

WAY AND WEIGHING: ABSTRACT PAINTINGS

AMELIE JEROME

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Way and Weighing: Abstract Paintings

The thesis *Way and Weighing: Abstract Paintings* explores the concepts of time, place and contemporary abstract painting as experienced through my current studio practice. It reflects on the process and thought involved within the body of paintings that will form my Master's thesis graduating exhibition entitled *Way and Weighing*.

“Way and Weighing” is the first line of a poem written by philosopher Martin Heidegger, entitled “The Thinker as Poet” (1). Heidegger relates the process of thinking to his observations of nature, and alludes to the nature and process of thinking itself: its dangers, failures and timely process. To me, it echoes the practice of art-making itself. It evokes a metaphor between action and thought, being and painting. “Way” also echoes “The Way”, an expression frequently referring to a spiritual path, or simply *way* referring to the “way” things are done, approached, seen – an angle, or a perspective. “Weighing” brings to mind choosing, balancing elements in painting, or “weighing” ideas and values. My paintings are a way of weighing action and thought in the process of abstract painting.

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Song of a Man Who Has Come Through

-D.H Lawrence

Not I, not I, but the wind that blows through me!
A fine wind is blowing the new direction of Time.
If only I let it bear me, carry me, if only it carry me!
If only I am sensitive, subtle, oh, delicate, a winged gift!
If only, most lovely of all, I yield myself and am borrowed
By the fine, fine wind that takes its course through the chaos of the world
Like a fine, an exquisite chisel, a wedge-blade inserted;
If only I am keen and hard like the sheer tip of a wedge
Driven by invisible blows,
The rock will split, we shall come at the wonder, we shall find the Hesperides.

Oh, for the wonder that bubbles into my soul,
I would be a good fountain, a good well-head,
Would blur no whisper, spoil no expression.

What is the knocking?
What is the knocking at the door in the night?
It is somebody wants to do us harm.

No, no, it is the three strange angels.
Admit them, admit them

Introduction

Do not count upon thought to ensure the relative necessity of what it thinks. Rather, count upon the contingency of an encounter with that which forces thought to rise up and educate the absolute necessity of an act of thought or passion to think.

-Gilles Deleuze

Martin Heidegger's term *Da- Sein* involves being present and aware in the world, experiencing place as an enhancement and reflection of our self-awareness. Similarly, my practice of abstract painting is a direct experience of the world and myself, magnified by the materiality of paint. My few materials delimit a space within which I experience a spatial, temporal, emotional and spiritual experience of "being-in-the-world".

And so, what can be this experience of Being in painting? What am I aware of while painting, and looking at paintings? How does it reflect my experience of being in the world? There is a mythologized mystery of the artist's process. Many speak of a surrendering to the moment of making, and the unexpected results it generates. Awareness and blindness stand side by side, taking turns in the creative process. This essay attempts to uncover, inform, map or release not only what my paintings are made of, but what artistic creativity personally means in an existential dimension. In the first chapter, I discuss my work within the concept of time. Inextricably tied to its passage, I explore how various notions of time manifest within the context of the studio practice, and the traces it leaves in my formal decisions. The second chapter contextualizes my work within the concept of place through the personal geographies I have experienced, Romanticism and its embrace of nature and the overall environmental influences that formally emerge in my work. The third and final chapter focuses on key concepts within abstract painting and modern art, specifically the primacy of sensation and the unknown. I end my thesis by speculating on my work's contemporary relevance. Ultimately, the aim of my thesis is to expose how abstract painting is a source from which thought is generated. While language here attempts to define these thoughts, words are always parallel to the form of communication that abstraction manifests through its visual constructs.

Chapter 1

Concepts are events in the making.

-Erin Manning, *Relationescapes*

Thought also moves through the elasticity of the almost. The elastic point is the creativity of movement in the making. It is the ontogenetic force through which becoming-form is felt.

-Erin Manning, *Relationescapes*

The greatest, most profound feelings of the human spirit never arise inside a frame of space. They always arise around the concept of time.

-Barnett Newman, *Ohio, 1949*

Each painting is made of accumulated choices that disappear underneath several layers, leaving a few traces and sometimes none at all. Impulse, accident and measure coexist. In the studio, time is free to roam. (See fig. 1, 2 and 3 for some of the development stages of my painting entitled *Seethe*.)

As I add layers of glazes and impastos, and wet surfaces haphazardly seep into other colors through days, weeks and sometimes months, the surface becomes rugged and past passages inform the newer ones. It is as if each day of the week was squeezed into one moment and past, present and future coalesce. I often feel overwhelmed by time, remembering the past and imagining the future, pressuring the present while I attempt to engage fully in the moment. Artists Amy Sillmann and Charlene von Heyl, considerable influences in my practice, both have abstract painting processes that are largely made of layers upon layers of adding and subtracting over an indefinite period of time. For von Heyl, it's about never getting too comfortable, always seeking the unknown and the difficult in the visual. In a work that instigates struggle and transformation, time is continuously grasped, reasserted. She is always re-inventing her visual language, and every minute is a chance to take back time and replace it with another gesture that testifies to a multi-faceted character. Mannerisms in painting, just like habits in everyday life, are

redundant and stifling. Surprise, accident and risk, on the other hand, have a way of making time a palpable event, one that carries change, transformation and growth.

The surface of an object that shows bumps, fractures, scratches and ambiguous transformations, like rocks for example, is associated with the metaphorical expression of time. These visual traces in the object emanate a weighty presence that a manufactured object or digital image does not manifest. It is trace of the accumulation of time and of the interaction between the interface of a thing or person with the exterior world. In the case of painting, it is the canvas that reveals the trace of time as experienced by the painter, through the intermediary of hand, paint and brush. In Amy Sillman's paintings, the surface is rough and hints at multiple layers underneath the final image. There is a trace of searching and struggling, and these qualities bring movement, like a faint rustling of leaves, as one plane of color roughly covers another and her last formal decision resonates with the past.

In Erin Manning's book *Relationescapes: Movement, Art, Philosophy*, she describes in the first chapter, entitled "Incipient Action: The Dance of the Not-Yet" (1-28) the process of writing happening in-situ, morphing as she writes, thinking through the act as opposed to listing what she knows. She discusses the drive of creating, either through moving, painting or writing as a moment full of "incipience", a moment that continues forward as the first act propels another. She describes how it is the act itself that provides the ground from which more thought arises. Thought is in constant movement, just as the body moves ceaselessly, even when it seems to be still:

Thought here is not strictly of the mind but of the body-becoming. Thought is never opposed to movement: thought moves a body. This movement-with is durational in the first instance. Duration is the plane of experience on which expressive finality has not yet taken hold. As thought shifts toward expression, it moves through concepts in pre-articulation. How thought becomes concept is parallel to how duration becomes experiential space-time (6).

In Dictionary.com, "Process" is defined as "a systematic series of actions directed to some end" but in my abstract painting, the words "systemic" and "end" are too insistent to

describe its organic and irregular flow. The abstract gesture arises out of an impalpable thought and reverberates throughout the entire painting as it morphs. It can be from anywhere and anything psychically possible: a sensation, memory, emotion or perception, and its exact location or definition is not constructively necessary. In this way, Manning's exploration of thought as movement and the constant transformations that morph through time reflect my own process and relate painting to thinking. Abstract thought and image are open-ended: they exceed (or are short of) specificity and in this way evade clear definition. Like poetry, abstract images continue to morph even as they are static shapes and colors on a flat surface. The result of each painting is an event that is stopped in time, but manifests in our own consciousness. This contradictory sense of time and timelessness is a common, often deemed mystical, experience of looking at abstract painting.

Contemplating an unfinished painting in its making is akin to Manning's "pre-articulations"; "becoming" but not quite there. The painting unfolds through stages composed of a series of movements that respond to one another, expand and contract and eventually adjust into a cohesive image. Manning writes:

to create concepts is to move with language's pre-articulations. In this mode of thinking/feeling, language does not yet know what it means. It has not yet defined where it can go (5).

Day by day, I choose another color, mark and composition and while they seem new, they are informed by the accumulation of past gestures. As painter Robert Lindsley describes in an article entitled "Improvisation in Abstraction", the accumulation of marks and their defining character is formed through time:

The Jazz musician/composer aims to create a music, and it is built gradually, over time, by constantly working through a set of motifs, repertoires, devices, mannerisms, techniques, so that the relation between the elements is incrementally changed until the whole edifice, a life's work, stands apart—a unique construction (2).

In Elizabeth Grosz's book entitled *Chaos, Territory, Art: Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth*, she describes in the first chapter entitled "Chaos, Cosmos, Territory, Architecture" art as a territory from which we slow down chaos and capture a part of its generative force, how art is perhaps strictly an intensification of our sensual experiences and how creativity enables sensations unique to the time and space we experience and disclose such an experience;

Art thus captures an element, a fragment, of chaos in the frame and creates or extracts from it not an image or representation, but a sensation or rather a compound or a multiplicity of sensations, not the repetition of sensations already experienced or available beyond or outside the work of art, but those very sensations generated and proliferated only by art (Grosz 18).

Art here becomes a moment in time to experience the world in a manner that only the process can offer. It is as if the world collapses in a borderless chaos, where unrelated things intermingle for a while. Each image testifies to a slowing down of chaotic perceptions and an intensification of sensation. Time experienced in the studio is a kind in which many different temporalities can merge and transgress. Thought flows, stalls, quickens or slows down. Each painted gesture testifies to the ebb of time as painted elements seem to streak, melt, drip, float, fall or fly.

Manning and Grosz define the act of thought and its movement in time and space. Both allude to art practice as generating a specific kind of thinking, situated in the unknown and the unpredictable, as a source of creative and intellectual possibility. Their ideas appear to me as a sensual and intuitive kind of thought that is *felt*, thought arising through *action*, thought as time itself. They both use terms such as dynamism, acceleration, contraction, and expansion, floating or falling: temporal characteristics of time inherent in thought that are harnessed and experienced. Time in the duration of the creative act is an event and a tool. We generate time as individuals and convert its tempo for our personal experience. For Barnett Newman, time was an experience that could only be experienced at a personal and solitary level (Cernuschi 203).

Heidegger's notion of time transcends days, months and years. He qualifies it through an existential recognition of the past and the future's weight on the present, and the responsibilities as well as the potential such a three-dimensional perspective of time brings in our awareness of the present (Cernuschi 210). Heidegger's German term "Da-Sein," translated as "There-Being," involves the intensity of awareness one can experience in a moment of presence, while also being aware of how that present moment is influenced by the past and the future. "There" connotes a space, a place in the moment of reckoning; being there, being *here* and not *there*, being present or absent. For Heidegger, attaining truth and authenticity are sought in the quality of awareness of one's self in place and time, thus signaling an individual's self-agency in harnessing his self in the world and through time;

...Heidegger saw authentic existence in terms of "anticipatory resoluteness". (...)
In other words, we must resolve to maintain our autonomy, face the terror of existence, and fulfill the potential afforded by future possibilities (Cernuschi 209).

Heidegger's "anticipation", Manning's "incipience" and Grosz' "territorializing" are perspectives on the relationship between time and the generation of an idea and/or a creative act. But most importantly, they indirectly highlight an existential sense of agency. That is, of harnessing time, forming it toward one's own goals and purposes just like I search and construct a painting from one movement to the next. Heidegger's "anticipation" is a reckoning with the awareness of three-dimensional time in the space of the present moment. "Anticipation" apprehends the unfolding of time as it potentially reveals one's sense of self. Manning's "incipience" is the manifestation of awareness as it unfurls within an interstitial dimension. Grosz's "territorializing" is the seizing of that anticipated, unfolding moment as it is conceptualized, contained, given form and intensified. I am in a state of flux as I move around past brush strokes and will erase future ones. The canvas is a territory from which I slow down chaos, experience my body in space and allow sensations to emerge in the unfolding of time (Grosz 16). Painting is a manifestation of being, in time.

Chapter 2

The lover of nature is he whose inward and outward senses are still truly adjusted to each other; who has retained the spirit of infancy even into the era of manhood. His intercourse with heaven and earth, becomes part of his daily food. In the presence of nature, a wild delight runs through the man, in spite of real sorrows. Nature says, -- he is my creature, and maugre all his impertinent griefs, he shall be glad with me.

- Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature*

The best modern painting, though it is mostly abstract painting, remains naturalistic to its core, despite all appearances to the contrary. It refers to the structure of the given world both outside and inside human beings.

-Donald Kuspit, *Reading Abstraction Expressionism*

I am not indifferent to the impact of landscapes on my senses and imagination. I spent half of my life living in remote Canadian towns in Northern Quebec, Newfoundland and Nova Scotia. In contrast, our family took yearly vacations in the Caribbean and I spent three months living in Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula. Now, I live in Canada's most densely populated city. These locations have influenced my imagery; I am a close observer of my direct environment's particular ecology, aesthetic appearance and affective impressions.

James Bay, QC, is the Boreal forest edging on the Tundra. My family and I went on frequent excursions in the wild and our home – and the entire, small town of Radisson – was surrounded by a vast expanse of wilderness. I remember excessive winter storms, frequent evacuations from fires caused by moss and icy caves and sand dunes. Newfoundland's fjords, pebble beaches, icy winters, constant rain and intensely windy climate are nothing short of dramatic. In Nova Scotia I lived in a coastal, rural area of foggy fishing harbors, regularly hiking the jagged, rocky coast. In Mexico, I spent many days underwater amongst mangroves teeming with tropical fish and their saturated colors, or walking through Mayan ruins sheltered by the jungle. These experiences seeped into my formal choices of color and form. My paintings often display bright colors against earthy

ones. My present urban setting is made of neon colors, dusty grays and angular man-made structures and waste. Nonetheless, I do not consciously set out to paint my environment, and I cannot affirm that my paintings emerge solely out of perceptual experiences of my environment. Rather, sights of the physical world, natural or not, can sometimes be a source from which to extract visual metaphors. And the sensual experience of my direct environment can be translated through paint. In David Urban's essay "Painting's Radiant Array", he aptly describes painting's paradoxical reality: a painting borrows some aspects of reality, but ultimately exists as an independent entity. Painting "enters into a realm that is neither real nor fully imaginary...It is an emblem of the imagination in a physical world" (44).

In my images, visual elements are often floating in an ambiguous space that alludes to sky or ocean, often dark and seemingly empty. Architectonic planes collide with organic shapes. Elements are in flux; trickling, floating, melting or exploding. Nature and the man-made testify to uncertainty and transformation, where chaos and self-organizing systems, co-dependence and annihilation, violence and beauty coexist in a precarious state. What is abstract in my paintings still holds ties to my exterior environment. Ideally, the viewer can feel or see a fleeting moment of these underlying forces.

According to art historian Robert Rosenblum, in his work entitled *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition: Friedrich to Rothko*, the Romantic painter seeks a new form of religious experience through nature. Its reoccurring cycles, the magnitude of its forms, and impalpable elements such as water, air and fire instill "sensations of overpowering mystery", awe, hope and transcendence. Rosenblum advances that the main impetus for both Caspar David Friedrich and Barnett Newman's work and ideas was a search for the sacred in a secular and industrialized world. The Romantic period was provoked by events that brought major change on many fronts; the rise of industry, the Enlightenment and its rationalization of existence, rejections of tradition and religious belief, etc. Modernity's promise of progress came with a price and is often described as the source of growing detachment toward spiritual beliefs, emotional expression and intuitive thinking in favor of more positivist leanings. How has our culture morphed since then?

Today, the industrial machine has matured into an ever-present technological presence that increasingly replaces human skill and presence. While this is not the place to argue against it, I personally resist many of its forms. I long for genuine human interaction, imperfection and the slow work of time that technology competes with.

In Donald Kuspit's article entitled "Abstract Painting and the Spiritual Unconscious", he describes how abstract painters Kandinsky and Mondrian's spiritual sentiments meant overcoming modern materialism, while five decades later Rothko and Motherwell sought to overcome modern alienation. Kuspit describes how all four expressed feelings of "desperation", "unbelief", "lack of purpose"; our "disequilibrating society", "hostile", "irrational", "absurd" and "ill at ease" (70). Mondrian's abstractions attempted to disclose equilibrium between disparate forces in his asymmetrical grids, and their bright palette reinforced what he called a "joy of living" (69). For Kandinsky, the limitations of a strictly materialistic culture could be overcome through spiritual transcendence. This meant a poetical, inner, personal and self-transformative relationship to the world. While Mondrian and Kandinsky held hopes that their work could enlighten viewers and be an invitation to transform their own selves, Rothko and Motherwell's reactions to modernity were less ambitious toward changing the world, and they turned the gaze further inward. Their feelings of alienation led them to find solace in spaceless, completely abstract and immaterial imagery. In both, there is a disconcerting nothingness. Ultimately, these four artists painted because they felt a considerable degree of discomfort in society, and painting embodied hopeful reconciliations, whether these functioned only within the painterly act or outside of the studio. Startlingly, Paul Klee asserted that "the more horrifying the world becomes, the more art becomes abstract". While I further on describe my own ambitions within abstract painting, I share many of these past abstract painters' feelings of unease in the world. Even though it has been said many times that the high hopes of changing the world through abstract painting failed, I think this argument is beside the point. Rather, abstract painting testifies to a time and place in an embodied, emotional and sensual way, there to be witnessed and perhaps imperceptibly, transform the willing viewer. As Heidegger concedes, "an intense and powerful sense of awe may dispel complacency and reawaken our sensitivity to the plight of existence." (Cernuschi 16)

Nature, like abstract art and the Northern Romantic painters, becomes a refuge from society but it is more of an imaginary than actual one. Disconnected from it in the city, it lives in my mind, manifesting itself more in my paintings than my outer environment. The natural world is a source of analogy-making for understanding, or perhaps even remembering a more organic, irregular, diverse and mysterious part of ourselves that can get lost in a world increasingly systemized, objectified and homogenized. Painter Agnes Martin lived in close proximity to nature, and yet her work did not translate its visual character. She wrote, “This poem, like the paintings, is not really about nature. It is not what is seen. It is what is known forever in the mind” (15). Like a walk in the forest, painting accelerates a thin veneer’s dissolution between outer and inner reality. Are art and nature my escape or my liberation? Perhaps both...

...the paradoxical structure of painting may occupy a unique role in a world in which the “real” is also increasingly contested and paradoxical. In this sense it is possible to construe our images as apertures or sites of reconciliation; they have the potential to heal and appease the bifurcation of the mind and its objects. (Urban, 45)

My experience of being in close proximity to nature, as well as the process of painting, entails surrender to a force greater than myself. That force is not destructive and exploitative, but freeing and enlivening. It conjures a sense of being that is elemental and egoless. Nature is a muse, a home and often, a mirror to the underlying meaning of the nature of art itself. David Urban poignantly writes: “This self-sufficiency is art’s response to the poverty of the commonplace. Moreover, it is this moment of transfiguration that confirms art’s metaphysical character; like nature, it does not need us although its effect on us is similarly sustaining” (44).

Painter Bill Jensen suggests that painting can enable a differing sense of truth through illusory veils of the world. Coerced to some beliefs early in our lives, he describes spiritual terms such as “the original face” and “innocence” as experiential states of surrender to other dimensions of thought. He writes: “I didn’t become an artist because I saw a beautiful landscape that made me want to paint it. I believe that I saw something that someone made

that put me in touch with that other world through the making of objects.” (Jensen) Again here, the process of abstract painting appears to carry an ability to extend, overthrow or reveal the otherwise unknown, forgotten or ignored: “to supplant or transform the commonplace” (Urban 2).

Nature as an environment brings me to the general idea of a place, a location, a space. This sense of place is multifaceted; local, natural or artificial environment; society, architecture and body, etc... The studio becomes a neutral, separate arena from the everyday where I contemplate, experiment with and intensify my experience of being in the world. Heidegger’s “Da-Sein” connotes being and place as inseparable. It calls for an awareness of our self in the world: “I work concretely and factually out of my ‘I am’, out of my intellectual and wholly factually origin, milieu, life-contexts, and whatever is available to me from these as a vital experience in which I live” (Cernuschi 57). At the same time, he suggests that questioning the nature of existence requires a distancing from everyday existence and the familiar. While we cannot separate ourselves from our lives, we can let go of the mundane for a moment to perceive an underlying reality, perhaps similar to Jensen’s mention of “the original face” – to lift a veil of illusion, to “reach a deeper state of truth or unconcealment, it is important to discard the external world in favor of interrogating the all-important question of being” (Cernuschi 65).

Both Heidegger and Barnett Newman believed that figurative art failed to explore this underlying reality. Newman asserted that Realism was “a crutch, an art of deception, an impediment to truth; abstraction is the opposite – self-evident, and intelligible without intellectual assumptions or preconceived ideas” (Cernuschi 62). Arguably, it may be advanced that figurative and representational painting requires conceptualizing at the expense of abstraction’s direct, improvisational process. When I am painting, I am fully engaging in a moment in time that is in the present, instead of anticipating an outcome. Bill Jensen says it best: “I work in a very immediate way (...) The work can ignite areas of our psyche, of memory, where we can link up with a specific emotional connection, or cause us to sense areas of our psyche that we would not otherwise have been aware of” (12). I often feel as if I am more fully, authentically and directly engaged when I am painting. In this

way, the concepts of time and place are hard to dissociate; they define one another symbiotically. Heidegger's notion of Being-in-the-world alludes to "nearness and presence", an intimacy with place and time:

A sense of place...forces us to contemplate our nature, face our limitations, and accept any constraints upon our mobility. Over and above the associations logically deduced from living in a physical world, Newman and Heidegger also endowed place and Da-sein with a mystical aura inconducive to verbal explanation (Cernuschi 79).

Even though my abstractions are largely unpredictable and improvised, they do not emerge out of a vacuum, but an inner, largely unconscious dimension that is expressed through a visual language:

...although Being is a metaphysical idea, and presence an intangible experience, these concepts must, in the context of either philosophy or visual art, be translated into verbal expressions that refer to physical situations (Heidegger) or by means of visual relationships on a physical canvas (Cernuschi 69).

Abstraction may seem, at first, anarchic and obscure, but its provenance is worldly. And perhaps it is precisely from the physical locale of sensual experience that the world provides, as well as the timely instance of awareness, that both maker and viewer can enter the realm of abstract experience in intensified thought, sight and emotion...

Chapter 3

The adventurous state of the mind is a high house.

To enjoy life the adventurous state of mind must be grasped and maintained.

The essential feature of adventure is that it is going forward into unknown territory.

The joy of adventure is unaccountable.

This is the attractiveness of art work. It is adventurous, strenuous and joyful.

-Agnes Martin, *Writings*.

My painting entitled “Swimmer” emerged following a period of looking at bodies in water. Merging with and emerging from the water, the tendrils and bubbles of water that formed around their bodies conveyed energy and movement, and an intimate relationship between the body and the element of water. In the painting, masses of shape and color intertwine and move from the bottom to the top of the image. The beige, curved form off-centre suggests an arm breaking into the other shapes. The balanced wholeness of this piece rests on the seamless bond between disparate forms, the movement that the shapes suggest and the deliberate but complimentary use of color. “Swimmer” emerged out of a meditation on the body and natural elements, and I did not foresee the image’s outcomes. So what, more specifically, is the impulse to paint abstractly made of? And what emerges from such an experience?

On thesaurus.com, sensation is synonymous with “thought”, “awareness”, “consciousness”, “emotion”, “passion”, “response” and “impression”. Appropriately, these terms form an ensemble of experiences that I value and seek out in everyday life, enhanced and intensified during my painting process. Like a chaotic rhizome of idiosyncratic reactions to the surrounding world, sensation and perception complement one another as a physical and intellectual experience of being in the world, potentially communicated through the formal language of abstract painting. In Donald Kuspit’s article, entitled “Symbolic Pregnancy in Mark Rothko and Clyfford Still”, he writes that sensation

invokes, even provokes possible meaning, like a gadfly; it does not fix or confirm actual meaning. All sensations are conditioned by our general sense of reality, bringing its indeterminacy to bear on particular situations, crystallizing that indeterminacy into a sense of living possibility. Sensations “dramatize” the indeterminate yet vital sense of possible meaning reality might have if it were subject to our intentionality, and the symbol any constellation of sensations issues in articulates such a possible meaning (372).

“Swimmer” suggests several contradictory sensations of movement and stillness, weight and weightlessness, warm and cool, dark and light. The various surfaces form hybrid amalgamates of painting qualities such as transparencies, graphic shapes, thick painterly brushstrokes and geometric lines. In dictionary.com, sensation is defined as a “mental feeling”. If metaphor is to equate the meaning of a subject through another, equal translation, then sensation’s “mental feeling” is the transference of a sense through the analytical possibilities of paint. Following this re-enactment of an experience, the outcome of the perception of the image persists as it becomes an analogy, metaphor or symbol for the viewer, as he/she attempts to form meaning out of what is seen. And that would be to “think” about the “feeling”.

Sensation is a direct experience of the physical world. Before thoughts are formed, our senses have already registered our environment. Ultimately, I strive to intensify this sense-faculty, to send a tiny prick, a jolt, an echo through my paintings.

And yet, sensation is elusive and highly subjective. What I am sensitive to, another may not be and the degree to which we are varies. In “Swimmer”, the image is highly suggestive of water while certain elements contradict a clearer suggestion of a body swimming in water. However, the visual elements are also on the cusp of something other than what is known and real. Such a teetering on the edge of what is recognizable and what eludes definition can be an invitation, an indeterminate space where the viewer’s own subjectivity is invoked, rather than imposed. For Kuspit, abstraction is dependent on the faith of both its maker and viewer. The “symbolic pregnance” of an image is of indeterminate meaning, but full of potentiality. Such a “pregnancy” is rooted in a symbol’s open-ended, unclassifiable

and multifaceted nature, leaving room for our personal associations. While the abstractions of color, texture and form can induce sensations within the viewer's perceptions of the imagery, the less abstract, subtle allusions to elements, places or events in my paintings are also close to symbolism. Sensation teeters on symbol, and they are both open-ended, unfixed inducers of meaning. "True symbolic pregnance involves a deliberate refusal to reference particular meanings, an insistence on the indeterminate situation of meaning" (Kuspit 372). Insisting on the uncanny, the unclear, the mysterious in my work reflects the abstract tradition of evading definite meaning, or meaning at all, in order to focus on the experience of being rather than the explanation of living.

In a talk by curator John Elderfield entitled "Why Matisse Matters – and de Kooning, Bob Dylan and Other Great Moderns", he spoke of a "negative capability"; the ability of being uncertain. This, he proclaimed, did not exclude knowledge, but enhanced it by fueling curiosity and imagination. He spoke of the process of an artist as an adventure, obscurity fuelling the pleasure in discovery. Not setting a goal, relying on instinct and refusing any claims on meaning defined the process of modern artists. The process of painting abstractly is akin to divination. As I surrender to often unconscious impulses, or gaze at the painting waiting to "see", to ideate the next formal decision, the paintings gradually reveal themselves. This process reflects daily living, where each day is a creative possibility in itself, awaiting our own agency to shape its unknowable outcome.

In *The Origin of the Work of Art*, Heidegger contends that the meaning of a work is neither in concept or materiality. His belief lies not in the viewing or the thinking of a work, but of allowing the work to exist independently, on its own terms. Otherwise, he asserts: "we force the work into a preconceived framework by which we obstruct our own access to the work-being of the work. (...) To gain access to the work, it would be necessary to remove it from all relations to something other than itself, in order to let it stand on its own for itself alone." (29) When I attempt to form a concept, or justify which color I decide to use, I suddenly narrow other possibilities by choosing only one. But I also lose the mysterious and freeing expanse of timeless, placeless void of possibilities. And so instead, I surrender to a process of seemingly random choices, becoming a "passageway

that destroys itself in the creative process for the work to emerge.” (39) Yielding oneself to the presence of a thing, for Heidegger, is to yield oneself to the manifest, to “that which is perceptible by sensations.” (25)

The indeterminacy of meaning in abstract painting’s ambiguous imagery can also overturn expectation, surprise and disturb the status quo. In painter Charline von Heyl’s images, she willingly destroys an image she may find too predictable or visually appealing. Her paintings show disjuncture, absurdity and unexpected visual tactics. She constantly transforms her technique and appropriates abstract mannerisms only to subvert them. Unpending the image is an abstract methodology that allows for unknown or surprising visuals to emerge, and perhaps hold the viewer’s attention in an “imagery made so contradictory and strange that it imprints itself on the mental image” (Simpson). Painter Amy Sillman is another inverter of the expected. Her brushstrokes are rough and irregular, and her colors appear accidental. We can dig deep into the image, where many paintings coexist uncomfortably. She paints awkward and raw investigations on human nature, where figures coalesce or push each other away, all but disappearing in a heap of abstract shapes. In this way, the visual tone of Heyl and Sillman reside in the plurality of their gestures, and where chaos and cohesiveness are precariously balanced between one another. Meaning, whatever it may be, fluctuates between endless possibilities. I equally strive for such effect.

A picture is produced in which everything seems possible but nothing is ever actual, leaving one in a state of perpetual turmoil of expectation, a kind of psychic randomness - a state of incipient chaos, a kind of nervous breakdown...One clings to a variety of attempted meanings, the most ultimate and the most banal, but none can be decisively articulated (Kuspit 373).

In a world saturated with media overload, it often seems as if our senses have been numbed by over-stimulation. A painting does not gratify as quickly as film or music, not to mention the quantity of contemporary abstraction that promises quick visual gratifications. Some paintings can look like a freshly iced wedding cake; it promises much, but tastes like

any other. At the same time, I cannot claim my own paintings always succeed in performing my best intentions. To be fully aware of my formal decisions, while also surrendering spontaneously to them in order to allow something surprising to emerge is contradictory and can sometimes be torturous. The viewer and I need a good jolt and finding it, amongst other ways, requires such sabotages of the known. As painter Robert Lindsley writes, “If the end is known, then nothing new can appear” (Lindsley 3).

I believe the challenge of making a visually startling and fresh painting is still a possible, albeit challenging, ambition in a time where irony and cynicism has been awkwardly sitting beside “art for art’s” sake for a few decades. I personally find the former futile and detrimental, but I am also not impervious to my own naïveté. I hold on, with some degree of blind faith, to tradition while hoping for a form of progress, or transformation in abstraction. I have chosen abstract painting, and thinking, as the platform from which to view, and experience the world. All I can assert with certainty is that, once I made an abstract painting, and I never looked back since.

...any serious practitioner will reflect the tenor of his or her times without applying a separate and artificial criterion of “newness” to it. Innovation is primarily related to the integrity of an artist’s struggle with the real, since it is reality, rather than art, that is constantly new (Urban 53).

Conclusion

In a book entitled *Painting Today* by Tony Godfrey, the chapter “Ambiguous Abstraction” includes a selection of artists working in various forms of abstraction in the last decade such as Tomma Abts, Jonathan Lasker and Thomas Nozkowski. Lasker himself affirms he “sought not abstraction, something which ‘represented nothing but their own form’, but a poetics of painting” (144). Lasker’s statement appears to counter Clement Greenberg’s and modernist abstraction’s belief in images that ‘represented nothing but its own form’: that would not reflect the outer world, but be an independent world in themselves, where meaning is dependent on the formal qualities of painting. Lasker and the other artists of “Ambiguous Abstraction” reflect on the reality they find themselves in, whether this means our virtual one of technology, nature or human consciousness. For most of them, inquiry and awareness of one’s experience of being in the world occurs simultaneously within the act of painting; the formal outcome of painting “conforms to the trail of the brush being driven by impulses of the psyche” (144).

While their works are made in awareness of their surrounding world, their images are a distinct world made up of their own particular ecosystem of gestures and colors, and these can only exist within the surface of the canvas. Their paintings also contain traces of past modernist gestures. Painting no longer holds a purist philosophy, but “a meeting place for contradictory or perverse ideas, drives and methods: the filmic, the rhizome, pastiche, doodling as gesture, nature, zen, political signs” (161). Meaning is no longer strictly tied to painting itself, but also to the world at large. Meaning is explored through the direct experience of painting. Lasker calls it a “poetics of painting (...) which could also embrace broad topics such as memory and presence, materiality and transcendence, and the flattening of high and low culture” (144).

The past can be re-engaged with, recycled, reinvigorated. Indeed, one aspect of Modernism was a self-conscious criticality and a propensity for the new. These values are regenerative in themselves. Twentieth century abstraction is filled with movements of a

particular aesthetic or concept: lyrical, hard-edge, monochrome, etc. Today I believe we can appropriate some of their formal language while carrying on new configurations in form, color and space. In our attempt to define, regroup, understand a movement, a style, a manifesto, we may limit formal surprises, necessary transformations and new ideas that generate novelty and enrich the course of history and culture. In my experience, I have the freedom to appropriate and reconfigure the past while attempting to reflect on present tendencies, but I do not strive to invent a new movement and write a manifesto. I am suspicious of our increasingly rapid attempts to define our times, without waiting for a period of distance from the present. Tendencies were once defined within a century, now it seems to be every year. In a popular culture where almost everything has or will become fashionable and cliché at some point, my biggest challenge as a contemporary artist is to be aware of my contemporaries, as well as my progenitors, so that my work can carry on, and deepen, the past knowledge that was gained and present paintings accrued in wisdom.

My propensity for traditional and past concepts and techniques, such as Romanticism, Abstract Expressionism and my rejection of the use of photoshop, photography or any other tools to make my images can be subversive. Increasingly, paintings hold a slick, designed aesthetic and artists frequently create systems to facilitate and increase their productivity. The appeal of some of these paintings recall manufactured, processed objects. Seductive at first, some paintings are meaningless artifices that evade complexity and the trace of the hand, even though deemed as contemporary, fresh and new. Painting never was as reflective of fashion and design as it is now but these fields mostly operate on the appeal of the masses and serve instrumental purposes. Art differs in that it arises out of an independent desire to communicate a human condition, a feeling, a belief that often transgresses and questions the status quo. The intimate immediacy of the hand, and unabashed personal expression, should have continued relevance as a traditional skill tied to the body, its sensitivity and its imperfection. The appeal of a book - its smell, fragility, weight and the sound of turning its pages are different from the physical experience of a reading tablet – one that is cold, flat and mechanized. Progress should not relegate everything from the past as irrelevant, or it may forget whom it was for in the first place.

Lasker describes how “In no other art medium is creation more permanently and intimately bound to the movements of the human body. Nowhere is the human more empowered to have a direct and immediate effect on the image of his world” (144). Painting is a carbon copy that translates the subtlest tremors of human experience that technology may fail to capture and reflect.

The contemporary, everyday experience is one that is fast-paced and highly organized, where quick and simple definitions, productivity and purposeful actions dominate everyday life. But most of all, we increasingly live in a virtual reality within which we are bombarded by flashy, seductive imagery. Insisting on my practice – one that is nebulous in meaning, zero in practicality, silent and still in presence is insisting on a slowing down of time, an invitation to contemplate and resist simple definitions and rationales. Gilles Deleuze’s *Logic of Sensation* calls for such a release from representing meaning, but rather to *sense* an experience. Experiencing a movie, a painting or an event not within its conceptual, technical, narrative and symbolization but through what it is doing to our physical self, to the nervous system: “the invisible and insensible forces that scramble every spectacle, the sensations on, in and of the body that are otherwise disregarded, minimized and subjugated in the territorializing practices in which meaning and representation prevail” (135). Sensation is direct and cannot be controlled – it either occurs or it doesn’t and is unique to each individual. But it also isn’t mitigated by popular beliefs or social constructs, and evades cliché. The unpredictable sensations that painting can provide, as well as existence in general, are subjective and vary in intensity from one individual to the next. In this way, it may allow for new experiences and different encounters with reality than what we think we know and understand: “Unlocking new areas of sensation – new colors, noises, rhythms, odors, textures, longings, desires, practices, feelings, beliefs, gestures and knowledge’s – gives rise to new facts, new events, new rhythmic relations, new logic of sensation, in short: new ways to appreciate life and new ways to live” (140). Deleuze’s *Logic of Sensation* is an experience of being in the world as a physical entity, inseparable from the contemporary experience of living. As painter Lydia Dona affirms: “Plunging into the river of information implies recognizing that you are the river” (154).

In our fast-paced, buzz-feed world that creates increasingly seductive media to lure us into some kind of temptation, I strive for my work to seduce just as much, but only so that once the viewer is caught looking, he or she is tempted to slow down and enter a reflective space free from any purpose, goal or question, a space of one's own thoughts and desires to roam free from the world's demands.

The Thinker As Poet

Martin Heidegger

Way and weighing
Stile and saying
On a single walk are found.

Go bear without halt
Question and default
On your single pathway bound.

When the early morning light quietly
Grows above the mountains...

The world's darkening never reaches
to the light of Being.

We are too late for the gods and too
early fro Being. Being's poem,
just begun, is man.

To head toward a star-this only.

To think is to confine yourself to a
single thought that one day stands
still like a star in the world's sky.

When the little windwheel outside
the cabin window sings in the
gathering thunderstorm....

When thought's courage stems from
the bidding of Being, then
destiny's language thrives.

As soon as we have the thing before
our eyes, and in our hearts and ear
for the word, thinking prospers.

Few are experienced enough in the
difference between an object of
scholarship and a matter thought

If in thinking there were already
adversaries and not mere
opponents, then thinking's case
would be more auspicious.

When through a rent in the rain-clouded
sky a ray of the sun suddenly glides
over the gloom of the meadows.

We never come to thoughts. They come
to us.

That is the proper hour of discourse.

Discourse cheers us to companionable
reflection. Such reflection neither
parade polemical opinions nor does it
tolerate complaisant agreement. The sail
of thinking keeps trimmed hard to the
wind of the matter.

From such companionship a few perhaps
may rise to be journeymen in the
craft of thinking. So that one of them,
unforeseen, may become a master.

When in early summer lonely narcissi
Bloom hidden in the meadow and the
Rock-rose gleams under the maple...

The splendor of the simple.

Only image formed keeps the vision.
Yet image formed rests in the poem.

How could cheerfulness stream
through us if we wanted to shun
sadness?
Pain gives us its healing power
where we least expect it.

When the wind, shifting quickly, grumbles
In the rafters of the cabin, and the
Weather threatens to become nasty...

Three dangers threaten thinking.

The good and thus wholesome
danger is the nighness of the singing
poet.

The evil and thus keenest danger is
thinking itself. It must think
against itself, which it can only
seldom do.

The bad and thus muddled danger
is philosophizing.

When on a summer's day the butterfly
settles on the flower and, wings
closed, sways with it in the
meadow-breeze...

All our heart's courage is the
echoing response to the
first call of Being which
gathers our thinking into the
play of the world.

In thinking all things
become solitary and slow.

Patience nurtures magnanimity.

He who thinks greatly must
Err greatly.

When the mountain brook in night's
Stillness tells of its plunging
over the boulders...

The oldest of the old follows behind
us in our thinking and yet it
comes to meet us.

That is why thinking holds to the
coming of what has been, and
is remembrance.

To be old means: to stop in time at
That place where the unique
Thought of a thought train has
Swung into its joint.

We may venture the step back out
of philosophy into the thinking of
Being as soon as we have grown
familiar with the provenance of
thinking.

When in the winter nights snowstorms
tear at the cabin and one morning the
tandscape is hushed in its blanket of
snow...

Thinking's saying would be stilled in
its being only by becoming unable
to say that which must remain
unspoken.

Such inability would bring thinking
Face to face with its matter.

What is spoken is never, and in no language,
What is said.

That a thinking is, ever and suddenly-
Whose amazement could fathom it?



Fig. 1. Amelie Jerome, "Seethe" (Stage 1), Acrylic and Oil on Wood, 36" x 48", 2013.



Fig. 2. Amelie Jerome, "Seethe" (Stage 2), Acrylic and Oil on Wood, 36" x 48", 2013



Fig. 3. Amelie Jerome, "Seethe" (Final Stage), Acrylic and Oil on Wood, 36" x 48", 2013



Fig. 4. Amelie Jerome, "Swimmer", Oil on Wood, 36" x 48", 2013

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