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THE BIRD

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THE BIRD

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

by

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Abstract

THE BIRD

By Kate Kisicki MFA

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Virginia Commonwealth University, 2009

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I have always approached my paintings with confidence. Mark making has always been my strength, particularly in drawing, and I feel this comes through in my gestural use of the paint. I also believe I approach paintings in a trial and error manner, where experimentation has precedence over concept. To remain in the moment and focused on what I am doing at that moment is a fundamental base of both my process and, interestingly what the resulting image translates to the viewer. To know this, and to remain suspended in this moment requires a foundation of trust within my capabilities and

myself. Approaching each new surface, I test various methods of applying paint. The successful methods prove to be ones that allow me to continuously build the surface into a coherent image. These methods I choose from, sometimes in sequences, as obstructions, or as starting points. In each painting, I begin differently, even if it is just a different colored ground. I have found the most success in starting with a specific method, one that exists in isolation, as a starting point.

I believe that too often, I look for answers outside myself instead of looking within. I do not seek a linear trajectory for painting, and my own work, though ironically specific to its medium, should not be categorized into a neat package. If my brush is an extension of myself, then what I think and feel comes through as my own thoughts and feelings.

The Bird

The sound of the door slamming must have startled the bird into chirping; otherwise you would have missed it over the humming fan. But now that you have noticed its presence, you remember the small bunch of birds howling to each other in the tree outside over the droning train in the distance. Perhaps you saw it fly in after all? The window being so small, you are surprised at its curiosity and its naiveté. How would it get out now? You are going to have to get someone to help. Could you somehow coax it back out the window from where it came? It flutters around in the steel ceiling, a similar palette in its breast and wings. It hovers around the plants on the shelf above the window, momentarily nesting in a fern. Knowing that in time it will starve inside, you begin to conjure ideas of capture. What if its shits on something of value? You hurriedly climb atop a tabletop, and stand, waiting for it to land in the plant again. At this angle, you meet the beady yet somehow empathetic eyes of your new companion. Lifting, it hovers and lands, yet always beyond your reach. The pleasure of the moment has given way to anxiety, your mind searching for possibilities. Its cheerful grey head pokes out before fluttering around like some kind of idea. It will not land and you are running out of time. Perhaps it can find its own way out, you hope. You need to leave now, and with a heavy heart, you descend and make your way back out of the room. Maybe the next time you come back it won't be here anymore. Or maybe it will be here, dead, somewhere.

Trust

I have always approached my paintings with confidence. Mark making has always been my strength, particularly in drawing, and I feel this comes through in my gestural use of the paint. I also believe I approach paintings in a trial and error manner, where experimentation has precedence over concept. However, that is not to say I am not thinking about anything while I paint. To remain in the moment and focused on what I am doing at that moment is a fundamental base of both my process and, interestingly what the resulting image translates to the viewer. To know this, and to remain suspended in this moment requires a foundation of trust within my capabilities and myself.



Black or White, 2007
26.5 x 14 inches
Latex, acrylic, and ink on masonite.

The Element of Chance

Approaching each new surface, I test various methods of applying paint. The successful methods prove to be ones that allow me to continuously build the surface into a coherent image. These methods I choose from, sometimes in sequences, as obstructions, or as starting points. In each painting, I begin differently, even if it is just a different colored ground. I have found the most success in starting with a specific method, one that exists in isolation, as a starting point.

I did not always work this way. I often began paintings wildly, covering the entire surface with varied mediums. To work in this way did not open the painting up, instead it narrowed the possibilities for future surfaces from the beginning, and the paintings became suffocated, jam-packed, and incoherent. Much of my first year graduate work became these “all-over” paintings, where color was not specific, spatial references became unclear, and material usage was unorthodox. Household latex, spray paint, my own collaged drawings, and “oops” paint sat alongside oil, markers, ink and acrylic. I was experimenting with surface as well; I used recycled paintings, panels, and found objects on which to paint. I wanted to add to the literal and metaphorical history embedded within painting. However, because my own process of working was not yet clear to me, I could not focus my abilities on singular methods.



2 OOPS, 2007
Latex on canvas.
40 x 30 inches

Artists that I most heavily identified with included Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner, Cecily Brown and Casper David Fredrich.

What attracted me to Pollock and Krasner was their technique of moving the paint around within their own respective gestural experimentation. I loved that each canvas was a new ground on which to build the image, and I responded by approaching my own paintings in the same way



Untitled, 1951
Jackson Pollock



Night Creatures, 1965
Lee Krasner
Acrylic on paper
30 x 42.5 inches

Similarly, I enjoyed Brown's searching use of the paint, but also her injection of the personal and figurative approach. I also loved her subject matter: things that were both personal and universal, and sometimes explicit.



The Girl Who Had Everything, 1998
Cecily Brown
Oil on Linen
100 x 109.8 inches

Regarding the personal and universal, Friedrich had always fascinated me, as well as Romanticism and the Sublime. I never had considered myself a Romantic, but for the

first time was seriously considering the motivating devices of both landscape painting and the Sublime.



The Monk by the Sea, 1808-1810
Caspar David Friedrich
Oil on canvas
43.3 x 67.5 inches



con safos, 2008
Oil and spray paint on canvas.
87 x 75 inches

Choosing Your Own Adventure

Because my experimentation was not readily accepted, I began to question its validity. I did not know why my paintings evoked an image of a landscape, and I was not ready to accept my working process as one of experimentation. I did not believe I was expressing anything, and began to rely on purely formal guidelines beginning my second year. Color became even more arbitrary to me, and gesture became reserved, if expressed at all. This is reflected most heavily at the end of my first semester, second year, when my paintings seem the most dead to me. I was embracing my paintings as an end to the creation of true emotive gesture; its caricature. I believed I was part of the linear trajectory of painting, and that because abstract figuration was not new, nor were my paintings groundbreaking, I was giving up. And the paintings reflected this.



Untitled, 2009
Latex and spray paint on canvas.

Landscape as Motivator

What brought me back to painting began with photography. I enjoyed photographing the landscape, oftentimes sites of detritus or decay, places of mankind's flops and frumpy pilings. What began as photography morphed into collage, and from there I made the jump into digital printing of various kinds. I looked at landscape with fresh eyes, as a place of endless possibility and fell in love again. I had remembered.



FRUMP!, 2008
Collage
5.5 x 4 inches

Painting became an extension of myself onto a surface. Color began to take center stage as I experimented with solid color grounds on which to begin. I began to isolate particularly successful processes, such as transparency, dripping, spraying, and the ever-important gesture. Yet these processes were allowed to exist in their own respects; I no longer crammed every imaginable technique I could think of into each painting.

As a result, the developing painting became more and more a real, sculpted space where paint existed. I was no longer painting landscapes, I was sculpting landscapes of paint.



Memory Sea, 2009
Latex and oil on canvas.
50 x 37.5 inches

My shifting perspective was also reflected in the artists I was most interested in, such as Jennifer Steinkamp and Sigmar Polke.

Steinkamp's creation of what I consider virtual landscapes appealed to me most, as well as her subject matter, medium and style. I loved her newest body of work, particularly the images that were of pulsing and swaying garlands of various types of flowers.



It's a Nice Day for a White Wedding. Pink and Blue, 2008
Jennifer Steinkamp
Video Installation

I also loved her more “abstract” works, such as swarming clouded masses (*Left Clavicle*) because it appealed to my own interests in abstracting.



Left Clavicle, 2008
Jennifer Steinkamp
Video Installation

Polke appealed to me because of his unconventional usage of materials, his ability to recombine images in consistently interesting ways, and his materials he used, such as semi-transparent canvas, screen-printing, paint, and collage.



Untitled, 1983
Sigmar Polke
Mixed media on paper
26.8 x 18.9 inches

These unconventional artists inspired me to incorporate similar tactics to my own methods of painting. I was no longer afraid to make a “bad” painting, and these artists helped me realize what it is I really like about painting in the first place.

Enigmatic Figuration

Once I had realized how my paintings were developing, I needed a way to continue to reexamine the same problem. What I always had loved about landscape was the horizon line. I loved to play with this idea: that referencing a particular spatial illusion could draw the image of space. I felt this played into ideologies that I had always wanted to talk about, but wasn't sure how. So, the best way I could approach this topic was visually, and I began to subvert, deconstruct, reverse, and explode the horizon line. This proved to be an endlessly interesting idea for me, because I was able to animate my paintings in accordance with how they were created. The building up of certain processes within the literal and figurative space gave way to spatial illusions, which I could or could not continue to build upon. I became in control of how my paintings looked in a way I never had been before, and somehow, this control had given way to more freedom, more experimentation, and more improvisation.



100%, 2009
Latex, acrylic, oil on canvas
90 x 49 inches

Improvisational Obstructions

This is not to say I did not create some stinkers. I threw away more paintings this last semester of my second year than in any other year. What began as improvisation soon could become fodder for a machine that oftentimes collapsed under itself.

Another element of landscape that I relied upon was borrowed from Taoist thinking: that the best way to look in is out. I believe that too often, I look for answers outside myself instead of looking within. My experience at Virginia Commonwealth University has proven this to me, and so has my development of my paintings. I do not seek a linear trajectory for painting, and my own work, though ironically specific to its medium, should not be categorized into a neat package. The third element to the puzzle of painting as process, material, and image is myself, the artist. Whether or not I choose to make myself foremost in my paintings is something I like to keep private, but I play a pivotal role in their creation. If my brush is an extension of myself, then what I think and feel comes through as my own thoughts and feelings.



3 Flavors, 2009
Latex, acrylic, collage, spray paint, oil on canvas
56 x 48 inches

The Bird

I like to think of my thoughts as a bird caught in a room. I try to catch the bird but to no avail, because it is elusive and I am ill equipped. Feelings of the sublime can come and go and freedom is waiting outside. Yet to capture the bird is a mistake that I no longer try to make, and I know it is better to trust that the bird is capable of making its way back outside.

VITA

Kate Kisicki was born and raised in Cleveland, Ohio, in the United States of America. She obtained her Bachelor's of Fine Art in May, 2007 at the Cleveland Institute of Art in Cleveland, Ohio. She will be obtaining her Master's of Fine Art in May, 2009 at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, Virginia.

Honors and awards include; the Fairmount Fine Arts Center Spring Art Show, 2002, the Erin Rachel Pincus Foundation Award for Painting, 2002-03, the Sybil J. Gould '31 Scholarship for Excellence in Drawing and Graphic Arts, 2004-05, the Carl Gaertner '24 Memorial Painting Prize, 2005-06, the Norita Wyse Berman Memorial Award for Excellence in Painting, 2006-07, and the Joseph McCullough '48 Scholarship for Excellence in Painting, 2006-07.

Exhibitions include; the Cleveland Institute of Art, Student Coffee House Space, Cleveland, Ohio: *Collections*, 2003, the Cleveland Institute of Art, Reinberger Galleries, Cleveland, Ohio: *Student Independent Exhibition*, 2005, the E. Gordon Gallery, Cleveland, Ohio: *I Had Too Much to Dream Last Night*, 2005, the Cleveland Institute of Art, Reinberger Galleries, Cleveland, Ohio: *Student Independent Exhibition*, 2006, Kent State, Ohio: *Three Way Show*, 2006, the Cleveland Institute of Art, Cleveland, Ohio: *Painting Girls Jamboree*, 2006, the E. Gordon Gallery, Cleveland, Ohio: *Farewell*, 2006, the Cleveland Foundation, Cleveland, Ohio: *Heteratopia*, 2006, the Wooltex Gallery, Cleveland, Ohio: *Come Closer*, 2007, the FAB Gallery of Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia: *Unanimous Head Apparatus*, 2007, Plant Zero of Virginia

Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia: *LIFT OFF!*, 2008, Zygote Press,
Cleveland, Ohio: *Mixed Media Me*, 2008, the Anderson Gallery of Virginia
Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia, *Master's of Fine Art Thesis Exhibition*,
Round 1, 2009.

Publications include: *Poictesme: VCU Literary Journal*. Richmond: Virginia
Commonwealth University, May, 2008.