

Connectivity

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A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

GRADUATE PROGRAM IN VISUAL ARTS
YORK UNIVERSITY
TORONTO, ONTARIO
APRIL 2017

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Abstract

Connectivity is an exploration of confluence – between the practice of painting and fibre arts. Through the shared material language of these established disciplines I seek to highlight both the act of making and the viewing experience, whereby sensory awareness and wonder may be evoked. My art practice addresses how, in the remaking and reweaving of materials, it is possible to discover new meaning and connections. This is often manifested in the elusive transformation of space and time, where every *action* has consequence and every *thing*, significance.

Defined as slowness, the work in my exhibition offers the viewer a form of temporality that points to the complex and layered nature of time as we encounter it daily. *Connectivity* explores the growing permeability and networks made between the realms of “art”, “craft” and digital processes while emphasizing good workmanship and the marking of time.

Acknowledgments

Sincerest thanks to my committee Michel Daigneault, David Armstrong and Lyn Carter for their support and encouragement in this endeavour. Thank you also to our Program Director, Barbara Balfour, for her support and dedication during my time at York University.

To my family, your love and enthusiasm throughout the duration of this program has been a source of strength for me. Thank you for everything.

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Introduction

braided together beyond name, woven
back always and forever into nothing:

this is called *formless* form
or *nothing's image*,
called *spectral confusion*,

something you meet without seeing a front
and follow without seeing a back.

...this is called *thread of the Way*.¹

In my thesis exhibition, I address experiences of sensory awareness and wonder. My artworks speak to the cultivation of an ever-deepening awareness of our sensory experience as a doorway into ourselves and into a profound connection with the world around us. Where *wonder* is the engagement with a higher degree of being that knows neither beginning nor end, but is a connectivity to something both tangible and mysterious.

My paintings, printed fabrics and woven works are made up of small detailed patterns and intricate layering that invite the viewer into an experience of infinite details, evoking a vast plane of vision and possibility. Modernist art's emphasis on mark making, the use of line, and grid serves to give compositional structure to my artworks. Continuing this exploration, my exhibition encompasses the use of colour, form, texture, scale, context and meaning, furthering the discussion about the inherent value of the physical act of art making. My work is, ultimately an exploration of uncovering unexpected significance found within ordinary materials.

¹ Tzu, Lao; translated by David Hinton. *Tao Te Ching* (Washington D.C.: Counterpoint, 2002), 14.

By engaging in the process of making, taking apart and adding, I reveal the materials' inherent qualities – the architecture of a weave, its combination of delicacy and resilience, the fact that it can be hung or laid, and the way it reflects colour. When making my artworks I am acknowledging the traditional painted surface and the handmade, while complementing it with a way of making from contemporary society: digital imaging.

In the following sections I look closely at the following: the importance of both the handmade and digital creations in my work; process, and how ideas circulate and take form in my studio practice; the relevance of line, time and light in my making; and, acknowledging what and who has influenced me.

I create a thematic focus in which all connections and pathways intersect by way of lines, grids and repetitions of colour that overlap each other – recommending a focused perception and revealing a belief in a world that is interconnected. The works in my thesis exhibition reveal that there is presence found in everything, often in the transformation of space and time; and in the remaking and reweaving– where every action is significant.

By Hand: Art and Craft

Through his hands man establishes contact with the austerity of thought... Hands are always living beings. Eyeless and voiceless faces that nonetheless see and speak.²

- Henri Focillon

Over the past fifteen years, critics, curators and artists have continued to debate the significance of fibre and craft in the art world, using labels such as “art fabric,” “woven forms” and “wall hanging,” where we see these materials being used like many other expanding mediums, such as performance or installations, to produce work and to give form to ideas.

There is an increased permeability between the realms of “art” and “craft,” with an emphasis on the importance of good workmanship and the handmade, as often observed in contemporary art practice as seen in the work of Liza Lou or Ernesto Neto.



Image 1: Liza Lou, *Color Field*, 2010–2013

² Higgins, Hannah. *The Grid Book*. (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2009), 11.



Image 2: Ernesto Neto, *TorusMacroCopula* for the Madness is Part of Life exhibition, 2012

Through this interest in using craft materials (fibre, thread and fabric) and craft strategies (weaving, knotting, stitching) that respond to material aesthetics in contemporary art, I investigate how these strategies have influenced my work. When looking at the work of artists Eva Hesse and Robert Morris, it is possible to see how the use of fibre-based materials is defined by considering provocative questions of materials, process and intention that bridged the art-craft divide.

Eva Hesse (1936–1970) is one example of an artist who used a wide variety of materials such as rope, wire, rubber, and fiberglass – and stretched them to the utmost to fit with ideas she was trying to communicate. “I was always aware that I should take order versus chaos, stringy versus mass, huge versus small, and I would try to find the most absurd opposites or extreme opposites.”³ In addition, Hesse explored the simplest materials to suggest a wide range of organic forms and emotional dispositions.

³ Brüderlin, Markus. *Art & Textiles: Fabric as Material and Concept in Modern Art from Klimt to the Present* (Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2013), 308.



Image 3: Eva Hesse, *No title* (1969–70)

Robert Morris (b. 1931), a contemporary of Hesse, is another artist who began challenging the traditions of sculpture in the 1960s, particularly in the way that his wall sculptures changed from vertical forms to meet the horizontal floor in soft pours when displaying his felt pieces.



Image 4: Robert Morris, *Untitled (Pink Felt)*, 1970

Morris's felt works were exhibited for the first time in 1968, at the same time that *Artforum* published his essay "Anti Form," where he wrote: "The focus on matter and gravity as means results in forms which were not projected in advance. Considerations of ordering are not

necessarily casual and imprecise or unemphasized. Random piling, loose stacking, hanging, give passing form to material.”⁴

To examine this material shift seen in the art of the time further, writer and critic, Lucy Lippard, organized the 1966 exhibition *Eccentric Abstraction*, where she found that painters who had become sculptors did not necessarily conform to the tradition of sculptural practice. She writes: “The influence of painting has provided alternatives to the apparent dead end of conventional sculpture. But where formalist painting tends to focus on specific formal problems, eccentric abstraction is more allied to the non-formal tradition devoted to opening up new areas of materials, shape, colour and sensuous experience.”⁵

This exploration of materials continued with feminist art of the 1970s, the expanded use of materials in the 80s and 90s, and, more recently, the use of fibre-based materials in the creation of freestanding installation and assemblage works such as seen in the work, *Max*, by Josh Faught (*Image 5*).



Image 5: Josh Faught, *Max*, 2014

⁴ Morris, Robert. “Anti Form” *Artforum*, 6:8 (April 1968), 34.

⁵ Lippard, Lucy R. *Changing: Essays in Art Criticism* (New York: Dutton, 1971), 14.

These examples of artists experimenting with materials has inspired the work in my exhibition, as seen in *Taking Apart* (Image 6), where I use materials to transform light, colour, weight and movement. The materials I incorporate in this work are thread, wax, vellum, straw and oil paint. I am stretching these media to heighten a viewer's sense of perception as to how the materials function, the textural differences and to demonstrate how the conventional use of materials has shifted over the years. The path I am developing from line to string, from two-dimensional to three-dimensional, has led this work to have striking contrasts between the ephemeral and solidity. *Taking Apart* also blurs the line between painting and sculpture, hanging and suspension, art and craft.



Image 6: Christine Nobel, *Taking Apart*, 2016

A writer who has influenced my consideration of including the handmade into my work is Glenn Adamson. In his book, *The Invention of Craft*, he discusses the resurfacing of craft in the 21st century and attributes the historical division of art and craft to the disappearance of guilds during the Middle Ages and the subsequent rise of academies in the Renaissance. He writes about how the historically accepted separation between art and craft began to be questioned in the 1930s at the Bauhaus in Germany when Walter Gropius founded the school with a vision of bridging the gap between fine art and craft. The Bauhaus movement taught “truth to materials” as a core tenet, which means that material should be used in its most appropriate and “honest” form.⁶

In my work, *Dusk* (Image 7), I combine qualities found in art and craft to look at the importance of good workmanship. I start with the printed grid material, and delicately apply each layer of paint with small brushstrokes to ensure that the silk ground is reflecting the perfect amount of light – where the intricate details create an intimate experience and heighten the senses. Through this interest in using craft-associated materials and strategies along with my oil painting, I continue the conversation of the importance of craft in today’s contemporary society.

⁶ The Bauhaus Movement; <http://bauhausinteriors.com/blog/the-bauhaus-movement/>



Image 7: Christine Nobel, *Dusk*, 2017

One of the considerations in incorporating the handmade in my thesis exhibition is my interest in the slow unfolding of skills, which relates well to what Richard Sennett writes about in his book, *The Craftsman*, where the slowness of making and experimenting with the material is connected to the slowness of craft time. Sennett sees this as a source of satisfaction that enables the work of reflection and imagination, as well as meaning.

In one of my recent works, *Afresh* (Image 8), loosely textured colours radiate like lights from within the surface of the material. This work is a six-by-three-foot oil painting and printed silk work made up of layered grid systems and patterns with different shades of blues, pinks and purples that demonstrates a fluid rhythm through the colour similarities, as well as combines the slowness of brushwork with the rapidity of printed material.



Image 8: Christine Nobel, *Afresh*, 2017

There is the literal use of line that connects all of my works in the exhibition, from the painted grids on wood panel, to the linear and organic cuttings of a material. In my works that combine painting with digitally printed fabrics, I begin the process by first photographing a section of an already existing painting and then digitally edit and rework the image using Photoshop. I manipulate the scale, texture, colour and contrast to make a repetitive image. I have the images digitally, commercially printed, using a reactive dye process, on fabric such as silk charmeuse, linen or cotton. For me, this process brings together differing forms of making: the repetition found in mechanical reproduction, both artist-made and out-sourced labour, while highlighting the value of both the handmade and the rapidity of digital fabrication.

I see this integration of materials in the work of Sarah Sze, as featured in her 2013 exhibition at the Fabric Workshop and Museum, as well as in the work of the artist Richard Tuttle, as seen in his 2014 installation, *I Don't Know. The Weave of Textile Language*, exhibited in the Tate Modern's Turbine Hall. Both have inspired me to incorporate fibrous materials in different ways to create sensorial experiences and interactive spaces.



Image 9: Sarah Sze at The Fabric Workshop and Museum (installation view), 2013

Sze's exhibition at the Fabric Workshop and Museum in 2013 was described by the artist as: "explor[ing] the construction and measurement of space, mass, time and volume through the use of materials,"⁷ in particular, where she printed the same print onto artificial rocks and canvases to create a rhythmic and artificial space. Marion Boulton Stroud, the Founder and Artistic Director at the Fabric Workshop and Museum, notes that in this exhibition, the marking of time was a central element in Sze's work: "Here, timelines are imprecise and purposefully obscure, leading us to a slow contemplation of the ways such threads can connect."

⁷ Danto, Arthur C., Gilmore, Jonathan and Kastner, Jeffrey. *Sarah Sze at the Fabric Workshop and Museum* (Philadelphia: Fabric Workshop and Museum, 2014), 4.



Image 10: Richard Tuttle, *I Don't Know. The Weave of Textile Language*, 2014

The influence of Richard Tuttle on my work comes from seeing his need to make work that shows his care toward materials and indirectly towards the world. *I Don't Know. The Weave of Textile Language* is a commissioned sculpture that combines vast swathes of fabrics designed by the artist from both manmade and natural fibres in three bold and brilliant colours. By looking at this question that Tuttle asks: “How to bring out-there weave and in-here weave together to make something good?”⁸; it becomes possible to see how value, commitment and meaning found in skill are equal to the same value found in our search for inner, human, significance. This also relates to how Sennett writes about having pride in one’s work: “Pride in one’s work lies at the heart of craftsmanship, as the reward for skill and commitment and where the work can transcend the maker. The slowness of craft time serves as a source of satisfaction and enables the work of reflection and imagination as well as meaning.”⁹

Fabric is, in fact, a humble material and the act of adhering or attaching or assembling it is traditionally seen as a skill from craft or the handmade. On occasion, Tuttle has identified his skill with what he calls “care,” or with what I might describe as reaching an awareness in my

⁸ Borchardt-Hume. *I Don't Know, or The Weave of Textile Language*, 11 (see n. 13).

⁹ Sennett, Richard. *The Craftsman* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 295.

artwork. His caring generates an art, tantamount to a mode of living. In fact, this is the very thing he cultivates: “If I can free a humble material from itself,” he has said, “perhaps I can free myself from myself – I think that I get a chance to be aware.” This is what Tuttle is offering us; his chance becomes our chance. Through his work, we too have an opportunity to become thoroughly aware.¹⁰ The meaning of craft skills and materials is also important in my work, for it reflects the value and strength that comes from a well-earned dedication to making. Through this, my work constructs contemplative surfaces, unexpected material combinations, and new spaces for the viewer to experience.

Many of the works in my exhibition also comment on time, through the visible labour of its making, and the combination of past and present skills (the handmade and digitally mediated). The qualities of time and slowness found in my work allow for a viewer’s active participation where they can have incredibly powerful experiences – as a dedication to slowly looking can be seen as a means of forging connections.

Opening

In my work, *Opening (Image 15)*, I began by thinking of how using pieces of fabric has been seen as a non-traditional material in the canon of the history of art, while attaching, or assembling fabric is traditionally seen as a skill from craft or the handmade. This work started with making the material by hand and then turning the material into something pliable and moveable. The material is then its own force and entity and starts to fold and rotate within my hands.

¹⁰ Shiff, Richard. “Textility,” *Tate Etc.*, issue 32 (Autumn 2014). <http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/articles/textility>



Image 11: Christine Nobel, *Opening*, 2016 (Stage 1)

The material in this work was made using a five-by-seven-foot piece of light-weight vellum, which I pinned onto the wall and then, using oil paint, I created three different patterned surfaces. The first pattern was made by painting diagonal lines across the paper in navy blue; the second pattern is done on the opposite side of the paper, where I used an embroiderers plastic template to make circular, gridded patterns in purple and green; and the third pattern was done using a freehand mark-making pattern in light blue over top of the navy lines.



Image 12: Christine Nobel, *Opening*, 2016 (Stage 2)

This material both reveals and conceals, where the labour that is put into making it is not obvious, but subtle, translucent and evocative.

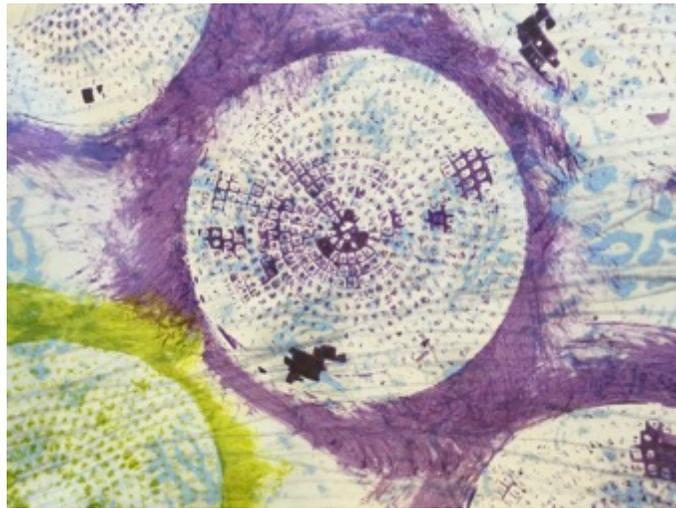


Image 13: Christine Nobel, *Opening*, 2016 (Stage 3)

After applying multiple layers of paint, the material also becomes fragile, precarious; it crumples from the folding and cutting.



Image 14: Christine Nobel, *Opening*, 2016 (Stage 4)

The paper begins to take on its own shape as it is cut into strips – I see the paper as living because it moves, turns, twists and generates an energy of its own. *Opening* is a window onto an unknown space that suggests the possibility of seeing more than what our physical senses can allow.



Image 15: Christine Nobel, *Opening*, 2016

A Living Process: Art as Listening

As Richard Tuttle endeavours to cultivate living into his artworks, I also see permeability between my daily life and my art practice. When considering the question, “How do my ideas circulate while making?” I reflect on how my process of making and thinking are ongoing, side-by-side, and I find that I move from one to the other intermittently.

One of the most important components of my creative process is the act of listening. Allowing myself to absorb feelings or information, whether consciously or subconsciously, is an element that filters into my making of work and is then shared with the world through exhibitions, published works, lectures, online information and teaching. In my practice, it is important that reflection, sensation, thinking and feeling are closely interwoven. I see the art that I make, not as the end-product, but as a temporary moment of an ongoing process in search of meaning. In my day-to-day life, I indirectly or subconsciously absorb experiences and places that become influences and thoughts that are then filtered into my work.

For example, when walking my dog in High Park, I might reflect on how these routine daily experiences filter into my subconscious. It is through what I consciously and subconsciously perceive by way of my senses in my everyday experiences find their way into my art practice. The following are some of the conscious and subconscious avenues, the direct or indirect ways that, although I am a participant in all of these actions, it is by listening and through absorption that these everyday experiences reach my work:

- Reading – Books, newspapers, magazines, websites
- Seeing – Travel, artwork, exhibitions, nature
- Feeling – Breathing, walking, touch, smell, taste
- Talking – Discussions, speaking, writing

It is by being attentive to my surroundings that I discover new thoughts and concepts or remove old ideas that no longer work for me. I also try to bring responsiveness and openness into my practice to discover new research possibilities and, in turn, understand others and my environment in a greater capacity. Another important component in my making is what Jane Bennett describes as bringing a “playful element” into one’s thinking and to be willing to play the fool.”¹¹ This playful element is valuable for me, as play can be an arbitrary, poetic and innocent method to discover creative ideas that can become significant.

¹¹ Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant Matter: a political ecology of things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 15.

Making

*Look between the rain, the drops are insular.*¹²

- Agnes Martin

Line

Beverly Gordon describes the fact that the fibres that go into cloth are made from the very substances that form our planet and is linked to the idea that textile making has been one of the ways in which we have directly connected with the world's vegetable and mineral kingdoms.¹³ Fibre, and the activity of weaving, has long been an important symbol in human culture as it comments on the act of labour, of repeated actions, the doing and undoing of patterns that create life and sustain ways of living. I see fibre as a meaningful material as it serves to define the maker, user and culture in which it is made.

In my exhibition, I investigate how mark-making (the use of different lines, dots, marks, patterns and textures created in an artwork) intertwines with the grid structure and the painted or printed fabric. In my work, *Cool Fields (Image 16)*, I attempt to express infinity through repetition, connection and as an endless expansion of space.

I use the drawn grid to structure the artworks, taking direct cues from the warp and weft of textiles, and encompass the use of colour, light and meaning. This approach relates to Agnes Martin's work, *Leaf*. In this work, there are seemingly infinitesimal differences in the lines and edges, but all of them are subordinate to the repetition of the grid. It is a surface that invites a contemplative gaze, as if the *work* of the work were to open on to an immaterial and meditative space.¹⁴

¹² Fer, Briony. *The Infinite Line: Re-making Art After Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 56.

¹³ Gordon, Beverly. *Textiles: The Whole Story: Uses, Meanings, Significance* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2011), 60.

¹⁴ Fer, Briony. *The Infinite Line: Re-making Art After Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 47.

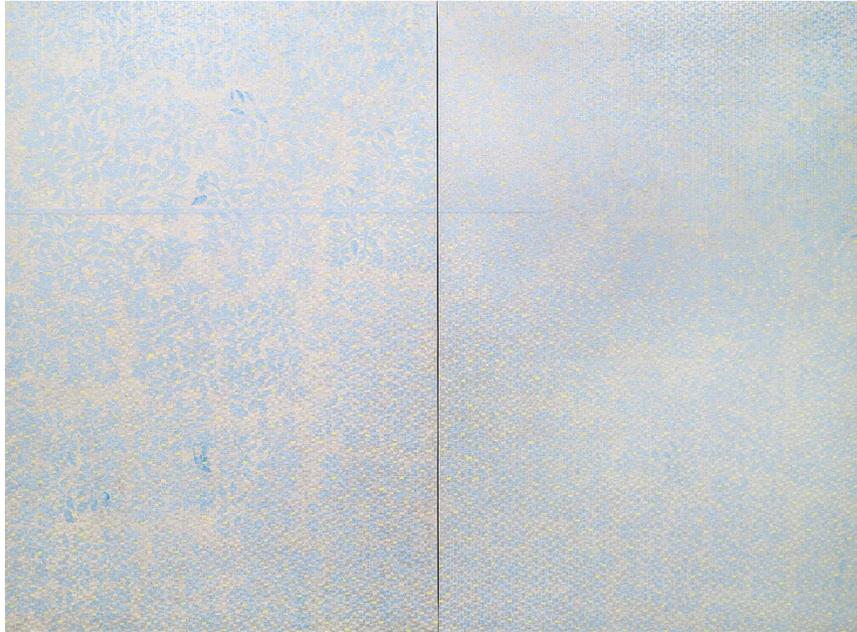


Image 16: Christine Nobel, *Cool Fields*, 2016

Martin uses various words to describe the experience of boundlessness that art could offer: “infinity,” “joy,” “bliss,” and “the sublime.” For her, infinity suggested the endless expansiveness of a transcendental subject. Martin always maintained something visionary, something that took vision beyond the merely literal, insisting on the significance of the infinitesimal difference between things, where everything is *in the interval*. These kinds of significant spaces – which are found in-between the lines, or in-between the colours – are also an important formal characteristic of my work. I see this infinitesimal between-space as substantial, as it is often what we don’t immediately perceive that can resonate within us.

By “active looking”, I hope that the work in my exhibition can foster new resonances to emerge. By making the work in grids, lines, circles and various types of mark-making that take many hours to render, I am encouraging slow observation. Through using materials that suggest different speeds because of their physical qualities: vellum, thread, canvas or printed fabric, there

are various tempos to be discovered. And, by interconnecting these materials, a more magical and powerful effect is created.

Time

The *interval* appears in my exhibition, as the spaces that are observed in-between the lines, colours and grids – as an important spatial and temporal feature. The interval, is, the small space found between movement and stillness. The sense of time I experience while working, through a process of making and re-making of material form, is ultimately one of stillness (a pause between two actions), and free association (a space in my imagination). Free association, or active undirected thought, occurs in down-time, moments of rest and stillness. Memories, feelings and thoughts freely arise from my work in these moments of stillness, rest, hypnotic repetition, only to become transferred/fed back into my making. This is seen in my work in the repetitive, meditative slowness it takes to make the materials and allows for a consideration found in this in-between time.

The marking of time is a central element of my work; it guides the viewer to different modes of contemplation. By making the work, which can take many hours or many months to fabricate, and by using materials that offer dissimilar experiences of speeds through their physical qualities, there is a difference of time measurements at play.

In Lutz Koepnick's book, *On Slowness*, he challenges the perception of slowness to argue that it is in fact a strategy of contemporary life that manipulates temporal and spatial experiences. He suggests that we are constantly being distracted by too much information and restless anticipation and, as such, lose our receptivity toward resonances of the moment.¹⁵ To “go slow”,

¹⁵ Koepnick, Lutz. *On Slowness: Toward an Aesthetic of the Contemporary* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 4.

as Lutz Koepnick suggests, means to open up to the multiple layers of the present, to look at the current moment and to produce “presence” beyond existing templates of meaning.¹⁶ The stillness and translucency in my work – the slowing down and looking, is a way that presses us to question our reality in the present moment.

Light

*Painters either paint towards light or they paint towards the night.*¹⁷

- Ian McKeever

In describing what light symbolizes to him, the painter Ian McKeever wrote: “By definition, all painters deal with light. Van Gogh alluded to this quality of light when he said: ‘I want to paint men and women with that something of the eternal, which the halo used to symbolize, and which we seek to convey by the actual radiance and vibration of colour.’”¹⁸

In my work, I search for dimensions of light in order to question the relationship between space and perception. I explore whether the soft diffusion of light found in the quality of colour in my work can assist us in reaching a greater awareness. In my exhibition, the layering of oil paint highlights the presence of “light” – which assists in illuminating what may normally not be possible.

¹⁶ Koepnick, Lutz. Ibid. 4.

¹⁷ Allthorpe-Guyton, Marjorie. *Ian McKeever: Paintings* (Farnham [England]; Burlington, VT: London: Ashgate/Lund Humphries, 2009), 178.

¹⁸ Allthorpe-Guyton, Marjorie. Ibid. 177.

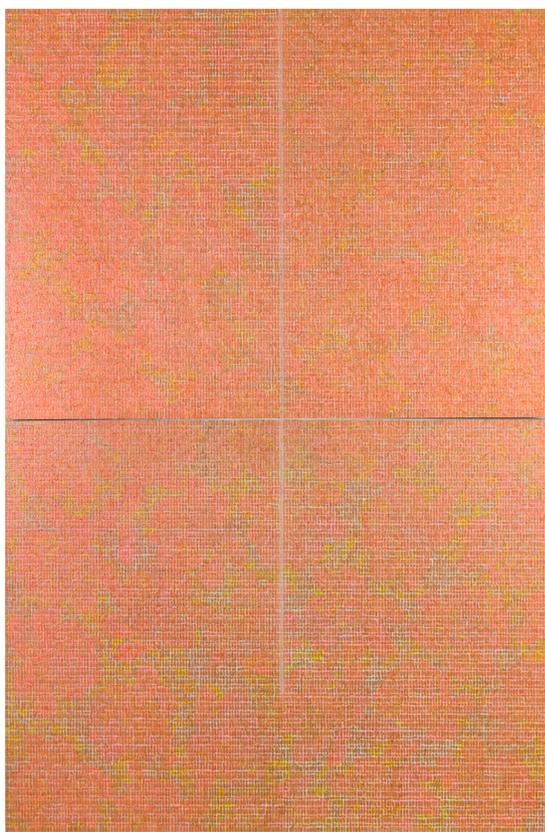


Image 17: Christine Nobel, *Dusty*, 2016

To look at my work, *Dusty* (Image 17) requires time, and by way of this dedication of time, it is possible to re-examine how we perceive the world – of what is illusory and what is real. I connect with what Ann Wilson writes about Agnes Martin’s paintings and drawings, where she notes that they consist of sequences of cadenced variations of austere forms and engender a wide range of optical and textural allusions. As the artist put it, the works “are light, lightness, about merging, about formlessness, breaking down forms.”¹⁹ In my own work I also strive to break down forms in order to create a sensory experience and harmony within a field of light. This field of light brings us closer to a primal state of wonderment and leaves us, in the wake of such experiences, to decide what it means.

¹⁹ Agnes Martin, quoted in Ann Wilson, “Linear Webs,” *Art and Artists I*, no. 7 (Oct. 1966), p. 49.

Conclusion: Connectivity

*A net is a textile whose crossed fibres are knotted at the intersections, forming a pliable grid of squared spaces.*²⁰

- Hannah Higgins

Nets have two interrelated physical characteristics: there is the size and space of their modules, and there is the structure of strings that delineate these modules and interconnect the whole nodal system of strings. It is this second characteristic that we associate with the contemporary understanding of “network,” a ubiquitous image that permeates our scientific, economic and social worlds.²¹ Just like in a network, my exhibition displays interconnectivity and interdependency through the use of differentiated material and linear elements.

In the art world, the handmade is gaining increased favour, perhaps because of the ubiquity of current computer-screen culture and the ever-widening practice of digital processing. Traditional craft, and the way in which the stitch mark records time acknowledges the increased relevance of the handmade found in art. Furthermore, the slower speeds found in the physical process of making can be seen as complementary to the increased speed of newer digital technologies.

In my thesis exhibition, we can understand how the seeking of slowness could be seen as a search for experiences of perceptual awareness that reveal the substantial, the immaterial and the importance of what I am calling an *in-between time*. This in-between time is a form of

²⁰ Higgins, Hannah. *The Grid Book*. (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2009), 235.

²¹ Higgins, Hannah. *Ibid.* 235.

waiting, a pause. It is a particular experience of time that is transformative. By slowing down and looking, we are pressed to question our relationship to other things.

In my works, the act of slow looking is a way to highlight the indeterminate, or that which cannot easily be identified. By inviting viewers to look closely, to identify, reveal and recognize the material and by using the idea of a material source as a point of departure that benefits from the use of sewing, cutting or painting in a contemporary art practice – I am attempting to create a thematic focus in which all connections and pathways interconnect.

Throughout this exhibition, my aim is to intensify and develop our awareness through the act of looking, to identify, reveal and recognize ourselves through an encounter with a material construction. By extension, every aspect of my work becomes an invitation to look closely at ourselves and the potential that close consideration holds for sharpening our sense of place in the world.

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