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## Hands On Painting

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## **Hands on Painting**

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

By

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Master of Fine Arts, Painting and Printmaking, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2015

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## Abstract

### **HANDS ON PAINTING**

Matthew Yaeger, Master of Fine Arts, Painting and Printmaking

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Virginia Commonwealth University, 2015

Major Director: Richard, Roth, Professor, Painting and Printmaking

How can we know something through how it is sensed? Making anthropomorphic, three-dimensional paintings through a set of basic, at-hand materials, I'm interested in how empathy, modesty, and doubt can mediate a tangible experience of an object. Challenging notions of perception, I want to create a heightened sense of awareness in which the intangible can be seen or felt.

## Hands on Painting

New formalism, zombie formalism, new figuration, provisional, sincere, networked, and atemporal are just several titles recent painting trends have been given. It seems that as quickly as new trends are named they immediately become suspect. A constant in reviews and criticism is an anxiety towards defining what painting should be within the ongoing struggle between painting as profitable equity and artistic endeavor. In a 2014 article Jerry Saltz claims that “A large swath of the art being made today is being driven by the market, and specifically by not very sophisticated speculator-collectors who prey on their wealthy friends and their friends’ wealthy friends, getting them to buy the same look--alike art.”<sup>1</sup> Although there is a case in point, the side effects of so much recent writing is that it focuses on trend and market bashing which draws further attention to the problem rather than pulling attention away through what can be positively written about.

In reality, what painting means now is still being written. Even though we can see specific periods as relevant, artists have historically been looked at with their entire careers in mind. Rather than riding on the anxiety of performing in-the-now, perhaps a more productive attitude is to take a firm stance that is long-term and forward looking. A stance that moves forward through its own set of

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<sup>1</sup> Saltz, *Zombies on the Wall, Why Does so Much Abstraction Look the Same?*, Vulture, <http://www.vulture.com/2014/06/why-new-abstract-paintings-look-the-same.html>

questions and motivations rather than an attempt to uphold a long since past avant-garde attitude.

Opposing the notion of painting as a portal for a series of references that continually take the viewer outside of the work through what may or may not be known to them, I'm interested in how tangible experience can constitute a form of knowledge that is experienced through the senses. Mediated through doubt, discovery, and awareness, how can an empirical approach communicate through the body as a way of better knowing out surroundings, each other, and ourselves?

Working against the notion that purity should be the product of reduction, I'm interested in how irregularities within reduction can give solid matter a sense of liveliness. Giving the work anthropomorphic features creates an emotional tone in the work, which opens the possibility for empathy. Within this psychological space, alternatives exist as a presence that is embodied through a set of materials and actions. The combined psychological space of the materials used, the way the object was constructed, and touch experienced through indexical signs, including shape, form, texture, and painted surface, work to create an object that is able to embody a sense of its history and an internalization of feelings. Like a shaman, I'm interested in how an object can be imbued with emotion as a way to experience what is immeasurable or intangible.

## **Brancusi's Studio**



The variation of surface, texture, shape, form, and scale within the close grouping of totemic sculptures give the space of Brancusi's studio rhythm and energy. The raw, carved forms are able to embody a sense of liveliness through a relationship "between symmetry and aberrant emphasis"<sup>2</sup> and "a complex interplay between pure formal creation and enlivening irregularity."<sup>3</sup>

Asymmetrical features and vibratory radiance give the work a sense of energy that is transcendent of their solid forms.

The equal importance between base and sculpture sets up "an interplay of differences and affinities, which is subject to differing emphases and adds a

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<sup>2</sup> Teja Bach, *Brancusi: The Reality of Sculpture*, in *Constantin Brancusi*, The MIT Press, 1995, pg. 23

<sup>3</sup> Teja Bach, *Brancusi: The Reality of Sculpture*, in *Constantin Brancusi*, The MIT Press, 1995, pg. 23

major new expressive dimension to the sculpture.”<sup>4</sup> Not only do the bases support the work, but through attention to detail and emphasis on form, the bases further dictate how the work is experienced. To use the wood bases as example, they are often larger than the work that is placed on top. These bases often have a flat supportive bottom like feet, a narrower waist and then more supportive top section like a set of shoulders. Through simplification, their slim, towering stack of repetitive, irregular geometric shapes take on a physical presence similar to the body. The work that rests on top of these bases acts as a head that completes the body.

I consider my own studio a space that is filled with life-like energy. Over the past year, the space has slowly filled up with a colorful variety of shapes and forms. Although many works are freestanding, I identify myself to be a painter and not a sculptor. Every aspect of my practice leads up to what can happen with paint on a surface. Painting further emphasizes the number of planes, shape, and posture of each form. Moving between suggestion of interior spaces, masks, or ritual-like objects, paint serves to give personality and emotion to the forms.

Maintaining that the end result of each form is unexpected, painting on the surface usually starts blindly. Using the confines of the form as a starting point, line becomes the building block of the spaces and shapes within the paintings. Reiterating the piece-by-piece construction of the forms, paint acts like building blocks that individually act as parts to a whole. Throughout the work there is a

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<sup>4</sup> Teja Bach, *Brancusi: The Reality of Sculpture*, in *Constantin Brancusi*, The MIT Press, 1995, pg. 26

strong sense of stacking and overlapping of forms and line, which frames in and gives structure to space.

Giving a painting form and volume opens opportunity for characteristics such as shape, weight and posture to give the paintings anthropomorphic features. Gestures such as tipping, twisting, standing, leaning, floating, pointing, and textures such as smoothness, lumpiness, and dryness combined with characteristics of painting, such as color, are able to embody the work with lived feelings and emotions. Making paintings that are three-dimensional gives the defining characteristics of painting, such as color, line, and shape a body to inhabit.

In the work, presence is most immediate in the rough, weathered, haptic, pieced together appearance of the work. This presence allows the effects of decision-making through actions to be experienced long after they have been performed. Touch, combined with the child-like associations of the materials gives the work a sense of playful energy. Used as basic building blocks added one on top of the next, wood shims are able to occupy an imaginative state of mind that would be similar to using Legos or Lincoln Logs.

In the human-scale work *A-Way*, the slightly curved vertical edge make the painting seem like it is leaning to one side. Because this is an asymmetrical feature that pulls up and outward from the rest of the form it creates the sensation of leaning or mimics a gesture of extension such as a raised hand. The surface of *A-Way* is structurally lumpy and rigid with a dry, brittle texture, which makes the work feel aged and fragile. Because the painting is handled very

differently from one side to the next, the front and back offer a contrast that makes the painting seem like it has split personalities, or that there is more to them than what initially meets the eye. This two-sided contrast gives the painting a sense of indifference, like reading into a facial gesture that rests doubtfully between a smile and a frown.

Like other works, color acts not only to control space and distinguish form, but also embodies the work with an emotional tone. In this case, the monochromatic, red side feels, soft and weathered. The thin, sanded down layers of color are soaked into the surface and emphasize the underlying staples and edges of the shims. The rhythm and relief on the surface makes the soft, dissipating red color seem to radiate outward in an anxious moment.





Viewed in space, works can often not be seen all at once. Within a single installation, the variety of forms and placement in space encourage a sense of discovery between the work and the viewer. Gaze and movement shift as paintings change from vertical to horizontal orientations and meet the body at different heights. Visible, negative spaces, inside and underneath certain works offer incentive to look further as they reveal how the works are constructed. The varying height and display method of each work changes how they are perceived.

Using the thesis exhibition as example, the low height of the tables emphasizes the hand held quality of the wedge paintings. Through their scale, the small wedge paintings resemble masks while the large wedge painting are



more architectural or monolithic. Seen from the side, the twisting ridges and valleys of the line painting make it seem topographical. Seen from the front, the horizontal orientation and radiating color that reflects onto the wall give the sensation of a sunset or sunrise on a horizon line. The placement of the circle painting up high emphasizes the feeling of weight that the downward arching white brushstroke has. The sensation of having to look up at a round shape places the painting within familiar context of the sun, moon, or a clock.



The tables, pedestals, and easels further define the paintings that rest on top of them. Presence, such as the depressions on the surfaces and curving in of edges of the tables exaggerate the weight of the paintings. The different legs of the tables place them into different contexts. Using sawhorses references shops, garages, or work sites. In comparison, the Use of simple, round, wood dowels

references design and the domestic. The simplification of the wood easels into legs, a waist, and neck give the paintings that rest on top of them a body to rest on.



### **Language Poetry**

L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry, or as it later became simplified to, Language Poetry, is known for the shift away from voice and an opening towards

reader interpretation through a focus on revealing the conventions of writing and reading. To briefly describe the interests of this group, their writing was a response to poets associated with, what would later be termed, the New American Poetry<sup>5</sup>. Writers under the larger term include Frank O Hara, John Ashbery, Allen Ginsberg, and Denise Levertov. Their main influences were in jazz music, surrealism and the work of the abstract expressionist painters who were working at the time of their writing. The poets of The New American Poetry are most interested in spoken and everyday language.

Shifting their emphasis to the materiality of writing and reading, the Language poets sought out a “dismissal of ‘voice’” which comes from “the foundational principal of lyric poetry.”<sup>6</sup> This shift places emphasis away from the persona of the author and towards the reader’s role in bringing meaning out of a work through emphasis on metonymy, synecdoche, and paratactical structure.

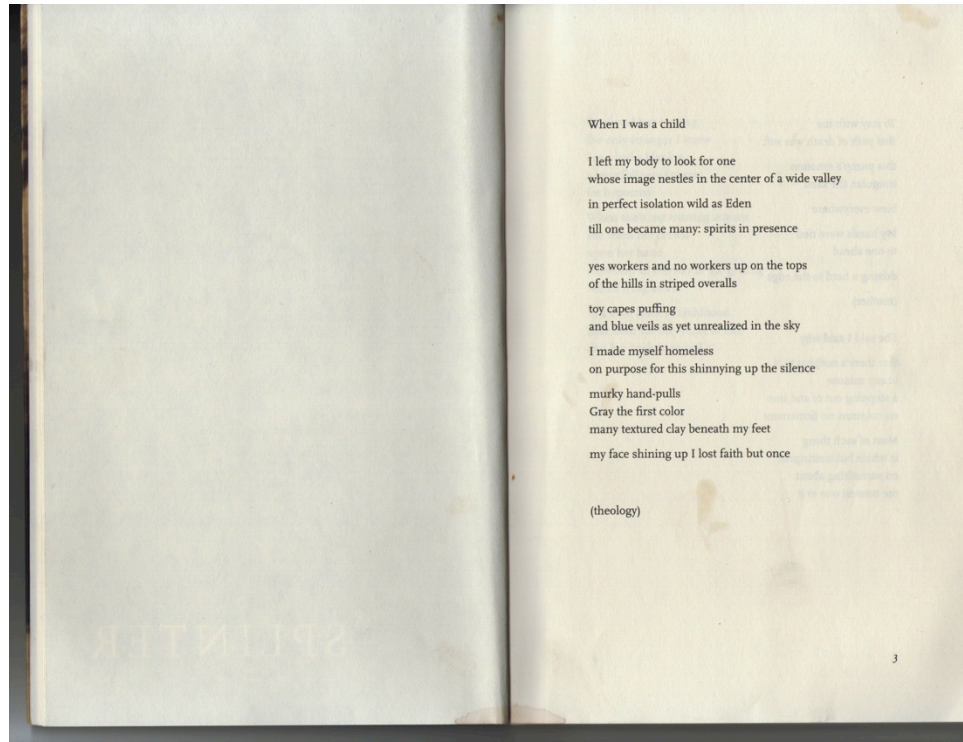
Looking at a selection from Fanny Howe’s 2003 book titled *Gone*, Howe’s writing is sensual, playful and nomadic. The strength of her work comes in the relationship of parts to a whole. Her use of short and concise lines gives every word feeling and presence. Experience is both vivid and fragmented as she often is stepping from one experience and into the next with no transition or warning. This nomadic way of writing carries through her books of poetry as she often moves from poem to poem with no title creating an ambiguity of where one poem

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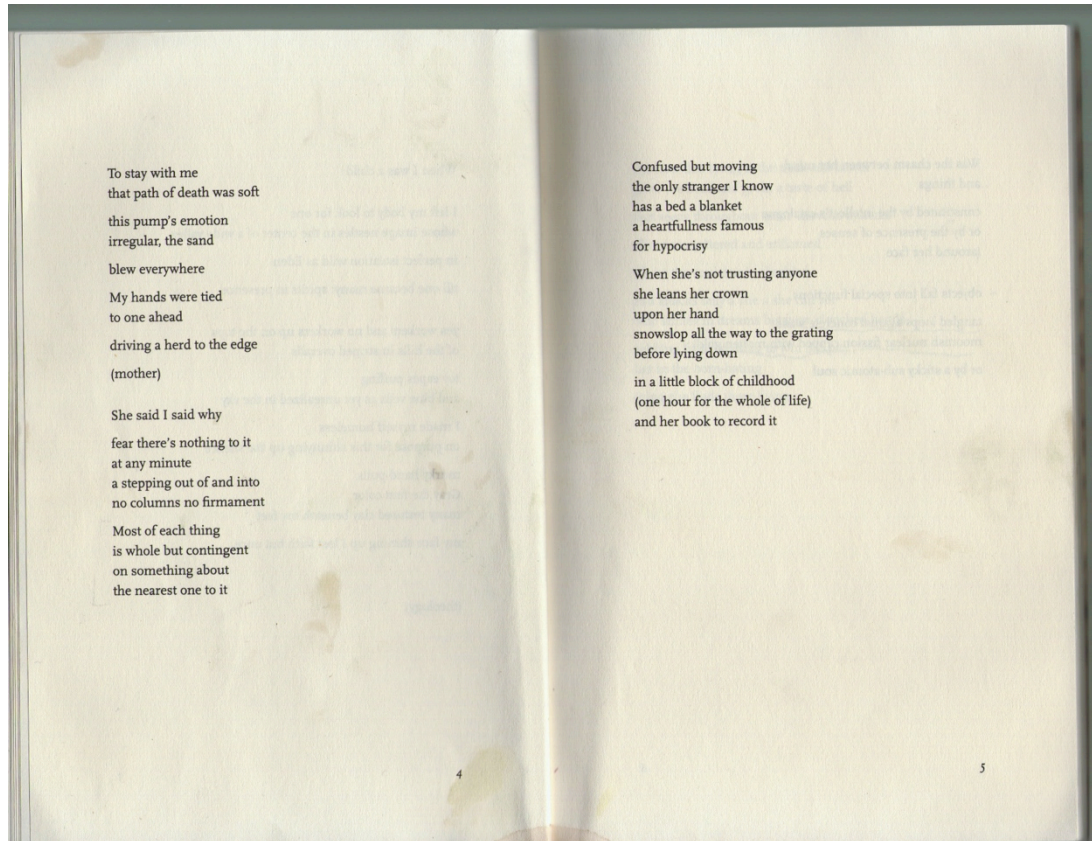
<sup>5</sup> The New American Poetry was an anthology edited by Donald Allen in 1960. The anthology includes a combination of poets from the New York School, Black Mountain College, and San Francisco Renaissance group of poets.

<sup>6</sup> Perloff, *Language Poetry and the Lyric Subject: Ron Silliman’s Albany, Susan Howe’s Buffalo*, The University of Buffalo, 1998, <http://wings.buffalo.edu/epc/authors/perloff/langpo.html>

starts and the next begins. The gaps in her writing are generous as they open up space for the reader to bring in their own associations, allowing them to complete the meaning of each poem.







In opposition to painting as a flat image, which serves as a portal to other references, I'm interested in disrupting regular ways of ascribing meaning. Through a relationship between the painted surface and tactile quality of the work I want to create an experience that is sensed more than cerebral. Like the language poets, I'm interested in the viewer's role in completing meaning. Through abstraction and ambiguity I want a space of not knowing to exist in which reduction and metaphor can become defining of the sensual qualities of the work.

In a similar way that paratactical structure is used by poets like Fanny Howe, I emphasize a relationship of parts to a whole to challenges notions of perception. Piece-by-piece construction, multiple sides to a single work, and the

use of building-block-like line in the paintings is meant to disrupt the appearance of a unified whole. Covering each of these points later on, they make the work seem simultaneously stable and unstable physically and psychological. Emotions can be sensed as external, internal, and are reciprocal between the work and the viewer.



### **Dislocating the Sign**

As a teenager I spent a lot of time skateboarding with friends. What was most exciting was the new way that the world was reflected back at me. No longer were stairs for only walking up or down, they could also be skipped

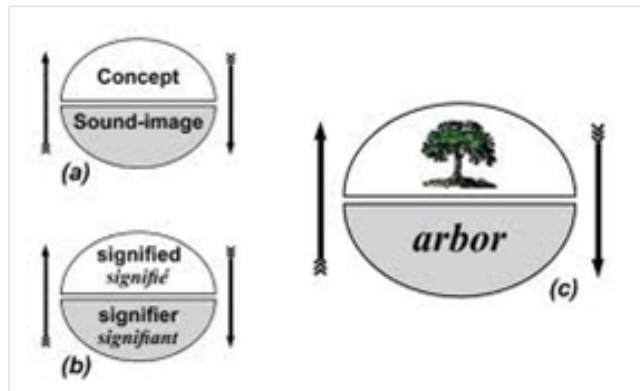
entirely by jumping over them. Driving around town we were always on the lookout for “new spots.” We would pile in a car and purposefully find new streets and alleyways we had never been down before. We unknowingly were on one of Guy Debord’s derives in search of sections of angled concrete, gaps, drops, stairways, etc.

Looking back, skateboarding was always exciting most immediately as an act of teenage rebellion and defiance, and less immediately, although now more importantly, as a way of thinking through seeing. In the process of seeing beyond the intended uses of my surroundings, the mundane became “new” again. The language of skateboarding became the way that the world was interacted with. Through seeing things in a different way, the landscape re-presented itself making me more aware of my surroundings along with the underlying structures and relativity that surrounds.

Questions of categorization, the function of conventions, and the forming of meaning have been ongoing focuses within my work. Using semiotics as a way to understand how meaning is formed, I’m interested in interrupting the meaning-making process as a way to distance the work from any singular meaning, emphasizing what can be known through sensual experience.

The three major components of semiotics are sign, signifier, and signified. The signified is the physical form that the sign takes. Using the example of a tree, the signified would be the physical object of the tree. The signifier is the concept that the signified represents which takes the form of a word, thus the word “tree”.

The combination of these two elements forms a seemingly irreducible relationship that works to form the sign.



To dislocate a sign from its meaning occurs through a break between the signified and signifier. Derrida acknowledges the significance of how signs are made singular through the distinguishing of difference through the concept of the trace. Because a sign internally differentiates itself from other signs we are able to recognize the non-meaning of a sign next to it's intended meaning. Although a tree can be categorized under the larger category of plant we would not call it a flower, vegetable, or weed. Since we can recognize the singularity of a sign's meaning next to its non-meaning, there is always the possibility for a shift towards the non-meaning.

In the thesis exhibition, a small work is installed against the opening into the gallery. Placed high up, in close proximity to the exit sign and above the large array of light switches the work rests between being an abstract painting and marker for the doorway. The Black, white and yellow-orange colors give the painting authority. The up and down triangles seem to be directions such as the arrows for an elevator. Placed at an angle with one edge up against and perpendicular to the doorway, the piece stresses the flat space of the wall and



open space of the doorway. Through the close oscillation between poetic placement and authoritative marker this back and forth negotiation keeps meaning open.



### **Cezanne's Doubt**

Writing about the painter Paul Cezanne, Maurice Merleau-Ponty puts an emphasis on the word doubt. The painter's break away from a composition that

uses a single point of perspective and starts to incorporate different points of perspective into the same painting was met personally with indifference and skepticism. He instinctively started to paint objects not in their singularity, but as a relationship of seeing objects next to other objects without distinction, and all at once. Cezanne was attempting to interpret “how objects strike our eyes”<sup>7</sup> setting up the “depiction of matter as it takes on form” through “perspectival disruption as contributing to how we see.”<sup>8</sup> This places emphasis on perception as through the body, moving in between objects through different perspectives as opposed to the perception of a unified picture plane through a single point of perspective.

Looking at Cezanne’s painting *Still Life With Basket of Apples* the composition is made up of a table with scattered objects viewed from a standing, look down perspective. The vertical break in the middle of the composition using the blanket, bottle, and two baskets of fruit causes the left and right sides of the front and back edge of the table to be separated. Since there is not a continuous edge to follow to make a straight line the left and right sides of the table edges are depicted at different heights in the composition. Although we can see the entire table in the painting without having to move our eyes Cezanne’s proximity to the still life while painting was too close, limiting how the entirety of the object could be seen. He had to move his eyes when painting the left side of the table and then move them again when painting the right side. Cezanne resists the urge

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<sup>7</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Cezanne’s Doubt*, University of Massachusetts Lowell, <http://faculty.uml.edu/rinnis/cezannedoubt.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Cezanne’s Doubt*, University of Massachusetts Lowell, <http://faculty.uml.edu/rinnis/cezannedoubt.pdf>

to “correct” these moments, combining the disconnected view points required to perceive the table as a singular object into a single image. The result becomes a painting that is disjointed from traditional, Western notions of how space is composed through a single perspectival viewpoint. The result is an attempt at the more natural way we bring things into being through sight. This position places importance on a body-centered idea of perception that is experienced through the subjectivity of an individual subject.



Paul Cezanne, *Still Life With Basket of Apples*, 1890-94

The doubt Cezanne experienced, we all experience. We do not see things so singularly as an outlined object within a space distinct from the other objects that surround it. We actually see things all at once from different perspectival viewpoints. In my work I am interested in the contrast between what is square, level, or straight, and what is slightly unequal, slightly bent, or wonky. Used to

draw unequal emphasis within the reduced forms, these asymmetrical features give the work a sense of motion and liveliness. When used to create an illusion of imbalance, the work becomes precarious. This tipping point keeps the senses alert, and inquisitive. Because the paintings deny the ability to be seen all at once, movement is encouraged, furthering the notion of experience as being body centered.

On the surface, many paintings seem to be structurally sound. The backside of, *Bent and In* is a simple composition made up of horizontal and vertical rectangular shapes against a yellow ground. The space in the painting moves between being a flat space of tightly stacked forms and an inwardly moving space, such as a tunnel, that is supported by arch-like forms. The pieced together quality of the painting through the use of contrasting color between shapes gives importance to the role of parts to the whole. Each piece seems to be wedged into place holding together the space. The red line on the left hand side appears to be pushing in, compressing the space together. The shapes that are stacked together in the center seem to be at their limits, and ready to pop loose. Moving inward from each shape that works to further frame in the space shifts in orientation causing the perspective of how the space is seen to change. Through these perspectival disruptions, our eyes must constantly readjust, making us more aware of how and what we are looking at.







## **Modesty**

Modesty can be described as, “the quality or state of being unassuming, the quality of being relatively moderate, limited, or small in amount, rate, or level.”<sup>9</sup> In my work, I see modesty as a force that is able to draw attention and awareness to the mundane. The use of unassuming materials such as wood shims, carved wood, and paper mache represent a basic and playful attitude towards making and learning that is hands on. Through transformative actions, the materials are able to take on new meaning giving them a reinvigorated appreciation and curiosity. I see value in using everyday materials as they create a heightened sense of awareness through familiar context.

## **Doubt**

Not only does doubt become a foundational way in how we understand perception through the proposed Merleau-Ponty model, but as a psychological state, has strong implications as an ethical position. In Dore Ashton’s critical study of Philip Guston the idea of doubt is brought up throughout the book. Speaking about his own work, Guston said, "doubt is the sharp awareness of the validity of alternatives."<sup>10</sup> The role of doubt in Guston’s work is complex as it resonates on a level with process, content, and interpretation.

On the level of process, doubt can be found throughout Guston’s career. Even in his abstract paintings of the 1950’s “Guston did not care to sink too far

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<sup>9</sup> Google web search, “define: modesty”, google.com

<sup>10</sup> Ashton, *A Critical Study of Philip Guston*, University of California Press, 1990, pg. 2

into the endless; his need for form was always to check that impulse. As James Lawler has written of Valéry, "Doubt leads to form, form to doubt, as criticism and creation become intimately reciprocal."<sup>11</sup> In this way, doubt becomes a guiding creative force in the work. Seen on the surface, traces of the painting's history are left intact. Erasure and pentimenti not only leave evidence of the artistic process, but become the solidification of a moment of change. The static image rests between the past, present, and holds implications for future decisions that can be projected through the content of each painting.

Looking at Philip Guston's *Prospects*, the painting easily presents itself as a whole. Lumpy, wonky forms rest in a pile across what seems to be a landscape. Often, they first appear as horseshoes, but then also seem to be gravestones, body parts, or buildings. The ambiguity of the forms leaves the content of the painting uncertain and in between different meaning. Through ambiguity, the forming of meaning is shifted from the ego of the artist, and generously given to the viewer. "At times, there seems to be no structure at all. No direction. We can move spatially everywhere, as in life." He moves on from here to his affirmation of doubt, so often expressed in other contexts: "Is this painting a vast precaution to avoid total immobility, a wisdom which can include the partial doubt of the final destiny of its forms? It may be this doubt which moves and locates everything."<sup>12</sup> As forms in the painting shift in appearance the scale of the space that surrounds them changes as well. Through the use of

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<sup>11</sup> Ashton, *A Critical Study of Philip Guston*, University of California Press, 1990, pg. 94

<sup>12</sup> Ashton, *A Critical Study of Philip Guston*, University of California Press, 1990, pg. 148



heavy outlining and evident brushstrokes forms can be seen as entirely constructed. The marks are laid bare and start to give way to earlier renditions of the painting. Rather than just an illustration of a narrative, the physicality of a Guston painting reveals the doubt and uncertainty that went into the making. Actions such as erasure and the depiction of ambiguous form shift the emotional tone of doubt in the work from the ego of the artist to the process of negotiation experienced through the subjectivity of the viewer.



Doubt and uncertainty are guiding forces in my work. At first, uncertainty and doubt would seem to be in opposition to any stance. Uncertainty and doubt linger in the space of not knowing. Doubt, as a defining human emotion, is the pre and post condition of difficult decisions we make in our lives. Doubt has the ability to offer a possibility for alternatives as it exists in the space of what is not yet given. Represented as a moment of choice, doubt becomes an empowering

force, which suggests a need for change. In this sense, uncertainty and doubt become defining traits of resistance. The creation of doubt can become a generous act.

Intentionally denying a sense of clarity when making the paintings, I search for forms that are able to shift between occupying different meanings, continually revealing themselves to be different than what they initially seem. Complicating this ambiguity is the interplay between the two dimensional and the three dimensional. The work *Hide Out, Around, Inside* has four painted surfaces, two different profiles, and a pair of holes that look through the side of the painting. Because the painting is not able to be experience all at once, it must be walked around with the memory of the opposite side in mind when viewing the other. The two main faces are painted in different ways. Each side is able to appear both flat and like a space that has depth. The illusions to space on the front and back of the painting appear to be squished-in or compressed by the bent-in sides. When viewed from the side, the painting comes to a point that cuts into the space that surrounds it. The slight twist, and uneven width of this profile stands in contrast to the sense of level, equal order that the room represents. Looking through the opening, a clear view to the other side is offered, and the wood shim construction of the painting can be seen. These interior spaces are significant as they are contained and separate themselves from the rest of the painting. I'm interested in this separation as it creates the possibility for different psychological spaces. The external is able to wear itself as what can be seen,

and the internal suggests an intangible space, which is projected. The series of contrasts within this painting give doubt to any one summation.





### **Attitude Towards Material**

Having a background in construction I see many parallels between paint as a plastic medium and the process of building a home through materials. Basic construction materials such as wood, concrete, and polystyrene foam not only have strength through their individual sensual qualities but also through the actions and uses that are embedded in their meaning. A statement that I wrote from this past fall illustrates the complicated and meticulous nature of construction working:

*“From the years I worked construction I remember a house we built on an open field during winter. The way the snowy field contrasted with the openings of the joined wood studs of the framing gave a clear impression of the skeleton-like structure. All could be seen: where the walls met the*

*concrete, the spacing of the studs, the crisscross of floor truss and rafters, as well as the headers over window and doorway openings. Every nail into every joist and stud became a sign of intention. Slowly, plywood, Tyvek, doors, windows, aluminum siding, and shingles covered these openings. The multiple languages of the construction site had merged into a single, sealed form: a veiled system of materials on which a continuous surface pulled the parts into a nearly undistinguishable whole.”*

The use of wood shims, carved lumber, and processes such as stapling and gluing represent a make-do type of attitude. Rather than working in the fastest way possible to achieve the forms, I desire a slower method that is harder to achieve. The repetitive way of making works through shims and carving creates a semi-meditative, half-mindless space. Through this machine-like process, attention occasionally slips, allowing failure to produce unexpected results.

The wood shim is a precision tool with practical uses such as to prop up, make level, stabilize, spread apart, or support. Rather than constructing a form through the most efficient and straightforward means, such as plywood in the case of the wedge paintings, the shim becomes the building block for many of the forms in my work. Using a material that would most likely be at-hand, and found in the home or at a job site creates a sense of urgency, as the shim is illogical, or counter-intuitive to constructing the forms.

Although the three dimensional forms are reductive in overall form, the use of low-brow materials and wonky appearance gives the work a sense of playfulness. Through the alchemical act of transforming the material from a utilitarian object into a work of art, the wood shim starts to take on a life of its own giving them a renewed interest.

With context in a blue-collar set of values, the materials I use emphasize an attitude of care and pride through a hands-on approach that promotes craft and resourcefulness as markers of value. Attention to the sanding of surfaces, making edges straight, the physics of making works stand up, and where the edges of tables are rounded or angled is evidence of attention to craft.

The use of paper mache shares with the wood shim a sense of resourcefulness as the ingredients are most likely stocked and at-hand in the home. In contrast, paper mache is a child-like material, which gives the work a sense of play and discovery. Paper mache creates a dry, brittle surface, which is fragile and smooth like stone or bone giving the work a primitive feel making it seem aged or weathered through use.

Covering the wood structures with paper mache hides how they are constructed, which makes the sense of urgency through constructing with wood shims seem bashful, ashamed, or desperate. In covering the forms, the totality of how each work is constructed becomes pushed back. Left visible as surface relief, implications of an interior offer a contrast to external appearances. This implication creates the possibility for an internal psychology of emotions and gives the work reference to ritualistic objects, reliquary vessels, handbags, and masks. My intention is to imbue the same amount of energy and personality into the paintings as the Egyptian artists who made sarcophagi.





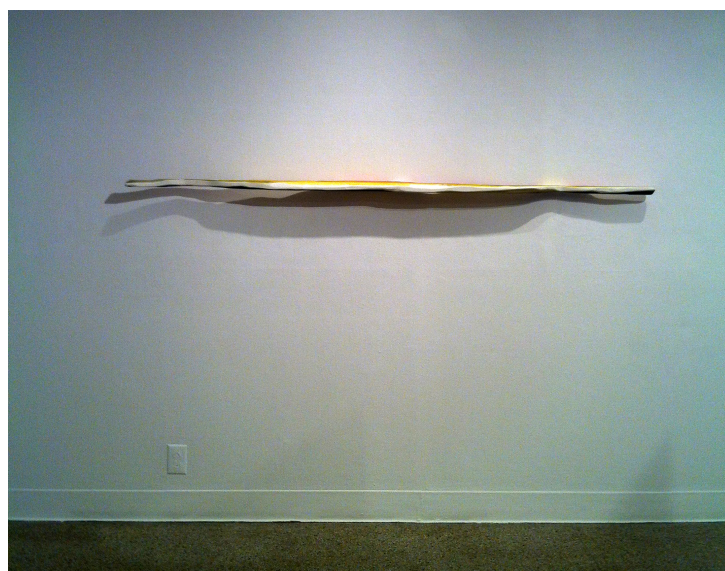
## Form

The wedge has been a primary form in my work. Doorstops, sandwich board signs, ramps and axe heads are common utilitarian uses of the wedge. The wedge has five sides, is able to stand upright through its own weight, and comes to a point making the two main surfaces angle outward from the top. This last feature has been important, as the wedge is often not perfectly in balance. It usually leans to the side, front, back, or to a single corner. Each painting is held in a precarious moment of balance. The sensation of something that seems to be at a tipping point often causes us to be startled and alert. Realizing that the

object is not falling, but somehow defying gravity, embodies the paintings with a sense of will.

The wedge cannot be viewed all it once. Walking around to the other side a memory of the other has to be taken with the viewer. Often painting one side significantly different than the other, the idea that a painting could be two-face creates a contrast to first expectations.

Forms outside of the wedge are painted through a different set of concerns. The horizontal, carved wood, line paintings are painted with their eye level, horizontal orientation in mind. Viewed from the front, color appears as a thin line that rests on top and behind the form. The use of bright color is meant to reflect against the wall as if seeing the heat rise off the surface in the desert, or the soft dissipating light of a sunset. This radiating effect combined with the drop shadow of the form makes it seem to hover out and away from the wall. When viewing the work from the side the work becomes more topographical and the full width of each brush mark can be seen.







The tables that hold the wedge paintings at first glance seem to be a straightforward method of presentation. The precarity and sense of energy of the paintings is exaggerated by alterations to the tables. The depressions into the surface of the tables where the paintings rest emphasize their sense of weight. To further this effect, corners are sanded to a rounded edge, and sides are slightly curved or cut at angles that are not square. The legs of the table are carved to appear that they are bending. Viewed from the front, the curved or bent edges of the tables, intersected by the form of the painting, make the edge seem disjointed. The combination of these alterations make the tables seem subject to the forces of weight, and gravity that the paintings they hold up imply.

### **Improvisation and Slapstick**

By definition, to improvise means “to speak or perform without preparation” or “to make or create (something) by using whatever is available.”<sup>13</sup> Popular cultural examples include jazz music and improv comedy. In a more everyday setting, improvisation takes the form of quick fixes through unconventional means. Improvisation often necessitates alternatives. As a way of performing, improvisation aligns itself with uncensored creativity that is able to draw otherwise not yet known connections.

Stuck in a tight pinch, trying to save the day MacGyver often has to turn to a rubber band or his “old trusty paperclip” to stop some doomsday device from exploding. He upholds the position of “the classical tragic hero” as he “acts purposefully and forcefully, and ultimately sacrifices himself in order to enforce a resolution.”<sup>14</sup> He is an archetype of the American engineer that prides himself on solving problems in the moment and on the go. MacGyver conforms to what Jan Verwoert would call a “yes I can” model of performance. An attitude in which the creative thinker must constantly adapt to changing conditions in order to be successful. This type of attitude is demanding and exhausting for the person who plays it out.

In comparison, Charlie Chaplin embodies the idea of improvisation from a different perspective. Jorg Heiser describes improvisation in Chaplin as a tool of slapstick. “Chaplin’s slapstick for example – reverses this logic” of the heroic “by

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<sup>13</sup> Webster, Webster-Merriam online dictionary, word search: “improvise”, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/improvise>

<sup>14</sup> Heiser, *Curb Your Romanticism: Bas Jan Ader’s Slapstick, The Artist’s Joke, White Chapel Documents of Contemporary Art*, The MIT Press, 2007, pg. 86

relying on comic mishaps that inadvertently result in heroic deeds.”<sup>15</sup> Chaplin’s character often loses his balance and relies on what is close-by to keep him standing. Props become symbolic objects of improvisation and resistance. “In Chaplin’s *The Tramp* (1915), the title character is charmed by the farmer’s daughter who has just escaped from a trio of robbers. As he flirts awkwardly with her, he swings his ragbag containing a brick and, one by one, inadvertently hits each of her assailants over the head. Increasingly aware of his unintentional bravery, he rises to the challenge and bluffs until even the strongest of the three is sent packing in the belief that he has encountered an undefeatable strongman.

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With a rough idea of what I would like each form to look like, wood shims are glued and stapled together until the form is resolved in terms of shape and balance. Through this slow addition of shims the forms often start to shift away from their intended shapes. Rather than fix these “mistakes” they are used to inform how the form will be completed. Using wood shims to build an otherwise straightforward sculptural form opens up opportunity for shifts in balance to slowly form and be adjusted. As the works are often built lying down, unexpected formal relationships go unnoticed. Instances such as curving, and unevenly joined edges cause bottom corners to lift off the ground once standing up.

In my work, improvisation positions itself as a stance towards resourcefulness that does not strive towards the heroic. To return to Verwoert’s

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<sup>15</sup> Heiser, *Curb Your Romanticism: Bas Jan Ader’s Slapstick, The Artist’s Joke, White Chapel Documents of Contemporary Art*, The MIT Press, 2007, pg. 87

<sup>16</sup> Heiser, *Curb Your Romanticism: Bas Jan Ader’s Slapstick, The Artist’s Joke, White Chapel Documents of Contemporary Art*, The MIT Press, 2007, pg. 87

essay, he proposes an attitude that is resistant to the demands of a high-performance culture in which “we are required to get our act together and get things done, in any place, at any time.”<sup>17</sup> This model of alternatives offers “the possibility for other possibilities” which points “to all other options outside the given regime of options imposed on social life by the dominant system of government.”<sup>18</sup> In opposition, I am interested in a model of resourcefulness that purposefully fails to perform at a high standard in terms of labor or efficiency of material means. For me, this space of a “not-yet-given” represents a shift away from what can be translatable and towards what is intangible.

## **Conclusion**

In making anthropomorphic, three-dimensional paintings I seek to understand how the psychological space of materials and actions can define an object. Through abstraction, I try to create an experience of not knowing which opens itself to doubt and metaphor. Through presence and variation of form, bases, and placement I seek to activate the senses so that they become more attentive to their surroundings. Giving paintings personality through posture and implied gestures creates the possibility for empathy and care. In creating a relationship to the interior from the exterior I hope to open a space for experiencing what may be intangible or immeasurable.

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<sup>17</sup> Verwoert, *Exhaustion and Exuberance, Tell Me What You Want, What you Really, Really Want*, Sternberg Press, 2010, pg.13

<sup>18</sup> Verwoert, *Exhaustion and Exuberance, Tell Me What You Want, What you Really, Really Want*, Sternberg Press, 2010, pg.26

In the face of a further externalization of our experiences through technology, such as virtual reality headsets like the Oculus Rift, I want to maintain a connection to the results of our actions that can be experienced in a tangible way. Using low-brow materials becomes a way to connect art making to life that carries with it an attitude towards alternatives. In leaving the solidification of actions as a tactile experience I want the results of choice to be felt. In moving forward with this body of work I hope to better understand how knowing through the senses can become a worldview in which tangible experiences become defining of how we relate to our surroundings, each other, and ourselves.

### Image List (in order of appearance)

Constantine Brancusi, *View of the Studio, Endless Columns, Mademoiselle Pogany [II]*, 1925

*A-Way*, Oil on paper over wood, 70"x 56"x8", 2015

*A-Way*, Oil on paper over wood, 70"x 56"x8", 2015

Installation view #1, MFA thesis exhibition, Anderson Gallery, VCU, April 2015

*The Heavy Points*, Oil on paper over wood with wood, 68"x15"x12", 2015

Scanned image, Fanny Howe, *Splinter, Gone*, University of California Press, 2003, pg. 3

Scanned image, Fanny Howe, *Splinter, Gone*, University of California Press, 2003, pg. 4-5

*Untitled*, Flashe on paper over wood, 67"x49"x12", 2015

Screenshot, Semiotic diagram,

<https://diaryofamedia girl.files.wordpress.com/2013/02/picture1.png>

Installation View #2, MFA thesis exhibition, Anderson Gallery, VCU, April 2015

Paul Cezanne, *Still Life With Basket of Apples*, 1890-94

*Bent Inward* (back view), Oil on paper over wood, 20"x14"x4", 2015

*Bent Inward* (front view), Oil on paper over wood, 20"x14"x4", 2015

Philip Guston, *Prospects*, 1977

*Hide Out, Around, Inside*, oil on paper over wood, 93"x81"x8", 2015

*Hide Out, Around, Inside*, oil on paper over wood, 93"x81"x8", 2015

*Hide Out, Around, Inside* (detail), oil on paper over wood, 93"x81"x8", 2015

*Hide Out, Around, Inside* , oil on paper over wood, 93"x81"x8", 2015

Screenshot, Tutankhamen's sarcophagus, <http://pixgood.com/real-egyptian-sarcophagus.html>

*White Budding*, oil on carved wood, 96"x6"x1.75", 2015

*White Budding (detail)*, oil on carved wood, 96"x6"x1.75", 2015

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