Perspectives

Beatrice Modisett

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PERSPECTIVES

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

By
Beatrice Modisett
BFA Montserrat College of Art 2007
MFA Virginia Commonwealth University 2016

Director: Holly Morrison
Associate Professor, Painting and Printmaking

Virginia Commonwealth University
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ABSTRACT

PERSPECTIVES

By Beatrice Modisett, MFA

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

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2015

Major Director: Holly Morrison, Associate Professor, Painting and Printmaking

My paintings are linked to a thirst for exploring new landscapes and perspectives, my interest in the extremes and subtleties of geological phenomenon and a desire to create, chase after, and teeter on a brink. Here I will discuss these topics and work to unpack my interest in avoiding comfort, my relationship to control and the creation and function of my paintings. To extract myself from my tactile and visual world of process and paint and enter the world of written language presents very different challenges than the ones fostered in the studio. The goal in both is to reveal the overlaps and complexities of the issues I am researching and to embrace any contradictions not as ambiguity, but as migrating, nutritious sediment; ever changing particles that can be examined again and again as their intersection with a historical and contemporary discourse evolves.
I actively seek out new ways to view the world around me and experience as many extremes and subtleties as I can. I dive under waves, lean to look over the edge, lay with my cheek to the grass and always, always go outside during the hurricane. I value curiosity and take an active role in deciding how I navigate the world and what constitutes my experience within that world. My paintings are extended investigations into these pursuits; they are documents, records and maps of my search for, creation of, and claim to new territory and perspectives.

I spent many years in the studio creating modestly sized paintings based on remembered past experiences, and small daily occurrences absorbed during walks. These easel paintings were loose representations of forms that attracted me - mountains, cairns, and expansive skies. Frequent references were made to my affinity for sitting alone under Delicate Arch in Moab, Utah – an early example of a strong draw to that which is being simultaneously created and destroyed -- but I had not yet gotten to the core of my interests.

*Looking Up* is a small painting with a lot of paint on it. In the spring of 2015, with a desire to create more topographical surfaces, as opposed to the slick flat ones that composed the paintings until that point, I moved from working on the wall to working on a tabletop where, free from the constraints of gravity, a larger range of paint viscosity
could be explored. The painting began as a weave of thick brush strokes, directional mark making of titanium white that alluded to the gesture of a landscape. The edges of these marks formed small ridges and valleys and eventually, a hard skin. Thinned down ultramarine blue, when poured on top, puddled into the crevices and dried overnight. It was in this moment – after the creation of a stained membrane - that I took to the painting with a spray bottle filled with mineral spirits, recognizing that the pressure of the stream was enough to form craters in the freshly developed crust and force the still wet body underneath to erupt and flow over.

Looking Up, 8" x 10", oil on canvas, 2015
Clifface, 12" x 9", oil on canvas, 2015
Realizing the potential, rather than constraints, of gravity to move paint in a more topically relevant way than a brush it became the main vehicle in the creation of the next tabletop painting, *Clifface*. With the canvas propped up slightly at one end a pour of thin grey paint washed down the surface, almost completely obscuring the vibrant orangey red that was already there, forming a shimmer and texture close to that of slate or charred wood. In a simple but fruitful gesture this small painting – just 12” x 9” – became an expansive space that for the first time embodied, rather than loosely illustrated, elements of the landscape.

The relationship between size and scale presented in *Clifface* prompted an inquiry into how a pour could function on a much larger surface. The subsequent exploration, a shift up to 10’ x 8’ canvas, also meant relocating from the tabletop to the floor. This positioning required that I bend and lean to apply paint and for the first time I procured an aerial view of the painting as I worked. With size and distance as variables, *Clifface* was the constant, a guide to composition and color.

The result, *Tidal*, became much more than a recreation of its predecessor. The leap in scale, the committed and heavy use of highly cherished cadmium red, and the large amount of material needed to make the work demonstrated the type of risk that I had been taking in travel but not in the studio. Furthermore the poured paint, due to an altered viscosity and having more room in which to move, operated completely differently in *Clifface*. As the grey pool spread across the surface the contrast in weight between the white and black pigment caused them to move at different speeds and separate. With room to do so, the mineral spirits carved rivulets through the pigment as water does through sediment. Observation of this movement led to a thrilling but slow
Tidal, 120” x 86”, oil on canvas, 2015
and contemplative space that recalled the eroding sandstone of Utah not through an image but through reflection on process unfolding. When the pigment came to a standstill and dried I lifted the canvas from the floor to observe from another position. For the first time the work presented a view of the landscape as experienced not only from within, but also from above.

Eruption of Cleveland Volcano, Aleutian Islands. Photo Credit: NASA

In creation and completion *Tidal* allowed for simultaneous encounters similar to being caught in a riptide and skydiving towards the Rocky Mountains. There are elements of the painting that speak to a physical reckoning with the world and ones that create a sense of proximity and distance, pointing both inward and outward. The sweeping grey forms recall incidents of standing next to the ocean during a storm – a
visceral and visual experience of strong winds, wet and salty air, and the roar of waves. The rivulets of black and white paint on the other hand, mirror blood vessels as can only be seen through a microscope, or as a view of a network of rivers from a faraway satellite -- two different and detached views achievable only through the assistance of specialized lenses providing little to no physical sensation.

Blood vessels under a microscope. Photo Credit: ALAMY

Through a methodology of astute observation, criticality and painterly response *Tidal* took the work in new directions. In a move to gain more control over the events that lead to its creation I invested deeply in the making of paintings that allowed for experimentation and closer observation. Interactions with *Tidal* also led to alternative means by which to achieve new perspectives that complemented and complicated the
swims, hikes and walks I love. The computer, as an extension of the lens, became a prominent part of my research, and by accepting it as an extended method of exploration, I gained insight into the places and experiences already referenced in the work and access to new perspectives.

Butterfly Nebula, a dying star captured by NASA’s Hubble, is made up of roiling cauldrons of gas heated to nearly 20,000 degrees Celsius
This acceptance quickly led to an engagement with photos taken from the International Space Station (ISS) and images captured by NASA’s Hubble Space Telescope. The screen facilitates fast and in depth access to mesmerizing, unfathomable and mysterious places – a compliment to the slow meandering experience of walking. Aside from the visually captivating views they offer, their opposing functions led to a better understanding of my own goals within my research. The International Space Station looks down on earth; it is self-reflective while Hubble points outward, far away from the known planet, and searches for the unexplored. The intent is for my paintings to accomplish both.

I have formed deep-seated connections with extreme landscapes that have instilled in me a sense of risk, fear, insignificance and absolute beauty -- being physically immersed in the Fiery Furnace in Moab, Utah and swimming deep into a forgotten cave in Luang Prabang, Laos are two instances that precipitated an encounter with the romantic sublime. I was surprised to find that I can feel similar emotions when viewing via a screen. It is this simultaneous physical detachment from and emotional reaction to an experience – a space between the virtual and the actual-- that I proffer as a contemporary instance of the sublime. An image of Earth as seen through the rings of Saturn, the murky sounds recorded from the bottom of the Mariana trench, and the noisy, scratchy blip that is known to be the sound of two black holes colliding 1.3 billion years ago all conjure grandeur. Such examples also represent ultimate potential – the speed at which we gather knowledge is slow in relation to potential discovery. There is a sense of insignificance when realizing the scale of the research endeavor as well as the scale of such non-human centric spaces. The loss of self is compounded by the
realization that these spaces are as of yet unreachable and uninhabitable -- even for the researchers closest to them.

Hubble has allowed me to explore remnants of a dying star fifteen hundred light years from where I stand, the ISS has presented me with views of the earth previously unrealized, and Google Earth allows me to traverse places like Iceland’s volcano Hekla. However, no matter how interactive the images may be, I yearn for a more tactile and physical engagement. My goal in the creation of images, the reason for painting, is to grapple with my complex experience of the world through both physical and virtually mediated means. The paintings are spaces that exist beyond and between the remote and the concrete. In creation and completion -- through imagery, material and process -- the paintings reference and conflate perspectives available through technology and the lived experiences of a corporeal body.
I continue to create increasingly large paintings while also embracing the absolute importance of smaller works within my research. Each scale shift requires a range of developed means leading to different ends and the jump between working at a variety of sizes further explores the degrees to which my body is needed to go somewhere. No matter the size of the canvas the paintings are deep investigations that allow for spaces of immersion and contemplation for both maker and viewer.

Color choices within the paintings are gathered from a variety of sources with a variety of intentions. A misty walk home filled with softly glowing streetlights coupled with images from YouTube videos of glaciers calving in Alaska informed the diffused and delineated forms and colors of Ice Fall. The balance of cool, murky blues and greens paired with saturated but watery oranges in Scheme for a Submarine Eruption aligns directly with my fascination with underwater volcanoes. Many decisions are made from specific instances such as these, while other decisions can be formally driven responses to what I have already put on the canvas or as a way to challenge a habit. By formulating a response to an ingrained painterly tendency, for instance, I better articulated that my prevalent use of desaturated colors speaks to a distance, a removal from source. With this understanding I recognized the powerful role of saturated colors -
Ice Fall, 20" x 16", oil on canvas, 2016
- which speak to closeness -- to further address the issues of access, detachment and proximity to place. Oftentimes, a color choice is a descendent of prolonged immersion and absorption of imagery and place and the correlation to my research becomes pronounced with time.

The development and utilization of processes that reference those that shape the landscape is a central part of my practice and inextricably linked to the content of the work. I lay the stretched canvas on the floor so that poured paint can puddle and evaporate. Tilting the canvas prompts pigment to move slowly down the surface, catching and highlighting ridges and crevices -- recalling mineral stains that bleed from cliff fractures. I throw, drip, heave, splash and scrape away paint, making decisions that embrace and deny gravity. Often, material meant for one painting will fling on to another, marking that surface with celestial dots. As with the formation of terrain, painting is an act of the simultaneous constructive and destructive process of erosion: weathering, sediment dispersion, the movement of air and flooding. The canvas becomes a record of these events. In a break from the American Action Painters, however, the canvas is not only an "arena in which to act" but an intentional image.

The surface of Aftermath was built with layers upon layers of poured paint and the subsequent scraping and removal of those layers. I weighed the surface down with stones so that the material would run towards and congregate at specific points; I pushed at it from behind with mounds of cloth so paint would navigate around the

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Aftermath, 114” x 96”, oil on canvas, 2016
obstacles like river water around rocks. When the canvas began to sag from use and poured paint started to pick up on the outline of the wooden support bars, I ripped them off not wishing to reveal the structure. By the time the painting was complete the sturdy framework that supported it had collapsed from the ordeal.

To reach the center of large paintings I utilize a ten-foot long plank as a bridge. Having grown up in Portsmouth, Rhode Island, one of three towns that constitute Aquidneck Island, crossing a bridge always meant going somewhere new or returning home. The bridge in the studio brings me deeper into a place of my own creation. While balancing on the four inch wide board to make moves in the middle of the painting I look down and take on the areal perspective of the International Space Station, I am in close proximity to the gnarly terrain of the painting I am forming. The smaller paintings do not
require me to teeter on a bridge, but instead are more of a nimble dance, a series of rotations around the studio.

Removing brushes from my practice was an invigorating risk that further aligned my process with my subject and complicated my relationship with control. I welcome and utilize the inherent movements of the material while creating imagery that point to
events far beyond the creation of a painting. Based on prolonged material investigations I can anticipate what the paint will do and be, but I cannot truly know until the moment when and where it is poured. In this space of the unfamiliar the act of painting becomes incredibly immersive – acute observation and presence is essential as is a willingness to approach the unknown. At times, working on a painting is like a long and strenuous hike --difficult, but rewarding. Other moments are small, intimate exchanges like pushing pollen around in a puddle. Decision-making flickers between meditative and urgent, it is a constant back and forth of cause and effect, reaction and response. An idiosyncratic balance between doing and being occurs as paint reacts to both the natural forces of physics and the conditions I create.

As important as this immersion is, I am also interested in the space between the surface and myself. There is an infinitesimal, un-pausable moment when the paint has been thrown into the air and is no longer rising but has not yet begun to fall. In this moment, similar to the pause between deep breaths, there is another moment of anticipation and ultimate potential in a space very close to me and of my own creation.

I embrace and cultivate risk in the studio through scale and process while also inventing devices that allow for control. In dealing with the two there is fear of the pendulum swinging too far in either direction; to be completely in control is equally as frightening as missing out on the experiences that come along with relinquishing control. Hovering on the brink between the two is the tumultuous but highly productive space in which I work.
The completed paintings exist beyond and between physical and virtual encounters with terrestrial and extra-terrestrial landscapes -- in contemplation they require a developed system of navigation, as they are images of impossible places and perspectives. They walk the path between representation and abstraction with structures, colors and textures that allude to the natural world -- both apparent and elusive -- while also investigating spaces only possible in painting. Forms of puddled paint shift from a visual metaphor for newly created landmasses of volcanic terrain, to what they actually are: remnants of a chemical spill and interaction with pigment. While the imagery may embrace perspectives from microscopic inner workings to spacescopic\(^2\) galactic phenomenon, they are made with minerals from the earth, synthetic pigments, and painting sludge. When these materials are in close proximity they further shift the work from an understood space to a newly created one -- not entirely foreign, but not one truly in existence -- for this reason I embrace the insufficiency of the term “abstract” to describe the work. The paintings closely reference and resemble that which is material but not often seen and as such reinforce the dimensions of a painterly language.

\(^2\) This is in reference to the images that Hubble produces.
The Dunes of Pluto simultaneously provides the experience of a slow meandering walk, a view into the mouth of a cooling volcano, and an expansive look at Carina Nebula\(^3\). The difficulty in this image lies in its constant motion – it does not settle

\(^3\) Carina Nebula is an interstellar cloud of dust, hydrogen, helium and other ionized gases which also are very often star forming regions where formations of gas, dust, and other materials "clump" together to form denser regions, which attract further matter, and eventually will become dense enough to form stars. The remaining material is then believed to form planets and other planetary system objects.
down and is an exercise in opposites. Energetic waves of muddied indigo, Mars black and titanium white oil paint crash towards each other from all sides with the seeming velocity and ferocity of a tsunami. The pigment rumbles, splashes and careens towards an off-center soft grey and blue, illuminated but opaque form that oscillates between the aforementioned mouth of a cooling volcano and a gentle puff of smoke. Remnants of an eruption border this central activity on all sides. Fiery reds and oranges point to molten lava and burn from behind cool and calm sheets of blues and greens. A single resilient blast of mossy green splashes to the upper right hand corner.

*The Dunes on Pluto*, detail, oil on canvas, 2016

From a distance, striations of black, white and indigo pigment mingle together to create an illusionistic image of a river delta as seen from far above. Just as quickly
these marks shift into an image of capillaries and then morph again into bolts of lightning. The elements vibrate between the microscopic and macroscopic and on approaching the painting it engulfs, vision and body. This immersion changes perspective and one is no longer looking down or up, they are just in. The striations that once were satellite images of meandering rivers have flipped orientation and now recede into space as mountain ranges. Following these illusions of depth throughout the canvas are transitions in and out of moments of real terrain - the paint cracks like a dry desert floor.

This is a mapped but breathing landscape; the experience of viewing allows one to hover, stand on firm ground, and be buried by areas of the image. A wisp of a grey sits next to a pile of thick sludge imprinted by a heavy but now absent rock – alluding to the force capable of moving it. Desaturated greys roll in front of saturated greens and reds – the two existing together further accentuate a skewed sense of relationship to this place. While travelling through the irregular spaces, becoming immersed and grappling with perception and perspective, small multi-colored flecks of paint will snap one back to the surface. These specks make visual references to phosphorescent jellyfish, planets and stars dotting the solar system, or a crowd of flashing cameras, further more they serve to remind that this window into an impossible scenario is also a painted object.

The surface of Sailing Stones is riddled with globs of thick, cracking indigo paint, evidence and remnants of the process of its formation. An anxiety accompanies the remaining pieces as they add to the sense that the whole image is on the verge of
disaster, about to collapse and existing in a transitional space and time. This erosion, destruction and anxiety points directly to the contemporary grappling with the complex issue of climate change and our changing role in, and relationship to, the corroding landscape and atmosphere. The paintings provide the brink of disaster that our planet is teetering on and reference the ones we may be forced to look to should we stay on our current trajectory.
Sailing Stones has multiple instances of a recurring theme in the paintings -- the existence of a vortex – which is the visual manifestation of a number of issues orbiting the work -- black holes, whirlpools and the stored energy located at fault lines -- they are points of an inevitable and unpredictable break. At this size the relationship of the vortexes to the heart and head of the viewer turn this inevitable break inwards, cultivating a kinesthetic and psychological relationship to the work. As with black holes, whirlpools and unpredictable fault lines, the desire to explore and the knowledge of inherent danger are at odds.

The issues that are dealt with in the individual paintings are magnified in the relationships between them in the installation of my thesis exhibition, Perspectives. Following the centerline of the four paintings, which are not conventionally hung “center
on sixty”, creates an uneven horizon line within the Anderson Gallery. This dissolution of a steady perspective takes from us “(o)ur traditional sense of orientation—and, with it, modern concepts of time and space—(which) are based on a stable line: the horizon line⁴ and contribute, in a more subtle way, to the anxiety and unrest that is investigated in the images. While each are strong separate inquiries, the three smaller paintings seem to orbit around the largest, acting as debris flung from this center of energy.

As complicated as the images are formally and in their range of references, so too is their intersection with historical precedent and contemporary discourse. While the paintings have a seemingly direct connection to action painting and the abstract expressionist movement of the 1950s they break from it in that the paintings are concerned with a contemporary condition, the existence of a corporeal body in an increasingly virtual world. They address more issues than that of the state of painting and at their best lead the conversation surrounding them far beyond that of their historical predecessors by presenting a utilization of a previously unavailable perspective. The paintings avoid a dependence on the personal and sub-conscious and though the goals of the work are lofty, speaking to a collective unconscious is not one of them. Instead these paintings operate in a space with just enough structure that they do not collapse completely into unrecognizable forms but also do not fully come together into a single sign.

Ultimately, it is my endeavor to engage and contend with simultaneous desires to experience the acuities achievable through close physical interaction with my surroundings, and the visual and mental wonderment made possible through

specialized lenses and the acceptance of the screen as a mode of exploration. It is through the critical construction and consumption of paintings that provides a point of correspondence between these seemingly disparate but equally rich spaces of perception, involvement and new perspectives.