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QUOTATIONS LIKE THE SHARPEST CLAWS

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

By Johanna Robinson

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Dedicated to the memory of Paula Robinson

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ABSTRACT

QUOTATIONS LIKE THE SHARPEST CLAWS

By Johanna Robinson, 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, 2018

Major Director: Cara Benedetto, Assistant Professor, Painting and Printmaking

Quotations like the Sharpest Claws describes a multimedia installation composed of paintings and sound that explores the theory of cognitive dissonance, a controversial psychological model that attempts to explain how we deal with inconsistency in incompatible beliefs. Imagination is given primacy as a source for truth-seeking and world-building. The uncanny and surreal are used as entry points into this topic.

The title is derived from a description of Eileen Myles' poetry I once read in an anonymous review. Their writing was described as beyond poetry in a way that it could only be described as such when surrounded by "quotations like the sharpest claws." This phrase has since stuck with me as a way to describe my own work, dealing with "truth," "metaphor," and "cognition", although in my case these claws are indicative of doubt surrounding the aforementioned subjects.

CHAPTER 1: THE ASSEMBLAGE

Be careful with your imagination.
Wherever it dwells in the world, it follows us constantly
little by little what man or beast, plants or stones
imagined, turns into crude or delicate reality.
The sick with fever, those who shake, those who want
to speak but cannot,
in waiting rooms, among pages of newspapers and
oranges,
those who gaze at the ceiling or else the sun, wounded,
those who hug each other illicitly, not knowing why,
or in the blue precinct of marriage, those contorted
with belly laughs,
the children, the slaves, the unjust, those who go
shopping, handle meat
the prisoners, soldiers, tyrants, with faces of singers,
the swimmers, the eager executioners, those who
blaspheme,
those who beg or give, the missionaries, the anarchists,
the submissive, the proud, the solitary, those who don't
understand,
those who work constantly,
those who do nothing and get tired
do nothing some more, without rest, irreducibly, the
unborn,
those who carry signs in their fur, letters, drawings,
mysteries that no one has deciphered,
those who wash everything the entire day like raccoons,

those who stink and scavenge for bones or excrement,
tumble around to stink even more,
those who appear spiritual, or musical, or poetic,
those who devour others like them
or themselves from madness,
those who are streaked, with spots, with silver scales
and tails,
the ferocious and the domesticated, those who love,
those who eat each other in order to fecundate,
those who live only on grass or precious milk,
or those who need to eat rotten meat,
those who crawl or those most beautiful, with
princely feathers,
those whom the water hoards among its glass, clear
green or black
in the dark molds of the earth, buried,

those who take so long in dying that they don't die
and seem like plants or stones, with the additions of
time,
those who barely live by a miracle, by suicide, on
nothing,
all that they have imagined
and that we mortals imagine
forms the reality of the world.

-Silvina Ocampo, *Vain Warning*¹

I consider the words of Silvina Ocampo's poem *Vain Warning* both in connection to the world and in connection to painting. In terms of the world, I accept her proposition that all that exists is the result of imagination — animal, non-animal and human-animal, although to varying degrees depending upon who is in a position of power. I question what other possible routes reality could have taken in its very formation. This is not so far off from the way a painting is constructed. Ocampo's poem has become central to me as an analogy for my painting process, which consists of an interweaving of interconnected, competing narratives.

In the painting *Contending with Logical Space*, 2018, an assortment of subjects both real and imagined attempt to power the world, or at least the fabricated world within the confines of the canvas. I have limited this painting to things that could potentially be found in Virginia. There are forty-nine subjects which power forty-nine lightbulbs, a very low number that of course could never accurately portray any complete picture of the universe (although under this logic the difference between 49 or 1049 things is statistically insignificant.) The number forty-nine was settled upon by using a grid that's seven by seven, keeping in line with the number of notes in the major scale and number of colors observed in the prism, as I will further discuss in Chapter 2. Every painting I have made in the past year is referenced in *Contending with Logical Space*, creating a complete picture of the universe that I have created in my work. Additionally, there are references to paintings I have not yet made but plan to make in the future. I consulted which images were contained on the Voyager Golden Records, released into space in 1977 aboard the Voyager spacecraft with the intention of portraying diversity of life on earth, not as a direct reference to images in the painting,



Contending with Logical Space, Oil on canvas, 96" x 72", 2018

but as an example of an editing process to look at critically for omissions and oversights.

A large inspiration for this painting was trying to make sense of Wittgenstein. I have long turned to philosophy as a way to try to make sense of the world — I haven't yet decided if this is a good way to go about it, but I enjoy the puzzles in logic. Studying philosophy has filled some void in me that I always thought was brought about by a lack of other systems in my life to provide meaning — religion or intergenerational family traditions to name a couple. Overall, I see this as a positive, although I don't know that I can claim it as a choice. I'm sure there have been instances in my life which have

indoctrinated me into this ideology equally so as others are drawn to their own ideologies (a fact I am clued into when, for example, I visited my father a few months ago and coincidentally found his battered copy of *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* at the very top of a years-long high stack of clutter, even though we have rarely discussed philosophy and certainly never Wittgenstein).

In any case, in Bertrand Russell's introduction to *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, he states, "Mr. Wittgenstein begins his theory of Symbolism with the statement: 'We make to ourselves pictures of facts.' A picture, he says, is a model of reality, and to the objects in the reality correspond the elements of the picture: the picture itself is a fact. The fact that things have a certain relation to each other is represented by the fact that in the picture its elements have a certain relation to one another. 'In the picture and the pictured there must be something identical in order that the one can be a picture of the other at all. What the picture must have in common with reality in order to be able to represent it after its manner—rightly or falsely—is its form of representation.'"² This seems to me an important consideration for a painter. To what degree do the subjects I paint correspond with actual subjects in the world? I'm not talking about the level to which they are painted representationally, but the way in which they become a symbol.

For example, there is a long history of painting affiliated with the painting of "things." In 17th century Dutch still life painting, an assemblage of objects was painted with the purpose of flaunting painterly skills as well as material wealth. *Contending with Logical Space* has elements of a Flemish painting gone awry: the freshly peeled, perfectly glistening lemon hanging stuck by a thread in some wiring, the squirrel overturned biting down on a plug instead of the nearby luscious grapes, while



Contending with Logical Space (detail), Oil on canvas, 96" x 72", 2018



G. van Deynum, Still life with grapes, lemons and oyster, created between 1650 and 1659

Contending with Logical
Space (detail), Oil on
canvas, 96" x 72", 2018



Frans Snyders, Still Life with Fruit, Wan-Li Porcelain, and Squirrel, 1616

the family dog's adorable face is barely visible through a glowing bulb. When painting the image of a subject from a painting rather than from life, the referent to the original subject becomes one step removed. I am no longer painting a lemon, but painting a painting of a lemon from nearly four centuries ago. This lineage of painted lemons becomes a language; a language that functions as a self-powered system in *Contending with Logical Space*.

At some point this painting became a balancing act, adding in an inanimate object here to counteract an animal there, the evidence of a person here to imply a world not controlled by humans over there. In this tangle of wires, many different worlds are formed depending upon how one crops the image. Some objects interact with each other to form puns — such as one of the four natural elements, fire, existing to light a cigarette, while some “fish out of water” are in close proximity to a water glass. Others speak to each other from across the canvas — a real plane and a paper plane angled towards each other to possibly collide somewhere out of frame. In the center-left, the back of a canvas can be seen, giving importance to the painted world.

Jane Bennett talks about a different kind of assemblage from the still life in the chapter “The Agency of Assemblages” in her book *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, although still an assemblage that relates directly to the self-powered subjects I am depicting. Bennett recounts the conditions that led to the power blackout affecting 50 million people that stretched up the east coast of the United States into Canada in 2003. She explains, “The electrical power grid offers a good example of an assemblage. It is a material cluster of charged parts that have indeed affiliated, remaining in sufficient proximity and coordination to produce distinctive effects...The elements of this

assemblage, while they include humans and their (social, legal, linguistic) constructions, also include some very active and powerful nonhumans: electrons, trees, wind, fire, electromagnetic fields.”³

This is a day that I remember well, having been in Queens to visit MOMA PS1 and later Manhattan, with the blackout occurring literally seconds before I boarded a train at Grand Central Station (thankfully so or I would have been one of the many trapped for countless hours underground.) Being in Manhattan without power, less than two years after the September 11th attacks, rumors of terrorism quickly spread through word of mouth up and down the streets. Cell phones were not functional from heavy usage and people were in a panic, as the price of water doubled and then tripled at the food trucks that remained open. As a crowd gathered at Bryant Park behind the New York Public Library, the source of information ultimately came from an unhoused person (I am in support of shifting away from the term “homeless”) with a battery powered radio. Panic quickly turned to celebration, the news spreading that the outage stretched all the way to Canada, making terrorism seem less likely as more bits of information trickled in. As dusk set in and I set up camp to stay at this park until early the next morning when I could find a ride home, a giant dance party with battery powered flashlights broke out in the streets.

I like to think of my paintings as portraying such alternate power sources and structures as those set up in this scenario, as a literal metaphor for the self-powered subject, crossing wires with other self-powered subjects that have the opportunity to exist independently outside of any overarching structure. Bennett sums up the causes for this massive power outage in the following terms. “To figure the generative source of

effects as a swarm is to see human intentions as always in competition and confederation with many other strivings, for an intention is like a pebble thrown into a pond, or an electrical current sent through a wire or neural network: It vibrates and merges with other currents, to affect and be affected. This understanding of agency does not deny the existence of that thrust called intentionality, but it does see it as a less definitive source of outcomes.”⁴

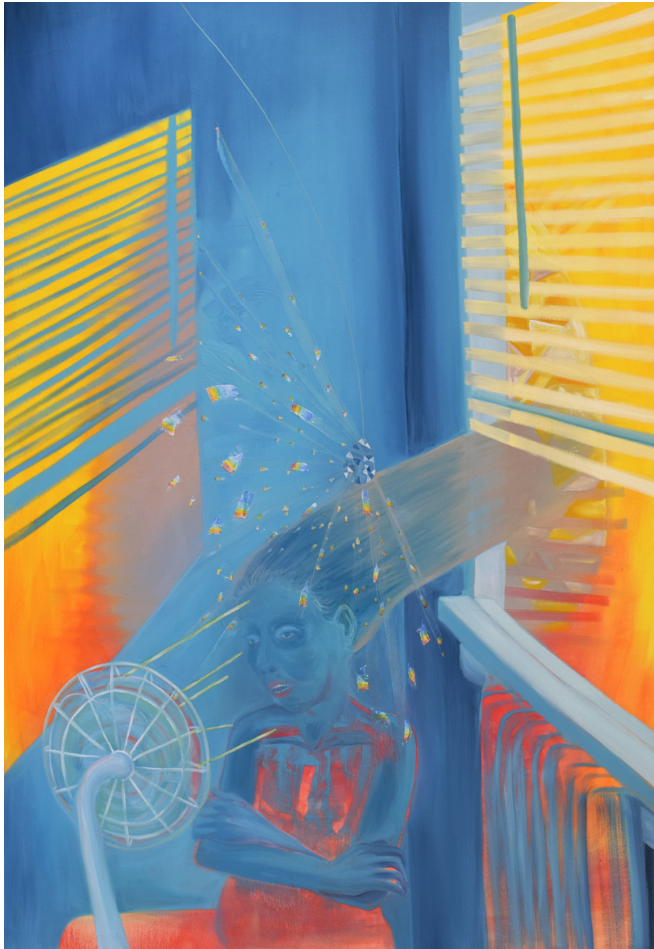
I am relating this idea from Bennett directly to Ocampo’s *Vain Warning*, which also takes into account the “many other strivings” beyond human intention. While Bennett does not place as high a value on imagination as Ocampo, the effect of an intermingling of intentions is well articulated in the quoted passage. In the same way that Bennett describes an electrical current sent through a neural network, a painting becomes a reflection of my neural network, an infinite connection of memory associations that come out as I make the piece. What began as an exercise to make sense of Wittgenstein begins to resemble a complex assemblage of interconnected networks, a serendipitous state of mind in that whatever book I open or memory I land upon all of a sudden feel relevant. In the following pages I will describe this process as best I can.

CHAPTER 2: DISSONANCE

Last year I began researching the history of cognitive dissonance, a controversial psychological model that attempts to explain how we deal with inconsistency in incompatible beliefs. This feels relevant when adopting a definition of the world that takes the competing intentions and imaginations of many to be responsible for the world's formation. I use the process of painting as a research tool. Many discoveries as to the content of the painting happen directly in its making. The paintings provide a structure to guide my inquiries, as each additional element requires research far beyond its visual appearance. For example, what does cognitive dissonance look like, when what we know to be true does not match up with our experience? What color would this feeling be, and what would it sound like? These were some of the questions on my mind as I began this body of work.

In *How Newton declared Indigo the seventh color so as to not affiliate science with the occult*, 2018, I began with an idea to make a painting about a figure wedged in between two opposing forces, light against wind. I view the figure as being engaged in paralysis by analysis, overwhelmed by the amount of external forces acting upon them. During my research into how many colors are visible through the prism's refraction of light, I came across a text that described how Newton arbitrarily added a seventh color to the light spectrum, indigo, because he believed six colors would affiliate science with the occult while seven would keep consistency with the musical scale.⁵ This anecdote is a prime example of imagination, stemming from cognitive dissonance (what Newton observed not matching up with what he believed) informing our sense of reality. Seven

colors in the light spectrum, a phenomenon never even observed, is still taught in schools today.⁶



How Newton declared Indigo the seventh color so as to not affiliate science with the occult, Oil on Canvas, 44" X 64", 2018

I began this painting with a hot mixture of Indian Yellow and Quinacridone Red. The proceeding layers of various blues and indigos functioned as a shield to tone down some of these initial glowing, saturated colors, which I allowed to peek through in areas, creating a sort of heat map. The resulting figure feels feverish, as if they are burning up and shivering at the same time, while the red-hot light coming through the window shatters within the prism and hits the figure from the right, a fan only inches from their face cooling them off from the left. I can

feel the figure's discomfort while looking at the painting. The summers and early falls of Virginia can be quite hot and at the time of making this painting I had spent two Augusts here without an air conditioner, my time at home usually spent with a fan merely inches from my own face.

In order to make this feeling of dissonance even more apparent I decided to add in a sound element to incorporate the term dissonance as it is most commonly referred



Ivan Wyschnegradsky, installation view, Neue Galerie, Kassel, documental 14, photo: Fred Dott

to, as audio. There is a long history of cross-pollination between the visual and auditory fields, ranging from Newton adjusting his theory of color to fit in with the major scale, to Ivan Wyschnegradsky, an avant-garde composer whose work I discovered at documenta 14, who also attempted to correlate the visible spectrum of light with tones of the chromatic scale. When I first heard Wyschnegradsky's quarter-tone system of music I immediately thought that this is what my paintings would sound like. His composition *24 preludes in the quarter-tone system*, recorded in 1934, is an abrupt clashing of notes, at once chaotic and foreboding.⁷ Through the addition of three small speakers hidden behind three paintings, I felt I could give a hint as to the way my paintings should be interpreted. Often, I find that viewers don't know if they should take my paintings seriously or humorously. For me the humor lies in the attempt to try to take

them seriously. The resulting tones created a setting that sounded so serious that it became almost like an ambient soundtrack for a campy thriller movie — the unexpected sharp sound that occurs right as one discovers something horrifying.

There is an element of humor in these pairings of image and sound that also has a connection to Fluxus. In Fluxus performance, the piano was often the instrument of choice to make experimental, absurdist sound, as in Larry Miller's 1976 piece *Remote Music* that kept an audience waiting to see the plaster mold of a pointed finger painstakingly lowered from the ceiling until it clumsily presses one key.⁸ The audience's enthusiastic cheering at this moment of contact becomes as much a part of the work as the action itself. I was pleased to know that at certain moments viewers jumped unexpectedly as an ear-piercing sound suddenly emerged from *Your Laugh is My Scream*, 2018, especially as they were drawn closer to the painting to peer inside the hole in the canvas which also functioned as a mouth. This is where I find the humor within such a serious sounding installation.

I recorded the three tones on a piano here on campus. The recordings played at randomly looping one-minute intervals so that at times there was a full minute of silence until the three notes played simultaneously, creating a vibrating, dissonant clash, while at other



Your Laugh is My Scream, 14" x 16", Oil on canvas, audio loop, 2018

times they would be evenly spaced, leading the viewer's gaze around the room as they followed the noise with not only their ears but also their eyes. The notes consisted of a high tone, a middle tone, and a low tone, correlating to the highest possible key on the piano, a middle key, and the lowest key. These notes were then digitally stretched to create the maximum amount of resonance until they faded out. I also shifted the pitch of each note to make them slightly out of tune. I consulted James Tenney's text *A History of Consonance and Dissonance*, which describes the progression of these two ideas in Western musical theory from the pre-polyphonic era (the 13th century) onwards in order to research which notes were considered the most dissonant.⁹ I was not surprised to find out that westernized definitions of dissonance have changed over time. I am left believing that a sound being in or out of tune is also just a construction, similar to a declaration of how many colors there are in the visible spectrum.

I come from a musical family. My mother was a classical pianist who taught lessons from home, and my father played the flute and was self-taught on the guitar, primarily by playing along to jingles and theme songs while watching TV. I am even named after Johann Sebastian Bach because I was born in the tricentennial year of his birth. When recording the dissonant sounds to accompany my paintings, I reverted to muscle memory — the frantic pressing of keys to see how obnoxious a sound I could possibly make, an activity I much preferred as a child to taking any sort of lessons. This was very therapeutic and ultimately served the purpose of shifting my creative output away from painting in moments of feeling that I needed to reflect on them mid-process before their completion. Contemplating painting through compositions on the piano was an activity also common to Morton Feldman, who wrote the pieces *Rothko Chapel* and

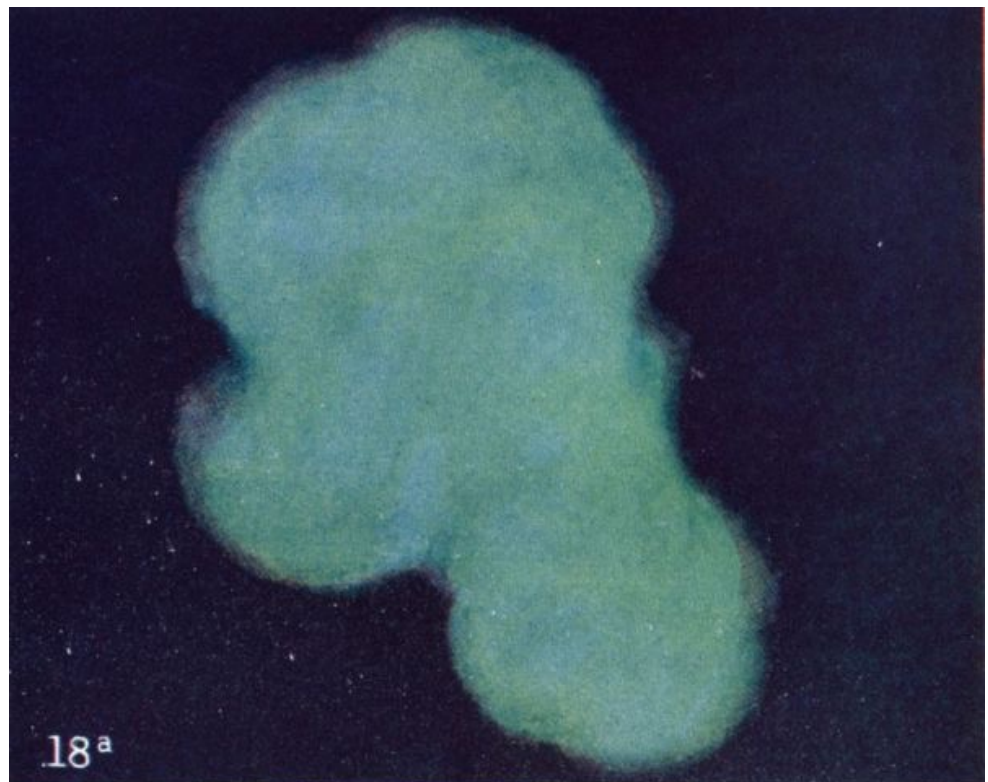
For Philip Guston in the 1970s and 1980s as a means to translate his interpretation of their marks and color into sound.¹⁰ These compositions have an intense, slow build-up that makes evident the great degree to which Feldman was affected by painting on an emotional level.

In a third and final example of dissonance occurring in color and sound, I would like to focus on Annie Besant, an early leader in the Theosophical Society. Besant, although revered as a women's rights activist and for her anti-colonialist stance, leaves certain questions about her political views unanswered within a critical analysis of her theory of color. In 1901, Besant, along with Charles Leadbeater, a fellow member of the Theosophical Society, published *Thought-Forms*. This fascinating text became increasingly relevant to my painting practice as I thought deeper about symbolism through color and sought out alternative systems of interpreting the color spectrum beyond Newton. *Thought-Forms* consists of fifty-eight paintings of what could be described as ectoplasms, the material manifestation of spirits, as well as three plates that claim to visualize the music of Mendelssohn, Gounod, and Wagner. In Besant's words, "Another point that should be mentioned before passing to the consideration of our illustrations is that every one of the thought-forms here given is drawn from life. They are not imaginary forms, prepared as some dreamer thinks that they ought to appear; they are representations of forms actually observed as thrown off by ordinary men and women, and either reproduced with all possible care and fidelity by those who have seen them, or with the help of artists to whom the seers have described them."¹¹

These images must be looked at critically when considering the value systems



Contending with Logical Space (detail), Oil on canvas, 96" x 72", 2018



Annie Besant,
Thought-Forms,
Fig. 18A: Vague
Sympathy, 1905

imposed by Besant onto the meanings of colors, which often correlated lighter colors with notions of intellect and darker colors with malice and selfishness. It's likely that these value systems originated in line with racism. As Fred Moten describes in *The Case of Blackness*, "The cultural and political discourse on black pathology has been so pervasive that it could be said to constitute the background against which all representations of blacks, blackness, or (the color) black take place. Its manifestations have changed over the years, though it has always been poised between the realms of the pseudo-social scientific...to the regulatory metaphysics that undergirds interlocking notions of sound and color in aesthetic theory: blackness has been associated with a certain sense of decay, even when that decay is invoked in the name of a certain (fetishization of) vitality."¹²

I will limit my analysis to two thought-forms, both of which appear in my painting *Contending with Logical Space*. Figure 18A, entitled *Vague Sympathy*, portrays a seafoam green cloud in what appears to be a twinkling night sky. I find these



Hilma af Klint, *The Swan No. 12*, 59.65" x 59.45", Oil on canvas, 1915

illustrations in themselves to be absolutely beautiful, and created (if not directly by a woman artist) under the direction of a woman thinker nearly forty years before Abstract Expressionism would come to prominence. These paintings were made around the same time that Hilma af Klint was working, another female abstract painter who

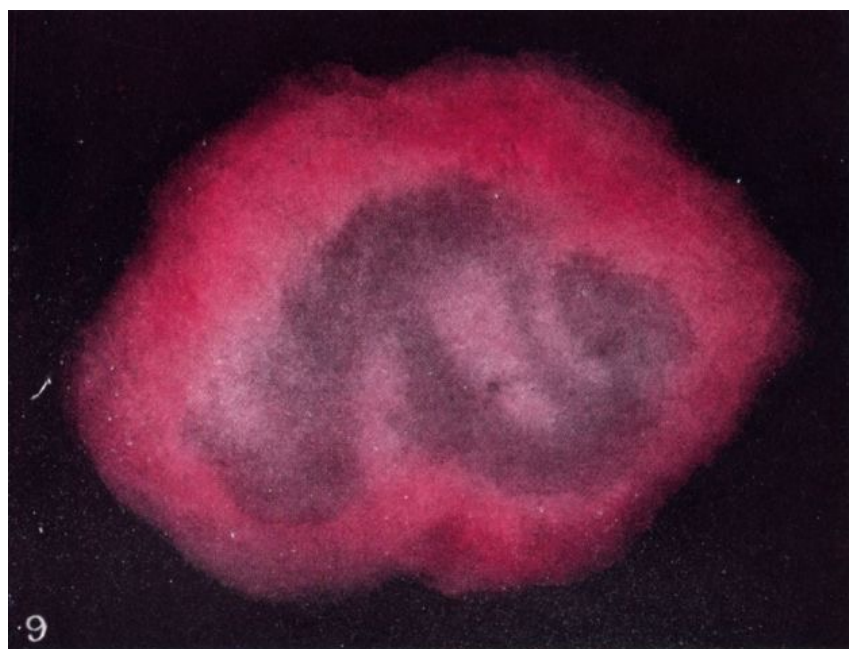
predated Abstract Expressionism. She was also a member of the Theosophical Society and likely read *Thought-Forms*.¹³ (It's worth noting that in Klint's *The Swan No. 12*, 1915, we can find yet another prism divided into seven colors.) It is not in the paintings themselves where my criticality of this work lies but rather in their descriptions. "In Fig. 18A," Besant notes, "we have another of the vague clouds, but this time its green colour shows us that it is a manifestation of the feeling of sympathy. We may infer from the indistinct character of its outline that it is not a definite and active sympathy, such as would instantly translate itself from thought into deed; it marks rather such a general feeling of commiseration as might come over a man who read an account of a sad accident, or stood at the door of a hospital ward looking in upon the patients."¹⁴

This description of inactivity is easily translatable to the present day, describing, for example, the experience of reading about the current political climate while Facebook notifies you that your friend posted a picture of their cat and an advertisement for the best summer lipstick color pops up, all within the time span of 30 seconds. I try to imagine what color this vague sympathy cloud appears for myself, and have an even harder time imagining it observed around another person. This experience of dissonance is something that I had planned to make a painting directly about but haven't yet found the appropriate colors or imagery to properly translate the message, so in *Contending with Logical Space* the feeling is represented through the appropriation of Besant's *Vague Sympathy* cloud.

The second thought-form I have chosen to represent is *Figure 9, Vague Selfish Affection*. This cloud takes a similar form as *Vague Sympathy* although appears even



Contending with Logical Space (detail), Oil on canvas, 96" x 72", 2018



Annie Besant, Thought-Forms,
Fig. 9: Vague Selfish Affection,
1905

more galaxy-like, the center nearly translucent. The act of recreating these thought-forms through paint provided greater insight into the context of their making, but not into trusting their meaning. Besant explains, “Fig. 9 shows us also a cloud of affection, but this time it is deeply tinged with a far less desirable feeling. The dull hard brown-grey of selfishness shows itself very decidedly among the carmine of love, and thus we see that the affection which is indicated is closely connected with satisfaction at favours already received, and with a lively anticipation of others to come in the near future...Fig. 9 represents what takes the place of that condition of mind at a lower level of evolution...Yet there is good in the man who generates this cloud, though as yet it is but partially evolved. A vast amount of the average affection of the world is of this type, and it is only by slow degrees that it develops towards the other and higher manifestation.”¹⁵

I have placed Besant’s thought-forms into a new context, surrounded by frogs, airplanes, measuring tape, and of course, light bulbs. Through careful observation of *Contending with Logical Space*, it becomes clear that these thought-forms do not function as a power source — it is my hope that the viewer will trace the cord’s path of any subject they are curious about in order to find out if the attached bulb is lit or unlit. The reasoning behind this traces back to Wittgenstein’s theory of logical space — that the world is a collection of known (lit light bulbs) and unknown (unlit light bulbs) facts. I have placed such an idea as thought-forms in the unknown category (along with the unicorn and inverted cube seen in the detail shots above, among others). Through the act of appropriating imagery from past paintings I attempt to discredit their implied system of categorization by pulling them from their frame of reference. For Annie

Besant, these thought-forms certainly appear to have been considered as facts, her imagination forming not only her own sense of reality but also those around her involved with the Theosophical movement. What elements of our own reality that we each feel so certain to be true will be perplexing (at best) to future generations?

CHAPTER 3: DYSTOPIAN OPTIMISM

My paintings explore the limits of constructed knowledge from the position of a dystopian optimist. I am interested in world-building. I want to believe, although am at times doubtful, that the action of world-building through painting has significance beyond the interests of the individual. Although beginning with a cynical framework, I take pleasure in discovering the narrative as the work unfolds.

The paintings are attempts to envision rebuilding power structures anew, both literally and metaphorically. In *Using the Electromagnetic Field for Personal Gain*, 2018,



Using the Electromagnetic Field for Personal Gain, Oil on canvas, 24" x 18", 2018

a group of hermits discovers a way to source electricity directly from the ground, but use this knowledge to simply cool themselves off. The figures are left painted in the same tone as the ground as a way to shift the focus away from their identity and towards the phenomenon happening in the space. The only figure that is not the same murky green as the ground tone is a pair of bright orange hands emerging from the bottom right corner, which pull open the crevice in the road as if it is a cartoon hole, reminding us of the two-dimensionality of the picture plane. Depth and perspective shift from areas of flatness to areas with more defined light and shadow, as two yellow pavement markings create a diagonal intersection of the canvas leading one's eye past the horizon line. This painting originated out of a series I began a few years ago which focused on paintings of sinkholes. In this piece, I wanted to try to put a more optimistic spin on the idea of the earth unexpectedly opening up and swallowing one whole. The fan becomes a recurring motif as I attempt to build my own lexicon through the imagery in the paintings.

In *Data Transfer*, 2018, the subjects are again each acting out of their own self-interest, in a closed loop system perpetuated and powered by the iPhone photograph. An interlocking network of snakes, frogs and extension cords act like nesting dolls, each one stacked inside the



Data Transfer (detail), Oil on canvas, 60" x 48", 2018



Data Transfer, Oil on canvas, 60" x 48", 2018

next while feeding off each other. The figure is implicated through the assumption that they were the one to capture the photograph. The function of the screen in my work is as a source of output, in the sense that the input is considered primarily to be the subjects that become the captured image, in a perpetual cycle. The effect is that subjects existing on the outside of the screen have agency which is lost once their image becomes digitized. I added a dark gray band at the bottom of the painting as a sort of punctuation mark, closing off the scene.



Lifting the Veil, Oil on canvas over panel, 35" x 54", 2017

In *Lifting the Veil*, 2017, a display of physical force in the form of a handstand takes place over cinder blocks physically ripped into the canvas which portray an interior layer that is identical to that of the exterior. As a result, the painted world becomes inverted, with cement receding into space rather than coming forward. Similarly to *Data Transfer*, the figure is cropped out of frame, shifting the focus onto their actions rather than their identity. Attempts at rebuilding the world are met with endless repetition.

I don't imagine the settings for these three paintings taking place in a post-apocalyptic society, but in present time, perhaps just out of view down the road, obscured by some trees or tall grass. As I write this it occurs to me that an experience I had in Boston has fed my imagination and perhaps provided the setting for many of these paintings. While in a Super 8 film class at The School of the Museum of Fine Arts, our instructor brought us to a park down the street which contained, unbeknownst to her but well known to the students, a popular gay cruising spot situated within an acre of marsh. While exclaiming "Look at the way those reeds sway in the wind, let's go test out our cameras over there!" the instructor encouraged us to film in this area, a place many of us were eager to explore having walked by it every day but never feeling it appropriate to enter. What I discovered was the most intricate system of tunnels made out of grass, a maze of private rooms tucked away, completely furnished and out of view from the busy city streets within earshot, along with a few wide-eyed men, shocked to unexpectedly have a group of 18-year-olds bearing cameras descend upon them.

My interest went beyond what took place there and became a consideration of what conditions exist in order for an off-the-grid space as such to be constructed by

particular subcultures and not others. The closest I have found to existing within a place of uprooted normativity has been my six years in Portland, OR, where the combination of being in close proximity to so many forests paired with a long history of a “do-it-yourself” mindset has created an activist culture replete with legalized public camping within city limits, world record setting naked bike rides and thousand-acre off-leash dog parks. I found a freedom in this place that hasn’t compared with anywhere else I’ve been, although it at times felt frivolous when considering the difference between constructing space outside of dominant culture out of necessity versus choice.

It is often the case that those who do not feel welcome within dominant culture “take to the woods.” It is within this idea of taking to the woods that the figures in my paintings are situated within. My parallel interest in reading about hermits goes hand in hand with this exploration of self-constructed spaces. However, all the hermits I read about are also most often men. A recent visit to the Great Dismal Swamp put this fact into a much more dire perspective. Inhabited by refugee enslaved peoples beginning in the 1700s, and previously occupied by indigenous peoples escaping the colonists, an informational plaque at the park installed in 2012 tells me that despite this long history there was no evidence of any women having inhabited the swamp, although they most undoubtedly did.

At some point during graduate school, I made the decision to only paint women-identifying subjects, perhaps as an attempt to safely populate them in the aforementioned spaces. Of course women are, to say the least, overpopulated within the realm of painting, but by changing the spaces they are portrayed within from beyond the domestic and exotic, I am shifting this discourse. In *What Do Pictures Want?* W. J. T.

Mitchell describes, “As for the gender of pictures, it’s clear that the default position of images is feminine, ‘constructing spectatorship,’ in art historian Norman Bryon’s words, ‘around the opposition between women as image and men as the bearer of the look’ - not images *of* women, but images *as* women. The question of what pictures want, then, is inseparable from the question of what women want.”¹⁶ Mitchell goes on to posit that what pictures (and women) ultimately want is power. Many of the paintings in this body of work are about power, power structures, and forms of power, and while I am hesitant to push for a gendered reading of pictures across the board, I do like the idea of my pictures being read as feminine and furthermore, feminine sources of power.

What these formative experiences of the New York City blackout and the tunnels through the marsh have given me, while it may seem strange to compare the two, are other ways of imagining being in the world outside of pre-existing power assemblages and structures. The ability to dream through painting is an optimistic activity within dystopian conditions.

CHAPTER 4: SURREALISM AND THE BODY IN SOLITUDE

The act of painting and working in the studio is a time for solitude. As I look to the many painters who have influenced me, I notice that their figures are also often alone. I do not equate this with loneliness but simply a fact that reflects the conditions of their making. In this section I will discuss my relation to two such painters who have ties to the Surrealist movement, although would not consider themselves to be Surrealists; Maria Lassnig and Tarsila do Amaral.

I am interested in the overlaps between Maria Lassnig's and Tarsila do Amaral's work, who both traveled to Paris during the Surrealist movement. Lassnig, an Austrian painter who arrived in Paris in 1951 and shortly thereafter met the Surrealist André Breton, was already in the midst of creating groundbreaking self-portraits placed within backgrounds devoid of distraction. Tarsila do Amaral, a Brazilian painter who studied in Paris thirty years earlier in the 1920s, while quite different from Lassnig in style, also created work that often distorts the body. Their work, like mine, is signified by absurdist paintings of solitary women figures situated within large fields of color.

Around the time of painting *Data Transfer*, 2018, I was influenced by Maria Lassnig's painting entitled *Woman Laocoön*, 1976. I noticed that Lassnig was working in a similar way to me by appropriating imagery from past artworks. In Lassnig's paintings, the figures remain ungrounded, with backgrounds consisting of undefined planes of color made up of what could be described as seemingly arbitrary brushstrokes (although I don't find them to be arbitrary in the least.) In *Woman Laocoön* an arm appears dislocated, as if to represent an error of translation or incompatibility with Lassnig's own body superimposed within the sculpture that is the image's source,



Maria Lassnig, Woman Laocoön, Oil on canvas, 76" x 50", 1976

Laocoön and His Sons, found at the Vatican. This painting was most recently shown as part of her exhibition at documenta 14 in Athens, appropriately titled *The Future is Invented with Fragments from the Past*. I find the most common threads between our work to be her dry sense of humor and blunt depiction of imagery. A difference is that Lassnig is primarily committed to self-portraiture.

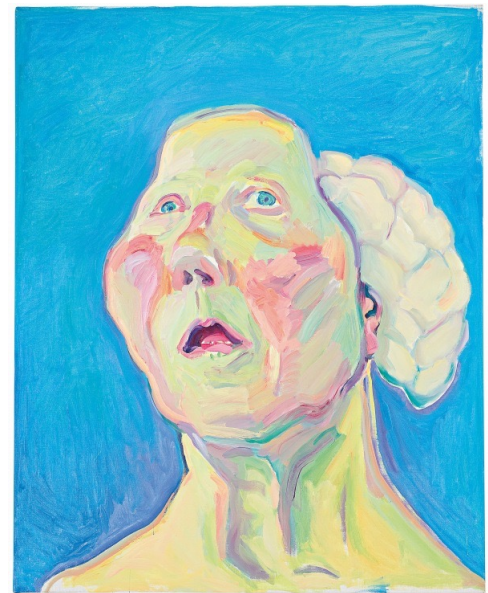
In a 2009 review by Carrie Moyer entitled "The Pitiless Eye," Moyer describes Lassnig's body awareness paintings. "Maria

Lassnig has spent the past 60

years making paintings that show us exactly how she feels in her own skin. In what she calls her body awareness paintings, Lassnig depicts only the parts of the body that she can actually sense while working. This position has given her license to freely hybridize figuration with abstraction as a means towards full sensory and psychological

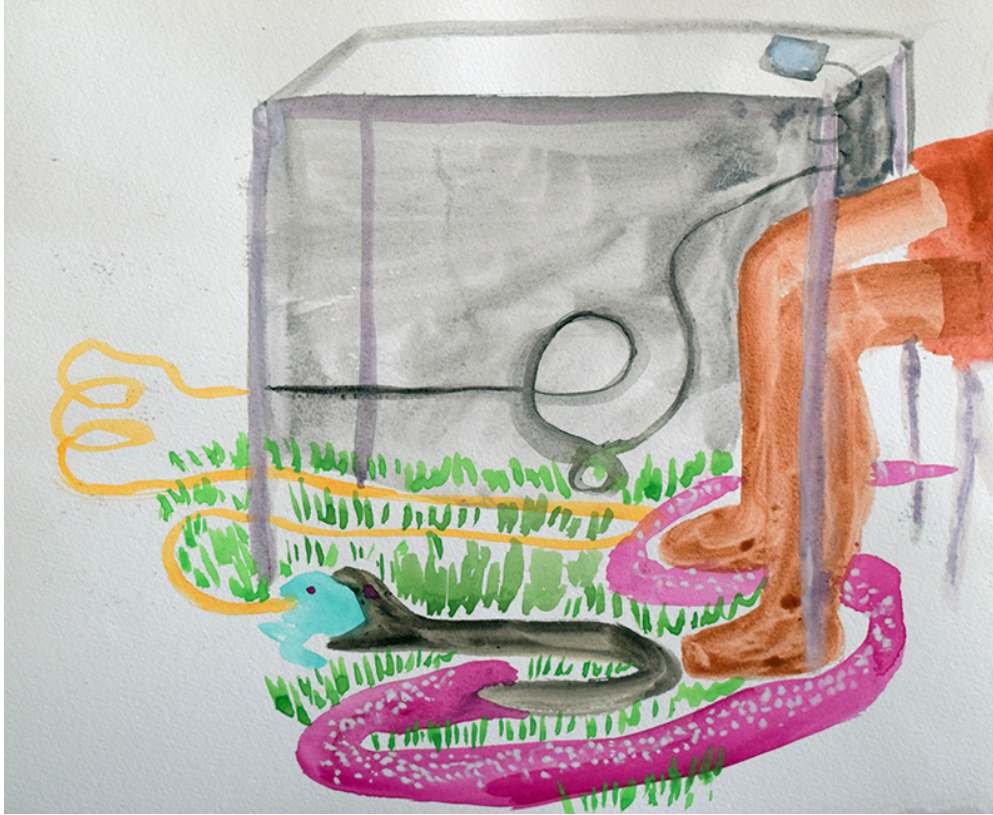
expression, and has engendered some of the most darkly perceptive imagery of the past century.”¹⁷

Unlike Lassnig, while the figures in my paintings often begin by using images of myself, this is mostly for convenience if I need a face at a certain angle or a leg pointed in a particular direction. As the painting proceeds I usually abandon the reference images and let the characters in the paintings take on a life of their own. However I do relate to this idea of sensing the body as I often find it necessary to position myself in the same poses as my figures. My paintings most often begin as small gouaches or watercolors that do not use any references at all, because these mediums can be done spur of the moment in periods of brainstorming while I am not in the studio, such as while traveling or directly before going to sleep or after waking up.



Maria Lassnig, Lady with Brain
(Dame mit Hirn), Oil on canvas, 1990

Through expanding these initial paintings in scale and materials, an opportunity to further suss out their meaning presents itself. When I do refer to my own body as the source material for paintings, I try to frame it to fit within the original composition of the gouache as a means to provide a reference to greater detail, rather than it becoming the source of the composition itself. A slight compositional awkwardness or tension results from this, a similar incompatibility of anatomy that is present in Lassnig trying to fit within the body of Laocoön. This is an incompatibility that feels familiar to me. Years ago I made a video work in which I unsuccessfully tried to fit my own body within the drawing



Data Transfer, Watercolor on paper, 16" x 12", 2018

of the Vitruvian Man. This video now feels humorously ironic as I find myself contorting my body in front of an iPad in order to fit into my own not anatomically correct sketches. In *Data Transfer*, legs that can never quite realistically connect to the out of frame torso bring up the possibilities and hindrances of invented space. Lassnig emphasizes these distortions through painting on a large scale with loose brushwork and bright colors, often with figures portrayed in exaggerated flesh tones that are at odds with the imagery she is depicting.

Many of the elements within the scaled-up versions of my own paintings are nearly life-size, aiming to give a sense of physical presence to the subjects and the



Maria Lassnig, *Inside and Outside the Canvas IV*, Oil on canvas, 1984–5

worlds they exist within. Although realistic in scale, the paint handling ultimately points to the uncanny through the use of a saturated color palette that is applied locally to each subject, suggesting their existence within a surreal space. Edges of the picture plane fade out into a vignette further implying an imagined, rather than observed, reality. I intend for my mark-making to be fairly immediate, without too many layers covering up what has already been put down. The work functions as a visceral reaction to an idea. Painting allows me to process and discover information in a tactile way that is not common in our technology-driven, fast-paced environment.



Carbon Monoxide Dioxide Oxygen Cycle, Oil on canvas, 60" x 48", 2017

The symbol grounding problem, which attempts to account for the gap that exists between written (or painted) symbols and their intended referents, can be visualized through the process of painting, and literally so when the referent does not perfectly match up with its source. I'm interested in the way that meaning is embedded in subjects through representation, how a subject can become the site for new meaning, and how meaning shifts over time. Lassnig's appropriation of the Laocoön as herself is an excellent painting to exemplify this process.

A second painting of mine that I would like to discuss in reference to Lassnig's groundless, shifting figures is *Carbon Monoxide Dioxide Oxygen Cycle*, 2017. In this

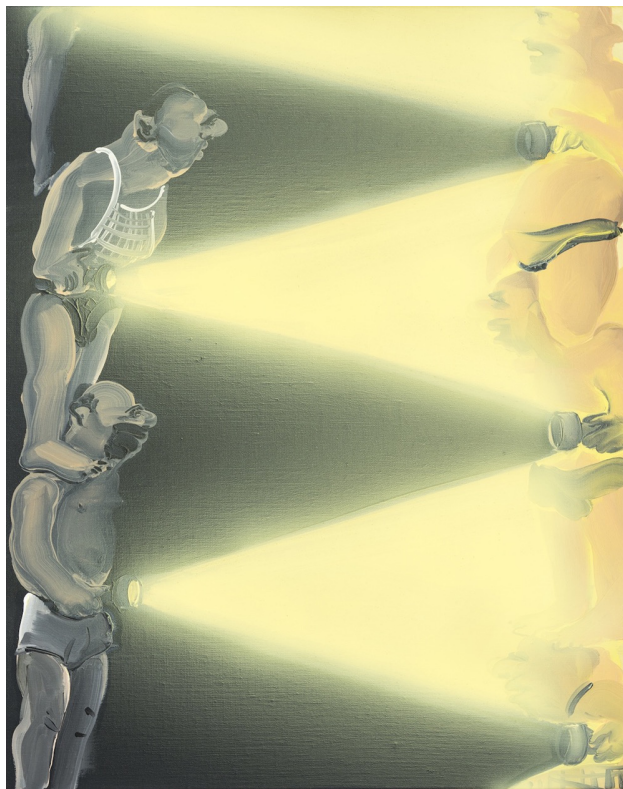
case, a painting intended to be about the exchange of carbon monoxide, carbon dioxide, and oxygen at some point became a portrait of my mother – chain smoker, white sneakers, plant lover – but an imaginary version of herself long before I was born, surrounded by a circle of oxygen producing plants in an attempt to counteract the looming smoke cloud/empty speech bubble. Never did I refer to an image of my mother or would I even say the figure looks much like her. It's more about a decision that a figure *could* refer to someone than it being a direct reference. I sometimes think of my figures as statuesque, as in meant to resemble the idea of someone but perhaps not them at all.

When describing the process of making *Carbon Monoxide Dioxide Oxygen Cycle* I can only describe a process that I believe must be common to many artists' trajectories — a constant shifting of references that what is observed in the world is subliminally connected to the personal. When my mother found out she was dying, she smashed every potted plant in sight. "Found out" probably isn't the right phrase as such matters come more as a slow reveal that one day compound themselves to the point of no more denial. There are still sharp bits of terra-cotta scattered throughout the yard. It honestly never occurred to me to relate this painting to this incident until recently — the work comes from a strictly nonverbal place that reveals itself over time. I find this to be a more sincere way of working than limiting the painting to be about solely what I decide beforehand.

Humor and irony used as a mechanism to deal with grief and mortality is a tactic that I recognize in Lassnig's work. Lassnig explains "Nothing is intentional. I work out of feeling, from an urge to do something - to draw or paint. Then I have to wait and see if

the painting is any good...They are not inventions, because the images already exist in my head. Imagination and fantasy are very different; fantasy has nothing to do with reality but imagination is connected to an awareness of the body as well as what you see inside your head.”¹⁸

I would like to compare this statement by Lassnig to one made by Tala Madani, one of my all-time favorite painters, in an interview with A.L. Steiner. “The work is coming from an internal mental space. You could be stuck in the same mental space for a long time even as your life is taking different shapes. That’s why I don’t consider it autobiographical. I like to give primacy to the imagination. The process of working from the imagination can be a way out of the limitations of lived reality; imagination is not bound to the same laws. My primary interest is to have a magical experience in my



Tala Madani, Light Balance, Oil on linen, 20" x 16", 2013

work. There are certain experiences that our bodies are too limited to perceive, experiences reserved for the mental sphere. This is the space I like to create for entering my own works.”¹⁹ While Lassnig connects the imagination to a bodily experience, Madani uses the imagination as a way to get beyond the bodily — this difference is clearly reflected in their paintings, with Lassnig’s portraying her own body while Madani’s depict the bodies of men. I like to think of

the subjects in my paintings as being somewhere in-between this opposition of experiences of imagined space. While my figures are not me, they are bodies that I can try to place myself within.

I imagine that Tarsila do Amaral may take up a similar position in regards to the figures she's depicting. The titles of her work suggest the figures exist in a state of anonymity: *Abaporu* (Man who Eats People), 1928, or *Composição - Figura Só* (Composition - Only Figure), 1930. Tarsila, as she is known throughout Brazil, whose work was concerned with the Anthropophagy movement in Brazilian modernism, takes cannibalism as a metaphor for the appropriation of cultures outside of Brazil. The catalogue for her current show at MOMA describes this time period as “a transformative artistic movement, which imagined a specifically Brazilian culture arising from the symbolic digestion—or artistic ‘cannibalism’—of outside influences.”²⁰ For Tarsila, her years in Paris at the beginning of the Surrealist movement may be one of the influences that she chose to “cannibalize” into her own practice once back in São Paulo. *Figura Só*, which was completed in 1930 after her return to Brazil, features a woman with flowing brown hair that extends past the edge of the canvas. I rediscovered this painting last fall after not having seen a photo of it for years, right around the same time that I began a series of figures with wind and fan blown hair. Coincidentally, Tarsila's first exhibition of work in the United States occurred in February of this year at MOMA and I felt fortunate to have the opportunity to finally visit this painting in person.

I recognize in myself and my paintings a tendency to romanticize the state of being a loner, even though my lived experience for the past decade has often been anything but. At the risk of portraying myself as a clichéd recluse painter, I will say that



Tarsila do Amaral, Composição (Figura só), Oil on canvas, 32 11/16" x 50 13/16", 1930



Tarsila do Amaral, Abaporu, Oil on canvas, 33 7/16" x 28 3/4", 1928

during public school I hardly talked to anyone for years, probably due to an extreme case of (at the time) undiagnosed social anxiety. I can't deny that there is a biographical component to the work, and only bring this up to put into context some background that I'm sure plays a significant role in my identity as a painter. The feeling of being most comfortable when alone lends itself well to work in the studio. The gallery and museum have also functioned for me as a place of solitude. Being in close proximity to New York City as a teenager provided a welcome escape into the silent anonymity of being among strangers. This is a mindset that has gradually begun to dissolve, although I am still most certainly an introvert in the sense that solitude is necessary as a means to recharge.



Crying, Face, Emoji, Oil on canvas, 18" x 18", 2017

Of course there are broader reasons for this romanticization that go beyond the personal. In Joanne Cubbs text *Rebels, Mystics and Outcasts: The Romantic Artist Outsider*, a historical precedent for this attitude is set. "Although rooted in countless myths and legends of earlier times, the view of artist as outsider was first fully established, in Western culture, during the Romantic period...Romanticism embraced an artistic philosophy of escape, fantasy, reverie, and revolt. It also preached a dissatisfaction with the mundane everyday world which it believed could only be redeemed through the mysterious transforming powers of the artist's individual imagination. Exiled from common social life by the myth of their unique creative vision, artists came to be viewed as isolates, rebels, and necessary outcasts from society."²¹ Stubbs goes on to recount tale after tale of artists buying into this myth from the eighteenth century to the present. While I identify with the solitary figures in my paintings, in part they also mock this romanticization.

CHAPTER 5: PAINTING AS A NON-LINEAR DESCRIPTION OF TIME

I've noticed that there are two ways in which people approach my paintings. For example, "That dog is digging a triangle!" Or, "You've *painted* that dog digging a triangle!" Although the second statement is obviously true, I repeatedly find myself in the category of the first. When viewing and creating paintings, I make that jump in belief that what's being depicted is actually happening. I allow myself to get completely lost in the work.



Divine Intention, Oil on canvas, 24" x 24", 2017

I would like to situate my work within Isabelle Graw's description of painting as a "semiotic activity with a highly personal production of signs." I particularly relate to a passage from her essay *The Value of Painting: Notes on Unspecificity, Indexality, and Highly Valuable Quasi-Persons*: "Linking indexality to painting does not imply that we ignore the split that occurs between the artwork and the authentic self. What we encounter in painting is not so much the authentically revealed self of the painter, but rather signs that insinuate that this absent self is somewhat present in it. As a highly mediated idiom, painting provides a number of techniques, methods, and artifices that allow for the fabrication of the impression of the author's quasi-presence as an effect."²² Perhaps it is this quasi-presence of the author that I am sensing when I allow myself to believe that actions within paintings are existing in the present tense. I feel that this passage sums up the differences in perception that I am describing when one sees the dog digging the triangle (present tense), versus my having painted the dog digging a triangle (past tense). There is a difference between the perceived linearity of time because the sign of the dog exists in the present, while the implication of the absent self points to the past. Linear time requires that we are always moving forward. Through the record of the artist's hand, some semblance of the past is able to jump ahead into the present.

I would like to expand upon Graw's description of the presence of the absent self to include not only the painter, but additionally the depicted subject. Of course the subject of any painting is only one of many versions of its potential self, being that of the artist's interpretation. But I do not believe this limits the subject from having some quasi-presence that persists throughout time, whether the subject is real or imagined. In this

interpretation, the dog (who happens to be a beloved dog of mine, Kimber, that I lived with for many years) is creating his own symbol, a triangle in the sand. I equate his marks with the marks of a painter who is absolutely intent on finding some purpose in their work. This idea simultaneously elevates the actions of a dog while reducing the actions of a painter to be not much more than instinct. The concentration in Kimber's gaze, the tag on his collar suspended in motion, and the blur of the flying grains of sand are all, for me, viscerally observed phenomenon. Although he is of course unaware of his presence in my painting, through my action of painting him some record of his presence is made.

The second way in which I regard painting as a non-linear description of time can best be summed up with Boris Groys' definition of the word "contemporary." In his 2009 essay *Comrades of Time*, he posits, "Here I would like to mobilize a somewhat different meaning of the word 'contemporary.' To be con-temporary does not necessarily mean to be present, to be here-and-now; it means to be 'with time' rather than 'in time.' It is the rather traditional artworks (paintings, statues, and so forth) that can be understood as being time-based, because they are made with the expectation that they will have time—even a lot of time, if they are to be included in museums or in important private collections."²³ While Groys intended this passage to be read with some irony, I am embracing it as a way to look at painting. In this context, I consider individual paintings as having no beginning and no end, as long as they are not destroyed and regardless of whether or not they have made it into an important collection. The content of a painting reads to me almost as if someone pressed the pause button, or a durational video on a continuous seamless loop. We do not know what happened before or what comes next

— the subjects are with infinite time in their present state. I do not mean to propose an ahistorical reading of painting as a whole, but one in which we can get lost within the frames of individual works.

Through a close reading of Graw's and Groy's texts in unison, we can take this quasi-presence to mean the eternal life of the absent author. To put this into a less abstract context, when I come across past works of mine from ten or even twenty years ago, it is like finding some piece of that version of myself that's still existing even though the conditions surrounding the painting's making are long gone. I eagerly await my own reception of my work in the future.

The research presented in this text has attempted to present a view of painting that does not lend itself to a clear-cut interpretation of meaning. Just as paintings can be experienced in a non-linear fashion, the memories and associations that go into any individual work are also culled from a broad spectrum of time. This should not be taken to mean that my work is undirected or without focus — I am instead presenting this fact as an inevitable condition of existence. Connections within any one painting resemble neural structures built over a lifetime, referring to both personal and external conditions. Returning once more to the lines of Silvina Ocampo's poem *Vain Warning*, she reminds us — “all that they have imagined, and that we mortals imagine, forms the reality of the world.” Through my painting practice, I am committed to imagining other ways of being in the world.

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¹⁴ Besant. *Thought-Forms*, 50.

¹⁵ Besant. *Thought-Forms*, 40.

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¹⁷ Moyer, Carrie. "Maria Lassnig: The Pitiless Eye." *Art in America*, Jan. 2009, pp. 70–75, www.petzel.com/attachment/en/59c5131c5a4091aa128b4568/Press/59c513755a4091aa128b723d.

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