My Mechanics of Justification

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My Mechanics of Justification

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

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Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA
May 2012
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Abstract

This document examines the theory behind the process leading to my paintings, as well as the content of the images I use. The former will invoke romanticism, infinite possibilities, and the need for having certain parameters and flexible rules. The latter will talk about sentimentality and contemporary culture. I will explain the mechanics of justifying the choice of a particular way of painting: the push and pull between the loaded content of an image versus the language of painting itself.
1- Romanticism and Ideas on Freedom

“Action, action is the soul of the world, not pleasure, not abandonment to feeling, not abandonment to reasoning, only action; only by action does one become the image of God, the God who creates ceaselessly and ceaselessly rejoices in his works. Without action, all pleasure, all feeling, all knowledge is nothing but a postponed death. We must not cease from toil until we have created free space, even if this space is a fearful waste and a fearful void, and then we shall brood over it, as God brooded over the waste and the void before the world was created, and then something will arise. O Bliss, O godlike feeling!” *Jakob Michael Reinhold Lenz*

I read this quote as an undergraduate in my favourite book by Isaiah Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism*. I began reading this book by accident, just wanting to know what Romanticism was, and not knowing that I would feel so impacted by its thinkers’ ideas. Berlin says that the reason Romanticism felt so familiar was because it was the first time in history when philosophers began to write down ideas and think in a way that we can recognise and sympathise with – where we can bask in their rays of disabling doubt and passion and see empathy and emotion. The concept of individualisation is an 18th century construct, and it began out of a reaction against the ideas of the Enlightenment period. Essentially the thinkers belonging to the Enlightenment believed in the complete harmony of “truths”, and those who affiliated themselves with Romanticism and with a “Romantic” way of thinking encouraged the opposite. Harmony did not equal humanity, and more important than trying to create a greater logic that explained everything was a purpose in life, and this purpose could be an individual one. It was a way of thinking that promoted the individual and his/her sense of self-righteous creative conviction. It allowed for a deeper understanding of what it felt like to be motivated to make something like art – what it meant to create things all the while knowing that you would never reach your goal. Romanticism encouraged creating for the sake of creating, moving for the sake of moving, thinking because thinking made you more conscious. There was an acceptance of multiple truths, and therefore an expectation to be surprised and to see
the possibility of moving into another direction. I love the Lenz quote because it
describes what it’s like to play alone in your studio. Words like “ceaselessly” and
“free space”, “fearful waste” and “O godlike feeling”, feel familiar to me. They are
extreme levels of either negative or positive emotion in the nothing space of your
studio. It is so dramatic. There is also another quote by the Romantic poet Novalis
that I find myself similarly attracted to: Novalis said, “I am always going home,
always to my father’s house.” Berlin writes that these words are not about God but
about Novalis’ creative process as a writer, and that this process is something that is
infinite and ongoing. Novalis is “always” going home, which means that he never gets
home. He is always moving towards it, he is always moving. It is the process, the
active part, which is important.

The Romantic philosophers wanted to know what the purpose of life was. They
wanted to know how to define or understand the idea of freedom. Freedom was
understood as the vital part of our consciousness, a way to define what it meant to be
alive. The French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau found one way of
understanding freedom. The story goes that he was walking in the countryside, on his
way to visit his friend in prison. Deep in thought he suddenly broke down and started
to cry, and it dawned on him that it was his friend who was free and not him. Freedom
was “the surrender of each individual with all his rights to the whole community.” He believed that “If you surrender yourself to the whole community, then how can
you not be free, for who coerces you?” In theory, being imprisoned was the only
way to remove the weight of decisions, which I guess felt rather binding to Rousseau.
On the other hand you had Immanuel Kant, a German Philosopher, who believed that
even helping others, sympathizing, and worst of all pitying was a way in which you
took away someone’s freedom. You imposed your will onto others with "kindness".
Each person was responsible for his or her own actions and was free to struggle on
their own. But it’s Friedrich Schiller’s ideas on freedom or his compromise with
freedom that is most exciting. He thought others should imagine that life was like a
game or a play that you chose to be a part of so that you weren’t completely
submitting yourself to a higher or more reasonable entity, but rather, you were
enjoying this game that you happened to be already playing. This idea assumes that
you want to be a part of society. Maybe it would only work on someone who is
positive and cheerful. It has a general feeling of, “well if you can’t get out of it, you
might as well make it fun!” This is a little ridiculous, but it is also realistic and practical. This kind of acceptance of rules and pressures forces you to play pretend and alleviates some responsibility. I like to think of Schiller’s “Spieltrieb” when I paint, sometimes giving in to the rules of the subject of my painting, or to the paint itself and its dominance on the surface.

For example, this is why I like to choose images to work with from the Internet. The images I work from have different resolutions and different contexts. Some are from photographs, and some are created on a computer. There are many factors in these images that help direct me in the way that they are painted. I choose images that are tampered with or created by a “middle man” so that there is a directing force that is helping me to make decisions. I relinquish some control over they way that something is normally depicted to honour someone else’s crazy decision. In that way, it is collaboration when I paint from found images, in the same way that Schiller would want me to collaborate with the other people playing the game.

Isaiah Berlin had ideas on freedom too. He believed that there were two conflicting concepts on liberty, and that these could be called positive and negative freedom. You could explain these two kinds of freedom like this (See Fig. 1)

![Figure 1](image-url)
Imagine that you are driving somewhere, and that you come across a fork in the road. You take a left. You drive on and come to another fork in the road and take a right. Here you are seemingly exercising your negative freedom, which is the absence of physical obstacles. Nothing has physically gotten in your way and prevented you from making these choices. But let's say that you made these decisions because you needed to buy some cigarettes. And instead of taking a right you should have taken a left in order to catch a train to get to an important appointment. Now you're going to miss the train, and even though you may have felt free when you made these decisions, some would say that you weren't acting freely at all and that you were bound to something more powerful that led you to the wrong choice. Positive freedom would be the presence of self-determination and of will power, which you did not exercise when you decided to buy your cigarettes. Negative freedom versus positive freedom is the "absence of" versus the "presence of", or the "external" versus the "internal". Positive freedom is exercising your will over more complex obstacles. A dictator would offer to help you make the right decision. That's why the idea of positive freedom lends itself easily to more fascist governments. The idea of being forced to be free (like Rousseau said) or “helped” to make the “right” decision.

I want to look back to the terms I used to define positive and negative freedom in relation to my studio practice. In the studio I am faced with the “absence of” physical obstacles and the “presence of” mental ones. I am removed from the “external” factors that could affect my work and in the presence of everything “internal”. The studio, equipped with my tools is my “state”, a space for protecting, sorting and examining my thoughts. But it is not just a place for meditating. It is a place for being productive, and in order to be productive there needs to be a system. A system that is flexible and can help me overcome my mental obstacles, which can be an enjoyable game as much as it can be a necessary one. My problems with confidence and patience can lead to playing pretend and to role-playing that extends itself into the way that something is painted. This leads me to the idea of sincerity.

If you are sincere, then you do not pretend. But how do you know if you're pretending? Why is sincerity so rigid, and why does it have to be made so clear to others? Imagine a high school girl. One day she's preppy, the next she's a Goth, and the week after that she decides she's a hippy (See Fig. 2). She would be called fake
and would instantly become unpopular and distrusted. By sincerely embodying different styles and characters she becomes hard to place, more difficult to read, and therefore perceived as less sincere. This doesn't make sense. Sincerity has every right to keep transforming, especially when it comes to style. Philosophy is a lot more interesting when connections aren't forced through consistency in visual appearance but can be found in a freer form.

Figure 2

When I was painting my stage paintings I was thinking of Friedrich Schiller's “Spieltrieb”. The five panels were being painted by a group of artists. If I messed up a part of the painting I would say to myself that it was a person I had hired who had messed it up. It was fine, and I could continue because that mistake was a part of the concept of that painting. By trying to embody the reality of that place, I was given more freedom. (See Fig. 3).
2. The Oulipians – Mind Games to Help Play the Game

I came across the Oulipians when I was having a studio visit with Bruce Pearson. I was describing my idea on how to produce new work when I was finding it difficult to justify choosing one idea over another. I thought I could create a self-referential system of creating, where I would make a painting, write a story about this painting, and then make another painting from the story and so on. I thought it could go on forever, and they could just feed each other indefinitely. One work would inspire the next and in this way I could create a series of paintings, which would be connected through their method, if not by their style or apparent content. Bruce told me I should take a look at the Oulipians, in particular at the author George Perec and his book *Life: A User’s Manual*, in which Perec writes a hundred stories on the lives and happenings within a hundred apartments in a single apartment building. He also
mentioned Italo Calvino’s *Invisible Cities*. I enjoyed the concept of creating constraints in order to create work. I read a book that described the Oulipian constrains, *Oulipo, A Primer of Potential Literature*, and found their ideas completely relevant to my ideas on painting in the studio.

The Oulipians are interested in the capacity of literature as “practice, as work, as play”. This, they think, is not the usual way to approach writing or painting. They seem less concerned with the idea of the masterpiece and more interested in keeping one’s mind active and productive. The word Oulipo comes out of a play on the French word “oeuvre”, which means a piece of work, and is related to the word “ouvrer”, which means “to work”, in the way that you would “work” a material such as wood or metal or stone. Oulipian literature is *potential* literature. This relates to Romanticism, to work in motion and progress that exists without the promise of the finish line. It makes me think of the Novalis quote, “I am always going home. Always to my father’s house.”

In this section of my thesis I’d like to relate Oulipian ideas to my ideas on painting by writing the quotes that interested me the most in the book, and that relate each quote directly to thoughts on my studio practice.

"Simplifying grossly, one might postulate three levels: first, a minimal level, constraints of the language in which the text is written; second, an intermediate level, including constraints of genre and certain literary norms; third, a maximal level, that of consciously *pre elaborated and voluntarily imposed systems of artifice.*" 

If I could simplify grossly on the constraints in my studio this is how I would divide them. On a minimal level my constraints are my studio, canvas, paint, paintbrushes, computer, and the wall I use to hang my stretchers: simply put - my tools. On an intermediate level my constraints are the images I use in my paintings and the style in which I paint them. On the maximal level my constraints are my arguments and attempts at negotiating with myself and my painting once I have begun painting.
"a text written according to a constraint must speak of this constraint"vi

My constraint is painting, so my painting has to talk about painting. My constraint is the narrative surrounding the content of my images, so I must make those narratives active. An example of this is in *I Am Always Going Home* (Fig. 4), where there are two paintings in one. First there is an image of dogs in a digital landscape. I copied, with some freedom, an image I found on the Internet, following the logic of the person that created this image before I found it. There are small, thick dogs painted on top of this initial painting. They are breaking the narrative of the first painting by disassociating themselves from the world that the other dogs are a part of. They are following a planar direction, as opposed to the image painted underneath them. Framing, as a painting already does, the first painting.

Figure 4: *I Am Always Going Home*, Oil on Canvas, 36” by 30”, 2013
"The Oulipo is anti-chance,' the Oulipian Claude Berge affirmed one day with a straight face, which leaves no doubt about our aversion to the dice shaker. Make no mistake about it: potentiality is uncertain, but not a matter of chance. We know perfectly well everything that can happen, but we don't know whether it will happen."}

In painting, people often talk about “accidents”. I’ve never liked this idea, mainly because of the way that it is talked about, like it’s a gift that comes out of nowhere. It’s the idea of good luck or divine intervention. It’s if some people will get these accidents and others won’t, which doesn’t seem fair - this fear that you will miss your accident, that you will overlook it, that you will never spot the accident that makes your work “real”. Or take the expression “mistakes make you human” – I feel like in art this can lead to the habit of making all things “look” human, putting in gestures that look like mistakes, little squiggles here and there to convince the viewer that they are indeed looking at the work of a genius. Everything is in your control, so that means that there are some things that just look like they aren’t, which means it’s just the comfort zone of the appearance of “sincerity”. This is why I like the quote above. I love accidents, but I don’t want to wait for one. I like the idea that you orchestrate your accidents.

"I don't for the moment inter to write poetry other than in adopting such constraints... The intense difficulty posed by this sort of production... palls in comparison to the terror I would feel in writing 'poetry' freely."

All of this is about figuring out an ideal psychological state for making your best work. Some people like to work under pressure; others don’t. Some need to tell themselves that they are making the most important piece that they will ever make in order to motivate themselves to make something good. Others need to believe the opposite; they are working on something unimportant, and they are just playing. What I find interesting about the Oulipians is that they are trying to keep things light in order to get serious. Just like Schiller with his Spieltrieb, they are taking some responsibility away from themselves in order to work harder – and more fearlessly. There is constant fear amongst artists in regards to inspiration. Something is always
stopping the inspiration, whether it’s because the studio you work in is a triangle, you’re depressed, or there is the presence of someone overbearing. An artist is always talking about why it is hard to work. What I like about the Oulipians is that they don’t believe in inspiration, so the reason you might not be able to work, can probably be fixed or worked with. It might be a constraint that can help you create work. There is no such thing as this perfect alignment, where everything comes together as you think you want it, and perfect art comes out of you. It seems nerve wracking to wait for this perfect alignment, and to stop working and to get scared and depressed because you did stop. I think the Oulipians understand the value of “practice,” of viewing everything you do as practice, and that a great piece of work can come out of you “practicing”. It makes me think of Martin Kippenberger, who said, “Idea today. Done tomorrow.” Or of Albert Oehlen who thought that education was the process of painting. For all the talk about constraints, the Oulipians are much more concerned with eliminating them and creating freedom to become productive.

“Constraint, as everyone knows, often has a bad press. All those who esteem the highest value in literature to be sincerity, emotion, realism, or authenticity mistrust it as a strange and dangerous whim.”

It is as if there was a hermetic boundary between two domains: the one wherein the observance of rules is a natural fact, and the one wherein the excess of rules is perceived as shameful artifice.

The reason constraint is not “vain” or a “shameful artifice” is because the idea of imposing constraints onto one’s creative practice is not just playful, but a way in which to deal with too many options. It’s the difference between the person that accepts freedom as actual freedom, where everyone can do as they please and destroy and self-destruct, and the kind of freedom as Rousseau gave into, a friend in prison, most of his options taken away. Absolutely everyone works with different kinds and levels of constraints, it is a large part of my practice to think about what mine are.
3 - Teddy Bears and Flowers

The title of Mike Kelley’s piece, *More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid*, made me view my painting of flowers and teddy bears differently (See Fig. 5). At first, this painting was meant to be a large monument to my efforts, a huge congratulations card – a present for overcoming my fear of big paintings and of painting. But reading that title made me realise that it was more of a monument to sentimentality than a gift to myself. It was an overt display of feelings in the form of cheap gifts, or a floating display of guilty feelings and signs of appreciation.

Figure 5: *Sentimentality’s Spectrum*, Oil on Canvas, 96” by 84”, 2013
There is a difference between flowers and teddy bears. Giving flowers are a short-term gesture, and teddy bears are more of a long-term gesture. For this reason, teddy bears are maybe a tackier congratulatory gift. Teddy bears will commemorate an event forever, while flowers will die and be thrown away. The teddy bear is given a long enough lifespan for it to become anthropomorphized. But when I was painting my painting I realized that I was anthropomorphizing both the flowers and the teddy bears. Both were painted with the goal of acquiring personalities. I was painting objects that are animated with the feelings of the people that give them, and then re-animating them as a painting. Double sentimentality.

Toy Story is a sad film because the toys that someone once loved very much, stop being loved. But they still live in the same room, ignored and not played with. What is nice about flowers is that you can throw them away and not feel guilty. But unless you throw a teddy bear away as soon as you get it, it will have developed a relationship that makes it difficult to get rid of. When I think of my stuffed animals at home I want to surround myself with them, have a party, and hold their hands. Did Mike Kelley already do this? Is this what he meant with that work? Was it an epitaph for teddy bears all around the world that were all once irreplaceable, that felt more important than a parent or a real human friend, and then were forgotten? Is it about how our promises are meaningless or that we should live our lives without guilt, or in guilt? I don’t think it’s stupid to love a cheap synthetic toy. Kelly’s work is not making fun of that kind of love. Everybody knows that kind of love. It’s powerful, and you remember it forever. When I read the title, “More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid” I think of all the relationships that were important to me once and aren’t anymore. I am filled with guilt, unhappiness, and a reminder that nothing is lasting. There is no way to honour anything enough. There is no way to control the way my memories leave me. I think Mike Kelley’s painting/sculpture(monument) is the most realistic thing I’ve ever seen.
**4- Skeuomorphism**

There are two different kinds of skeuomorphs. The first is the old-fashioned kind, relating to objects in the real world that are pretending to be their more expensive versions, where the “new ornamentation references original functionality”\(^{xi}\). Like plastic Adirondack chairs, or the fake wood grain on a station wagon. The other kind of skeuomorph resides in the computer world, where it refers to “a design principle in which design cues are taken from the physical world.”\(^{xiv}\) This can be a volume knob that you have to “turn” on an iPad, or folders on the desktop of a MacBook.

The difference between these two concepts of skeuomorphism is that the first is about money, industry and class and the second is not, or not once you get past buying the technology that uses it. Once someone buys an iPad or a MacBook, the actual skeuomorphs are about representation, imitation, but most of all pretending. This pretending is intended to make the consumers using these products feel more comfortable and familiar with the technology.

I don’t make paintings that imitate objects perfectly in order to make the viewer more comfortable - or uncomfortable. But I do sometimes pretend as I am using paint, that I am using something that is not in the world of painting, to make *me* more comfortable. Sometimes I need to relate the process of painting to the process of something in the physical world, in order to be able to make it, and this feels skeuomorphic. An example is *Desperate Painting* (Fig. 6). This painting comes from an image of a sand sculpture made on a beach. When I was making it, I thought of the paint as sand, and I imagined that I was on a beach having fun, and that I was playing with the sand to make this sand sculpture that was a painting. While painting can feel desperate and the image I was working with was of a monster digging itself out of a grave, I wanted the process to feel like this other, more relaxing process, I was familiar with.
Figure 6: Desperate Painting, Oil on Canvas, 18” by 24”, 2013

Painting is often pretending, or standing in for something, on different levels and in different ways. But it’s interesting to think how it is doing it. To think about when it is acting metaphorically rather than skeuomorphically, or anthropomorphically rather than metaphorically (Fig. 7).
Figure 7

I don’t know if the line between these words is blurry or if one painting goes through several of these modes of representation at once. When something is standing in for something, or acting as something, when is it what? In my stick paintings the bars could be interpreted as prisons, and through Rousseau’s philosophy can become metaphors for freedom. But the flowers and teddy bears in my large painting, besides acting as symbols and metaphors anyway, are mostly anthropomorphic, taking on the characteristics of imagined people and temperaments. In other paintings it gets too confusing, and I’m not sure which is which. It is not always helpful to even try to categorise their modes of representation. But I think when the process of painting an object imitates the process of how that object is made in the physical world, in order to help you operate the paint, that this is skeuomorphism in painting, or at least skeuomorphic thinking in painting. I feel like this is contemporary, because I’m not talking about the digital image and the Internet and the overload of visual information, I am talking about the way in which we try to translate, from one container of images to another.
In my second semester at VCU Jeremy Sigler dictated to me what he thought my artist statement should be. He dictated it in my voice, as if I was saying it.

*I am making a responsive painting. Positive schizophrenia. Something that can’t exist in real life. I approach my own paintings as if they were made by someone else. I find the gap between multiple painters. Where there is humour. Mortality, the body and the unconscious. Jeremy looks at my paintings as a psychoanalyst, breaking into my inner psyche. If one person is playing the analyst, the other person must be the patient. Is it a dual personality? Or, like Cybil, 18? My paintings are best resolved when there is a clear duality. Is there an erotic tension to my work? Not necessarily. I think that when I enter the studio, I really try to deal with the task at hand. It’s a struggle to get my imagination to do anything that doesn’t feel utterly self-conscious. I’m moving away from using other people’s paintings to use as a ground and to (?) with even though it’s a quick way to arrive at multiple personalities. When I work this way it’s as if I’m not facing the terror of the naked canvas. It feels like an exercise but not totally fulfilling and gratifying. This semester I’ve had moments, glimpses, of my future, some sense of the proportion of my own work. Where it might go to be meaningful to others. Successful in the career sense. But I still feel it’s important for me to enter the studio and enter my painting as if I really genuinely don’t know what I’m doing and what’s to come. Maybe this schizo idea is an attempt at finding a sort of blissful disorientation where I lose myself, lose my sense of direction, of what is up and down, where I’m from, and celebrate a moment of freedom and what Jeremy calls compositional beauty.

There are a few words and sentences in this statement that I still find relevant in my work. “Responsive.” “Positive schizophrenia”. “…task at hand.” “…utterly self-conscious.” “Blissful disorientation.” Jeremy pretending to be me talking about my own work was like having my fortune told. Some of it felt eerily true, and some completely off the mark. I was latching onto the “true”, picking out what I wanted to hear. The process of selecting the words that resonated with me (and the denial of the other ones) helped create the language of my work. Every studio visit adds to this process of building the vocabulary of your practice.
I came to VCU with two paintings (See Fig. 3 and Fig. 8).

Figure 8: *Missile*, Oil on Canvas, 44” by 35”, 2010

In both these paintings something happens on the floor in front of the main story. Something breaks the narrative. In *Missile* I painted flowers on the floor after I had finished everything else in the painting. The idea was that I was congratulating myself on a job well done. It was a small performance in the form of painting on my painting. In *Place for Pets* I painted two dogs copulating in front of an idyllic setting for a story about country house comfort – two characters that don’t care what’s painted behind them but are somehow interacting with it. Something that I have discovered in grad school is that I often need to make two or more paintings in one painting, like I did with these older works. The first painting, leads to the next painting on top of it and so on, creating a series of relays between intention and result.
This semester I wanted to tackle a large work, a massive painting. I thought back to my stage paintings, and in particular *Missile* with its congratulatory flowers and single teddy bear. I decided to “conclude” things, or tie things up, as you feel you should at the end of something, with an enlarged version of the floor of this painting. I wanted to paint a floor and then litter it with gifts for myself. I wanted to make a large obnoxious painting about painting, tackling painting, conquering a big space, being in school and learning – a sentimental goodbye. I also wanted to set up a system where I could make something this big and not be intimidated by it, set up some kind of reward system. Every time I painted a flower, or teddy bear, the reward was the finished section. When I finished a flower I would get a flower. When I finished a teddy bear I would get a teddy bear. I could divide the way that I thought about this painting into two parts.

As I painted more and more objects I couldn’t stick to one way of painting them. At first my plan was to paint thinly and realistically at the bottom of the painting and slowly get thicker, until I reached the top and all the small things would be thick and looming forward. I couldn’t do this though. As soon as I finished the first large bouquet I needed to make something rougher and faster. And as soon as I finished that I wanted to make something slow again. I kept thinking how these flowers were all from someone different, how that could allow me to paint them as I felt I needed to paint them. Having planned the composition of the painting beforehand I needed a way to keep things exciting, but I also couldn’t maintain the same attitude the whole way through. Some days I felt confident and could paint something weird and feel fine about it. Other days I felt more patient. Either way I couldn’t keep a steady logic. I wanted different logics that reflected different psychological states.

In terms of composition I was imagining someplace where everyone would throw flowers and teddy bears. A skating rink? Somewhere where a synchronised but not consciously composed composition could happen. Where there could be a collaboration of different logics following different rules of space, creating accidental forms and groupings, like a totem pole of teddy bears and floating and spiralling sweet things, all kitsch and cheapness: a demonstration of appreciation and formality.
that culminated in something tacky, but also controlled. I was imagining when people leave flowers, whether it’s throwing flowers down, or arranging them on a memorial, how they subconsciously or consciously collaborate on an arrangement. But everyone has different impulses. Someone might leave a teddy bear with other teddy bears. Or throw a pink flower near another pink flower. It’s interesting how the logic of these compositions are schizophrenic. The logic exists, but it is always changing.

I find this painting difficult to look at. It’s intense looking, “girly”, too playful and embarrassing. It’s about feelings and about painting as a collection of skills and efforts. But in thinking of the environment, or place, of this demonstration, the subject matter becomes neutral to me. Why would teddy bears and flowers be girly? Sick people get both those things from family and friends. So do children, lovers and performers. Is romance girly? This could be happening anywhere, in a hospital or opera. This painting is pretty placeless. These objects are floating and are only following rules that apply to painting. I painted gifts, and everyone gives gifts. Since people rarely know what to give, they become these meaningless but familiar objects that are not so much about what they actually are but what they stand in for. I think paint is always uncomfortably standing in for something. It never seems completely adequate in its connection to real things or real subjects, except for expressing itself as being made by someone, and expressing itself as being made out of paint.

*See Shell by the Seashore* (Fig. 9)

I was finding that I had a formula that I followed with my work. I would paint an interesting source image, and then paint “inventively” over it. With the painting *I am Always Going Home* this is what I am doing. I am breaking the narrative of one image with another. With my seashell painting, I wanted the thing, the object that was going to disrupt the narrative, to be planned from the beginning. I wanted the seashell to be large and obnoxious. I wanted its painterliness to interrupt the story, the real action, which was one man drowning another, or healing or baptising, as others interpreted it. I was imagining someone taking a walk on the seaside and picking up a shell. Looking at the shell closely, the person holding it is admiring the intricacies of nature, of something otherworldly and beautiful. I imagined that they were paying close attention to the shell but not to the action behind it. This action that was taken from
the world of artificial action, stills from action films and video games called “Hitman”. The person holding up the shell doesn’t see the two men. But the viewer of the painting sees both. The viewer is watching two narratives while the paint in the painting follows its own rules and tries to merge both.

Figure 9: See Shell by the Seashore, Oil on Canvas, 53” by 45”. 2013

Desperate Painting (Fig. 6)

In critiques and studio visits there are two words that people often say in relation to “good” work: urgent and desperate. I decided to name my sand sculpture painting “desperate painting” because it was depicting a desperate character digging himself out of a grave and because I was desperately trying to build a good painting out of a
lot of paint. Sometimes I think that the activity of painting can be quite performative, and in this case in particular I felt like I was trying to act out a narrative.

*Nighttime, Glass Talking, Strong Dummy and Locking Up Casper* (Fig. 10, 11, 12, 13)

All four of these paintings begin with the same painting. A field of colour divided by three or four vertical bars that are crossed by a horizontal bar. This image comes from a zoomed in perspective of a tree house overlooking a lake.

I chose to paint a close up of a balcony and a window because I was interested in creating paintings that were about transparent layers. The idea was to make a “weak” painting, a thin painting that would create a structure for something strong. I think it is easier to respond to an existing painting, than it is to create a new one. By painting something that was unfinished, but an adequate first layer, I was creating the perfect jungle gym to practice on.

This jungle gym, holiday home, or container of potential relaxation and activity, also looks like a prison. I find the most exciting part of painting to be when you are thinking of how things fit in a space, a space that has information to work off of. This is similar to real life, when you are thinking of how to organise books, videotapes, plants and miniature dogs on a shelf. A seemingly enclosed space is comfortable and can give you a feeling of creative freedom. Even though the initial structure of this painting is meant to make it easier for me to paint on top, I wouldn’t want the second layer to reside too comfortably on top of the first.

In *Locking Up Casper* there is a transparent ghost residing in a weak transparent space. The strength is in his ability to smoke three cigarettes. In *Talking Glass* the strength is in the bright colours of the abstract shapes that are resting both behind the bars and in front. The pink deflated girl in *Strong Dummy* is weak too, except for her very strong arm that is supporting her to the weak structure and in turn telling us that the structure might not actually be very weak. In *Nightime* light and darkness exist at the same time and without logic. What is resting within and between the light of the bars is actually resting on the shadows of the background.
Figure 10: *Locking Up Casper*, Oil on Canvas, 16” by 19”, 2013

Figure 11: *Glass Talking*, Oil on Canvas, 16” by 19”, 2013
Figure 12: *Nighttime*, Oil on Canvas, 16” by 19”, 2013

Figure 13: *Strong Dummy*, Oil on Canvas, 16” by 19”, 2013
7- Statement: Synchronization Disorder

What used to be called stress-related disorders are now called synchronization disorders. My dad called me last year, after he had come back from a neuroscience conference, and told me that the term “synchronization disorder” made him think of my work. I had been having trouble explaining my paintings, and he thought that this term might be the solution.

This was a good point. Our artistic lives are marked by individualization and the lack of predictability, and these are the two characteristics used to describe this new medical term. But how could it describe what was happening in my paintings? It makes me think of Jeremy’s expression “compositional beauty”, and how I’m not sure what that is. Is that synchronised or not? It makes me think of the Oulipians, creating rules and constraints, synchronizing information, and creating order out of disorder. It makes me think of the birth of individualisation, Romanticism, and how this is where synchronization disorder begins.

Everything in painting is about synchronizing or breaking synchronization between the images and the paint. The dogs in I’m Always Going Home are doing this; they are both supporting each together, and contradicting each other. So are the fifteen flowers in Sentimentality’s Spectrum and the seashell and murder in See Shell by the Seashore. I want forced communication and needy attempts at fitting together. Like I’ve said earlier, I want to create a double sentimentality, between the sentimental content of some of my images, and the sentimental process that binds them together. One thing that my painting has, and most painting has, is a constant battle with synchronization all the while living and being surrounded by exciting different states of a synchronization disorder.
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