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ADVENTURES CLOSE TO HOME

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

By Ryan Syrell

BFA SUNY Purchase 2006

MFA Virginia Commonwealth University 2017

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ABSTRACT

ADVENTURES CLOSE TO HOME

By Ryan Syrell, 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, 2017

Major Director: Hilary Wilder, Associate Professor, Painting and Printmaking

My work articulates experiences of intimacy and porosity with regard to domestic space. I think of these paintings as fields of interrelatedness which work to dismantle the perceived thresholds between things. The following text brings together the research of my studio practice with a survey of artists, writers, and filmmakers who have charted related spaces of the ordinary, domestic, and porous.

Introduction

“What’s really going on, what we’re experiencing, the rest, all the rest, where is it? How should we take account of, question, describe what happens every day and recurs every day: the banal, the quotidian, the obvious, the common, the ordinary, the infra-ordinary, the background noise, the habitual?” ... Where is our life? Where is our body? Where is our space? ... How are we to speak of these ‘common things’, how to track them down rather, flush them out, wrest them from the dross in which they remain mired, how to give them a meaning, a tongue, to let them, finally, speak about what is, of what we are.”

- Georges Perec, from *The Infra-Ordinary*

I’ve been making paintings of the intimate, domestic spaces of people who are close to me. The paintings grow out of our running dialogues and exchanges, our histories and trajectories. They depict bedrooms, kitchens, living rooms, desks, and dressers. They seek out and celebrate a cluttered and cacophonous intimacy. They articulate keys, cups, plants, computers, paintings, pens, shadows, movements, and absences with equal, non-hierarchical significance.

My reasons for working with such subjects are several, at least. In perhaps the most important sense, I approach these as a form of portraiture—they are very directly affirmations of love. This love for the depicted/absent/person/space is what makes these paintings possible and sees them through to completion. Secondly, they are mappings of particular places and times, filled with constellations of objects and charged with the affect of a specific moment (or accretion of moments). In this capacity they may imply actions or narratives, as well movements around the perceptual

space—acting like a hybrid of still life and novella. This allows them space to be funny and serious.

These paintings also function as a record of our historical moment. We are inhabitants of the Anthropocene, living through tumultuous times, and witnessing an unprecedented merging of the virtual and the physical. Lastly (and very much interwoven through all of these concerns), they are involved with processes of dismantling and openness. They are about loosening the hold of language superimposed upon our sensory experience of the world. By pointing to the space between sensation and language, the paintings work toward a sense of the interrelatedness of things, and of the porous nature of the self and the world. This shouldn't be taken as an inherently anti-language sentiment.

Some of these are large ideas, and it seemed unwieldy to tackle them via grand subjects, and since I believe that the mundane is central to our experience of the world, the domestic seemed like a wonderful starting point between the molecular and the global. That being said, I should articulate that I have no interest in pursuing some sort of all-encompassing logical system, and that these paintings work through the body, perception, sensation, and memory. Recently, Whitman has become increasingly relevant to these paintings, particularly a passage from section 30 of *Leaves of Grass*:

All truths wait in all things,
They neither hasten their own delivery, nor resist it,
They do not need the obstetric forceps of the surgeon,
The insignificant is as big to me as any,
(What is more or less than a touch?).

Logic and sermons never convince,
The damp of night drives deeper into my soul.



Monstera and Photo, oil on canvas, 40 x 34", 2016.

CHAPTER ONE

[Bodies (Presence/Absence/Embeddedness)]

Paintings leading directly up to this body of work depicted figures in domestic settings, engaged in what might be considered non-actions, like reading, looking, or resting. They articulated figures in suspended psychological states—and they were both static and miserable. The same interiors to be used later were explored here for the first time, with completely different handlings and results. Forms were over-determined, with hard delineations, and opaque light; there was no air in these paintings.

I've come to think of these paintings as having been executed too much from the outside. Even though figures were present and placed within intimate settings, the space in no way felt inhabited. What wasn't working? In grasping after a depiction of the intertwining of body and space, I had inadvertently shut down the entire project. These paintings were essentially slowed, diaristic narratives—the figure overwhelmed everything else, even if (as was often the case) it was the painting's least engaging attribute. The rooms fell back, operating solely as sets for these one-person non-plays. This was entirely antithetical to my intention of articulating the blurred edge between self and world.



Ginevra Reading, oil on canvas, 62 x 78", 2016.

At this point I reinvestigated the work of Neil Welliver, specifically his early attempts at fusing figure and landscape. In his paintings of this period (late 60s to mid 70s) certain of Welliver's aims were not altogether far removed from my own. He sought the weaving together of the human form (models, friends, his children) and the dense interior woods of Maine. Welliver was looking to deal with the messy entanglement of being in the world—working toward dismantling the arbitrary distinctions constructed between the human and the natural.



Neil Welliver, *Vicky*, 1973.

These early figure paintings fall noticeably short of this lofty goal. A figure shown in the woods—naked or clothed—does not inherently articulate a sense of embeddedness. These paintings of Welliver’s display an unavoidable focus on the depicted person, with results that fall closer to the voyeuristic than the ontological. The figures here are always aware of—and respond to—the viewer/painter. The acknowledgement inherent in this form of display—figure to Welliver, and painted figure to viewer—will almost always dislodge the human form from the ground. The painted figures reveal their cognisance of an outside presence, which immediately upends any appearance of seamlessness with their environs. Via Welliver’s observation we have

happened upon these mundane events (bathing, dressing, launching a canoe), and effectively dislodged the figure from any semblance of embeddedness. This was the central key in relocating the effect of Welliver's observations: we cannot see what we recognize as another human figure without efficiently and subconsciously extracting their form from their environment—this is built into our very perceptual system.

As assertive as Welliver was in his methods of breaking, fragmenting, and inserting the human figure into the Maine woods, he was going about this project from an impossible angle for years. The crucial switch came when he put aside his attempts at combining body and world in an overtly pictorial sense. Once the depicted figure was abandoned completely, the paintings—the dense forest interiors, specifically—became far more resonant. They had switched their mode of operation; the paintings were now responsive “visual thickets”¹, receptive spaces for the psychological projection of the viewer. The removal of the pictorial body allowed for the implication of the viewer's own body (either Welliver in situ, or person in front of painting). In this way, Welliver found a route to a sense of embeddedness which could work actively upon the viewer directly through perception, rather than the simpler visual metaphors of his figures-in-the-world.

¹ Welliver: “I'm so accustomed to it I don't think anything of it and often when I am walking along these brooks, which are canopied by the forest, there is suddenly no water because the water is such a constant reflector, there are always these aberrations in the forest. Suddenly I go along and the forest is inverted and I don't see the water really...It's an endless thicket, a visual thicket, here's the forest, the forest is upside down, but it is no less a forest.”

Welliver in conversation with Frank Goodyear: “Certain paintings want to be large. I am very interested in the idea of the spectator entering a picture, being able to, in fact, not see the picture as an object, but really enter into it. The 8 by 8 paintings seem to be a really proper scale for that. It is always a great thrill when someone says, ‘I was absolutely drawn inside that painting, i wanted to go into it.’”

“You mean go into it in a physical sense?”

“Yes, but more importantly in a psychological sense.”

One has the sense in front of these paintings that entry is both perfectly plausible and also absolutely denied.



Neil Welliver, *Brook on Ledge*, 1982.

The large (often 8 x 8' or 8 x 10') forest interiors of the last decades of Welliver's practice engage in a unique play of focus and dissolve. The opposing registers of the best of these paintings can become perceptually and psychologically disruptive to the viewer, with the literal, material qualities of the paint and the pictorial legibility of the

image dually asserting themselves—like a band with two lead singers. If these paintings strike a balance, it is not struck by ease, but by tension.

This tension is something I found that I required in my paintings. I began to conceptualize the act of painting in a wholly different way: how could I remain a painter who articulates recognizable objects and spaces, without the resulting image falling too exclusively into the realm of static, legible image-making—as in the space of my recent figure attempts? An answer presented itself by fusing these newfound Welliver lessons with thoughts from Merleau-Ponty and Finnish architect Juhani Pallasmaa:

“I confront the city with my body; my legs measure the length of the arcade and the width of the square, my gaze unconsciously projects my body onto the facade of the cathedral, where it roams over the mouldings and contours, sensing the size of recesses and projections; my body weight meets the mass of the cathedral door, and my hand grasps the door pull as I enter the dark void behind. I experience myself in the city, and city exists through my embodied experience. The city and my body supplement and define each other. I dwell in the city and the city dwells in me.”

-Juhani Pallasmaa, *Eyes of the Skin*, pg 40

“The body unites us directly with things through its own ontogenesis, by welding to one another the two outlines of which it is made, its two laps: the sensible mass it is and the mass of the sensible wherein it is born by segregation and upon which, as seer, it remains open.”

- Merleau-Ponty, *The Intertwining*, pg 136

These ideas fleshed out what I had discovered regarding the pictorial strategies used in Welliver’s woods. The further step that Pallasmaa and Merleau-Ponty led me to

was the decision that I would try to paint the exchanges between things, and not necessarily the things themselves. Neither of them states anything like this overtly, and both maintain a dualism of self and world, even as they speak of dismantling this sort of situation (Pallasmaa gets close: “I dwell in the city and the city dwells in me”, but that’s still more like nesting dolls than a field of flux, intensities, and exchange). In this way I always feel that the likeness of anything in my paintings is almost coincidental—things are painted as if they are the act of seeing the thing, or of touching the thing. To varying degrees they coalesce into recognizable forms.

Forms in these paintings tend to grow outward from internal points; they are rhizome-like, branching out or knitting into one another. This way of working brought about a form of edge-making that conveyed the porosity of thresholds that I had been searching for. What read as edges from a distance are very rarely hard or crisp—more often they are fuzzed out, dusty and molecular. If they are hard, they are a series of transitional color/value/saturation shifts which work to make it unclear as to which edge is of which thing—an act of unnamings by removing parenthesis. These are transitional spaces—legible, but without words, slippery but workable.

Where Merleau-Ponty pursued language around the intertwining double, the body/self and the sensible world, I’m going after the intertwining of any and all things in a space, the activities and exchanges that permeate the world, but are often unnoticed or unnoticeable.



Guestroom, oil on canvas, 52 x 62", 2016.

CHAPTER TWO

[Objects and Obverses (exchanges)]

I was reading a selection of object-oriented ontology texts, and it seemed like Lao Tzu said it all better with fewer, more deliberate words. The concept of the interrelatedness of all things, and the subtleties of exchange between self and other seem rather at odds with the dream of an all-encompassing grand philosophical narrative so central to western thought. Objects, like still life, work at the dismantling of

narrative structure and continuity simply by persisting. No written ontological system “works”, and the inscrutable nature of being continues on regardless.

What i mean to say is that words are crucial, but they are often overwrought. There are a few very short pieces of writing as well as the work of a couple of painters which succinctly articulate different forms of exchange between the self and things, and they have been important to the development of this body of paintings. I’d like to discuss works by Jorge Luis Borges, Giorgio Morandi, Josephine Halvorson, Silvina Ocampo, and Franz Kafka. First, Borges’ poem “Plain Things”:

A walking stick, a bunch of keys, some coins,
A lock that turns with ease, useless jottings,
At the back of books that in the few days left me
Won’t be read again, cards and chessboard,
An album in whose leaves some withered flower
Lies pressed—the monument of an evening
Doubtless unforgettable, now forgotten—
And in the west the mirror burning red
Of an illusory dawn. So many things—
A file, an atlas, doorways, nails, the glass
From which we drink—serve us like silent slaves.
How dumb and strangely secretive they are!
Past our oblivion they will live on,
Familiar, blind, not knowing we have gone.

Borges’ things are purely outside of us; they are other in a way that is both near at hand and totally unreachable (serving us silently, dumb and secretive). Although the things themselves may be inscrutable to Borges, I would venture that they are also what

he would consider the “writing of the world²”—that their endless configurations and reconfigurations in a space like the one of which he speaks amounts to the tacit accumulation of an untranslatable history of ourselves embedded in the world of things.

In a network, or rather, *the* network of total interrelatedness, clearly any relationship or series of relationships might become the locus of inquiry. This could, and often does, lead one to offer up lists of exceedingly far-reaching elements as examples of how this all-encompassing web is composed. Borges consistently activates this method in numerous other works. In “The Aleph” for example: “...I saw a silvery cobweb in the center of a black pyramid...I saw convex equatorial deserts and each one of their grains of sand...I saw a Summer house in Androque and a copy of the first English translation of Pliny...”—or in “Funes, the Memorious”: “With one quick look, you and I perceive three wine glasses on a table; Funes perceived every grape that had been pressed into the wine, and all the stalks and tendrils of its vineyard. He knew the forms of the clouds in the southern sky on the morning of April 30, 1882, and he could compare them in his memory with the veins in the marbled binding of a book he had seen only once.”

This far-reaching, cosmic/compulsive list-making which is a common feature of Borges’ writing, appealed to me for a long time—but its effectiveness runs dry through

² Borges has used this phrase himself, but I also relate it to the following writing by Perec, from *Species of Spaces*: “(t)he sense of the world’s concreteness, irreducible, immediate, tangible, of something clear and closer to us: of the world, no longer as a journey having constantly to be remade, not as a race without end, a challenge having constantly to be met, not as the one pretext for a despairing acquisitiveness, nor as the illusion of a conquest, but as the rediscovery of a meaning, the perceiving that the earth is a form of writing, a *geography* of which we had forgotten that we ourselves are the authors.”

its very overuse. Borges' lists seeks out a cosmic interrelatedness, but in a very real way their means and content are not at all relatable—the reader (or viewer) needs to feel their relation to, and not removal from, the listed things. Borges' fantastical lists are the results of fictional mental anomalies or cosmic/divine interventions. It is only in the short poems, most of all "Plain Things", that this beautiful sense of the constellations of objects which provide the context for our bodies and our being, is centered on the domestic, and made up of an inventory that is at once mundane, accessible, and otherly.



Desk Corner, oil on canvas, 26 x 22", 2017.

The crucial jump in Borges' cataloging comes in the transition from expansive and arbitrary spatio-historical collages, to immediate, personal, and close-at-hand items.

We move from a character like Funes who is capable of reverse engineering entire histories from a glass of wine, to the autobiographical Borges who acknowledges the strangeness and secrecy of the personal things which surround him near the end of his life. Borges was at this point completely blind, and he seems to have given in to the knowing/unknowing exchanges of memory and touch. Both of these moves, the shift from cosmic or divine to mundane and domestic, and the increased reliance on memory and haptics informed my choices in subject and working method. I stopped my attempts at constructing elaborate cosmologies, and trusted that a sensory, bodily experience of the world could be a valid painterly pursuit.



Giorgio Morandi, *Still Life*, oil on canvas, 1959.

The next body of work that offered guidance to my project were the later still lifes of Giorgio Morandi. I've been enamored with Morandi's work for as long as I can remember, and while I don't like to use words like purity or essence, these particular paintings always seem to strike at the heart of the immanent alterity of which some

observational painting is capable of expressing. These paintings—and certain of Morandi's Bologna landscapes—for all their silence, seem to instruct my body about its own presence and placement. They are also among the paintings in which I have felt the most *seeing*; where painting was essentially synonymous with seeing. What makes both of these things even more intriguing to me is that Morandi's paintings manage to almost disappear by their own volition. Through flawless manipulation of the simplest means available to painting—edges, values, colors—Morandi imbued directly observed images with an autonomy that allows them to flicker in and out of existence while being viewed.



Morandi, *Still Life*, oil on canvas, 1957.

My handling of edges, translucence, and brush strokes was radically modified by an close study of Morandi over the last year and a half. I observed in his manner of applying paint a technique that was inextricable from his content and subject. When we first approach one of his paintings, the immediate qualities we register are an almost glacial stillness and silence. The stoic presence of these little bottles and jars is on par with Egyptian bas reliefs, or a cliff face in Utah—but there is another pace present. Morandi’s brushstroke—the history of his having seen these objects—flutters all over the surface, in some places liquid and ribbon-like, knotting and coalescing at others; always a fluid-twitchy anxious scanning, always saying simultaneously: “yes”, “no”, “here it is” and “where is it?”

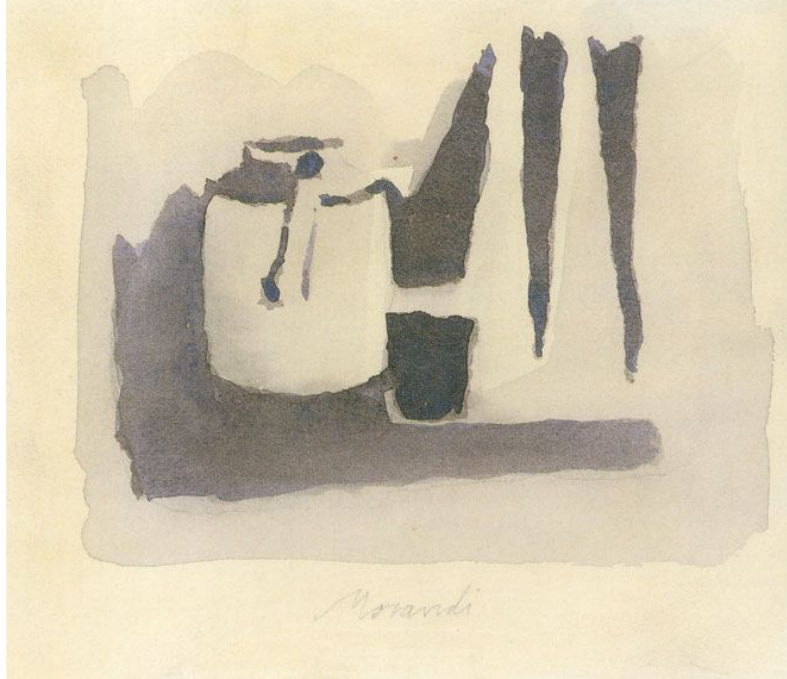


Bowl, oil on canvas over panel, 8 x 10", 2016.

I spent awhile last year making very small scale paintings of single objects, which were essentially portraits. I was trying to understand the flips, reversals, and ghostings of which Morandi's objects were capable. A few were successful—bowls worked well—but most were just studious and flat. Through this process I more deeply grasped how necessary an unshakable skepticism had been to Morandi's practice. As Yves Bonnefoy observed, "We still possess...a language of nouns, of shapes for the bottle or the box; but can we *speak* in these words, can we claim to find in them the unity we still need? Morandi, in any case, no longer uses them; he observes them from without, sees them shriveled and shivering in the unimaginable room he inhabits; he denounces our language, discredits it...this is the *further side of meaning*, the revelation of a new and irreparable silence."

In this way, Morandi went much further than Borges in the articulation of objects and world as utterly alien and unknowable to the self. I was still drawn to these works, but realized that I in fact wanted something much opposed to this mentality. I was no longer interested in pursuing the bleak and solitary. I could navigate a world of objects and tracing of human activity, but through the conviction that empathic exchange not only was possible, but was in actuality always in play—embeddedness in response to isolation. Renato Miracco's observations that "In some of his watercolors you feel as if you are inside matter, at the molecular level, where form becomes the innermost substance" and "It is not transcendence but rather the spirit of the things of this world,

almost a materialistic ecstasy that goes straight to the heart of the things that surround us”, helped me to shift this mentality in the studio.

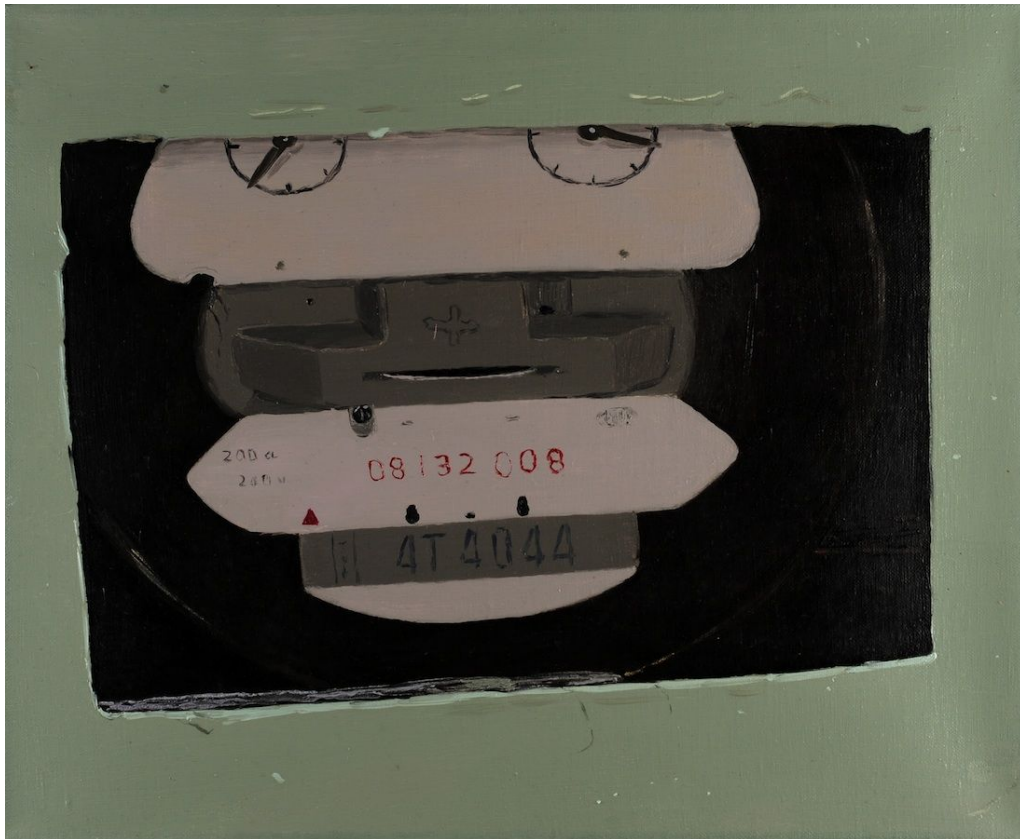


Giorgio Morandi, watercolor on paper, undated.

The use of color in Morandi’s work seems to echo this sentiment; his objects can seem simultaneously a presence and an absence. His colors, his use of closely related tonalities that were painted onto the actual surfaces of his objects, then observed and transposed to canvas, have always brought to mind an analogue with dust. Dust is a molecular material that both displays and obfuscates; it shows us time and light made manifest and granular, accruing into a fuzzy border by alighting upon any dormant surface, or articulating the circulation of air when caught in a shaft of sunlight.

I think about the relationship between dust, surface, and sight quite often when painting. I deliberately use numerous, highly diluted layers of transparent or

semi-transparent pigments to achieve a surface that parallels this thinking. Keeping Morandi and dust in mind, I've worked to develop a way of painting which depicts the acts of seeing, experiencing, and recalling spaces and things, rather than simply recording them in a more straightforward, literal manner.



Josephine Halvorson, *Meter*, oil on linen, 2008.

Josephine Halvorson's work and discussions of the uses of painting have also been important to the development of my thinking in numerous ways. Halvorson's work, along with Lois Dodd's (and to a lesser extent, Maureen Gallace) pointed the way toward a method of working which felt far more direct and "of the world" than anything I had pursued for years. This was an essential pivot in my practice, and one that I had

been seeking out through many discrete bodies of work. Before attending VCU, my practice had calcified into a routine from which I felt increasingly distanced. The act of painting the world directly, in all of its sensory immediacy, hadn't seemed like a viable option to me—that I could work in this way was the first major insight I pulled from Halvorson.



Josephine Halvorson, *Three Photo Albums*, oil on linen, 2008.

So when Halvorson states “the best-case scenario is when I’m painting, it feels as if I’m feeling that object through the brushstroke, or I’m reimagining what it means to be that object, in paint, so a lot of what I’m after is this correspondence between the object and the paint, mediated through me”, I was able to begin formulating thoughts and practices centered around what that sort of painterly exchange could look like for myself. At that point—sometime in the Fall of 2015—I abandoned all elements of my painting practice that involved elaborate, nearly solipsistic constructions. I would no

longer allow a pre-figured theory or philosophy to function as the primary substrate for painting—painting would have to be established on its own terms.

Later in that same interview with Phong Bui, Halvorson observes that “It’s really just your body and its relationship to the world. Using the senses is not anti-intellectual.” The reminder here was simple but important, and it helped to keep me from doubting my own sensations and actions. In writing about the work of David Schutter, Halvorson says that “perhaps this acute awareness of our own bodies through the material trace of another is how we can define painterliness.” This is about as close as I’ve found to my own thoughts about what is painterly: the material that is simultaneously an action, a record and a transmission, all acting simultaneously on the eye, the mind, and the body—painting as an ideal empathic space.



Detail from *Napkin Holder and Rosewater*, oil on canvas, 34 x 30", 2016.

Silvina Ocampo's short story, "The Objects", gives us another, much darker sense of the exchanges to be had between things and selves. She chases down the unspeakable or hidden "face" of her objects, she charges the mundane with a supernatural foreboding through her use of magic-realist methods, and her work always plays with implications of doubt through her consistent adoption of the unreliable narrator. The place which is most unique to Ocampo, in her short story "The Objects", is Camila Ersky's loss of autonomy. Over the course of three pages, which span several decades of Ersky's life, we witness a character come into definition almost exclusively through their relationship to material things; through the initial childhood ownership and subsequent loss of objects ("once by fire, and once by a poverty as ferocious as fire"), and then the inexplicable reappearance of these objects in her adult life ("She hardly looked at the things around her for fear of discovering a lost treasure").

The objects of Camila Ersky's youth slowly reappear later in her life, when she is married and has children; she discovers them while going about her daily routine. They overtake her thoughts and all of her waking moments, she dreams of them and tells her children stories about them. They steadily erode her agency in a way that is reminiscent of the effects of substance abuse, and I would argue, the fracturing and dilution of self that many experience through the making multiple of the self through virtuality.

In my paintings, while desiring an emotional range from playful to manic and anxious, Ocampo was helpful in determining a form of self/object/world exchange that led to the utterly dismal. The character of Camila Ersky was useful as an example of someone doing it wrong. "She lost track of the day and the night. She saw that the

objects had faces, the horrible faces that they acquire when we have stared at them too long...Through a long series of joys, Camila Ersky had finally entered Hell.” Ersky is the individual who dives into a state of de-individuation and is unable to return or recover.

Lastly, and in many ways most intriguingly, is Kafka’s “The Cares of a Family Man”, with it’s wonderfully enigmatic Odradek. I’ve been returning to this extremely brief story for years; its coupling of straight-forward, plain-language description with the nagging sense of an otherness centered in a small autonomous entity/thing, all located in a domestic space, has informed numerous bodies of my work.

The first thing Kafka does is to question language as it applies to Odradek: “some say the word Odradek is of Slavonic origin, and try to account for it on that basis. Others believe it to be of German origin, only influenced by Slavonic. The uncertainty of both interpretations allows one to assume with justice that neither is accurate, especially as neither of them provides an intelligent meaning of the word.” I think that this immediately unsteady footing is what gives this story its incredibly uncanny air. If we are reading a two page text that begins by doubting language, then where are we to go? Much of my discussion about pointing to the gap between language and perception stems from this moment.

“No one, of course, would occupy himself with such studies if there were not a creature called Odradek.” Kafka then proceeds with a relatively matter-of-fact description of Odradek’s appearance; “At first glance it looks like a flat star-shaped

spool for thread”, explaining that it does in fact hold a small mass of knotted lengths of thread “of the most varied sorts and colors”. The physical detail which sets Odradek apart from a regular spool is a “small wooden crossbar” and “another small rod...joined to that at a right angle.” This attribute, coupled with the use of a point of its star-body, allows Odradek to “stand upright”. In the course of one paragraph Kafka has presented us with a slippery and miniscule entity/thing that seems at once perfectly conceivable and impossible to really grasp—it has a body and autonomy, but that body is comprised of scraps and typically inanimate materials. There are plenty of details here, but they refuse to coalesce in a stable way. This is furthered by Kafka’s assertion that:

“One is tempted to believe that the creature once had some sort of intelligible shape and is now only a broken-down remnant. Yet this does not seem to be the case; at least there is no sign of it; nowhere is there an unfinished or unbroken surface to suggest anything of the kind; the whole thing looks senseless enough, but in its own way perfectly finished. In any case, closer scrutiny is impossible, since Odradek is extraordinarily nimble and can never be laid hold of.”

This is the paradox of Odradek: it appears as a fragment of an absent whole, and is composed of an accretion of components (“old broken-off bits of thread”), while simultaneously showing no sign of being in any way broken. Odradek is a thing/entity that is senseless but perfectly finished.

CHAPTER THREE

[Becoming Porous]

For four days and three nights one October, I detoxed from alcohol in a hospital in Baltimore. Like many things, this was not planned. Behind two sets of locked security doors I was monitored around the clock as the last of the alcohol in my body was metabolized and took its life-threatening leave of my organs. So heightened and intensified was my perception of this experience, that I was convinced that I could detect activity in and around my body at a molecular level. I seemed to be the same temperature as the furniture.

Being the only alcoholic in the ward, the doctors and nurses continually explained to the other patients that my detox was the only one that could prove fatal—this is an odd way of being introduced to others. These statements punctuated my time in the hospital; a public metronome announcing my mortality. I was asked repeatedly if I was downplaying my symptoms and responses (the answer was no), and I only learned on the last day how close to death I had actually been.

The reason I think about this now, is because it was the longest sustained period in which I felt how porous my being really was. I felt the utterly dissolvable nature of my body and self, the terrifying, beautiful non-face of deindividuation coming to meet my own.

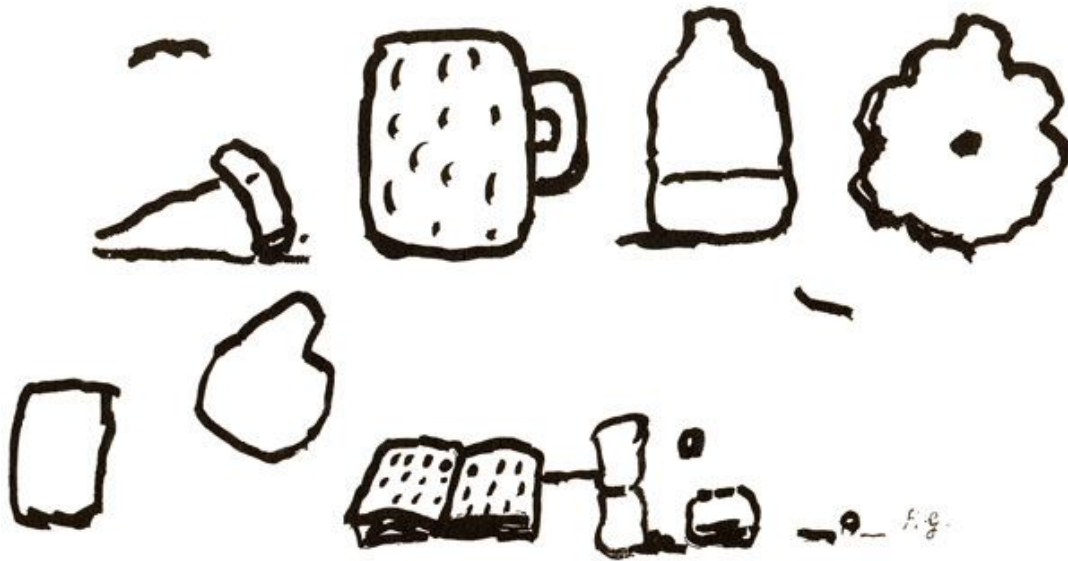
Entering the ward, as is customary, I was stripped of my clothes and possessions. My things, mundane and intimate possessions, my keys, wallet, shoes,

sat in clear plastic bags, in an office with an internal window; visible but at a double-remove. No one else in the ward was familiar with the term *memento mori*.

I happened to have a book with me, which I was allowed to keep on hand. It was Bill Berkson's collection of essays, The Sweet Singer of Modernism. In what retrospectively appears to have been a form of meditation, I read and re-read the essay on Philip Guston, "Pyramid and Shoe". It contained the following quote from Guston; "Human consciousness moves, but it is not a leap, it is one inch. One inch is a small jump, but that jump is everything. You go way out and then you have to come back - to see if you can move that inch."

That inch, for me, has been the awareness of porosity, increased radically since faced with my own mortality. Porosity and mortality are of course intimately related; when one becomes so porous as to become ethereal, or to become mostly something else, we experience a sort of state-change, a vacated body, evaporating too much self to have a stable identity.

Painting for me, (anybody's, mine, doesn't matter) when it succeeds, is usually the transcribed act of an attempted/temporary de-individuation; a brief death, the exhaling of one's self into the rest of the world, which can allow the painter or a viewer to dissolve their edges at least a little.



3

Philip Guston illustration for Bill Berkson's poem, *Mazurki*, from [Enigma Variations](#)

³ The illustration shown above was executed by Guston for Bill Berkson's poem *Mazurki*, which is essentially a vertical list of 36 adjectives capped by the title noun *Mazurki*. Berkson identifies *Mazurki* as the plural form of *Mazurka*, a Polish dance. He states: "The *Mazurka* part is how the poem "turns" on its one-word lines, all of them adjectives. In an email interview with John Seed, Berkson is quoted discussing the Guston illustration: "some are generic Guston objects, but some objects are in the Guston mode of meta-object—objects that could be one thing and another. 'You're painting a shoe, you start painting the sole and it turns into a loaf of bread, you're painting the bread and it becomes the moon...' (inexact quote of what PG said to me)."

Upon researching further, Seed tracked down a note from Guston in the Special Collections of the University of Connecticut, which had been attached to his original drawing. It states: "I love this poem—the words—I mean the 'list'—keeps on working—active—never stops, i mean to say—perhaps that's what I meant by my little object pieces THINGS—as the eyes roam around anywhere in life."



Desk and Moon, oil on canvas, 62 x 78", 2017.

CHAPTER FOUR

[Table and Room]

“Maybe I am not very human—what I wanted to do was to paint sunlight on the side of a house” - Edward Hopper

Tables and rooms—I’m trying to write about them without resorting too often to art or literary historical precedent. To be sure, there is no shortage of earlier practices that could be mined and discussed here, and at great length. But this is the section of this writing that I have held off on the longest—and it’s not that I haven’t approached it;

rather, I've approached it more than any other, and it always slipped away. I now think that the reason that this section on rooms and tables remains elusive is that the slipping away *is* the important thing.

Perhaps the reason that I haven't been able to speak/write in a sustained way about these things is due to a fear of the destruction that often follows acts of translation. If these things were to be articulated in a rational, cohesive, linguistic manner, they might be obliterated—like the original form in a lost wax process. I'm trying to find an oblique path toward these things. It's the same when painting—going too directly, too dead-on, too face-to-face, or having the feeling of knowing too much—all of those things amount to ruining the whole exchange: “the gentle and yielding is the disciple of life.”⁴

I know the tables and rooms and everything are important, but if I ascribed specific meaning to any of these things it would be the first step in a process of shutting them down, of closing them off. I'd like to show more than can be held in the mind. I want painting that can be overwhelming, that encompasses the body and washes over us with the sensations we have made tacit through familiarity. It's here at the moment of too-much that the thinness and translucence of the paint allows it all to teeter. When

⁴Chapter 76 of the Tao te Ching:

We are born gentle and weak
At our death we are hard and stiff
Green plants are tender and filled with sap
At their death they are withered and dry
The stiff and unbending is the disciple of death
The gentle and yielding is the disciple of life
An army without flexibility never wins a battle
A tree that is unbending is easily broken
The hard and strong will fall
The soft and weak will overcome

they work, the paintings are able to pivot from superabundance to nothing—the process of approaching a degree of saturation and backing up, emptying out, over and over.

In many instances, I've applied metaphors to these desks and rooms, pertaining to how they function, relating them to analogous mechanisms, which I will refrain from mentioning now. They are obviously *like* plenty of things, but they are not to be simplified, totalized, or translated. The paintings are actually much more melancholic than I would have anticipated, but I'm glad for that. If the paintings manage to convey something that is at once legible, dissolved, playful, and sad, then they are that much closer to really being of the world and our experience of it. There is a bittersweetness in knowing that some thing or some time is out of reach. I'm interested in painting where each space is charged with both a sense of inhabitation and departure.

The rooms, tables, objects, and hopefully paintings, push back—they resist the easy summarization that can befall a day or a moment or a time, usually assigned meaning and character by the more easy to articulate events or entities of an instance. That would be time and history as we are more accustomed to experiencing it. These other moments are part of a hold out of the things that we don't know how to name, or haven't wanted to, or that have managed to escape language—and there would seem to be a lot of these things. Probably most of our world is comprised of situations of this sort, but they are elusive, and so they aren't easily ordered. What makes them difficult to work with, or to try to be in dialogue with, is their success in being elusive while being right there; how to show something and keep it slippery at the same time.



5

Philip Guston, *Painter's Table*, oil on canvas, 1973.

⁵ There are so many painted tables and rooms that I care about, that have absolutely informed these recent paintings, but in the act of writing they seemed to fall to the side. Giving them a point by point analysis would have served very little purpose here, but I still feel like they need to be represented in some way. Guston's weird living archive tables were obviously important, the table in Vermeer's *Sleeping Maid* at the Met, Bonnard's many tables, but while at VCU especially his 1940-47 *Dining Room* at the VMFA, Sylvia Plimack Mangold's wood-floored rooms with mirrors and sunlight, a number of Matisse tables (who knows how many were just the same one) - the phantom table that held his goldfish in *Goldfish and Palette*, the white-blue-grey covered table in *The Painting Lesson*, the floor, walls, and checkerboard on a sculpture stand in *The Painter's Family*, the shy, flattened table in *Still Life with Aubergines*, the grey diamond table from *Anemones and Chinese Vase*, and the one I always considered it's sibling *The Rose Marble Table*, the early New York interiors of Lois Dodd, Saul Steinberg's painted carved wood object tables, Josephine Halvorson's painting of a cupboard or shelf, the two Morandi still lifes at the VMFA (which are inexplicably hung stacked one on top of the other) and archival photographs of Morandi's table, Elizabeth Murray's splayed-folded-body tables, the wall and the small room with the barred window that floats between Mary and Gabriel in Fra Angelico's *Annunciation* at San Marco, William H Johnson's tables, especially the chair used as a table to hold a vase of orange-red flowers.



Laundry Basket, oil on canvas, 43 x 46", 2017.

CHAPTER FIVE

[Color and Rhythm]

Color is central to my practice, that much I would assume is articulated through the paintings themselves. But wait—central is actually a misleading term. It implies both a hierarchy and a singularity; that color is the beginning and the end, that “color” is a

unified, cohesive way of proceeding. That is decidedly not what I am after through color. We can invert this centrality, make it its opposite: color is deployed in my practice in a way that decentralizes and destabilizes, it often undermines the presence of the very things it seems to articulate. When things are going well, color strikes me more as a verb than a noun; an active force that retains its agility even after the transition of oxidation.

Jon said that he saw painting in this way as trying to hold down a picnic blanket on a windy day, and that has stuck with me as a perfectly viable analogue. He first made this observation in my studio when *Evening Corner (H&H)*—a large painting measuring 110 x 158”—was underway, and the observation was particularly apt. This painting was more demanding of my body than any previous work on canvas I had ever undertaken. Something especially difficult had been the radical scaling up of the off-handed appearance of the smaller works. There were extended periods during which areas or elements of this painting were too pinned down; things would become nearly static—one could easily hold the image still in their mind. The solutions to these problems were consistently through color, almost never through drawing; always a simplification of the palette, a removal of needless and complex color interactions.



Evening Corner (H&H), oil on canvas, 110 x 158", 2017.

Maybe the best analogy I can find for this process would be tuning a piano by ear, which I have done. The majority of the keys on a piano sound two or three strings; in my untrained piano tuning, I would tune the strings of a single key, then tune the nearby octaves of that pitch, and then move on to tuning the harmonic overtones of the pitch. There was no overt pattern (beyond an unstructured reliance on the harmonic series), no simple ascending of the scale, only the constant back-and-forth criss-cross of harmonic confirmations to find a way of tuning a piano to itself.

I bring this up because there is a strong parallel between my thinking about and handling of color and music. I've been a musician for longer than I've been a painter, though it took quite awhile before I even realized that I was treating color in the way I had treated improvised music. Polly Apfelbaum observed "color is structure for me. The system is there, but it's invisible. It's both intuitive and formal, emotional and controlled... Like music, it can be incredibly precise and specific without being 'named'". This formal, sensory, rational, intuitive system—a system that reverberates with a bodily intellect—is what I attempt to navigate.

I love the history of color theories: Goethe, Itten, Kandinsky, Albers, et al., the arbitrary interpretations and attempts at order. What I actually love most about these situations is how easily color loses itself from them. Color seems always to invite language, to encourage rules, only to disprove them, shatter them, and then shoot wildly and unpredictably away. Color and language seem to be forever orbiting each other, but never making a decisive and cohesive bond.

Attributing a meaning or meanings to a color can only be a losing game for me; a limit that inscribes parenthesis around a color. I can only think of color as a facet of the complex haecceity of any given moment. It is akin to Ornette Coleman's conception of Harmolodics⁶, the answer can only be discoverable in the moment, never preemptively known through a formula or theory.

⁶ Selections from Ornette Coleman's *Harmolodic Manifesto*: "—I have found that by eliminating chords or keys or melodies as being the present idea of what you're trying to feel i think you can play more emotion into the music. in other words, you can have the harmony, melody, intonation all blending into one to the point of your emotional thought."

"—Chords are just the name for sounds, which really need no names at all, as names are sometimes confusing."



Henri Matisse, *Goldfish and Palette*, 1915.

I've been thinking about how to achieve a sense of color/light that's relevant to our time. We inhabit a world of ceaseless interruptions, of tremendous generalized anxiety, of global turmoil; I feel that in some way I need paintings to reflect that. I've been looking at Matisse's WWI paintings—they're still paintings of his studio, still lifes, and views from his window, but they are absolutely made in a time of upheaval. Our light is 24/7: it comes from translucence, from the backlit screen, the overlay, the reflection, from a global network of devices—our light seems to me to be the result of the unpredictable slamming together of the virtual and the actual. We live in the light of the Anthropocene.

I have made paintings whose color came from direct phenomenological investigation of the world, and I have made paintings whose color was pulled from varied mass cultural sources. What I've discovered in the last five months is that I need color/light that comes into being from within a painting, through the process, on its own terms. Working through memory seems to be the route to this sense of color/light. These recent paintings are made without recourse to photographs, direct observation, or even preliminary studies; they are made through stages of ludic improvisation followed by slower, more deliberate, responsive periods.



Window and Dresser with Painting, oil on canvas, 62 x 52", 2017.

“More of me comes out when I improvise.” Hopper said this, and I’ve held it in mind for the last few months. I’ve wondered what improvisation was like for Hopper, who so famously worked with such meticulous methods. My best guess at the moment is that Hopper’s improvisational moments came almost exclusively through his handling of color; the vast majority of his studies were structural: building drawings, drawings finding form. Drawing was the armature he would establish, which could then be overlaid with countless passages of color. This process would continue until the analytic structure of his drawings would register with the more intuitive and exaggerated color situations he developed. These inventive color solutions—which locked in the bizarre atmosphere of his best paintings—don’t occur so often in Hopper’s landscapes or early works. It’s the later paintings—the interiors—which open up an invented, amplified experience of the light of Hopper’s time.

When I begin a painting, there is never a drawing in play. Rather than execute studies, I have to share space with the primed canvas for a while. It’s during this time that the beginnings of an image, of a history of sensations and interactions assert themselves. Whenever I’ve worked from a drawing or study, the resulting painting always ends up dead. What transpires when a painting actually works, is that it has been painted and partially obliterated numerous times, before whatever ends up surviving as the “finished” image is left in place.

I typically end up with a smooth, cloudy, marbled mass of washy color on the oil ground; the result of repeated painting, partial absorption, and wiping away. I work to

keep the surface smooth and relatively edgeless. I generally have little interest in the way palimpsests display the history of choices and adjustments made during the course of my own painting. I think that this is due to the nature of their occurrence—they often come about when painting has halted, things dry, then something else is interjected or overlaid in a collage-like manner. In my practice, this is the opposite of porosity—edges like this aren't to be avoided at all costs, but they are rarely pursued directly.

These paintings rely on translucence, on the awareness that their color comes from light reflecting back off the titanium white ground and through each of their subsequent layers. The essential thing here is that while the color may be assertive, amplified, and saturated, the actual paint films are diaphanous and insubstantial, to the point of nearly not being there—Presence/Absence, yes/no.

Before arriving at this way of painting, I had been thinking about the experience of looking at the Agnes Martins at Dia:Beacon. Whenever I'm there, I spend time with her *Innocent Love* paintings from the late 1990's. I've looked at these paintings for a long time; I look at them as a form of meditation. Edges between colors disappear then come back, the red folds into the yellow, then jumps back, eventually the pale red, blue, and yellow become one unnamable fluttering field. The last thing to go is the framed edge of the paintings—and that's the hardest part. This activity can take ten or fifteen minutes (I'm approximating, I've never timed it). The final part of this exchange is difficult to describe: after fading into the cloudy, shifting, blankish wall, the painting reasserts itself, re-doubled, its usual self compounded with its own afterimage. Its colors appear with a vividness that is unbelievably clear—this effect lasts just

seconds—before the painting is back, just as before, just as it was the whole time. I apply the vibrance and translucence of the afterimage to my paintings. I need them to jump into a viewer’s perceptual field with a rush of sensation, but I also require that they fall apart and dissolve; it’s important that they not be pinned down, and that they maintain a sense of past-tense.

By way of a hinge to another series of thoughts about color, Stan Brakhage:

“Imagine an eye unruléd by man-made laws of perspective, an eye unprejudiced by compositional logic, an eye which does not respond to the name of everything, but which must know each object encountered in life through an adventure of perspective(...) Imagine a world alive with incomprehensible objects, shimmering with an endless variety of movement and innumerable gradations of color. Imagine a world before “beginning was the world.”



Box Fan and Aloe, oil on canvas, 64 x 80", 2017.

I've related color and music up till now, but really what I've been talking about is color in the sense that it can be analogous to the harmonic aspect of music. I've been talking about color in painting as though it addressed the viewer as a pure simultaneity—an indefinitely sustained chord of unchanging intensity. This is clearly not the case. One of the missing elements here is rhythm: rhythms of a painting, rhythms of a viewer, rhythms of the world.

In order to think about this rhythmic sense of color, we can go back to the picnic blanket; back to the multiplicity of wind-blown things and the attempts to stabilize them. These paintings demand to be held together in precarious ways. The things depicted in them most often reside in flux—inhabiting instability, with a color/light/rhythm for the time.

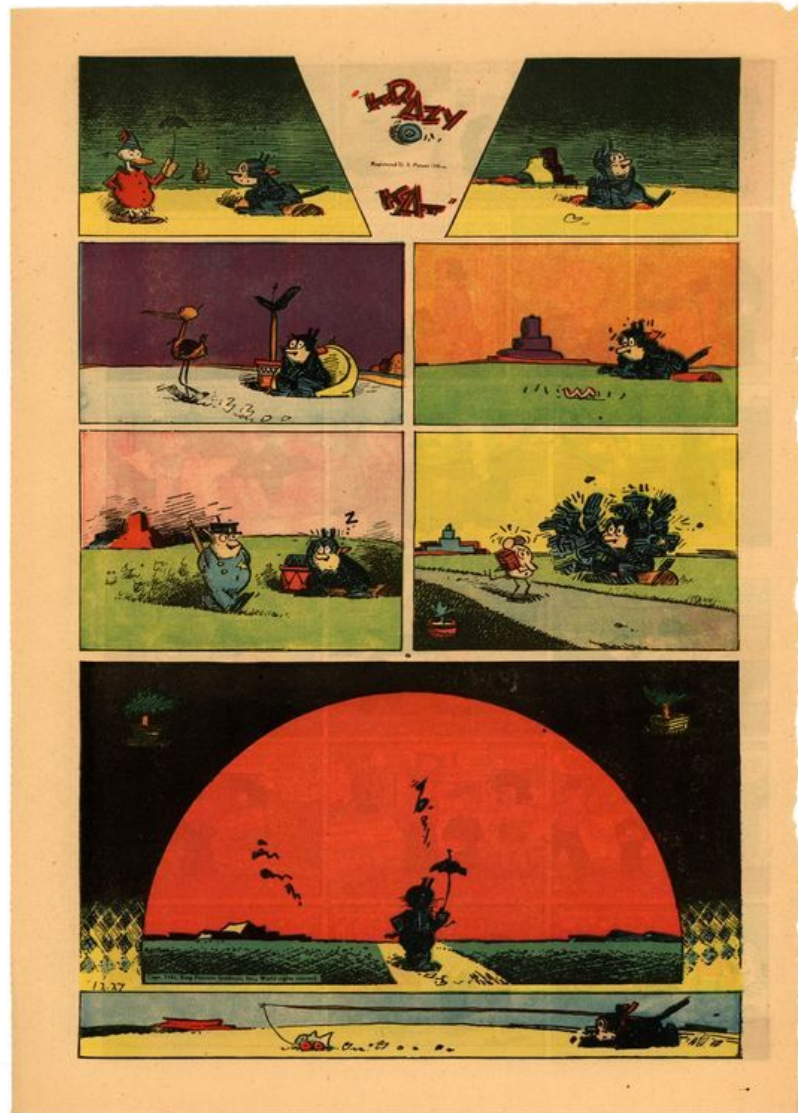


Installation View, Shirley Jaffe.

Shirley Jaffe speaks to this sense of rhythm and relations: “I can only say that I want a cohabitation of events in my pictures so that, in looking, one is confronted with

the ‘manyness’ we see relating to each other.” I need every part of every surface to be active and responsive, even if the actions are small and irrational: a coffee mug dissolves, a wooden dresser inverts itself to swallow a keychain, walls and shadows oscillate in space. All elements pulse and bleed into one another, a cacophonous field of intensities rather than the neat and discrete objects which we learn to perceive through language—color and rhythm are the primary means of this conveyance. “Nothing is motionless, everything is alive, everything moves, everything breathes in and out, everything metamorphosizes in every moment” (Theophile Thore).

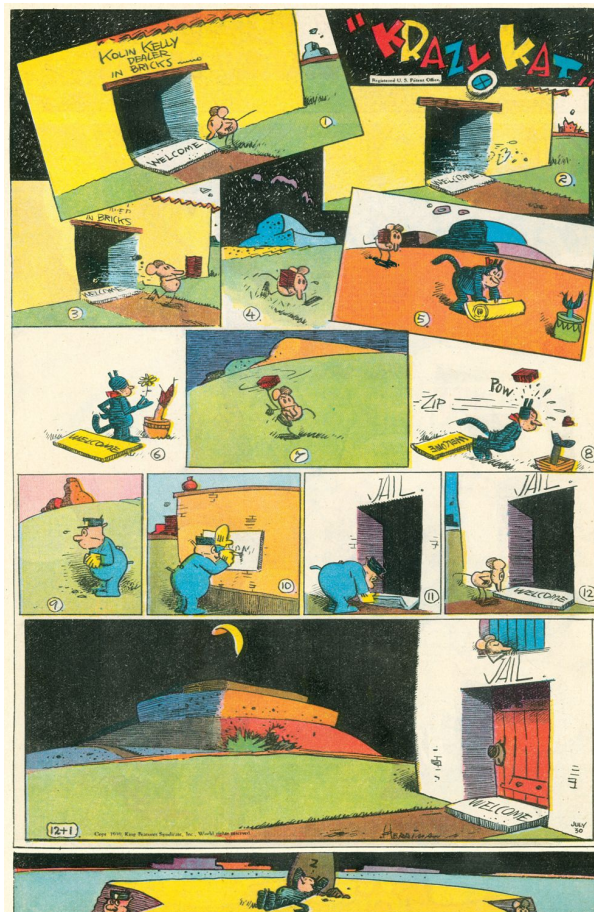
I try to paint in a way that articulates this sense of movement, interconnectivity, and slippage of language. I am interested in scaling up and inhabiting the moment of the shock of seeing—the fraction of a second during which the registration between sensation and language has not yet taken hold. Rhythm aids in keeping paintings from becoming too cohesive or legible. Some of these paintings can feel like accretions of interjections—pictures within pictures, frames within frames—rarely a dominant center, but a rhizome-like web of varying densities and intensities.



George Herriman, *Krazy Kat* sunday page.

I look at and re-read George Herriman's *Krazy Kat* a lot, especially the Sunday pages of his last decade, 1935-1944. These were in full color, and after decades of wide-ranging compositional strategies, they were at their expressive and poetic peak here. In *Krazy Kat*, everything is fluid and rhythmic: the ever-shifting Coconino County backdrop is as melodic as Krazy's sing-song patois, moving at a pace that totally inverts

our understanding of geologic/biologic time frames. Characters in dialogue, appearing to stand stationary inhabit a landscape where mesas stack themselves up or march out of frame, trees appear for single panels with outstretched arms, a wealth of potted succulents, crescent moons, patterned ceramics, and pyramids make instantaneous but inevitable cameos. Night and day oscillate between single lines of exchange. This isn't the space to say everything I want to about Herriman and Krazy Kat, so I will simply note that I try over and over to learn the lesson that showing someone another way of seeing, a poetic, playful, apparently illogical way of conceiving of the world, is viable, useful, and important—that beauty can be important.



George Herriman, *Krazy Kat* sunday page

Jacques Tati is another non-painter whose work has been deeply influential on my practice. In particular, I think about and watch two of his Monsieur Hulot films: *Mon Oncle* and *Playtime*. In these films the lanky, bumbling Hulot meanders through nearly plotless situations, navigating a version of Paris which has rapidly and radically modernized around him. The character of Hulot, and the haphazard but generative circumstances of his movements through the world have always made him a filmic counterpart to Krazy Kat in my mind. Both are deeply comic, steeped in the bodily, pantomime traditions of vaudeville and early Hollywood. The ways in which their bodies (drawn or filmed) interact with and respond to their environments has always struck me as beautiful, thoughtful, and slapstick articulations of embeddedness.



Jacques Tati, still from *Playtime*, 1967.

What we know about Hulot's character in any given film is relatively unimportant. Whether he is unemployed, on vacation, designing cars, or working in a factory—these are simply devices that afford Tati the opportunity to unfold Hulot into an overtly ordered

space. Typically, this Hulot-activity permeates an environment to the degree that the systems which surround him collapse in a kind of socio-comic entropy. In the long scene shown above, the already hectic opening night of an upscale restaurant gradually devolves into a raucous dance party accompanied by a rhythmic barrage of visual jokes—helped along by the ever-crescendoing house band.



Jacques Tati, still from *Mon Oncle*, 1958.

The essentially non-speaking Hulot calls to mind Michel de Certeau's observation that "to practice space is thus to repeat the joyful and silent experience of childhood." *Mon Oncle* is filled with scenes wherein Hulot is baffled by the formal and material qualities of the world around him. This often leads him to bend, break, and reconfigure his environment, in well-meaning attempts to make sense of his surroundings. In

discussing *Playtime*, film historian Philip Kemp notes that one way of considering Tati's project is as an investigation into "how the curve comes to reassert itself over the straight line". Tati is endlessly involved in analyzing the body's framing by material and societal structures—and the ways in which one might cause them to crack by reasserting a fluid and playful humanity.

My paintings are simultaneously anxious and joyful, manic and celebratory. As much as these painted spaces can feel overwhelming or claustrophobic, they can also by turns be calm, absurd, playful, and comedic. I wish that I could make a painting that felt like the worlds envisioned Jacques Tati or George Herriman. I'd love to make paintings where it may be difficult or impossible to say what is "happening", because the thing that is happening is simply an imbuing of vitality into the mundane—finding, amplifying, and creating beauty without ignoring the complexity and anxiety of the time. LeFebvre observes near the end of *Rhythmanalysis*: "[Rhythm] has an ethical function. In its relation to the body, to time, to the work, it illustrates *real* (everyday) life. It *purifies* it in the acceptance of catharsis. Finally, and above all, it brings compensation for the miseries of everydayness, for its deficiencies and failures."

[addenda // bedroom]

“...so the world and space seemed to be the mirror one of the other both minutely storied in hieroglyphs and ideograms, and each of them could equally well be or not be a sign...living in the midst of signs had very slowly brought us to see as so many signs the innumerable things that had at first been there without indicating anything but their own presence, it had transformed them into the signs of themselves, and had added them to the series of signs deliberately made by whoever wanted to make a sign”

-Italo Calvino, *Cosmicomics*

The room—one of six, plus a guest room—was at Gallery Four (405 West Franklin Street, in Baltimore), specifically the southern portion of the room, the part that was the bedroom as opposed to the studio. Ginevra lived there for 16 or 17 months, the majority of the time that I was away at school. Gallery Four has been around for about 20 years. Both the move in, and the move out were abrupt—albeit in different ways. I’ve moved so many times, and each move has it’s own tone.

The windows aren’t original, and the six sets of curtains came with the space; functional and innocuous enough to leave in place. Not perfect, but better than finding and buying six new sets of curtains. The bricks had been painted thickly and repeatedly, Ginevra left them alone. The floor, however, had never been refinished, save for a smallish portion in the north/studio side of the room, (Even that had been done many years prior).

The two bookshelves—the good one and the bad one—were situated not-quite-flush to the bricks, which was as close as they could get, their contact held frustratingly back by the radiator pipe that ran along the floor. The books in the two shelves were oddly ordered; each shelf contained artists monographs, theory and philosophy, and some literature and poetry. The southernmost bookshelf always seemed like the better shelf, in both design and content—a subconscious curation. Books often migrated from shelf to shelf, with numerous layovers in between, but tending to retain their permanent addresses.

Resting on top of the maybe-less-good shelf: an oil painting on paper—done from observation—of Prettyboy Reservoir, north of Baltimore. The painting was made on a trip to the reservoir so that Ginevra could take photos for a book Suzie Zak was putting together about Prettyboy. She photographed the painting while it was being made; a funny collaboration, but anyway, that painting was made years ago and it was usually on top of that shelf, but sometimes it was shuffled into piles of documents and mail. The little glass container next to it is heavily textured and holds a few pins designed by friends—I think it used to hold earrings—and I don't know, but I've always assumed that it belonged to Ginevra's Mom.

The nice bookshelf held plants mostly. Notably, the red kalanchoe we rescued shortly after moving into the previous warehouse—the Annex. It was nearly dead, and its leaves and flowers have remained sparse. Because of the pruning we gave it, it has grown in a way that resembles a cascade-style bonsai—several of its branches dipping below the upper threshold of its pot, before righting its course and lunging upwards.

The folding woven chair sat near the good bookshelf, it was found behind a water heater after Ginevra's family moved into a new house when she was little. Her brother Dante scratched at the wooden structure with a knife, then G brought it with her to Vermont, where it stayed on an outdoor porch for a few years. After moving it so many times (six? seven?) we finally learned that it was a Danish modern knock-off, so G polished the exposed wood with wax—but the fibers are still loose along the edges. Between this chair and the leather loveseat (with the ripped armrest and broken leg, from Vermont), in various configurations, were the green lamp and one of our milk crates. I have only the vaguest memory of acquiring the lamp as a result of moving from Annex 3E to Gallery Four. I think it was in the Annex unit before we moved in. It never had a wing-nut or thumbscrew to hold the shade in place, and we never remedied that; a miniscule task involving the procurement of such a tiny object to resolve a trivial inconvenience—a task as absurd to undertake as to ignore. That lamp, with its too-glossy too-green body, its always loose shade, and its faulty wiring, was nevertheless the better of the two lighting options in the room, as the wicker makeshift ceiling lamp threw at least as much shadow as illumination, making every movement feel like that late picasso shadow painting—one's gaze catching primarily an eyeful of silhouette wherever you looked, like a lamp that casts cataracts.

The milk crate was one of Ginevra's—mine were all in Richmond—but I don't think it came from Vermont, maybe another Annex object. It was older, rough and surprisingly fibrous—it's sharper edges having mushroomed out over years of handling. It was rotated numerous times, usually with its top down, simply a plastic lacework

volume to get the lamp up off the floor. At times when I was not in school, it would be rotated ninety degrees in order to become a little bookshelf/nightstand. It held: two books about Florence (one both historical and gossipy, like a Renaissance tell-all, the other, one of those obnoxious/necessary travel guides), a Shirley Jaffe exhibition catalogue in French and English, a few issues of *Art in America* that I have been carrying around for over a decade now (an Oyvind Fahlstrom on one cover, a Philip Guston on the next, and Yvonne Jacquette on another—with an article about her written by Bob Berlind), some Bachelard and Perec, a collection of Silvina Ocampo, the *Six Problems for Don Isidro Pedro* by H. Bustos Domecq (Casares and Borges pen name for their foray into collaborative detective fiction), my xerox of the Hatje Cantz edition of Agnes Martin's collected writings, numerous receipts, in no order whatsoever—almost exclusively for coffee or painting supplies—pooling like flotsam in any small but open space, after July lots of postcards, my wallet and keys (depending on the time of day), a few single socks whose missing partners I long held out hope of finding (unsuccessfully, eventually), my black, blue, and red vinyl-tipped pens and gridded notebooks if not in use (and very rarely actually *in* the crate, but always satellite to it—never feeling as though they were just “on the floor”, anyway), and anything else that felt disruptive in any other location.

From here, around the far side of the loveseat, was a small rug, maybe from Vermont, but definitely in our old Annex bedroom, serving no real purpose other than to show that, yes, a small rug could fit between the foot of the bed and the back of the loveseat, and to make the large rug near it feel much larger—but that only came into

play when vacuuming the two. The small rug was always frustrating to me; when compared with the large rug it seemed a needless articulation of space.

The large rug—the red/blue/yellow-ochre/pale-yellow one—came from Ginevra’s Dad’s house. He has an essentially identical rug in his bedroom in Silver Spring, outside of DC. Whenever I’ve lived with a large rug, most especially this one, I think of the early Persian rugs which were massive abstractions of fantastic gardens to be used indoors or outdoors—gardens which were both permanent and nomadic, their own internal constellations forever fixed while the world moved around them. I also think of the map that is the same size as the territory, or how because of a rug’s intricate, ordered space, it becomes a visual sounding-board or stage—a static but impossible to memorize ground over which every action plays out as unrecordable choreography.

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