin Manning describes as "the more-than" of perception: the excess of experience that precedes categorization, felt before it is understood.⁸⁴ The *extra-aesthetic* quality of painting arises through affect, so that painting performs what language alone cannot: moving us without anchoring us, opening onto presence without resolution. This is not transcendence but an immanent more-than, where painting's force circulates in the extra-discursive folds of perception. The act of painting thus becomes an ethical and ontological engagement with the world. The negotiation of matter and meaning is entangled. Through its conceptual openness and networked form, painting becomes a catalyst of differential becoming.

This sense of the "more-than of experience"⁸⁵ or the "more-than" of perception is also invoked in my concept of *more-than-representational*, which so far I have discussed in terms of its disruption of binaries. Here, I bring the *extra-aesthetic* to this term whereby, through a practice of *care/full* looking, the viewer is invited to dwell in openness—to participate actively in the *extra-aesthetic* affect of *more-than-representational* painting. Expanding formal analysis means rethinking the formal qualities of painting (colour, line, texture, shape) as dynamic, co-

active participants in meaning-making. Where classical formalism championed the autonomy of form, contemporary painting insists on an expansive interpretative framework—one that accounts for the material properties of paint, the bodily presence of the viewer, and the surrounding environment as a redistribution of agency across human and nonhuman forces. Form, reconsidered as porous and interwoven, configures meaning as intra-active and contingent to the specificities of its emergence.

IV. Opacity as Resistance: The Illegibility of Abstraction

As the representational demands of identity politics increasingly give way to commodification and extraction, the more-than of contemporary painting—particularly where excess leads to opacity—offers a crucial refusal. The layered and resistant surfaces of artists like Sandra Brewster and Mark Bradford enacts a withholding that resists legibility, and colonial modes of visibility. Rather than offering identity as transparent or extractable, these practices cultivate what Édouard Glissant famously termed the “right to opacity,” allowing difference to remain relational but unassimilated.⁸⁶ A diffractive framework thus sees opacity as a site of affective density—a surplus of sense and sensation that exceeds interpretation. Krista Thompson’s work on photographic aesthetics and Black visibility in the diaspora underscores this point, revealing how refusal and blur operate as counter-visual strategies that protect and project alternative modes of being.⁸⁷

A key feature of encountering affect as a distributed, emergent force is that doing so offers a way of sensing painting’s relationships—its field of tensions, intensities, as well as occlusions. This orientation aligns with Achille Mbembe’s call for a postcolonial, posthumanist thought where his discussion of “distributed agency” marks a political or “ontological turn” toward moving beyond humanist hierarchies without erasing the histories of racialized and

colonized bodies.⁸⁸ Within such a framework, painting can be reimagined not as a formal escape, but as a speculative practice for holding complexity in ways that resist the extraction of legibility. What emerges is a mode of *more-than-representational* painting that honours opacity as an ethical and aesthetic stance—a diffractive entanglement of form, erasure, and affect.

Brewster’s textured photo-based works operate within Thompson’s aesthetic framework of “visual opacity”⁸⁹ as a mode of visual resistance that defers clarity. In her *Blur* series, (2017) Brewster manipulates photographic images of diasporic subjects into painterly, ghostly traces that refuse the extractive gaze. Here, the “right to opacity” is enacted as both a political and aesthetic act.⁹⁰ Brewster’s work diffracts legibility through a material sensibility: the body becomes a blur in the thickening of subjecthood, in that material opacity generates affective density.

Bradford similarly engages abstraction as a material refusal of singular identity or legible narrative. Working with found materials, such as signage and maps, drawn from his South Los Angeles neighbourhood, Bradford constructs vast palimpsestic compositions that surface and submerge colonial histories of urban transformation. In Chapter Two, I discuss how Bradford infuses abstraction with content by rethinking abstraction as an interplay between formal techniques and narrative allusions; here I emphasize that his scraping, sanding, and layering processes function not only as formal strategies but also as acts of inscription and erasure—gestures that echo the systemic violence and forgetting inscribed on racialized bodies and neighbourhoods. In Bradford’s work, affect circulates through the tension between exposure and concealment. What emerges is not identity rendered visible, but difference made tangible through the haptic and associative qualities of surface. Both Bradford and Brewster’s paintings

reorient identity without erasing its specificity, and hold space for the relational complexity and nuance of lived experience.

Following Bradford's layering technique, the compositional concealing and revealing method I use in my own work acts as an intentional act of disrupting meaning. Through overpainting, masking, and the accumulation of textures, I construct compositions that hold traces of what has been obscured as much as what remains visible. This approach creates surfaces that resist easy interpretation and instead call for *care/full* looking. These layered archaeologies—where form is an unfolding and folding of contradiction and difference—affirm the complexity of my own emergence. Here, opacity becomes an ethical strategy to explore subjectivity. It is through these frameworks—opacity as *extra-aesthetic* refusal, painting as a *more-than-representational* practice, and surface as site of entanglement—that I move between reflections on my own studio practice and the activation of an *expanded formalism*. In this spirit, the following analysis of Julie Mehretu's *Black City* serves as a synthesis and application of the vocabulary I explore in this chapter, and seeks to renew painting as a critical site of interdisciplinary inquiry for the expanded humanities.

V. Expanded Formalism in Play: An Analysis of Mehretu's *Black City*

Often described in terms of the velocity of their cartographic and architectural layering, Mehretu's paintings—read by the means of *care/full* looking—do not merely represent complexity; they perform it.⁹¹ Her practice exemplifies how painting can operate as a materialized theory of entanglement—one that resists closure and stages intra-active relationships that decentres human perception. Mehretu's layering of formal and conceptual material reconfigures the logic of the image into hybrid fields that are neither wholly spatial nor symbolic. Painterly gestures dislocate cartographic specificities in a process of superimposition

that erases through accumulation. Meaning is not imposed upon material; rather, intra-acting forms perform a relational ontology folded within the painting's structure. Mehretu's paintings are dynamic sites of folding and unfolding, where form emerges through the material negotiation of subjectivity.

Her syncretic approach troubles formalist boundaries between form and content through a polyphonic negotiation of visual syntax, where recognizable signs are reduced to marks and gestural marks acquire new meaning in relation to other notations. The abstraction of Mehretu's paintings is always haunted by political and social residues—echoes of urban unrest, migration, and the spectral architectures of empire reverberate within her stratified approach. Such traces resonate affectively as “virtual potentials” or perceptual intensities ⁹² so that the social embeddedness of her iconography calls for attunement. Reading the iconographic traces as contextures in Goode Bryant's sense of the term, the paintings can be understood as conceptually unsaturated in the Greenbergian sense but never aesthetically autonomous.

Mehretu's 2007 painting *Black City* is a particularly compelling example. From a traditional formalist standpoint, *Black City* offers a masterful orchestration of gesture, line, and compositional tension. Yet viewed through an *expanded formalism* framework, *Black City* ceases to function as a self-contained visual system and instead becomes a diffraction pattern—a visual and conceptual field that bears the marks of interference between overlapping systems. Barad's theory of diffraction emphasizes the way phenomena leave traces upon each other, generating new, non-linear configurations. Mehretu's architectural lines supersede a straightforward formalist read as they ghost and disrupt one another. They carry the imprint of political cartographies and erased infrastructures. The painting's space is cumulative; its impressions of stratified crisis fold into each other across time.

This sense of visual dislocation and layering is central to the *extra-aesthetic* presence in *Black City*. Similar to von Heyl's approach, Mehretu's compositional elements animate and eclipse one another so that in their convergence they resist reduction to singular metaphorical associations. What might at first appear as meteorological abstractions are unsettled by the playful reappropriation of astrological symbols and geometrical forms, sardonically deployed with the casual irreverence of a child's sticker collection. Read diffractively, these diagrammatic elements become epistemologically indeterminate, performing a relational mapping that unsettles categorical claims to knowledge. Layered architectural schematics displace these seemingly nostalgic motifs, revealing how their affective charge shifts in relation—untethering the modernist grid from its spatial and temporal demarcations. In this cloud of broken syntax and competing visual systems, *Black City* stages the entangled legacies of colonialism, diffracted back through the embodied subject. Perception here no longer belongs to the sovereign viewer but emerges through bodies, memories, surfaces, and environments intra-acting. In this process, the empirical site of the canvas itself becomes an intra-action where histories, affects, and relations converge.

Viewed through the lens of *care/full* looking, *Black City* suggests the violence of planning through displacement. The sedimentation of crisis lingers in the composition's formal construction. *Care/full* looking, as a reparative mode of attention, traverses the opacity of these fragmented cartographies, attending to the painting's superimpositions as the source of its affective force. The resulting cacophony of visual systems hovers at the edge of articulation, knowable but unspeakable.

While Mehretu's *Black City* exemplifies the possibilities of *expanded formalism*, this approach also allows us to reconsider key figures of modernist abstraction. Jackson Pollock's

work, long framed through Greenbergian formalism as emblematic of optical autonomy and painterly purity, can likewise be reread through this lens as staging a field of material intra-action. Pollock's poured lines and layered gestures emerge not solely from sovereign authorship but from the dynamic entanglement of distributed agency across human and nonhuman forces. Pollock's process performs an early articulation of Barad's intra-action: the becoming of form through material encounter. If Pollock's all-overness is where Greenberg sought purity, a contemporary reading instead reveals it as an indeterminate field of affective becoming. The surface registers and diffracts the interplay of co-constituted forces: intention and chance, transcendental gesture and embodied trace, industrial modernity and material utopianism, the heroic subject and the political embedding of freedom in form. Read through a diffractive lens, the all-over surface becomes a site of material-discursive relations.

Through this reframing, the contemporary terms I put forward in this chapter and dissertation as a whole function to both expand formal analysis and reorient key aspects of modernist abstraction. I offer these terms as a framework for interpreting contemporary art as well as for reinterpreting modernist art. Reading Pollock's work through this framework, his surfaces operate as fields of relational emergence. Material forces modulate perception through micro-intensities,⁹³ producing what Neofetou describes as a state of "conceptual unsaturation": an openness that delays semantic closure and sustains affective engagement.⁹⁴ Likewise, Neofetou's account of modernist "affective immediacy" can be invoked in Pollock's work to emphasize its capacity to deliver an unmediated encounter with form prior to conceptualization.⁹⁵ It is in this withholding of meaning that the conditions for intra-action are present—where form is continually enacted through embodied response.

Although Pollock's and Mehretu's compositions share congruencies in scale and the formal layering of colour, texture, line, and shape, their iconographies emerge from different aesthetic epochs. Pollock's *One: Number 31* (1950), with its rhythmic yet haphazard drips, enacts modernism's obsession with interiority: gestures collapse inward toward the canvas's centre, while sparse edges demarcate a contemplative boundary with the surrounding room. Where Pollock's gestural marks—aimed at self-emancipation—recede inward, Mehretu's scaffold-like structures of *Black City* are multidirectional, pressing identity against social, ecological, and political forces. Mehretu's notations set back into motion the dynamism of subjective experience—the formless mediation between self and world. Through the superimposition of disparate visual worlds, Mehretu's lexicon performs a systematic decoding of discursive infrastructures, superseding the self-referential paradigmatic framework that defined Pollock's historical moment.

As a contemporary painter today, Mehretu expands and complicates these dynamics, layering historical, geopolitical, and digital vectors into the material. Her diagrammatic compositions perform “affective ecologies” through the displacement of sign and meaning, where the convergence of heterogenous visual systems generates an *extra-aesthetic* surplus of sensation, relation, and material intensity. It is this weaving of multiple semantic vocabularies into a single visual field that reshapes the very conditions of encounter in her work. Although Mehretu seems to understand the stakes of her methods, *expanded formalism* offers not only a broadened framework for contemporary painting but an approach to analysis that is reparative—attuned to how paintings, past and present, function as relational sites of affective, ethical, and material becoming.

Conclusion

This chapter reimagines formalism through its intersection with the expanded humanities by shifting emphasis from painting as an autonomous aesthetic experience to painting as a relational practice that is philosophically, pedagogically, and aesthetically generative. Where classical formalism privileges visual autonomy, and medium specificity, an *expanded formalism* foregrounds relation, and ethical attunement. Through the concepts of intra-action, diffraction, and affect, in this chapter I propose that painting can take on a generative methodology—one that not only reflects but enacts ontological and epistemological shifts central to contemporary humanities discourse.

First, I use Barad's concept of intra-action to provide the ontological grounding for a relational formalism. I use the concept of intra-action to argue that painting is not a composition of discrete elements orchestrated by a singular author; rather, it is a site of co-emergence—of gestures, materials, light, tools, bodies, and historical traces. The act of painting, in this sense, is a microcosmic event in which the boundaries between subject and object, self and world, are not given but continually reconfigured. Albers's modernist attention to chromatic relations gains renewed vitality here, as relational perception is extended beyond the optical to the ontological and ethical.

Second, I raise the idea of diffraction, as developed by Haraway and Barad, to further challenge representational habits of vision by foregrounding interference. Painting, in this context, becomes a surface of *difference-relating*—a performative field where form is shaped through entanglement. Diffraction offers a methodology for disrupting habitual ways of seeing and knowing in painting, and encourages categories to blur and composition to unfold as a *more-than-representational* practice of attunement. Through *care/full* looking, we encounter the

emergent richness of difference as we attune to the porosity of borders and dwell in their contamination.

Third, I explore the concept of affect to extend this onto-epistemological inquiry into the terrain of sensation, perception, and ethics as a felt relationality. Here, I treat affect as a pre-linguistic force that moves across and through bodies, images, and materials; and as that force shifts, it moves into the realm of effect. Painting, in its “conceptual unsaturation” and unresolved form, I argue, can operate as an “affective ecology”: a site where the circulation of intensities opens perception to an ontological domain.⁹⁶ The abstract image touches, drawing the viewer into a field of becoming where sense experience is the primary modality of knowing.

Together, these three concepts scaffold an *expanded formalism* that resists mastery, or resolution. They position painting as a field of intra-active becoming, where meaning is conjured iteratively and in concert with other forces. This refiguration remains rooted in formalism while retooling it for a world where the human is no longer sovereign. Here, form is a generative threshold—a shifting contour where matter, and meaning co-compose. In this framework, contemporary painting offers a critical methodology for re-sensing the world beyond the anthropocentric certainty of epistemological division. A framework towards modes of thinking and looking in/formation.

¹ Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Duke University Press, 2007), 132; Cary Wolfe, *What Is Posthumanism?* (University of Minnesota Press, 2010), xxv.

² Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 33. Drawn from her agential realism framework, Barad introduces “intra-action” to emphasize that “relata do not preexist relations,” challenging classical notions of independent entities and discrete causality.

³ Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 1–73, esp. 71; Donna Haraway, *The Haraway Reader*. New York: Routledge, 2004. “The Promises of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/d Others,” in *Cultural Studies*, eds. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula A. Treichler (Routledge, 1992), 70.

⁴ Brian Massumi describes affect as a circulation of intensities to emphasize its prepersonal, relational nature; affect flows between bodies and environments, shaping capacities to feel and act without being bound to individual emotion. Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Duke University Press, 2002), 24–25.

⁵ *Affective ecology* refers to the entangled relations through which affect, perception, and environment co-emerge—highlighting how emotional and sensory experience is shaped across human and nonhuman fields. See Alexa Weik von Mossner, *Affective Ecologies: Empathy, Emotion, and Environmental Narrative* (Ohio State University Press, 2017).

⁶ See Michel Eugène Chevreul, *The Principles of Harmony and Contrast*, trans. Charles Martel (George Bell and Sons, 1908), originally published in 1839; Wassily Kandinsky, *Point and Line to Plane*, trans. Howard Dearstyne and Hilla Rebay (Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1947), originally published in 1926; James Panero, “A Study in Contrasts,” *The New Criterion*, December 2023, <https://newcriterion.com/article/a-study-in-contrasts/>; “Primary Forms,” The Getty Research Institute, https://www.getty.edu/research/exhibitions_events/exhibitions/bauhaus/new_artist/form_color/form/; “Simultanism,” Tate Art Terms, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/s/simultanism>. Michel Eugène Chevreul’s *The Principles of Harmony and Contrast* (1839) was seminal in the expansive exploration of colour that followed its publication, helping to shift modernism’s “focus of perception from representation to sensation” (Panero, 6). Neo-Impressionists such as Georges Seurat applied Chevreul’s principle of “simultaneous contrast” in their optical colour mixing. The Fauves, including Henri Matisse and André Derain, pushed their ideas toward bold, emotive chromatic juxtapositions. Later, modernist colour theorists and practitioners such as Johannes Itten and Joseph Albers refined these principles into formal teaching systems, while painters like Robert and Sonia Delaunay, Milton Avery, and Hans Hoffman explored the plastic, structural role of colour in composition. Likewise, Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee and other Bauhaus artists worked experimentally with line, plane, shape, and texture to study the relational aspects of composition, placing the utmost importance on the sensorial quality of these interconnections.

⁷ Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 374–375. Karen Barad critiques Enlightenment epistemologies for relying on visual metaphors that emphasize observation over entanglement—what she calls the “geometrical optics” of representation.

⁸ Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 86. Barad describes the reliance on optical metaphors in Western knowledge making practices that “dates back to the Greeks.”

⁹ Josef Albers, *Interaction of Color* (Yale University Press, 1963), esp. 5–15.

¹⁰ See Greenberg’s “Modernist Painting” and its later rebuttal in Phillip Guston’s published Philadelphia Museum School of Art lectures in *Philip Guston: Collected Writings, Lectures, and Conversations*, edited by Clark Coolidge (University of California Press, 2010), <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520945395>. Also, see moma.org and the artstory.org for a historical recount of the philosophy and influences of de Stijl movement in modern art and the International Style of modern architecture.

¹¹ See Clement Greenberg’s Modernist Painting 1960 as contextualised by The Art Story.org. <https://www.theartstory.org/definition/medium-specificity-and-flatness/>.

¹² Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 33.

¹³ Meyer Schapiro, “Nature of Abstract Art,” *Abstraction*, ed. Maria Lind (Whitechapel Gallery, 2013), 35.

¹⁴ Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 91.

¹⁵ Barad, 46.

¹⁶ Barad, 93.

¹⁷ Barad, 93.

¹⁸ Barad, 88.

¹⁹ Barad, 67.

²⁰ Bruno Latour, “From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik: Or How to Make Things Public.” In *New Critical Writings in Political Sociology: Volume Two: Conventional and Contentious Politics*, 515–37, 2017. For Latour, images are not obstacles to truth but indispensable mediators of human understanding. Yet he also warns—much like Benjamin—of their power: not because images are inherently deceptive, but because their authority becomes dangerous when their provisional, mediated nature is forgotten. As Latour writes, “If you stick to them, images are dangerous, blasphemous, idolatrous; but they are safe, innocent, indispensable if you learn how to jump from one image to the next” 525.

²¹ Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 88.

²² Rosi Braidotti and Matthew Fuller, “The Posthumanities in an Era of Unexpected Consequences,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 36, no. 6 (2019): 3–31.

²³ “Albert Oehlen,” Gagolian, <https://gagolian.com/artists/albert-oehlen/>, accessed December 9, 2025.

²⁴ Von Heyl quoted in. Julia Pelta Feldman, “Canon Fodder: Julia Pelta Feldman Charline von Heyl at Petzel Gallery, New York,” *Texte Zur Kunst* 112 (2018): Para 8.

²⁵ See Sarah E. Fensom, “Hans Hoffman: Pushing Forward,” *Art and Antiques Magazine*, 2020, accessed November 10, 2025, <https://www.artandantiquesmag.com/hans-hofmann-paintings/>.

²⁶ Von Heyl quoted in Ekin Erkan, “Charline von Heyl,” review of Charline von Heyl at Petzel Gallery, New York, *The Brooklyn Rail*, October 2023, <https://brooklynrail.org/2023/10/artseen/Charline-von-Heyl-Ekin/>.

²⁷ Charline von Heyl, “Too Little and Too Much, All the Time: Charline von Heyl and the Life of Painting,” interview by Robert Enright and Mika Walsh, *Border Crossings*, September 2014, <https://bordercrossingsmag.com/article/too-little-and-too-much-all-the-time>.

²⁸ Barbara, A. MacAdam, “Charline von Heyl’s Audacious Eclecticism,” *Two Coats of Paint*, October 24, 2023, <https://twocoatsofpaint.com/2023/10/charline-von-heyls-audacious-eclecticism.html>.

²⁹ Rem Koolhaas quoted in Erkan, “Charline von Heyl.”

³⁰ More-than-representational painting derives its meaning from the way that representation exceeds the bounds of its signification in painting. The term draws conceptual lineage from Erin Manning’s notion of “the more-than of experience,” which foregrounds the preconscious, relational, and affective dimensions of sensory experience. It also resonates with the “more-than-human” turn in posthumanist and Indigenous ontologies, which insists that knowledge, agency, and relationality are distributed across human and nonhuman actors, challenging the epistemological boundaries set by Enlightenment humanism. Both frameworks unsettle representational logic as the primary mode of meaning-making. The term “more-than-representational” also has a specific history in landscape theory that emerges from cultural geographer Nigel Thrift’s theories of non-representation, but in the framework of expanded formalism, it denotes the prioritization of attunement, interdependence, and situated co-constitution in painting. More-than-representational painting embraces ambiguity, excess, and affect, challenging traditional dichotomies between abstraction and representation. See “Erin Manning, “Artfulness.” In *The Nonhuman Turn*, edited by Richard Grusin, 45–79. United States: University of Minnesota Press, 2015, 48; Also, see Emma Waterton, “More-than-representational landscapes,” in *The Routledge Companion to Landscape Studies*, Edited by

Peter Howard, Ian Thompson, Emma Waterton, and Mick Atha, 2nd ed., 91. Routledge, 2019.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315195063-7>.

³¹ Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 33.

³² Amy Sillman, David Joselit, and Michelle Kuo, “Shape: A Conversation,” *October* 172 (2020): 146.

³³ Gregor Quack critiques certain abstract painting practices for adopting new materialist rhetoric as a marketing strategy, arguing that such “decentering” often functions to erode relationships rather than deepen them. See Gregor Quack et al., “A Questionnaire on Materialisms,” *October* 155 (2016): 82.

³⁴ See also Walter Robinson’s coining of the term “zombie formalism,” which describes a wave of market-driven abstract painting characterized by stylistic repetition and philosophical pretense. Walter Robinson, “Flipping and the Rise of Zombie Formalism,” *Artspace*, April 3, 2014,
https://www.artspace.com/magazine/interviews_features/the_big_idea/whats_the_deal_with_zombie_formalism-52184 (site now offline).

³⁵ Jane Bennett describes assemblages—heterogeneous collections of human and nonhuman bodies—as affective bodies whose efficacy emerges only through their relational interactions. See Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Duke University Press, 2010), 21.

³⁶ In *Artistry and Agency*, Bennett argues that a philosophy of “vital materialism” is also a green politics—a sensibility that deliberately slows us down in an over-consumptive, ecologically disastrous society. See Jane Bennett, *Artistry and Agency in a World of Vibrant Matter* (inaugural lecture, Vera List Center for Art and Politics, New School, November 2009), 56:43.

³⁷ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick introduces *reparative reading* as an alternative to paranoid critical practices. See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Duke University Press, 2003), 123–151.

³⁸ Drawing on feminist witness theory, “soft witnessing” here denotes a sustained, relational mode of perception attuned to nuance and entanglement. See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s development of “reparative witnessing” in *Touching Feeling*, 123–51.

³⁹ See Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (Verso, 2012); Maria Lind’s introduction to *Abstraction*, ed. Maria Lind (Whitechapel Gallery, 2013); Robinson, “Flipping and the Rise of Zombie Formalism.”

⁴⁰ Evelien Geerts and Iris van der Tuin, “Diffraction and Reading Diffractionally: Deleuze, Derrida and Barad,” *Philosophy Today* 60, no. 2 (Spring 2016): 231.

⁴¹ This formulation draws inspiration from Timothy Morton’s reflection on the paradox of texture—how extreme granularity can produce a sensation of smoothness. See Timothy Morton and Hans Ulrich Obrist, “Hans Ulrich Obrist Speaks With Timothy Morton,” *DIS Magazine*, February 2016,
<https://dismagazine.com/disillusioned/discussion-disillusioned/68280/hans-ulrich-obrist-timothy-morton/>

⁴² Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 43–46. Karen Barad critiques representationalism as a metaphysical assumption that divides the world into separately existing entities—subjects and objects—and calls instead for an agential realist account grounded in relational ontology.

⁴³ Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More than Human Worlds* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 32–33.

⁴⁴ Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 97. Karen Barad critiques reflective thinking as a representationalist mode of knowing that privileges a detached subject position and reaffirms an epistemology of individualism.

⁴⁵ Bruno Latour critiques the modern reliance on “matters of fact” as a limited epistemological stance that privileges

detached objectivity over entangled, situated knowledge. See Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*, trans. Catherine Porter (Harvard University Press, 2004), 232–234.

⁴⁶ Joshua DiCaglio defines meter-scale perception as the human-scale register that underpins traditional visual representation and shapes understanding of the world from a fixed vantage point. See Joshua DiCaglio, *Scale Theory: A Nondisciplinary Inquiry* (University of Minnesota Press, 2021), 26.

⁴⁷ Daniel Neofetou, *Rereading Abstract Expressionism, Clement Greenberg and the Cold War*. (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022), 5. This quote is Neofetou’s paraphrase of the broader consensus among Abstract Expressionists.

⁴⁸ Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (University of Chicago Press, 1983), esp. 185–200. Guilbaut critiques how modernist formalism was co-opted to symbolize democratic freedom, masking its complicity in Cold War cultural agendas.

⁴⁹ Eva Cockcroft, “Abstract Expressionism, Weapon of the Cold War,” *Artforum* 12, no. 10 (June 1974): 39–41.

⁵⁰ The term *slippage* is drawn from Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois, who use it to describe how art resists stable formal or conceptual definition. See Krauss and Bois, *Formless: A User’s Guide* (Zone Books, 1997). The phrase “form feeling form” and the notion of embodied perception are inspired by Susanne K. Langer’s theory of art as symbolic form and “the morphology of feeling.” See Susanne K. Langer, *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art* (New York: Scribner, 1953), esp. 27–29.

⁵¹ Donna Haraway critiques reflexivity as a mode of thought that “invites the illusion of essential, fixed positions,” while diffraction, by contrast, emphasizes “the processing of small but consequential differences.” Haraway quoted in Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 29.

⁵² Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 71. Karen Barad draws from physics to develop a diffractive methodology that foregrounds the relationality of matter and meaning, focusing on “patterns of interference” rather than reflections of sameness.

⁵³ Trinh T. Minh-ha critiques essentialist, hierarchical conceptions of difference, which Evelien Geerts and Iris van der Tuin frame as an “apartheid-based, segregational type of difference.” Quoted in Evelien Geerts and Iris van der Tuin, “Diffraction and Reading Diffractively,” in *Matter Journal of New Materialist Research*, Vol 2 No 1 (2021): 173–177.

⁵⁴ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt. (Schocken Books, 2007), 241. Walter Benjamin warns that fascism aestheticizes politics, turning mass spectacle into a tool of domination. My understanding of this point is further expanded by Timothy O’Leary’s account of Benjamin’s discussion of aesthetics and politics in “Foucault, Politics and the Autonomy of the Aesthetics,” *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 4, no. 2 (1996): 273–91. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09672559608570835>.

⁵⁵ Andrew Stefan Weiner, “Contextures: Art and the Politics of Abstraction, Representation, and Identity (Part One),” *e-flux Criticism*, October 18, 2023, <https://www.e-flux.com/criticism/570183/contextures-art-and-the-politics-of-abstraction-representation-and-identity-part-one>.

⁵⁶ David J. Getsy argues that abstraction is not an escape from representational logic; rather, it is a mode that reveals and exceeds representation’s limits, embodying a queer excess that resists legibility. See David J. Getsy, “Ten Queer Theses on Abstraction,” in *Queer Abstraction*, edited by Jared Ledesma (Des Moines Art Center, 2019), 65–75.

⁵⁷ Weiner, “Contextures (Part One).”

⁵⁸ Andrew Stefan Weiner, “Contextures: Art and the Politics of Abstraction, Representation, and Identity (Part

Two),” *e-flux Criticism*, October 18, 2023, <https://www.e-flux.com/criticism/570183/contextures-art-and-the-politics-of-abstraction-representation-and-identity-part-one>.

⁵⁹ Weiner, “Contextures (Part Two).”

⁶⁰ Linda Goode Bryant, quoted in Weiner, “Contextures (Part Two).”

⁶¹ Geerts and van der Tuin, “Diffraction and Reading Diffractively,” 173.

⁶² Getsy, “Ten Queer Theses,” 65.

⁶³ Getsy, 68.

⁶⁴ Simon O’Sullivan, “The Aesthetics of Affect: Thinking Art Beyond Representation,” *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 6, no. 3 (2001): 126.

⁶⁵ Michael Young, “The Aesthetics of Abstraction,” in *Aesthetics Equals Politics: New Discourses Across Art, Architecture, and Philosophy*, edited by Mark Foster Gage, (MIT Press, 2019), 145.

⁶⁶ John Rajchman, “What is Abstract,” *Constructions* (MIT Press, 1998) 61.

⁶⁷ Brian Massumi, *The Politics of Affect* (Polity Press, 2015), 8.

⁶⁸ María Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More than Human Worlds* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 33.

⁶⁹ Barad, Meeting the Universe Halfway, 393. Barad defines response-ability not as a moral obligation imposed from the outside, but as an ethical capacity that emerges from entangled relations—a form of accountability that arises within the very intra-actions that produce meaning and matter.

⁷⁰ María Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, .

⁷¹ Puig de la Bellacasa, 17–19.

⁷² See Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Feminism, Femininity and the Histories of Art* (Routledge, 1988). and Jacqueline Rose, *Sexuality in the Field of Vision* (Verso, 1986).

⁷³ Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, 203.

⁷⁴ For foundational accounts of affect, see Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics*, trans. Edwin Curley (Penguin, 1996); Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy* (City Lights, 1988); Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*; and Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*.

⁷⁵ Daniel Neofetou, *Rereading Abstract Expressionism: Clement Greenberg and the Cold War*. New York: (Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2022), 5.

⁷⁶ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 23.

⁷⁷ Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Duke University Press, 2002), 30.

⁷⁸ Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 35. Massumi describes the “excess” or affective surplus of experience as those intensities, and sensations that exceed what is cognitively registered or can be linguistically expressed. He refers to the real but unactualized dimensions of experience.

⁷⁹ See Massumi, 196–197.

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- ⁸⁰ Jan Verwoert, “The Beauty and Politics of Latency: On the Work of Tomma Abts” In Tomma Abts, edited by Laura Hoptman, Bruce Hainley, and Jan Verwoert. 92. Phaidon Press Inc. 2008. Published in conjunction with the exhibition of the same name, shown at New Museum, New York, April 9 – November 2, 2008.
- ⁸¹ Jan Verwoert, “Affect: in Effect: Being Touched by the Face: Why are Conceptual Artists Painting Again? Video. Unitednationsplaza.org. United Nations Plaza Archive, April 29, 2009. Web. March, 02 2015.
- ⁸² Benda Hofmeyr, “‘Isn’t Art an Activity that Gives Things a Face?’: Levinas on the Power of Art,” *Image [& Narrative]* 18 (2007).
[https://www.imageandnarrative.be/inarchive/thinking_pictures/hofmeyr.htm#:~:text=%22Isn't%20Art%20an%20Activity,of%20Words%22%20\(1949\).](https://www.imageandnarrative.be/inarchive/thinking_pictures/hofmeyr.htm#:~:text=%22Isn't%20Art%20an%20Activity,of%20Words%22%20(1949).)
- ⁸³ This discussion of Verwoert and the Lacanian Face returns to my discussion of these topics in my MFA thesis and puts them into a new contextual dialogue with my notion of the *extra-aesthetic*. Maegan Harbridge, “Affect as Effect: Towards the Social Significance of Abstract Painting” (master’s thesis, The University of Guelph, 2015), 14–15.
- ⁸⁴ Erin Manning, “Artfulness,” in *The Nonhuman Turn*, edited by Richard Grusin, 45–79. (University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 47.
- ⁸⁵ Manning, “Artfulness,” 48.
- ⁸⁶ Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (University of Michigan Press, 1997), 189.
- ⁸⁷ Krista Thompson, “The Fugitive Photograph and Archival Escape in Jamaica” (Public Talk, Goldfarb Summer Institute of Art, York University, May 06, 2021).
- ⁸⁸ Achille Mbembe, “Disenclosure,” In *Out of the Dark Night: Essays on Decolonization*, translated by Daniela Ginsburg (Columbia University Press, 2019), 84-85.
- ⁸⁹ Thompson, *Shine*, 41.
- ⁹⁰ Julie Crooks, “Sandra Brewster and Ming Smith: UnKnowing the Image,” Mice Magazine, Issue Four: Opacities. <https://micemagazine.ca/issue-four/sandra-brewster-and-ming-smith-unknowing-image>
- ⁹¹ Julia Bryan-Wilson, “Julie Mehretu,” *Artforum* 59, no.6 (February 2020): 214.
<http://www.artforum.com/print/reviews/202002/julie-mehretu-81917>.
- ⁹² Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 30 and 196–197.
- ⁹³ Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 26.
- ⁹⁴ Neofetou, 5.
- ⁹⁵ Neofetou, 5.
- ⁹⁶ Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 35.

To Be a Narratively Constituted Being

Glaciers melt, tipping points loom, the agro-industrial complex churns like a well-oiled machine, forcing life in support of densely accumulating populations of wage slave labour. The colonial narrative and capitalist narrative are interwoven to the extent that labour and land are always, only, resources for the extraction of capital.¹ The hu(Man) story, an origin story of Western Man (where Eden and Evolution conflate), maintains a status quo of possessive individualism that subjugates human and more-than-human bodies under an auspice of human freedom! This “chronological line of an imperial matrix of knowledge [a hegemonic and hierarchical notion of the hu(Man)], in which Europeans themselves conceived, narrated, and practiced,”² is a systemic narrative that propels “global linear thinking.”³ Narratives embedded within a social imaginary, so deep as to go undetected in a monopoly of “liberal monohumanism,”⁴ inform ideas of hierarchy, home, nutrition, and hygiene that physically act on bodies from infancy; an “overrepresentation” of systemic norms; “calcified by our commitment to this belief system.”⁵

The hu(Man) narrative, guised as an epistemological classification, centres our species exceptional, but is a “fictively constructed and performatively enacted genre”⁶ of being human that justifies human extractive practices for the sake of (Man)kind, at the expense of all else. This is the fiction, the contagion, that managed to colonize all—a Western colonial episteme of psychic warfare that continues to linger in an aftermath of the modern imperial age.

What does it mean to be both biologically and mythically constituted⁷—to be a sum of inherited genetic trajectories but also an inherited legacy of Western European expansionism (in all that this entails)? Decolonial theorist Sylvia Wynter contends that to reimagine “who-we-are

as humans,”⁸ as mutationally evolved storytelling beings, is to shatter an illusion of a purely biological Man, “mak[ing] possible the extra-territoriality of our self-cognition.”⁹ To conceive humans as narratively constituted is to loosen the knots of our (presently biocentric) “overrepresented” “macro-origin stories”¹⁰: rational, proportional, masculine, white—a Vitruvian Man mythically constituted through hetero-normative conceptions of hu(Man) exceptionalism. To be a narratively constituted being is to imagine humans beyond biocentric Man. It is to postmark the story of our species prior to an epistemologically determinant “Greco-Roman concept of the human” and beyond the universal visions of humanism¹¹ where there lays in waiting the possibility of a reconstitution of origins of human life and the world in a non-linear unfolding.

In 1985, Donna Haraway presented a story of a cyborg, a figure forged in the ruins of modernity, as a counter narrative to the Western origin story of Man. *A Cyborg Manifesto* wasn’t a transhuman idealization of technology (after all) but an alternative origin narrative to dismantle the story of Eden and its mounting wasteland of capitalist production. Eden, Haraway posited, is the narrative responsible for Man’s subjugation over *other*—where “animal, barbarian, [and] women” are separate and nature and culture are forever dislocated from one another.¹² For Haraway in the 1980s, the cyborg presented a possibility of creating a new myth of “incarnation [that could be] outside salvation history”¹³—a myth that entangles humans and all their detritus within a sensitive network of relations of the world and its bodies. What becomes explicit in Haraway’s rejection of the Genesis story is that an Edenic wilderness, a “nature” separate from Man’s “culture,” provides the space for opting out of care—care for the present moment and the fragility of the planet that we inhabit. She notes that to “shake hold of these monotheisms” is to get a sense of the fact that “we really do die, that we really do wound each other, that the earth

really is finite.”¹⁴ The cyborg, a new myth of incarnation, was meant to interrupt the stories of Man, Other, and passive Nature embedded within modernism because, as Haraway lamented, more than three decades ago, such a story had already revealed its effects.

To recognize Western human exception as merely an arc in its own genesis story is to acknowledge “we,” all participants of a globalized West, are only exceptional because “we” say we are. To acknowledge the human as a creature rooted in self-narration counters hegemonic hierarchies of humanness situated in genesis and anthropological origin stories.

In conversation with Katherine McKittrick, Wynter sets out the stakes of becoming conscious of this self-narration and the work of reconciliation ahead. She says:

The struggle we are confronted with cannot be in any way a one-person task. We must now collectively undertake a rewriting of knowledge as we know it. This is a rewriting in which, *inter alia*, I want the West to recognize the dimensions of what it has brought into the world—this with respect to, *inter alia*, our now purely naturalized modes or genres of humanness. [For] if we continue with our old way of thinking—the prenuclear way of thinking—we drift as a species toward an unparalleled catastrophe.¹⁵

To reimagine what it means to be human, to re-articulate biology and myth as co-constituting “is to underscore relationality and inter-human narratives” as integral and unique to the story of our species.¹⁶ To think myth entangled with the biological processes of human constitution is a Wynterian re-narration of the role of narrative itself, where “our capacity to produce narrative as physiological beings [and to recognize this as inherent to how our species makes meaning] allows us to critically re-envision our futures in new and provocative ways.”¹⁷ To conceive the human as “a hybrid being, both bios and mythoi” is to reconsider myth as the principal formal

device in how humans' matter and make worlds. In recognizing our narratively instituting augmentation, we can play with ways to subvert it.¹⁸

Expanded Formalism (A Co-Citational Manifesto)

In this chapter, I think with Wynter's decolonial theory and Haraway's feminist posthumanist scholarship to further develop my expanded approach to formal analysis that accounts for the relationship between biology and narrative (form and content). Here I draw out the significance of this relationship in the context of scholarship that sees narrative as formal to human constitution and meaning. To take note of a link between material, spaces, and stories as sets of differences that matter through interconnection, not autonomy, is to attend to the intra-action between all of the compositional elements of painting. *Expanded formalism* highlights the interrelationship between form, but also positions narrative as a principal formal device (or evolutionary mutation) in how humans evolved to create meaning through art and cultural objects.

Ever teetering on the brink of death—criticized as propaganda or dismissed as commodity—painting is reimagined within the expanded humanities as a nonconforming site against legibility, transparency, and surveillance. Through elision and formal relationships, contemporary painting presents pictures of unresolved and indeterminate worlds iteratively manifesting. This is a formalism of opacity to counter the transparency of representation assimilated and weaponized as a program of surveillance and control—a reflective surface of homo economicus that reproduces iterative versions of itself. *Expanded formalism* takes back painting as a face of fugitivity outside of categorical distinction, as a political position against the homogenization of identification through representation. A painting is a body, and a painting is a face,¹⁹ but its face is a mask that conceals and liberates its content.

Colour, line, texture, and shape (elements of modernist form), reduced as the component parts of composition, emphasized the picture plane's edges, borders, and flatness as an ultimate gesture of hu(Man) criticality. But what about the mythology of Man that underwrote this modernist stance? "We presently live in a moment where the human is understood as a purely biological mechanism that is subordinated to a teleological economic script that governs our global well-being/ill-being";²⁰ but what if myth, de-linked from a secular conception of the hu(Man's) "macro-origin story" can be understood as the definitive formal device in human constitution? "Humans are...a biomutationally evolved, hybrid species—storytellers who now storytellingly invent themselves as purely biological"²¹—a species that enacts myth in the evolution of its own genesis.

To conceive the human not only in biological terms of phylogeny or ontogeny²² but also through Frantz Fanon's conception of "sociogeny"—which holds that subjectivity is also constituted through the social and cultural order of colonialism²³—is to rethink the relationship between macro-origin stories and the Anthropocene. Wynter's development of Frantz Fanon's conception of "sociogeny"²⁴ positions the human as both a "bios/mythoi"²⁵ being. In contrast to modernist painting, where the aesthetic was an "autonomous value"²⁶—art made for its own sake—*expanded formalism*, attuned to the relationality of the pictorial, reconsiders narrative as a key formal device in the history of Western expansion and its coming dissolution. Rather than an omission of subject matter, *expanded formalism*'s radical disavowal positions representation as a material-discursive force—one that has enabled the conditions of our own exception and, consequently, our own demise.

Expanded formalism is an aesthetic intervention that proposes a reconceptualization of formalist theory for the contemporary humanities, where painting is reassessed for its virtue as a culturally constructed tool for critical perception. To attend to the intra-action between formal relationships within

a composition, between line and plane, light and shadow, narrative and subject matter is to reconnect self and other through focused attention to the troubled matter of subjects and how they matter (materialize) as reciprocally produced migrations of form. Line is the space between bodies, shadow is an obstruction of light, narrative is a matter of subjecthood.

Expanded formalism is a mode of visual analysis that recognizes the role that visual storytelling has played in the myth of hu(Man) exceptionalism, underscoring the link between origin narratives and Western practices of representation. It re-asserts contemporary painting as an aesthetic activity to counter the image of still dominant hierarchies of humanist rationality, autonomy, and exceptionalism. Through its non-linear, *more-than-representational*²⁷ approach, abstract contemporary painting decentres normative modes of looking, thinking, and feeling—as a corporeal and affective force that engages with the nuanced affective and material realities of human sense experience. This embodied material practice actively counters an otherwise systemic attention economy that accelerates the consumptive and extractive practices of a rational, hierarchical, hu(Man) established during the Enlightenment.

Expanded formalism is a formalism that offers a different origin narrative—a cyborgian narrative assembled as a heterogeneity of positions and parts to disrupt the auto-instituting loop between humans and stories—intervening into the traditional representationalist script rationally disseminating current hegemonic biocentric and evolutionary conceptions of the human.²⁸ This is the self-conscious narrative that after Wynter, *expanded formalism* proposes.

The power of stories lies in the ease with which they are assimilated; untethered from the narrator, they stand in for secular, objective reality. To parse narrative as epistemologically structural to humancentric world-making is to rupture the Western story of Man. Destabilizing this pathological epicentre of hu(Man) exceptionalism is to unravel the tightly woven fiction of its reliance on “words”

and “things,” a reliance that, through representation, reduces the fullness of nature, bodies, and materiality.²⁹ *Expanded formalism* co-opts painting as a *more-than-representational* practice to counter the story of Man; it is a technology of estrangement, an assemblage of parts. Painting becomes a cyborg, a junkspace of disparate narratives and worlds, haphazardly contaminated through entanglements of bodies and terrains. Through *care/full* attention to the contingency of form (to note how a line wavers from an edge, to a shadow, to a colour, to a shape), painting tells a story of non-linearity—acting on bodies and social institutions as an epistemological disobedience against a self-replicating script of atomistic individualism.³⁰

In a postcolonial, feminist, and posthuman future, painting becomes a site of productive antagonism, where the suspension of logic through incoherent forms precedes rationalization and opens space for affective, embodied experience. The non-linear gestures of contemporary painting enact a practice of defamiliarization that is inherently non-normative—a dis-identification “from familiar and hence comforting values and identities.”³¹ As a creative counterpoint to the representational logic of humanist subjectivity that underwrites Western capitalism, contemporary painting operates as a dis/coherent composition that presses against the edges of language, “a conspiracy without a plot”³²—a collective rehearsal for other ways of being.³³ *Expanded formalism* envisions painting as a field of virtual potential:³⁴ a world without binaries, unfixed and pulsating with cosmologies of disparate personal narratives that resist resolution, instead cultivating a simultaneity of becoming.³⁵ This optical entanglement of signs composes a multifaceted field of “extra-discursive and extra-textual”³⁶ intensities that exceed quantification within fixed regimes of representation. Contemporary painting emerges not as a medium of depiction but as a speculative methodology—an iterative practice of world-making through affective interconnection.

Through *care/full* looking, learning to see relationally intervenes into our storytelling

predisposition, interrupting the linearity of Western macro-origin stories to imagine new narratives of our hybridly human selves. *Expanded formalism* parses the iterative and relational dimensions of form—including narrative—within painting, revealing the contingent quality of composition. Reconsidering myth as structurally integral to human practices of world-making, *expanded formalism* aligns with Wynter and Haraway to surface Western macro-origin stories as a centrifugal force of the Anthropocene. To acknowledge the human as a creature rooted in self-narration is to counter hegemonic hierarchies of humanness grounded in Western genesis and anthropological origin stories. This bio-mythical mode of knowing³⁷ repositions the human outside of chronological time, signalling a shift toward a narratively constituted way of being and becoming.

¹ As put forward in his 2018 discussion on colonialism and “possessive individualism” at Woodbine, Fred Moten asserts that “settler colonialism [was] the historical condition [for] the possibility of [a] new theory of the subject,” where colonialism and capitalism are interwoven to the extent that they are indistinguishable from one another. See Moten in “A Conversation with Fred Moten,” lecture, December 2, 2018, posted by Woodbine NYC, December 3, 2018, YouTube, 50:33–50:44, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I6b5N_u7Ebs.

² Walter D. Mignolo, “Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis,” in *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*, ed. Katherine McKittrick (Duke University Press, 2015), 117.

³ Mignolo, 111.

⁴ Katherine McKittrick, *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis* (Duke University Press, 2015), 9.

⁵ Mignolo, “Sylvia Wynter,” 108.

⁶ Sylvia Wynter, “The Ceremony Found: Toward the Autopoietic Turn/Overturn, Its Autonomy of Human Agency and Extraterritoriality of (Self-)Cognition,” in *Black Knowledges/Black Struggles: Essays in Critical Epistemology*, ed. Jason R. Ambrose and Sabine Broeck, 196 (Liverpool University Press, 2015).

⁷ Katherine McKittrick, “Yours in the Intellectual Struggle: Sylvia Wynter and the Realization of the Living,” in *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*, ed. Katherine McKittrick, 5 (Duke University Press, 2015). Sylvia Wynter explores Frantz Fanon’s concept of *Sociogeny*, which describes humans as both biologically and mythically constituted beings.

⁸ Wynter, “The Ceremony Found,” 195.

⁹ Wynter, 245. Wynter suggests that in locating ourselves as a hybrid species—both biologically and narratively constituted—we no longer require the veil of our own illusions and are therefore prepared to address the dire consequences of an epochal humanism.

¹⁰ McKittrick, *Sylvia Wynter*, 11.

¹¹ Mignolo, “Sylvia Wynter,” 108.

¹² Donna J. Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,” in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (Routledge, 1991), 4.

¹³ Haraway, 1.

¹⁴ Constance Penley and Andrew Ross, “Cyborgs at Large: Interview with Donna Haraway.” *Social Text* 25, (1990): 20.

¹⁵ McKittrick, *Sylvia Wynter*, 18

¹⁶ McKittrick, 2.

¹⁷ McKittrick, 4.

¹⁸ McKittrick, 6.

¹⁹ Benda Hofmeyr, “‘Isn’t Art an Activity that Gives Things a Face?’: Levinas on the Power of Art.” *Image [&] Narrative* 18 (2007), 2.
[https://www.imageandnarrative.be/inarchive/thinking_pictures/hofmeyr.htm#:~:text=%22Isn't%20Art%20an%20Activity,of%20Words%22%20\(1949\).](https://www.imageandnarrative.be/inarchive/thinking_pictures/hofmeyr.htm#:~:text=%22Isn't%20Art%20an%20Activity,of%20Words%22%20(1949).) Benda Hofmeyr connects Levinas’s notion of radical passivity to the way we experience art objects (2). The opaqueness of a face (be it human or the one of an expressive object) in its irreducible quality breaks up representation, destroys the possibility for a linear understanding, and triggers what Hofmeyr calls “pre-conscious awareness” (3). This primary experience exposes the fragmentary nature of a singular perspective and complicates the notion of a reliable objective experience.

²⁰ McKittrick, *Sylvia Wynter*, 10.

²¹ McKittrick, *Sylvia Wynter*, 11.

²² McKittrick, 11.

²³ Frantz Fanon introduces the concept of “sociogeny” in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952). See Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (Grove Press, 1967), 4–5.

²⁴ Sylvia Wynter later develops Fanon’s notion into a broader “sociogenic principle,” arguing that the human is always constituted by cultural codes, narratives, and systems of meaning. See Sylvia Wynter, “Toward the Sociogenic Principle: Fanon, Identity, the Puzzle of Conscious Experience, and What It Is Like to Be ‘Black,’” in *National Identities and Sociopolitical Changes in Latin America*, ed. Mercedes F. Durán-Cogan and Antonio Gómez-Moriana (Routledge, 2001), 30–66.

²⁵ McKittrick, *Sylvia Wynter*, 31.

²⁶ Clement Greenberg, “Modernist Painting,” *Art and Literature: An International Review* 4 (Spring 1965): 6.

²⁷ More-than-representational painting derives its meaning from the way that representation exceeds the bounds of its signification in painting. The term draws conceptual lineage from Erin Manning’s notion of “the more-than of experience,” which foregrounds the preconscious, relational, and affective dimensions of sensory experience. It also resonates with the “more-than-human” turn in posthumanist and Indigenous ontologies, which insists that knowledge, agency, and relationality are distributed across human and nonhuman actors, challenging the epistemological boundaries set by Enlightenment humanism. Both frameworks unsettle representational logic as the primary mode of meaning-making. The term “more-than-representational” also has a specific history in landscape theory that emerges from cultural geographer Nigel Thrift’s theories of non-representation, but in the framework

of *expanded formalism*, it denotes the prioritization of attunement, interdependence, and situated co-constitution in painting. More-than-representational painting embraces ambiguity, excess, and affect, challenging traditional dichotomies between abstraction and representation. See “Erin Manning, “Artfulness.” In *The Nonhuman Turn*, edited by Richard Grusin, 45–79. United States: University of Minnesota Press, 2015, 48; Also, see Emma Waterton, “More-than-representational landscapes,” in *The Routledge Companion to Landscape Studies*, Edited by Peter Howard, Ian Thompson, Emma Waterton, and Mick Atha, 2nd ed., 91. Routledge, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315195063-7>.

²⁸ Zimitri Erasmus, “Sylvia Wynter’s Theory of the Human: Counter-, not Post-humanist,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 37, no. 6 (2020): 51.

²⁹ Karen Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28, no. 3 (Spring 2003): 812.

³⁰ Rosi Braidotti, “The Politics of Radical Immanence: May 1968 as an Event,” *New Formations* 65, no. 65 (2008): 29, <https://doi.org/10.3898/newf.65.01.2008>.

³¹ Braidotti, 31.

³² Stefano Harney and Valentina Desideri, *The Curatorial: A Philosophy of Curating* (Sternberg Press, 2017), 125.

³³ Braidotti, “The Politics of Radical Immanence,” 32.

³⁴ Braidotti, 31.

³⁵ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (University of Michigan Press, 1995). In his 1981 publication *Simulacra and Simulation* Jean Baudrillard opens his text with a passage from the Hebrew Bible where he declares that “The simulacrum is never what hides the truth—it is truth that hides the fact that there is none” (Ecclesiastes quoted in Baudrillard, 166).

³⁶ Simon O’Sullivan, “The Aesthetics of Affect: Thinking Art Beyond Representation,” *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 6, no. 3 (2001): 126.

³⁷ Erasmus, “Sylvia Wynter’s Theory,” 52.

Conclusion: Formalism in Relation

This dissertation has traced a trajectory from the rigid certainties of Greenbergian modernism through the critical interventions of Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois, culminating in a reimagined formalism for the expanded humanities. Greenberg's emphasis on medium specificity and purity, while foundational, imposed a reductive lens that isolated painting from its broader relational contexts. Krauss and Bois disrupted this insularity by introducing structuralist and poststructuralist critiques, exposing the limitations of a purely formalist approach and opening the field to interdisciplinary dialogues. Building upon these foundations, my project retools formalism for the contemporary present, positioning painting not as an autonomous object but as an active participant in a network of intra-actions. This perspective aligns with Karen Barad's concept of intra-action, where entities emerge through their relations, and Donna Haraway's notion of "making kin," which emphasizes relationality and interconnectedness. In this framework, painting becomes a site of entanglement where form, matter, and meaning coalesce in a dynamic interplay.

Unfolding through five chapters, this dissertation speculates on and proposes how the formal aspects of painting enable human capacity to think-with the world. It opens with a poetic essay that introduces *care/full* looking as a relational, *more-than-representational* method of attention. The next two chapters turn to contemporary abstract painting—including my own practice—to consider how formal strategies like layering, erasure, and overpainting enact ontological and political concerns. I examine how contemporary artists expand the formalist tradition. My own practice, alongside the works of Julie Mehretu, Mark Bradford, Mary Weatherford, Helen Frankenthaler, Joan Mitchell, Amy Sillman, and Charline von Heyl illustrates how painting transcends disciplinary boundaries. These artists abstract not as a retreat from representation but as a means to engage with complex social, political, and ecological

realities. Their works exemplify a *more-than-representational* approach, where painting operates as a relational interface, facilitating encounters between human and more-than-human agencies.

Chapter Four marks a theoretical turn, structured around three key concepts—intra-action, diffraction, and affect—that reframe composition as an emergent and entangled perceptual field of encounter. Barad’s intra-action challenges the notion of independent entities, proposing instead that phenomena emerge through relational engagements. Diffraction, as both a physical phenomenon and a methodological approach, offers a way to read differences relationally, emphasizing patterns of interference over reflection. Affect, drawing from thinkers like Brian Massumi and Erin Manning, underscores the pre-conscious intensities that traverse bodies and materials, shaping experience beyond linguistic articulation. Together, these concepts inform a practice of *care/full* looking, an embodied attentiveness that recognizes the entangled nature of perception and matter.

The final chapter returns to poetic speculation, exploring narrative not as a linear unfolding but as a fugitive gesture within painting, one attuned to multiplicity and revision. Here, I explore the formal capacity of narrative to act as a posthuman practice of decentring. Storytelling becomes an act of entanglement, weaving together threads of human and nonhuman experiences. This approach resonates with posthuman and Indigenous epistemologies that view knowledge as relational and situated, thus challenging Western narratives of linear progression and human exceptionalism. In that narrative is constitutive of human perception and meaning, this chapter calls attention to the stakes of taking an *expanded formalism* approach.

Although my research-creation practice is grounded in painting, the questions that have shaped this project extend well beyond the bounds of any one medium. The neologisms I have introduced—*expanded formalism*, *care/full* looking, *difference-relating* and others—emerged

directly from the slow, situated work of making, from time spent in the studio attending to the relational quality of form. But I believe these concepts resonate across disciplines. What began as a deeply personal inquiry into how painting operates otherwise has grown into a broader framework: one that re-opens modernism's legacy and places it in dialogue with decolonial and posthuman trajectories. In this way an *expanded formalism* is not just a theory of painting; it's an evolving, interdisciplinary language for sensing, composing, and collaborating otherwise.

In sum, this dissertation proposes a reimagined formalism that embraces the complexity of our entangled, more-than-human existence. By weaving together theoretical inquiry and studio practice, it positions painting not as a closed historical genre but as a living method of research-creation within the expanded humanities—a space where form is relational, perception is ethical, and matter moves alongside us. Here, painting becomes a vital tool for sensing and resisting. A creative framework to reconfigure the world.

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