

# *Re-working*

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# Abstract

This paper represents the support document for my thesis exhibition. The thesis *Re-working* explores the concepts of affect, constant change, the unfinished and undefined, and the ineptness of representation.

It is a reflection and contemplation on the ontology of painting and the ongoing and undeniable allusive force of the abstract image as evidenced by the continued liveliness of, and interest in, the painting medium.

My choice of the title *Re-working* speaks to the editing and revisions necessary in the process of realizing an image. At the same time I am inferring a larger and more encompassing sense of functioning and being in the world. It is the case that self and identity, the natural world, relationships and existence itself, are always in a constant state of flux, re-working and adaptation in the causes of renewal and sustainability.

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## Quotes

*I already feel the opposition that I shall have to overcome. I suspect that even those who have believed in me until now will not be willing to see the necessity of this development. It is not a lack of invention or of technical skill that has urged me in this direction. I am following an inner compulsion that is stronger than education, and am obeying a law that is natural to me, therefore more powerful than my artistic training.*

Arnold Schoenberg

*An artist's job is to go into the studio and say 'I don't know what to do, I'm lost.' That it's the impossibility, if you like, of any poetic substance. And then you go in there and in spite of that terrible feeling, which you have to live with, you do something and you think ah, maybe that can lead to its own content, not something already there.*

Anish Kapoor

*Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp,  
Or what's a heaven for?*

Robert Browning

*I was taught by abstract expressionists. So the idea of any kind of preliminary work beyond an impetus is absolutely foreign to my character. I will sit in front of the canvas and put some paint down. I'll think: That seems like a good idea. I'll put a stroke down and look at it and think: Does this make any sense? If it doesn't, I'll make a second stroke, and if that doesn't, I'll fix the first stroke.*

Thomas Nozkowski

## Mutability

We are as clouds that veil the midnight moon;  
How restlessly they speed, and gleam, and quiver,  
    Streaking the darkness radiantly!—yet soon  
Night closes round, and they are lost forever:

Or like forgotten lyres, whose dissonant strings  
    Give various response to each varying blast,  
To whose frail frame no second motion brings  
    One mood or modulation like the last.

We rest.—A dream has power to poison sleep;  
We rise.—One wandering thought pollutes the day;  
We feel, conceive or reason, laugh or weep;  
    Embrace fond woe, or cast our cares away:

It is the same!—For, be it joy or sorrow,  
    The path of its departure still is free:  
Man's yesterday may ne'er be like his morrow;  
    Nought may endure but Mutability.

Percy Bysshe Shelley

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# Introduction

I like audacious positions that also acknowledge their inevitable shortcomings (read scrappy paintings that allude to much more than appearance and refuse resolution let alone decisive readings). I think about the difficulty that arises in manifesting any image, namely the ineptness of representation. My use of the word representation is here meant in the broadest sense of producing any artwork. That ineptness or inexactness lying somewhere between being and knowing, can be an integral part of the emotional landscape of an artwork.

My practice revolves around that ineptness, and by this term I am not referring to lack of skill or incompetence but rather the challenge and complementary seduction of imaging the inscrutable. Each work is an event, a speculation, an opportunity for the viewer to feel something. At its most basic I make images in my desire to touch others through a sensory experience involving colour, shape, line, mark, form and space. As human beings we are hard wired to communicate and whatever form that may take it is charged with the Sisyphean challenge of realizing one's intent with veracity, responding truthfully to the impulse that sits behind every gesture.

My thesis exhibition is comprised of both paintings on wood panel and works on paper. The nexus of the work has to do with the improvisational playing out of materials that only ends based upon some indefinable prompt from the images themselves. Nothing is settled. I am working against series. The logic or connection from one piece to another resides within a vocabulary in constant mutation.

## Contextual Positions

In his famous essay *Modernist Painting* influential art critic Clement Greenberg stated that “The essence of Modernism lies, as I see it, in the use of characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself, not in order to subvert it but in order to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence.” (85) In this Greenbergian account abstraction was seen as reduction and a progression towards purity. Anything not “intrinsic to the medium itself” was considered expendable. (Greenberg: 82). When viewing my work there is much to align it with a formalist history. Reading the work through such a lens is unavoidable and has the advantage of providing a historical context. However I am also at a distance given my concern with form not just for the sake of form, but form as content. I am attentive to finding ways of painting outside forces and to the idea of the artwork functioning on multiple levels.

The expressive gesture and freedom in Abstract Expressionist painting was an early influence for me, especially Jackson Pollock's physical involvement with the act of painting and his use of fluid paint. His painting expressed both action and contemplation. He once defended the source of his imagery saying, "I am nature." Though on the surface this may come across as bravura, I understand the impetus for such a statement coming as it does from a deep involvement and kinship with nature. I have similar attachments and my work makes both direct and oblique references to the visual and sensual potency of nature.

My interest in abstraction has evolved into a greater alignment with Lyrical Abstraction, a variation of abstraction that appeared in the 1960s and 1970s at a time when artists began moving away from geometric, hard-edge, and minimal styles. It came out of a desire to return to more lyrical, sensuous abstractions employing a loose gestural style and with a focus on process. Lyrical abstractionists focussed and reinvigorated a painterly tradition within abstraction, exemplars being artists such as Helen Frankenthaler and Morris Louis.

In the Tate podcast series *Painting Present: Lyrical Abstraction*, panelist Jon Thompson commented that “lyrical seems to suggest to me something close to a natural language...a kind of painting that, like song, is fully embodied and entirely sensible”. He finds the lyrical as having “some kind of economy built into it, that it arrives at a point apparently quickly and easily and it is filled out at the moment one apprehends it...like a flowering, of something that has just happened”. (Thompson: Tate podcast.)

Within and beside these interests and tendencies I am sensitive to physical space. Merleau-Ponty has emphasized the body as the primary site of knowing the world. “The painter ‘takes his body with him,’ says Valery. Indeed we cannot imagine how a *mind* could paint. It is by lending his body to the world that the artist changes the world into paintings. To understand these transubstantiations we must go back to the working, actual body—not the body as a chunk of space or a bundle of functions but that body which is an intertwining of vision and movement.” And “My moving body

makes a difference in the visible world, being a part of it; that is why I can steer it through the visible. Moreover, it is also true that vision is attached to movement". (124)

The space of the artwork is a kinetic one. I am conscious of movement not only as an attribute of the elements within the space of the artwork, but even more critically, my ability to navigate within the space. Choosing most often to work on a smaller scale I don't feel inhibited but rather find the compression of the smaller space provides necessary tension.

The work of Thomas Nozkowski serves as an example of a remarkable sense of freedom within a constrained physical space. Confining himself to working within a smaller scale, usually 16 x 20 inches, is a choice that is in contrast to the 1980s art world that equated large scale with challenging acts and spectacle. Nozkowski's smaller scale, which he proved could also be ambitious, allowed him to "work quickly, to put down an idea in the world, look at it, and then wipe it off and do something else if it's no good...When I did large paintings like I did in art school, it could take days to change a colour." (Kerr: Interview with Nozkowski) His subject is personal experience in the broadest sense including events, things and objects culled from his daily life and the world. These are combined and recombined in a range of flowing forms, grids and branch-like connective lines and shapes. Considering that his work is rooted in drawing, in multiple media, and without concern for a style, these are all strong touchstones for me.



*Pink Surrender*, 2014, 16x16 in., monotype

## **Being, Restlessness and Longing**

I am lying on my back on the pink flat stone of Huckleberry Island. It is where our family has a cottage on the Georgian Bay just four miles by water from Parry Sound, Ontario. I am feeling like I don't need anyone or anything in this moment: just the sun, the water, the breeze and this warm stone beneath me. At ten years old I already understand the sufficiency of mind, body and nature. This is part of my daily ritual, a visit to watch the pollywogs in the water-filled crevice nearby and marvel at the appearance of legs where previously there was just a tail. To feel the slime under my feet as I enter the water, the slow slippery slide as my body descends and is swallowed whole. I am floating, no, the world is floating, and I am but a floating speck amongst innumerable other floating specks.

Should I not have had the privilege of spending my youth on the Georgian Bay I suspect that, regardless, I would have been inclined towards a life of exploration and a fascination with the mystery of the unknown. That I have been imprinted by certain geography is but an influence over a much larger and sustained sense of disquiet and changeability, something I have finally come to name restlessness. A persistent feature of my life, I recognize that this very restlessness is a medium in my artistic process.

It is exhausting to be on the move, to feel lost and in doubt much of the time, to feel the constant internal pressure and demand for shifts and alteration. It is however also in those very moments of being lost and in transition that one acquires valued insights, vital focus and rejuvenation. This is the paradox of such a life.

In her book *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, author Rebecca Solnit promotes the unknown and the dark as the places where “the most important things come from, where you yourself came from and where you will go”. Solnit proposes the following:

To lose yourself: a voluptuous surrender, lost in your arms, lost to the world, utterly immersed in what is present so that its surroundings fade away. In Benjamin’s terms, to be lost is to be fully present, and to be fully present is to be capable of being in uncertainty and mystery. And one does not get lost but loses oneself, with the implication that it is a conscious choice, a chosen surrender, a psychic state achievable through geography. (6)

I am reminded of my ten-year-old self that time slipping into the Georgian Bay, the total surrender, the absolute trust in my connection to the world around me. In the silence and aloneness I became part of everything; shedding all attachments I was free to sink down into the experience and adventure of my surround. Rising up again to the

surface I brought something with me, as I do every time I make a painting, coming upon a new horizon that seems limitless.



*Blue Distance*, 2014, 36 x 48 in., acrylic on wood panel.

In titling this painting *Blue Distance* I have borrowed from Solnit's anecdote on light and colour theory. She explains that "the light at the blue end of the spectrum does not travel the whole distance from the sun to us...that it becomes scattered light...the blue at the farthest reaches of the places where you see for miles, the blue of distance". And later, "The color of that distance is the color of an emotion, the color of solitude and of desire, the color of there seen from here, the color of where you are not. And the color of where you can never go". (Solnit: 29) Nature teases us with her atmospheric distance, that seductive endless blue, the blue of perspective, the blue of longing. Some things are always blue and always far away.

*Blue Distance* is a painting comprised of two panels and depicts an unrecognizable and somewhat uncomfortable space predominately blue in colour. This is broken by small flesh toned areas mostly confined to positions at the outer edges of

the painting. There are three major elements inside the space, all at a distance from each other and all in various shades of green and yellow green. An inverted blockish upper case “T” shape drops down from the top of the left panel. Another element is located on the right-hand panel and is creature-like, balancing precariously on a short horizontal support. Arm like extensions reach out from the sides of the form, one of which is substantially longer than the other and it forcefully slashes diagonally across into the left section of the painting in one long gestural brush stroke. The terminus of that stroke is somewhat blunt emitting a trail of green paint that drips down and off the lower edge of the panel. The third element, again evoking an arm, enters from the left side of the painting. Its movement seems less impulsive and stays close to the left edge of the painting. Measured ball-like interconnected shapes drop vertically down from the arm, eventually turning into a long drip of paint that once again dribbles down and off the lower edge of the panel. The otherworldliness of this piece doesn’t overwhelm the sense of that which is desired and sought after through a long reach. A feeling of dissipation is conveyed through the drips from the creature and multiple arms and it calls into question the success of the endeavour. To return to Solnit, “The far becomes the near, and they are not the same place.” (35) There is another potential kind of dissipation or loss here and it happens in the transaction between the roving fluid being in time and space and the fixed image. Or is this fixed image part of a map of things at a distance and by keeping them at a distance they stay alive? It is an illusion to think we can possess anything. I think about absence, about longing, about sensual spaces of fleeting connection and the exquisite tension between isolation and belonging.

## Connectivity and Communication



*No Place and Every Place*, 2014, 24x24 in., acrylic on wood panel

I am living in a gap, a gap that is at once ungraspable and at the same time concrete and specific. The gap is a split or crack and seeping through it is an internal pressure, led by instinct, which takes me to where I didn't know I wanted to go. The artworks are a series of conjectures to do with this gap between feeling and knowing. Speculative activity, the ungrounded, belongs to strategies of potential and I attempt to pressure paint to allow for something different to become thinkable and visible. My methodology has to do with a simultaneity of "thinking and doing" in the act of painting. Through the performativity of making, the artwork becomes a meeting point of distilled thought and action.

As marks and fragments pile up, the forms evolve into an intuitive structure that becomes a place of connections, perhaps uneasy but connections I can personally be tethered to if only briefly before I move on. I spend a lot of time trying to get things right, get forms to be efficient and hopefully coherent, in order to meaningfully communicate to someone. It requires a narrowing down to a very visual priority.

*No Place and Every Place* is a terrain without scale, hierarchy nor a definable site or position. For the most part, the space is shallow and ambiguous, a space that is both enclosed and vast and at the same time not concerned with illusionism. The colours are counterintuitive and should not be seen simply as colour applied to the surface but having a force on its own. By that I mean that colour is alive and can be an unmanageable thing, a dangerous thing that can be both true and untrue. The controlled shapes in the work, not readily identifiable, have an “anything goes” quality opening up the abstract narrative to various associations.

W.J.T. Mitchell in his book *What Do Pictures Want?* argues that pictures have always been with us, including world pictures from different places and eras that are “not just descriptions of events and practices but of “representations” of events and practices. Pictures are our way of gaining access to whatever these things are. Even more emphatically, they are (as philosopher Nelson Goodman puts it) ‘ways of worldmaking,’ not just world mirroring.” (Mitchell: xiv)

*Worldmaking* or otherworldly, or maybe both, I am inviting the viewer to enter and inhabit the space, to have a conversation.

Since paintings exist it would seem to follow that it is possible to discuss the ontology of painting. Barry Schwabsky struggles with that notion commenting in his essay, *Object or Project? A Critic's Reflections on the Ontology of Painting* that in order for us to be able to talk about such a thing, “there would need to be something particular about painting—and nothing else but painting—with regard to being. Painting would have to be a particular category of being.” (69). Over the course of his query that ranges across descriptions and evaluation and interpretation of objects, paintings among others, he concludes that “the object is not considered the ultimate ground of its own justification. Instead, the real point of the artistic enterprise, the thing that one really wants to pinpoint and to construe, is what might be called the artistic *project*. This focus on the project has been intermittently articulated at least since the early days of Romanticism—in 1798 Friedrich von Schlegel wrote, ‘A project is the subjective embryo of a developing object’—but it is as relevant as ever today, if not more so.” (77) It is in a project’s very nature “to be in progress, in development—to be incomplete and unfolding and above all to be subject to revision.” (78) This characterization of a project is in keeping with my sense of the enterprise of making paintings. As an artist I have the intent to produce something however it is more in the nature of a conversation than an object. Within the artist project we might ask what we can learn from each particular work.

## Opening of Boundaries

My roots are in the history of abstraction however there is an opening of boundaries with an allusion to figuration, investing the vocabulary of abstraction with strategies that belong to other categories such as figure painting. The work proposes a movement based on an oscillation between abstraction and a distant figuration.

There is an acknowledged corporeal body in the flesh colours and bruising blue of *Blue Distance*. Crazy lines form a bridge between wobbly insect like figures in *Touching Me Touching You*.



*Touching Me Touching You*, 2015, 18x18 in., acrylic on panel

*Touching Me Touching You* presents another example of a quirky, unpredictable and yet agreeable palette including yellow, greys, grey green and bright blue. On the

one hand we are presented with a non-representational amalgam of colour, line and shape interconnected through a network of lines and smaller filled-in ball and ovoid shapes. Like an optical illusion there is an ambiguous flipping back and forth between this abstract reading and connected shapes that become figural. The central dark shapes mutate into a dancing figure bound at the knees and thus pinned down. This tension is not relieved but heightened by a pulling of the central “body” to the right by an arm-like extension and simultaneously to the left by the back of the “head” in a conflicted binary of head and heart, or mind and body.

I use colour, as suggested by Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, as “a pictorial ingredient that typically does not communicate a specific meaning and is read as ambiguous”. In his article *Colour as Metaphor* he suggests that “color works more like a simile than a metaphor...While metaphor suggests an unambiguous relationship between image and idea, simile is likely to propose an arguable and problematic one, because saying that something is like something else rather than actually being that other thing permits each of the sides of the comparison to retain its individual identity.” (Gilbert-Rolfe: 104). As with the development of the work itself, my choices of colour are instinctual and colour is another way for me to leverage the complexity of the work. Gilbert-Rolfe sees colour’s function in painting as “implicitly ambiguous because of the impurity of visual experience itself, and that it is this impurity which gives to color its role as the provider of what one might call uncontrollable similarities.” (104)

Colour is a seductive force and for that reason, in any painting, colour is likely to draw the viewer into making associations. Looking again at *Touching Me Touching You*, the grey could suggest clouds or mist and a flat green mass might imply

topography that squeezes and compresses a diminishing bright peek-a-boo yellow. Inside the yellow at the lower right a line of yellow green infers a distant, ungraspable horizon.

The organization of the compositions in many of my works points to a sense of an interior which is reinforced by how the edges function, a movement “in” rather than a movement “out”, holding the inside space not the outside space. This interiority should not be confused with some sort of self-involvement and forgetting about the world. Rather it is a focus, but a focus or container with a tremendous amount of freedom that allows me to do whatever I want and making it all happen inside a frame. With *Snow Painting*, even though it was physically done in the out of doors, on the ground, in the snow, it is highly compressed and shares a compositional sensibility with the other works.



*Thinks It's a Landscape*, 2014, 22x22 in., monoprint

With the work *Thinks It's A Landscape*, the physicality of the making process is echoed in the material handling. Energy is translated into shape and motion. Small ovals float in controlled orbits withholding and containing their mysterious force.

In his book *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, Gilles Deleuze states, "In art, and in painting as in music, it is not a matter of reproducing or inventing forms, but of capturing forces". (48) For Deleuze the task of painting is defined as an "attempt to render visible forces that are not themselves visible...Force is closely related to sensation: for a sensation to exist, a force must be exerted on a body, on a point of the wave". (48). Forces become explicit in works like *Thinks It's a Landscape* through the sensation of speed and movement in the smudges and lines and the compression of the donut-like oval shapes. The accumulating intensity suggests larger phenomenon at work, outside of our control, as in a brewing storm.

I don't privilege my paintings over the monoprints. The chance operations that are a part of the monoprint process are attractive to me. There is also an interesting backwards index of what I did, a painting as a "forwards and backwards" movement. Layers of paint are built up on the plexi and when it is printed the layers are reversed, the bottom layer now becomes the top. This forwards and backwards relates once again to the idea of re-working, another oscillation present in the process and work, one that acts between the past and future.

## In Defence of Variation

Every position holds within it its opposite. There are no absolutes and thus we must be comfortable with contradictions, we must be prepared to live in a state of cognitive dissonance.

The artworks making up my thesis exhibition move between abstraction and figuration, between flatness and space, and between media. I am engaged in an iterative process, one much more rooted in experimentation and flux than a singular overarching plan. Unlike a sequential flow of time the artworks speak to moments and discontinuities, each work realized on its own idiosyncratic terms.

German artist Gerhard Richter is often celebrated for the diversity of his approaches to painting. Moving between paintings after photographs, traditional still-lives as well as abstract pictures amongst other subject matter, he has never concerned himself with the wide range of his work. His is a practice that centres on questions that he has asked throughout his life.

Laura Fried, Associate Curator, Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, when discussing the work of Richard Aldrich, suggests that “even in the variety, you can see, from gesture and from technique, even if you think of the question of style, the practice as a whole comes from a place of deep personal engagement with the artist’s life in the studio, his relationships and his relationship to history, the history of art and the history of painting”. (Fried)

Through cumulative mark making and a certain relationship of colour and form, things shape themselves and the strength of the work is its vitality and its kind of freedom. Through the mark making I recognize an instinctive vocabulary and it becomes a language. By "language" I am referring to my extension of a late Modernist language of abstract painting through the development of a personal non-verbal syntax of shapes, swipes, gesture, blobs, drips, dots, colour, lines, blurring, smudging and touch. Through this complex of elements and activity I attempt to communicate various ideas and emotions and invite a "felt" response from the viewer(s). Depending on the needs of each new image this language is repurposed and expanded.

The way that I work contributes to varied outcomes and varied qualities. I am not interested in repeating myself and do not wish to rely on style to carry the work. It is not that I am resisting "style" as some sort of political stance but rather the diversity in the work affirms my artistic process, my relentless desire to keep moving and experimenting, to follow different impulses.

## On Abstraction and Affect

The unresolved nature of abstract painting is part of its authority and its staying power. Like a difficult poem it suggests deeper secrets and meaning but it does not spell everything out. Can we have artworks that refuse closure, that are not concerned with reaching any definitive meaning that would foreclose it? Paintings can feel experimental and resist finality but they can still be accomplished works.

Simon O'Sullivan in *Aesthetics of Affect: thinking art beyond representation*, speaks about art as being “a *part* of the world given that it is a made thing, but at the same time is *apart* from the world”. And this apartness...is what constitutes art's importance...this apartness, this “excess” or “rapture” which as Lyotard remarks (as quoted by O'Sullivan in the article) “constitutes art's effectivity over and above its existence as a cultural object.” O'Sullivan suggests that “we can think of the aesthetic power of art in *an immanent* sense—through recourse to the notion of affect.” (125)

Affects are “moments of intensity, a reaction in/on the body at the level of matter” and are “immanent to experience”. (O'Sullivan:126). Previously I suggested that each artwork is an event. The artwork is more than a mere object and becomes a place where the viewer might encounter the affect. In the apprehension of the space of the unfolding artwork the viewer is briefly suspended from normal reality and can enter another level of consciousness that moves beyond everyday experience. The viewer is not reading the artwork, not seeing it as representation, but is accessing a realm of non-subjectivity, a world of forces. In that moment, “the aesthetic is activated, and art does

what is its chief modus operandi: it transforms, if only for a moment, our sense of our 'selves' and our notion of our world". (O'Sullivan: 128) I am asking the viewer to contemplate images, to feel through the abstractions, the forms, the colours and sensations a real experience. "Art is less involved in making sense of the world and more involved in exploring the possibilities of being, of becoming, in the world. Less involved in knowledge and more involved in experience, in pushing forward the boundaries of what can be experienced". (O'Sullivan:130) It means to be touched by art's affective and intensive qualities. Intensity and experience accompany one another.

## We Don't Have a Vanguard Anymore

In the past Modernism and the avant garde were synonymous along with the belief that we are always moving forward. There was a deafening call to “make it new”. In our current times we recognize that the modern is thoroughly over and it is not possible to do anything new anymore while at the same time we have never lived in this moment before so it might be argued that what we are doing and experiencing is “new” to us. Referring again to Jon Thompson, he says, “certain rhetorics that have come out of modernism keep finding a new form, coming back in different guises and being made for different reasons...the manifestation is a rhetorical repeating language of some kind.” (Thompson: Tate Podcast)

In his article of January 5, 2015 in *The New Yorker*, Peter Schjeldahl reviews the exhibition *The Forever Now: Contemporary Painting in an Atemporal World* at MOMA in New York. He states, “It’s not that painting is “dead” again—no other medium can as yet so directly combine vision and touch to express what it’s like to have a particular mind, with its singular troubles and glories, in a particular body. But painting has lost symbolic force and function in a culture of promiscuous knowledge and glutting information.” (Schjeldahl: *The New Yorker*)

In his summation he states, “You can see the painters in “Forever Now” reacting to the dilemma of an image-making art struggling to stand out in an image-sickened society—‘Filled with fancies and empty of meaning,’ as Eliot went on from his line about distraction. The artists’ tactics include emphases on gritty materiality and refusals of

comforting representation. It's a strong show, and timely. But its own terms make it more expressive of honest discontent than of inspiring invention. Painting can bleed now, but it cannot heal." (Schjeldahl: *The New Yorker*)

We have access to everything and access to too much influence. Jonathan Lethem in his essay *The Ecstasy of Influence* speaks to our "open source" culture stating that "Finding one's voice isn't just an emptying and purifying oneself of the words of others but an adopting and embracing of filiations, communities, and discourses. Inspiration could be called inhaling the memory of an act never experienced. Invention, it must be humbly admitted, does not consist in creating art out of a void but out of chaos. Any artist knows these truths, no matter how deeply he or she submerges that knowing." (61).

The upside of the dilemma is that this "information glut", rather than being paralyzing and doubt inducing, is a tool like any tool we might use in the making of a work. As artists we must believe that something is still possible. Our obligation is to use all of the resources available to us and make work that is thoroughly and unapologetically our own.

## Finale (but not quite)



*Snow Painting*, 2015, 21.5x22.5 in.,  
mixed media on paper



Snow after *Snow Painting* removed .

The natural world has a hold on me. Weather, clouds, wind, heat, cold. In January I took a piece of paper outside and placed it in the snow. Using brushes, inks and paint I stood in the cold and we struck a bargain, her and me. As I pressed into the paper the snow gave under the pressure and my contact with my materials shifted, the cold changed the actions of my body and even when I brought the work back into my studio, the snow that had mingled with the inks dried into a magnificent pattern, a pattern unique to the collaborative condition of the making of this work.

I don't want solutions. That is not very interesting to me. The process itself is an unsolved problem and always will be. The abstract work that refuses to be defined is richer in its ambiguity and mystery than any answer of what it may be about. I am confronting, among other things, my relationship with nature, the potential of

abstraction, constant change, intimacy, doubt and emotional struggle. There is only the possibility of the painting pointing toward emotional experience that is otherwise beyond the capacity of the media to express. Vanessa Fleet and Megan Toye, PhD candidates in Art History and Visual Culture at York University have written about my work that “Thomas’s paintings...are territories of emotional grappling, whose abstract syntax underscores the heart’s reaches, failures and paths of resistance. The gaze of the spectator is suspended between the colourful and chaotic forms where we wander through an affective landscape that resists optical resolution and conclusion.” (Fleet & Toye: Encounters)

Romanticism’s “romance” with the artist’s emotionality carries on despite postmodernism’s resistance. The critical reception of emotion in art is a more recent phenomenon coming after the long shadows of Greenbergian flatness and the seriousness of conceptual art. There is nothing trivial or insubstantial about human emotion, no matter one’s gender. I am not referring here to sentimentality but rather the unmappable but somehow accessible forces of human emotion, emotion as subject and material, as social engagement. In Jennifer Doyle’s book titled *Hold It Against Me: difficulty and emotion in contemporary art*, she writes: “Because emotion itself has been associated in art criticism with a self-indulgent and naïve practice, it has been absorbed into the category of things one ought not take seriously”. And later, “Emotion is widely assumed to make things easier to get and to pollute critical thought.” (71)

Art can be hard, difficult, and often impenetrable and still be saturated with feeling. I rely on abstraction in my practice for its capacity to challenge expectations and structures of feeling.

I have been told by people viewing my work that they have no idea what they are looking at but they can't stop looking. In those moments of looking I believe I have made a profound connection to another human being, and that particular connection is the true measure of intimacy. I am not setting out to explicitly "make" the audience feel anything. Rather I am convinced that paint as concept, method and image is a vital and ongoing model of potential within contemporary art. I will happily continue to linger in the trenches of abstraction, an all too young art form to be easily dismissed by our demise culture. As a contemporary painter I am more occupied than ever with the idea of stimulating new ways of being and seeing. I believe in abstract art's continuing ability to lead to new sensations, to new ways of becoming visible to the eyes of the other. I am staying inside the question of what painting can do.

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# Thesis Exhibition Installation Shots



Installation Shot Number 1



Installation Shot Number 2



Installation Shot Number 3



Installation Shot Number 4



Installation Shot Number 5



Installation Shot Number 6