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Difficult Paintings

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

by

Hao Ding (Damien), BA Art History, Swarthmore College, 2018

Director: Holly Morrison, Associate Professor, Department of Painting and Printmaking

Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia

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Abstract

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The sublime as a concept has a fraught and racist history. However, it remains the single most helpful idea in describing the deeply felt state of being when one comes across something ineffably powerful. From an art-making perspective, this thesis, and the accompanying exhibition of installations and paintings, proposes an alternative construction of the concept of the sublime. Using Lacanian psychoanalysis as a conceptual point of departure, a painter can manipulate the relationship of the viewer and paintings to create paradoxical moments of simultaneous intimacy and distance, which interact to create an alternative path towards the sublime. Through descriptions of these mechanisms of interactions, this project proposes a sublime that is melancholic and vulnerable instead of violent and terrifying—a sublime that is derived through a process of difficulty and eventual reckoning with failure.

Vita

Hao Ding (Damien) was born on October 18, 1992, in Nanping, China, and is a Singaporean citizen. He graduated from Raffles Institution in Singapore in 2011 and holds a Bachelor of Arts with Honors in Art History and a minor in Asian Studies from Swarthmore College in 2018. He has had a solo exhibition at List Gallery, Swarthmore, Pennsylvania, and group exhibitions at Z/H Projects in Brooklyn and Fox Garden in Richmond, Virginia. His work was featured in the online group exhibition *Within Global Isolation: Asian Artists in America*, curated by Chandler Allen and Hongzhen Han. March 2021, he had a solo exhibition, *Selfish Paintings*, at Braverman Gallery in Tel Aviv, Israel. Before his time at VCUarts, Damien worked in galleries and auction houses such as Hauser and Wirth, Kasmin Gallery, Christie's New York, and public institutions like the National Gallery Singapore and the National Arts Council in Singapore.

Prelude

I shall start with an origin story. The origins of my work remain extremely important to me and underlie a significant, if not the foundational concern of my practice. I started painting at the relatively late age of 24, and it began as a personal experiment. Initially, I was an art history student interested in modernist narratives and a late believer in Greenbergian essentialisms. I was interested in the truth of things—the platonic form, the noumenon, or whatever other names it took on. My initial interest in painting came from my attempts to suspend the understood function objects and their separate thingness in two-dimensional form. For example, an early preoccupation of mine was the form of the Dougong, a style of roof bracket commonly found in Chinese architecture (fig 1).

For me, the Dougong existed in a state of simultaneity, at once purely functional, to support a structure's roof while still exuding a strong and almost inexplicable material presence. When one is first confronted by the Dougong's confounding, overwhelming, and almost fractal form, its functionality can be forgotten or overlooked. Yet this fractal form is still shaped by its structural logic, vibrating between the sensual and architectural. Painting these Dougongs was an attempt at capturing the wholeness of both function and form while abstracting it two-dimensionally. I believed that some level of truth could be revealed through my explorations and the true nature of objects or things discerned.

The project ended in dissatisfaction. I now know that I was seeking something concrete while the form of truth was something much more ambivalent and ambiguous. Even though I had no philosophical

understanding of this initial project at the time, I realized later that I was trying to find an alternate space between the Heideggerian duality of ready-at-hand objects and those that are present-at-hand.¹

¹ When something manifests as ready-at-hand it is defined by its functions, its relation to the structure of purposes that surrounds it, for example a tool. What manifests as present-at-hand is instead an object that is seen in a theoretical frame, an object examined for its constituent parts without consideration of its practical use, for example objects being dissected in a scientific setting, or even when a tool is broken and rendered unusable.

A Chance Discovery

In 2016, while visiting the Art Institute of Chicago, I came across a modestly sized painting by Henri Fantin-Latour, *Still Life: Corner of a Table* (fig 2). This is the painting that I first remember when I think of the Art Institute of Chicago, and it is also the first painting that ever made me cry. The painting itself has a moment of subtle humor. Fantin-Latour left his signature on what appears to be a window, creating a moment of visual confusion, giving what initially looked like a window a dual role as a painting within the painting. I remember chuckling audibly at this. But the tenderness of the image is what caught my eye and generated my tears. Latour arranged the rhododendron plant in the foreground in a state that is both opulent (by their sheer size) and tenderly shy. The way the leaves curve and *almost* touch the tangerine on the right side of the painting and how the petals of the flower almost cup the fruits in the white bowl evoked a sense of melancholy, longing, and distance.

Perhaps this melancholy is something all still-lives share, by the nature of how objects with no one to use them can easily evoke feelings of emptiness and loneliness. Yet this painting, with my projection of anthropomorphism onto the flower, depicted a sort of desire attributed to objects in the painting. The rhododendron, in particular, had an ineluctable drive to communicate through the painting. Unlike a still-life that indicates a sort of simple absence of human subjects, *Still Life: Corner of a Table* revealed a kind of agency in the painting's motifs themselves, a positive presence. This presence is not achieved through some simple suspension of disbelief. Fantin-Latour's prominent signature on the painting has marked the

picture as a painting: two-dimensional artifice made of dried oils and pigments. Yet somehow, the explicit, unambiguous knowledge that this is a painting (versus a trompe l'oeil or an immersive history painting) could have accentuated the melancholy of the image in my eyes. Upon reflection, it revealed a core matter of painting, a possibly crucial core in its importance. If a painting desires to be understood, are the elements (colors, depicted objects, shapes, etc.) doomed attempts at communication? And is this tragedy possibly the point? Are my tears the point?

Paintings / Pain Things

The aforementioned tragedy in painting reveals its fundamental role. And this role is its depiction of the very conduit through which we understand and regard objects. Since a painting, no matter how realistically painted, will eventually reveal its two-dimensional nature, painting's very character, or possibly painting's *sublime* subject, is that of failure— failure of simulation, communication, and representation. While failure is usually used as a negative term, I intend to flip that connotation. In this case, the failure can be pleasurable, productive, and fertile with otherwise ineffable meaning.

Evoking the concept of the Lacanian gaze, where there is always a conceptual screen through which we view objects, Peter Schwenger, using the example of Georgia O'Keeffe's painting *Red Cannas*, says this about painting,

In these ways O'Keeffe defeats the concepts by which a flower is usually seen—in Lacan's terms, each of her paintings challenges the screen. This is not to say that we see the "real" flower behind the screen. Rather in becoming aware of the screen, our gaze ... is checked and tamed. What takes its place is the gaze of the picture itself. This is an annihilating gaze ... the gaze of the painting ... emanates from a screen. It claims neither to stand in front of a real object nor to reflect ourselves back to us. It reveals itself as an extreme instance of what has been there all along in our every day life: the illusory point around which desire turns ... one senses behind this fullness of color and form an emptiness in the dynamics of one's own gaze ... The bowl of the eye fills, overflows—but in that flooding the subjective "I" is swept away. And this annihilation follows a certain trajectory of the sublime: it is both appealing and appalling.²

² Schwenger, Peter. "Painting and the Gaze of the Object." Essay. In *The Tears of Things: Melancholy and Physical Objects*, 45-46. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006.

The Lacanian concept of the gaze surrounds the fundamental concept of the *objet a*. In the Lacanian frame, a typical object engages in a kind of reciprocal gaze, almost anthropomorphizing it. As such, as much as it is impossible to expect even the closest lover to understand their partner fully, to get to the other person's core, the same can be applied to our understanding of objects, no matter how familiar. For Lacan, this "core," while applied to objects, is the *objet a*, an unattainable object of desire. In Lacanian psychoanalysis, this *objet a* is the thing beyond the object that we merely sense: a thingness or noumenal form in both the Kantian and Platonic sense. The Lacanian gaze seeks this *objet* but will always be frustrated due to its ultimate absence in the objects we see and sense in the world. Paradoxically, the absence of this *objet* is key to its simultaneous existence and indiscernibility. To be a thing of desire and drive, it must assert that it is not there.

Schwenger's passage reveals that painting goes beyond this initial structure. Unlike tools that are most obviously mediated by their functionality, or other objects in the world that are first defined by their physicality and presence in space, the painting's presence is heavily predicated on the artist. Maybe due to painting's two-dimensionality and its anthropological origins, it has a strong adjacency to text, where communicative function is prominent. As communication often happens from one to another, the role of the communicator is always palpable. Yet painting differs from text due to its simultaneous materiality, sensuality, and its undeniable object-ness. Paintings are objects that very obviously speak, yet do so without speaking, like the suggestive gaze of another—in this case, the painter's surrogate gaze. This

surrogacy leads to an unfortunate, almost pitiful, consequence. A painting's inevitable failure—a certainty that is common to all communication—is that of the painter's. Yet, the painter who still paints is still trying, all the while knowing of their eventual defeat. To characterize the willingness to participate in such an endeavor will require the use of oxymoron: a hubristic vulnerability.

Perhaps in painting, an artist's vulnerability manifests not only in a painting's wish to communicate, but also its fundamental failure to be able to do so due to the image's susceptibility to parasitism.³ Then, the emotionality in an image comes from its specificity, ostensible and ostentatious concreteness (through form, narrative, content, color), a sureness that the image must mean something. If a painting stares back at the viewer, this will be an extremely intense gaze, full of desire, of searching, for that perfect object/subject of reception that can never be found. When this break/disappointment asserts its presence, it leads the viewer to realize the Zenonian gap between themselves and the painting.⁴ Once this gap is realized in the viewer's consciousness, it acts as a metaphorical mold unto which the mental substance of understanding—slippery and formless—is poured. The substance eventually takes the form of the gap itself, representing the reification of failure from the abstract absence of success to a positive presence of its own, resulting in ineffable feelings, adjacent and similar to melancholy, terror, or even the sublime. Despite the marked terms, it is a pleasurable feeling. Maybe by representing this gap, one brushes past the lingering scent of

³ Parasitism in terms of meaning, in the sense that an image's meaning is dependent (a parasite) on its relation to the contexts of the viewer, the setting of viewership, the surrounding imagery, curation, etc.

⁴ By Zenonian I am referencing Zeno's Paradox, an admittedly absurd paradox that implies that a distance can never truly be fully traversed.

truth, the commonality of some shared ambivalence, desire, and sadness. In other words, a melancholic *sublime*, that, unlike the traditional understanding of the term, is not predicated on immensity or overt violence and domination and is not experienced only through some calculative assertion of logic.

A Brief History/Critique of the Sublime

When speaking of my work, it is sometimes difficult to use the word "sublime." The reason for this is manifold: partial embarrassment at the pomposity and self-importance the word implicates, an aversion to common misunderstandings of what the sublime means, and a historical understanding of the sublime that renders the term almost aggressively undesirable. Yet, it always returns to the sublime, albeit in a manner that gives it a character that can seem antithetical to its original meaning and archetypes. But to call this an anti-sublime is inaccurate since the term's felt quality is not a negation of its previous meaning but more an expansion. Thus, a melancholic sublime.

While explorations around the idea of beauty can be found in early works by philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle, the concept of the sublime as such is not found in explicit form in early Greek philosophy. The first theoretical exploration of the idea of the sublime can be found in a study of literary criticism: Longinus' work *On the Sublime* written in the first century CE.⁵ In this work, Longinus describes the sublime in purely rhetorical and literary terms. To Longinus, the sublime is a way of speech and writing that evokes *hupsos* (height) or *megethos* (greatness), depending on translation.⁶ In his use of language that

⁵ While an author named Longinus was believed to be the writer of this work, subsequent studies have discounted the attribution. See Longinus, and Georges Maximilian Antoine. Grube. *On Great Writing: (On the Sublime)*. New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1957.

⁶ Heath, Malcolm. "Longinus and the Ancient Sublime." In *The Sublime: From Antiquity to the Present*, by Timothy M. Costello, 12. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012

refers to magnitudes, Longinus' characterization requires a reading that is subtly metaphorical. For it is not a physical size that the sublime evokes or strives for, but a feeling of elevation and ecstasy.⁷

While the ancient sublime of Longinus is limited to the field of literary theory and rhetoric, the language that Longinus uses sees echoes in later explorations by quintessential philosophers of the sublime, Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant. Of particular importance is the idea that the sublime almost exerts a violent force upon the receiver. In Longinus' case, for the viewer to be merely persuaded through reason and logic is not enough. Instead, they must be left helpless in being compelled to ecstasy and feeling. In other words, the idea that the sublime is a pleasurable surrendering of agency has its roots in Longinus.

Longinus' treatise on the sublime is written as instructional, supposedly to guide future writers and orators in the way to craft the perfect speech. He lays down five sources that the sublime can draw from, thought, emotion, figures of thought and speech, diction, and composition.⁸ However, how these sources work can be quite ambiguous and fluid, while "greatness of thought, imitation or imagination" can contribute to the sublime feeling, so can the "meticulous description" of a poet such as Sappho.⁹ In fact, Longinus' descriptions sometimes function like pithy aphorisms. Longinus does not specify how exactly each source is to be shaped but instead gives us a few possibilities and examples that worked in their

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 17.

⁹ Ibid.

context—these examples, such as that of his comparison of Cicero and Demosthenes, are sometimes overtly contradictory.¹⁰ What we can divulge from Longinus' account of the sublime is thus something more general. Only the right kind of relationship (which is to be discerned almost intuitively or mystically) between the sources he describes can be evocative towards the sublime.

By being vague about defining the sublime, Longinus also leaves the idea of the beautiful mostly untouched in his explanation of the sublime. While Longinus does explain that the sublime does not necessarily arise even if the particulars of speech and text are perfect—the imagery, or the technical sophistication—neither does he think that these particulars are detrimental to the creation of the sublime, and instead proposed that sometimes they even encourage its manifestation. The sublime is to be created by something more inexplicable.

The idea of the beautiful is considered together with the sublime in Edmund Burke's famous treatise on aesthetics: *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful*. Burke's account on the subject remains one of the most oft-quoted ones. It is especially significant because Burke's oppositional separation of the ideas of the sublime and the beautiful grabbed the attention of his European contemporaries, and has proved to be enduring in later, and even current, discourses on the subject.¹¹

¹⁰ Ibid., 19.

¹¹ Gasché, Rodolphe. "... And the Beautiful?." In *The Sublime: From Antiquity to the Present*, by Timothy M. Costello, 25. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

In the Burkean mode, both the sublime and the beautiful are aesthetic passions, grounded by a bidirectional drive towards self-preservation and society. These passions are parsed through our faculties of sense, imagination, and judgment. In doing so, they provoke feelings and emotions in people. Burke attempts to map out a mechanistic conception of the sublime and the beautiful with this model.

In this mechanism, the sublime is evoked through the perception of whatever that is "terrible" and the qualities that enhance terror: vastness, obscurity, power, and privation.¹² This terrible object has to then project into the subject's imagination and be interpreted as a terrible and incredible *idea*.¹³ Finally, the sublime is only evoked once this idea achieves a certain distance from the subject, such that the subject feels the removal of the threat, and the aforementioned self-preservation is achieved. This sublime is a feeling Burke also describes as "delight." To Burke, while this feeling is probably the most intense aesthetic sensation, it is a feeling generated through negative means, through the removal of a threat.¹⁴

¹² Ibid., 47–60. For a religious framing of such an idea, see Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane* and the idea of the numinous and *mysterious tremendum fascinas in* Otto, Rudolf. *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*. Translated by John W. Harvey. New York: Oxford University Press, 1958.

¹³ The "terror" in this idea is noted for its ability to challenge and suspend the imagination that it was projected on. Its magnitude and complexity impossible to be comprehended and imaged by the imagination. As such, the element of mental mortality is strong, and the sublime in a way petrifies the imagination, keeping it still in horror. This also reflects Walter Benjamin's thoughts on the sublime, which takes this idea of petrification to construct an anti-motionalist account of the sublime which challenges the core account of a confounding sublime that most philosophers of the sublime (Burke, Kant, Hegel, Lyotard) subscribe to. See Menninghaus, Winfried. "Walter Benjamin's Variations of Imagelessness." Translated by Timothy Bahti and David Hensley. In *For Walter Benjamin: Documentation, Essays, and a Sketch*, edited by Ingrid Scheurmann and Konrad Scheurmann, translated by Timothy Nevill, 166–79. Bonn, DE-NW: Arbeitskreis Selbständiger Kultur-Institute E.V., 1993.

¹⁴ Burke. *A philosophical enquiry*. 32.

The beautiful is the opposite of this. In the case of the beautiful, the subject feels *pleasure* from the direct experience of a beautiful object—a positive experience.¹⁵ Burke explains that while beauty is not rationally linked to dogmatic ideas such as proportionality or ratios neither is it purely animalistic physical desires.¹⁶ Instead, there is a strong social element to the Burkean conception of beauty. In this conception, beauty is seen as closely aligned to the idea of *love*, such that the experience of beauty is, while in some parts physical and particular, not only a physical sensation. Beauty is a quality that inspires admiration and respect, as well as tenderness and affection for what is beautiful—in other words, it inspires love.¹⁷ There is no resultant urge to possess or control, as part of the passion for the beautiful is also to appreciate the particular for its agency. As such, beauty requires process in the imagination to escape the trappings of lowly desires. For Burke, the idea of love and the respect it bestows to particular agency shows us that the beautiful is not an assimilative passion, unlike the sublime, which generalizes terror into an idea so that its initial visceral nature can be pleasurablely distanced by conceptual abstraction.

Burke's idea of beauty also prescribes it as something that is derived from *weakness*, *smallness*, *smoothness*, and *delicacy*, as opposed to the strength and power that is required to invoke the terrible of the sublime.¹⁸ This oppositional conception is an attempt by the philosopher to abstract the gendered image of the sublime and the beautiful that runs clear throughout his entire treatise. Burke says,

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., 74-86.

¹⁷ Gasché, 31.

¹⁸ Burke, 95, 100-101.

But in these, so far is perfection, considered as such, from being the cause of beauty; that this quality, where it is highest in the female sex, almost always carries with it an idea of weakness and imperfection. Women are very sensible of this; for which reason, they learn to lisp, to totter in their walk, to counterfeit weakness, and even sickness. In all this they are guided by nature. Beauty in distress is much the most affecting beauty.¹⁹

Alas, Burke attempts to gender beauty (and concomitantly the sublime) through this definition. Here, his characterizations run into the trappings of his social context and history—that of eighteenth century English society before universal suffrage and equal female dignity where the misogynistic ideas of the medieval times were still widely accepted.²⁰ It is impossible to ignore that, by characterizing beauty as something feminine by nature (while being ignorant or even complicit of the historical power dynamics underlying these typically male preferences), Burke is implicitly placing it in a lower rung in the taxonomy of passions than the sublime.

Nonetheless, Burke's ranking of the beautiful and the sublime was highly influential at the time, and was picked up by the other archetypal philosopher of the sublime, Immanuel Kant.

Kant worked on the sublime in two of his major writings, the earlier *Observations of the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime*, and in the later 'critical period,' the *Critique of the Power of Judgement*. The *Observations* is written like a series of aphoristic sayings, and functions like a "catalogue" of characterizations of what the sublime and the beautiful are. As such, this earlier writing is treated with much less seriousness

¹⁹ Burke, 88.

²⁰ See Bloch, R. Howard. "Medieval Misogyny." *Representations*, no. 20 (1987): 1-24. doi:10.2307/2928500.

by contemporary scholars than his later analysis of the sublime in the *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, where Kant delves into the mental and rational mechanisms that underlie our feelings of the sublime.

In the *Critique*, Kant outlines the sublime in what seems to be purely rational terms. He registers that our experience of the sublime is purely through our mental faculties and that the *real* form of sublime is derived through rational principles, and affirmative of men as rational creatures instead of purely animalistic sensible ones. In this frame, he claims that strongly instinctive and emotional impulses are pure *enthusiasm*, and while resembling the sublime, they are fraudulent, as they prevent a person from "engaging in free consideration of principles, in order to determine itself in accordance to them."²¹ On closer inspection, however, this division between enthusiasm and the rational, "real," sublime is fraught with the dangers of arbitrariness. What Kant may discern as deep moral feeling or natural sublimity evoked by reflections of rational principles may just as well be experienced in the people who experience what he sees as pure enthusiasm. In his mental conceptions, objects that evoke the sublime are only representational and thus require the subject to mentally process and abstract the object in thought. It seems to be a purely infantilizing move on Kant's part (as it is impossible to prove the particular mental process of people) to assert that people who experience *enthusiasm* do not go through this process.²² In

²¹ Merritt, Melissa McBay. "The Moral Source of the Kantian Sublime." In *The Sublime: From Antiquity to the Present*, by Timothy M. Costello, 39-47. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012

²² For example, within Kant's framework, he might very well claim that any enjoyment of objects to be pure enthusiasm but also conceivably allow it to be a manifestation of real sublime if rational reasons are stated. This thus is a purely arbitrary judgement on his part.

fact, Kant uses this distinction to effectively deny the sublime to entire peoples he believed were not "rational" (in his limits of cultural understanding) or functioned within anti-rationalist principles. It goes without saying that Kant's ideas were strongly tinged by the colonial and racial undertones that characterized Enlightenment thought.

To understand the roots of Kant's exclusionary conception of the sublime requires us to consider the earlier *Observations* where his generalizations of male/female society were baldly expressed.

Observations is a remarkable essay because it reads like a free association exercise, in which Kant, a strapping and confident philosopher, makes pronouncements about what the sublime and the beautiful are and what they are associated with. It reveals the deep cultural biases that Kant had, and also shows how influential and powerful Burke's gendered associations of the sublime and beautiful were.

[I]n such a way that all the other merits of a woman should unite solely to enhance the character of the beautiful, which is the proper reference point; and on the other hand, among the masculine qualities, the sublime clearly stands out as the criterion of his kind... Women have a strong inborn feeling for all that is beautiful, elegant, and decorated... The fair sex has just as much understanding as the male, but it is a *beautiful understanding*, whereas ours should be a *deep understanding*, an expression that signifies identity with the sublime...Laborious learning or painful pondering, even if a woman should greatly succeed in it, destroy the merits that are proper to her sex...they will weaken the charms with which she exercises her great power over the other sex. A woman who has a head full of Greek, like Mme Dacier, or carries on fundamental controversies about mechanics, like the Marquise de Châtelet, might as well even have a beard; for perhaps that would express more obviously the mien of profundity for which she strives.²³

²³ Kant, Immanuel. "Of the Distinction of the Beautiful and Sublime in the Interrelations of the Two Sexes." In *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, 76-78. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003.

From a contemporary standpoint, the remarks that Kant makes are almost amusing, if not for the deep influence it had on both his later philosophy and that of other thinkers. With an academic knowledge of cultural bias and knowledge shaped by power, it appears to us that Kant, like Burke, was particularly unaware (or uncritical) of his own place in society, and how the values of society were shaped. Kant's stringent demarcations for the role of women (or non-European men, in his Orientalist conceptions of other cultures) in society manifest in many of his other works, and always through a pseudo-scientific lens, most notably in his lectures on *Anthropology*.²⁴ As Christine Battersby explains, "Kant also registers that there are some empirical subjects who should not be educated in such a way as to transcend fear. Here he indicates that it is the duty of women to protect the unborn fetus in the womb, and that fear plays an important role in helping them perform this task. But this means that women are debarred from any proper enjoyment of the sublime."²⁵ For a philosopher famous for never leaving the city he was raised in, it appears that his ideas of gender were especially fixed within the social norms of the time. The implications of this part of Kant's thought are tremendous, as his thought uses biological claims to imply that women (and as we shall see later, non-Europeans in general) are naturally predisposed to be less rational creatures than men. It is also prudent to remember that these characterizations were taken for granted then, as the influence of Burke's treatise also testifies to. As such, it is unsurprising that contemporary philosophers such

²⁴ This kind of philosophical attitude provides the context in which this paper is reacting against.

²⁵ Battersby, Christine. "Terror, Terrorism and The Sublime." In *The Sublime, Terror and Human Difference*, 32. New York, NY: Routledge, 2007.

as Melissa McBay Merritt claim to have "relatively little to say" about *Observations* (and Kant's subsequent *Remarks* on it),²⁶ since accepting its remarks effectively delegitimizes her work as a female philosopher.

But Kant's use of pseudo-scientific justifications to exclude, extend beyond that of his views on women. In this gendered conception of the sublime (and with the assistance of a strong bias towards monotheism), Kant finds easy assimilation of the European-centric views on culture of the time. Cultures such as the Hindus and the Chinese were seen by Kant as unable to access the sublime through the femininity of their natures, and their inability to have "taste," that is, an understanding after sensuousness.²⁷ The effeminate nature of these 'Orientals' (whom Kant likely never really met, since he never traveled), made them dwell solely in the sensuous and the particulars, without the power of "conceptual thought" to be able to "deal in generalities."²⁸

G W F Hegel picked up this Kantian idea of conceptual thought in his idea of the sublime. While Hegel's philosophical frame is fundamentally different from that of Kant, it shares striking similarity in that the later philosopher seemingly conceived of it with the preconception that non-European peoples cannot access the sublime. Hegel uses his idea of the Absolute Spirit to exclude in particular Hindu cultures, where he claims that, "The Hindoo race has consequently proved itself unable to comprehend either persons or

²⁶ Merritt's willful ignorance of the *Remarks on The Observations* are deeply felt in an otherwise illuminating essay by Merritt on the Kantian sublime. Merritt, Melissa McBay. "The Moral Source of the Kantian Sublime." In *The Sublime: From Antiquity to the Present*, by Timothy M. Costello, 37. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012

²⁷ Battersby, Christine. "Kant's Orientalism." In *The Sublime, Terror and Human Difference*, 81-82. New York, NY: Routledge, 2007

²⁸ Ibid. See also Inden, Ronald B. *Imagining India*. Bloomington, Ind: Indiana University Press, 2010.

events as part of continuous history."²⁹ For Hegel, the Hindu culture, due to his perception that they have "no History in the form of annals ... no growth expanding into a veritable political condition,"³⁰ is one that seems to be confused over the what the sublime or the transcendent is. Vijay Mishra explains Hegel's position in his book *Devotional Poetics and the Indian Sublime*,

The simple answer, Hegel's point of view, is that Hindus "contort the sensuous phenomenon into a plurality of Divinities" even as they construct the spiritual abstraction of God in terms of a protosublime aesthetics in which Brahman cannot be presented to consciousness. In short, the difficulty arises because of a cultural desire to offer manifestations of the divine in nature...even though in the process the purity of the concept itself is tainted.³¹

One must suspect that Hegel considered polytheism without a deep understanding of the Hindu *Brahman* and the Hindu ideas of multiplicity, unity and wholeness in infinitude. In fact, it would not be unfair for us to indict both Hegel and Kant for having a false understanding of cultures other than their own. However, it seems that something slightly more malicious is at play, and that a philosopher such as Hegel was actively excluding other races without real philosophical grounding to do so, even within his own intellectual frame. Mishra's subsequent rebuke of their racism—specifically, Hegel's charge that the Hindu sublime is confused with the beautiful—is worth taking note of here,

But where Hegel would interpret this state of affairs as a sign of the false sublime or of pantheistic/fantastic symbolism, the Indian would read the same category through metaphors of unrepresentability. In this Hindu reading the Indian sublime is boundless; the human mind aspires toward the infinite as it defies the paragon, the frame, and confronts that which confronts that

²⁹ Quoted in Mishra, Vijay. "The Sublime Object of Devotion." In *Devotional Poetics and the Indian Sublime*, 11. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, Albany, 1998

³⁰ Quoted in Mishra, "The Sublime," 11.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 13.

which cannot be presented in all its totality to the imagination. Sublime thought reaches its grand point in the civilization's engagement with Brahman.³²

As such, even if Hegel's philosophy is valid, his stubbornness towards his conception of what the Absolute Spirit is—transcendental and completely detached from the particular—makes him blind to the possibility of another kind of valid sublime that is, non-dual in polarity, in tension with the beautiful, and oscillatory in character, that of the *Brahman* negotiated by the *Atman*, or a being-in-itself contained within, and not completely detached from, the particular.³³

While these Orientalist discourses on the sublime do not directly mention the beautiful, the characterizations Kant and Hegel make of non-European people are highly analogous to the Kantian and Burkean description of the (lower) passion of the beautiful. The previous quote by Mishra also reveals the implications that the philosophical impulse—to generalize the sublime and base it upon heavily Abrahamic monotheistic principles—has on the very ability of European philosophers to consider a framework of the sublime that is inclusive of the beautiful and the particular. Yet to have such a framework is essential, as by now we have realized that the grounds upon which the exclusionary sublime is founded were based on racist and sexist understanding.

To facilitate the process of structuring a sublime that has a complementary instead of an adversarial relationship with the beautiful, the object theories—that of Lacan and Heidegger—mentioned in

³² Ibid., 16.

³³ Ibid., 13.

the previous sections prove very valuable. By considering the particularities of an object, and the possibilities of its individual agency (for example, the Lacanian gaze of the object), we are able even to construct a theory and ontology of the sublime that is not only inclusive of the details and physicalities of the beautiful but altogether alternate from that duality of the profane and the transcendent. A theory of the sublime that is neither predicated on the logical nor sensual, but rather on a pleasurable resignation or surrender. A cohesiveness of non-understanding that centers the subject in their milieu through common impossibilities.

Thus, my work is pursued upon the belief of painting's unique adequacy in this project of critiquing and restructuring the sublime and manifesting these admittedly abstract and mystical ideas into something that can be felt and understood intuitively through feeling. In the following sections, I will describe how the work in the exhibition attempts to do this.

Two Presences

My paintings are placed in two separate spaces and exist in two different scales. One of the spaces is indoors, comprising three large paintings hung in a small tight room, the other space a constructed structure positioned outdoors housing a single smaller painting that is thin but long. While the paintings themselves have varied dimensions, the two spaces they occupy are both small and restrictive, such that it is only comfortable for one person to be in the space at a time. The spaces, while separate, are supposed to be viewed one after the other. The indoor space, located in VCU's Anderson Gallery, is the viewer's first point of contact, given the centrality of that location as a place for art viewing. After viewing the work in the Anderson Gallery, the viewer may then proceed to the outdoor installation, located just beyond the Anderson, on a small field of grass.

The sequential viewing, and the ambulatory act of entering a space, exiting, and entering again is my attempt to create a specific ritual of sorts. My interest in ritual stems from a case study I did on the Hindu Caves of Shiva at Elephanta (fig 3), where devotees are taken on an extremely specific and eccentric ritual (that was sometimes counterintuitive to other standard ritual practices of the time) to generate vague clouds (or fog) of signs which can point to the multitudes of narratives that a typical Hindu devotee may be familiar with. These signs are then rarefied in the final central object of the lingam, which semiotically explodes with meaning, as its simultaneous concreteness and its role as an all-encompassing mystical sign absorb and reconstitute the fog of meaning previously generated by the devotee. Similarly, the initial

entering into space in the Anderson Gallery, where three large abstract paintings are positioned looming over the viewer, serves to generate that fog of signs (fig 4).

The images of the three paintings are abstract but contain formal allusions to bodily forms and representational signs. As such, the paintings function in ways that are more suggestive than expository to generate the symbolic cloud without it fully concretizing into a clear narrative form. The three paintings are sized the same, at 80 x 54 inches, making them proportionately large paintings in relation to the space they are in. Positioned facing the entrance of the space is the central painting of the space *Arduous Trek* (fig 5), which is incidentally also the most concrete and possibly figurative painting of the three. Even though the elements in the painting are fragmented and abstracted, the picture plane is still arranged in a way such that a viable, discernable space can be made out. The two swooping curves, one vermillion and red and the other a dark mix of viridian and magenta, that extend from the top two corners of the painting overlap to create a kind of quasi-landscape, only confused in space by the patterned and assertive brightness of the yellow and green masses where one would typically read a sky. The mass of forms in the center of the painting as well is meant to imply physicality within the symbolic structure of the image. Modeled, albeit sometimes irrationally, with light and shadow, forms that can resemble rocks and body parts emerge and integrate into a total form that, while remaining unrecognizable, is highly suggestive of something familiar, resulting in an image where this mass of forms in the middle asserts agency and presence over the "situation" that is being depicted.

The reason that this central painting is made in such a way is so that the first painting the viewer experiences orientates them in their experience of the rest. So that they understand the physicality of the paintings, a physicality that makes the viewer aware of the possible agency and meaning of the paintings even as the obvious allusions dissolve more aggressively in the other two paintings.

The painting positioned on the right side of the space, predominantly red-hued, titled *No Touch* (fig 6), is painted in a way less delineated and defined than that of *Arduous Trek*. The brush strokes in the painting are mostly fragmented, translucent, and layered, resulting in a painting of less definable space. However, the direction of the strokes themselves contour in specific and intentional ways such that the space that these strokes define when viewed as a whole defines a certain something outside of just atmospheric space. In a sense, the goal here is to generate a kind of pictorial setting that can both take form and yet still stay essentially formless. The only overtly symbolic motif in the painting, that of the flame shape on the bottom right side of the composition, is positioned so as to accentuate the double existence of the background, where the left side of the flame shape is more clearly in the foreground. In contrast, the right side of the same shape exists more in the background, giving the surrounding brushstrokes a more three-dimensional form.

The last painting in the space, *A Decision* (fig 7), exists in a similar kind of visual space as *No Touch* does, even if the forms can be more biomorphic and suggestive. The painting also features a motif that, while present in the other two paintings, is most strongly depicted in this particular composition. In the

bottom third of the painting, two blocks of intense yellow against a fluorescent green act as points of intensity. These points of intensity, where the light of the painting asserts its presence against the viewer—a reinterpretation of Lacan's sardine tin anecdote—are related to the idea of the Lacanian gaze previously talked about.³⁴ Almost as if looking and beholding the supposed viewer, the points of intensities in the three paintings invert the pre-understood relationship between viewer and painting.

In addition to the points of intensity in the paintings, the way the paintings are installed—two of the three paintings slanted towards the viewer—is to make the viewer acutely aware of their position in this painting space, as a subject that is imposed upon by the paintings. The room in which the paintings are located is small relative to the scale of the paintings themselves, creating a space that can be tight and almost restrictive. While this seeks to augment the element of "looming" paintings, at the same time, this is also meant to remind the viewer of their physical presence and the presence they exert in this space—a situation that is clearly deliberate and felt. The viewer then not only reads the paintings as screens projecting a communicative image, but also as modifications upon an environment, of color, atmosphere, and of floating signs.

After viewing the installation in the Anderson Gallery, the viewer can then visit the outdoor installation, titled *A Room For My Painting* (fig 8.1, fig 8.2), which is located just beyond the Anderson

³⁴ See Feldstein, Richard, Bruce Fink, and Maire Jaanus. *Reading Seminar XI: Lacan's Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis: Including the First English Translation of "Position of the Unconscious" by Jacques Lacan*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995.

courtyard, in the corner of a medium-sized grassy lawn. The installation is made up of a 10-foot tall A-frame structure. Even though the height of the structure is relatively tall, the actual interior space of the structure is small, wide enough to only fit one individual comfortably at a time. The exterior of the structure is covered on two sides by glossy plastic roofing, painted dark viridian on the underside. Thus the structure is meant to be both integrated yet conspicuous in relation to the surrounding grass—a gleaming extrusion out of the earth, theatrical and possibly monumental, an object of confidence. However, this assertiveness is inverted in the interior of the structure, which houses a long thin painting, suspended by metal wires and precarious in its presentation. The precarity is then complemented by shyness in the actual visibility of the painting. As the structure involves no artificial lighting, light enters through a small vertical opening on the side of the structure. This vertical opening is positioned such that the sliver of light that is let in will only illuminate a small portion of the painting at a time and move along the position of the sun at the time of the day. The lighting of the interior of the structure, painted in a light-absorbing black paint, is wholly dictated by the exterior conditions and the whims of the weather. This creates a certain shyness in the presentation of the painting, veiled in bad visibility, almost hiding and at the mercy of something wholly exterior to it, as opposed to the shiny assertive presence of the structure it is housed in.

The painting is made in egg tempera, a medium that is much more fragile and prone to damage compared to the medium of oil or acrylic. The medium also creates a surface of intense color built up in thin translucent layers—this has been considered the "jewel-like" quality of the medium. The image itself is

figurative and recognizable, should the viewer give themselves time to see it fully. It comprises a composite human figure, not completely logical in its composition but discernible in form. The dimensions of the painting itself, 69 x 10 in, are approximate to the height of a person but narrower than a person's width. As such, the figure in the picture appears to be restricted and closed in by the boundaries of the surface, all the while attempting a position of repose. Like the shrugged shoulders of someone hoping to be unseen, this discomfort in this image, together with the environment it exists in, again opposes the confidence of the external structure.

This seemingly oppositional presentation of the painting and the structure it is housed in is meant to recall a duality that is related to what has been previously discussed in this paper, that of the strong assertive sublime and the meek and weak beautiful (or as I see it as, the particular). However, this relation does not imply complete analogy, as my manifestation of the duality attempts to locate it in something closer to my role as a painter—and the role of painting that was hinted at previously, as objects of productive, pleasurable, and potent failure.

The commonality of the two spaces—and their suitability for only an individual—constitutes their intention to engage the viewer with intimacy. By creating highly specific and intimate situations, the space that the paintings inhabit focuses the viewer on the particularities of the images and their (the viewer's) relation to the images. The viewer is thus encouraged and directed to view the paintings with a higher level of intention, and the specificity of the painting installations imparts an expectation of concrete meaning.

With the vague symbolic cloud previously experienced in the Anderson Gallery portion of the exhibition, the expectation of something concrete as signaled by the confident, almost pyramidal structure, the way the painting is finally encapsulated and presented results in a collapse and reconstitution of the previous aggressiveness. The ultimate shyness created by non-visibility then avoids easy reading, and the meaning remains fragmented and elusive. But this "collapsing" does not totally erase the previous importance signaled by the outdoor structure or the installation in the Anderson. Instead, it remakes it in the image of vulnerability, positioning the painting as an object that is not shy out of pure introversion and anxiety but of self-importance. To borrow an oxymoron from earlier—hubristic vulnerability.

By conflating such oppositions and integrating them within each other, the meaning of the image becomes even more slippery (in this case, the mystery may pertain to the idea of vulnerability and egoism, and how the painting swings between the two) the difficulty of the painting is augmented and made noticeable. That is to say, despite the representational nature of the painting in the structure (as opposed to the abstract compositions in the Anderson Gallery) and the quasi-ritualistic way the two installations are set up to provide the expectation of meaning, it remains difficult to understand. And not only does it remain difficult to understand,³⁵ but the viewer is made aware of the difficulty itself, as a palpable presence and not just as an adjective—an awareness that will later possibly extend to an awareness of failure.³⁶

³⁵ After all, the fact that a painting remains difficult to understand is nothing out of the ordinary. The extraordinary, sublime feeling is instead generated by a manifestation of the difficulty itself as the subject of the painting.

³⁶ A way this difficulty as presence exists in a quotidian context is our physical feelings of frustration, such that instead of just a mental emotion, frustration from difficulty manifests as a felt lump in our throat, a heaviness or ache on the shoulders, etc.

Paintings About Difficulty

The title of the exhibition—*Difficult Paintings*—is in a sense a pun. As such, the multiple meanings associated with the word *difficult* are simultaneously relevant and form an essential part of what gives rise to failure. *Difficult* as in a difficult child, refusing to be controlled despite one's best efforts. *Difficult* as being hard to see, which manifests in the restrictive and almost antagonistic physical settings in which the paintings are placed. Or *difficult* as being challenging to comprehend, created by an ambiguity of imagery that eludes understanding.

However, these difficult paintings are not meant to be solved. Instead, the difficulty, like the bodily challenges of a long-distance runner or a hiker, becomes the thing of focus and practice. Instead of futile attempts to resolve the pain or to ignore it, the runner gets into their trance by giving into and focusing the dull ache of the body and the labor of rhythmic breathing. While this is not to say experiencing a painting is analogous to running a marathon or hiking a mountain, how many of us have felt that dizzying sense of fatigue and malaise in a museum of pictures after trying to make sense of a series of inscrutable paintings? This exhibition thus offers—somewhat forcefully—an alternative, in which painting's inherent difficulty becomes the subject matter, the screen through which other signs can then be considered. Thus, it also offers an alternative to the need to fully understand, instead proposing a pleasure in failing to do so—in resignation.

Hopefully, viewers of the exhibition, when in the small, quiet space of *A room for my painting*, can move beyond the need to perceive with perfect vision and apprehension and find that the *sublime* object may reveal itself only after an acceptance of failure and rest beside our common vulnerability, and our shared impossibility of understanding.

Appendix



(fig 1, examples of *Dougongs*)³⁷

³⁷ Zhu Gang, Zhang, *Pingyao Zhenguo Si* 2013.08.26 15-42-55. August 26, 2013.
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pingyao_Zhenguo_Si_2013.08.26_15-42-55.jpg



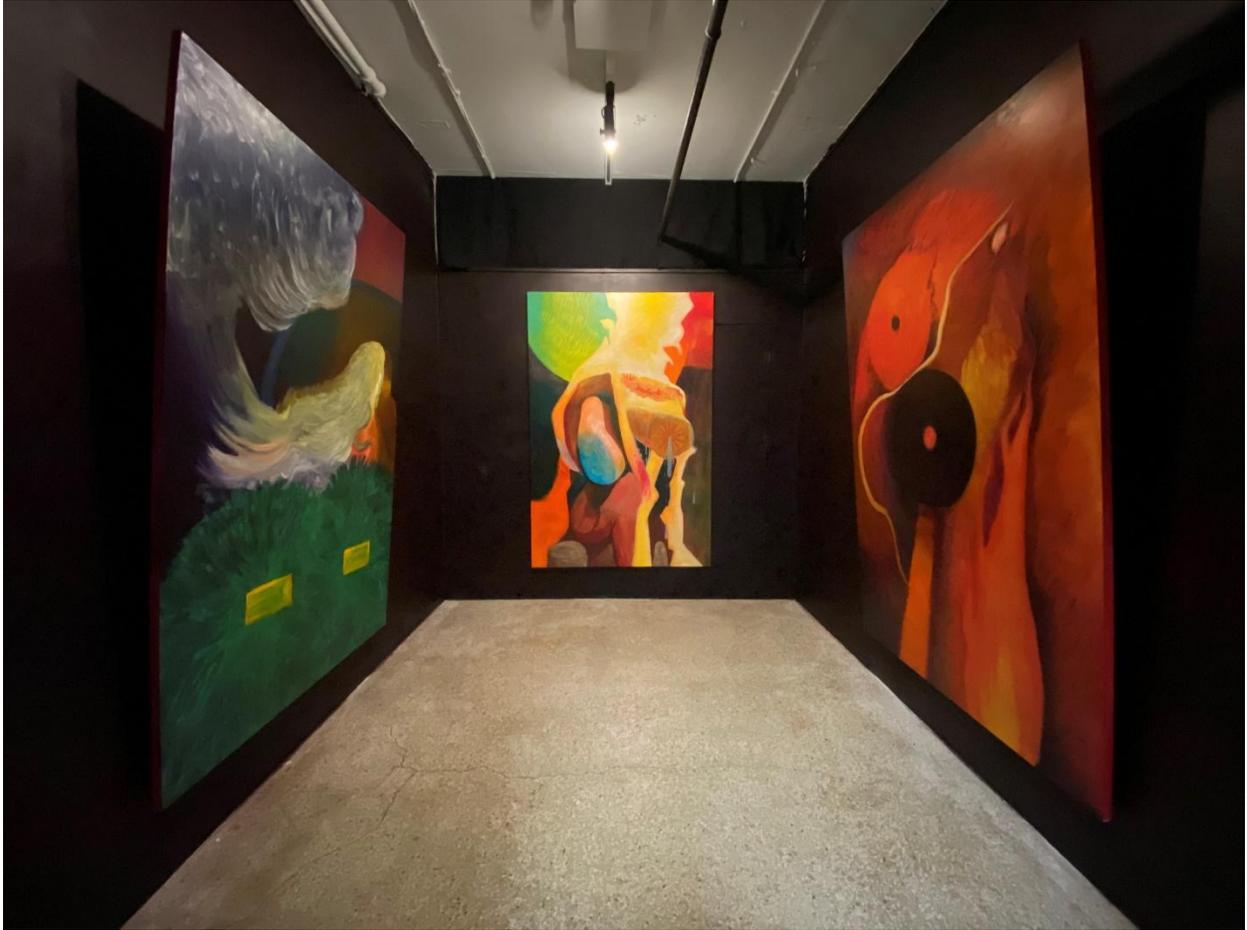
(fig 2. *Still Life: Corner of the Table*)³⁸

³⁸ Fantin-Latour, Henri. "Still Life: Corner of a Table." Online: Art Institute of Chicago, 1873. Art Institute of Chicago. Chicago, IL.



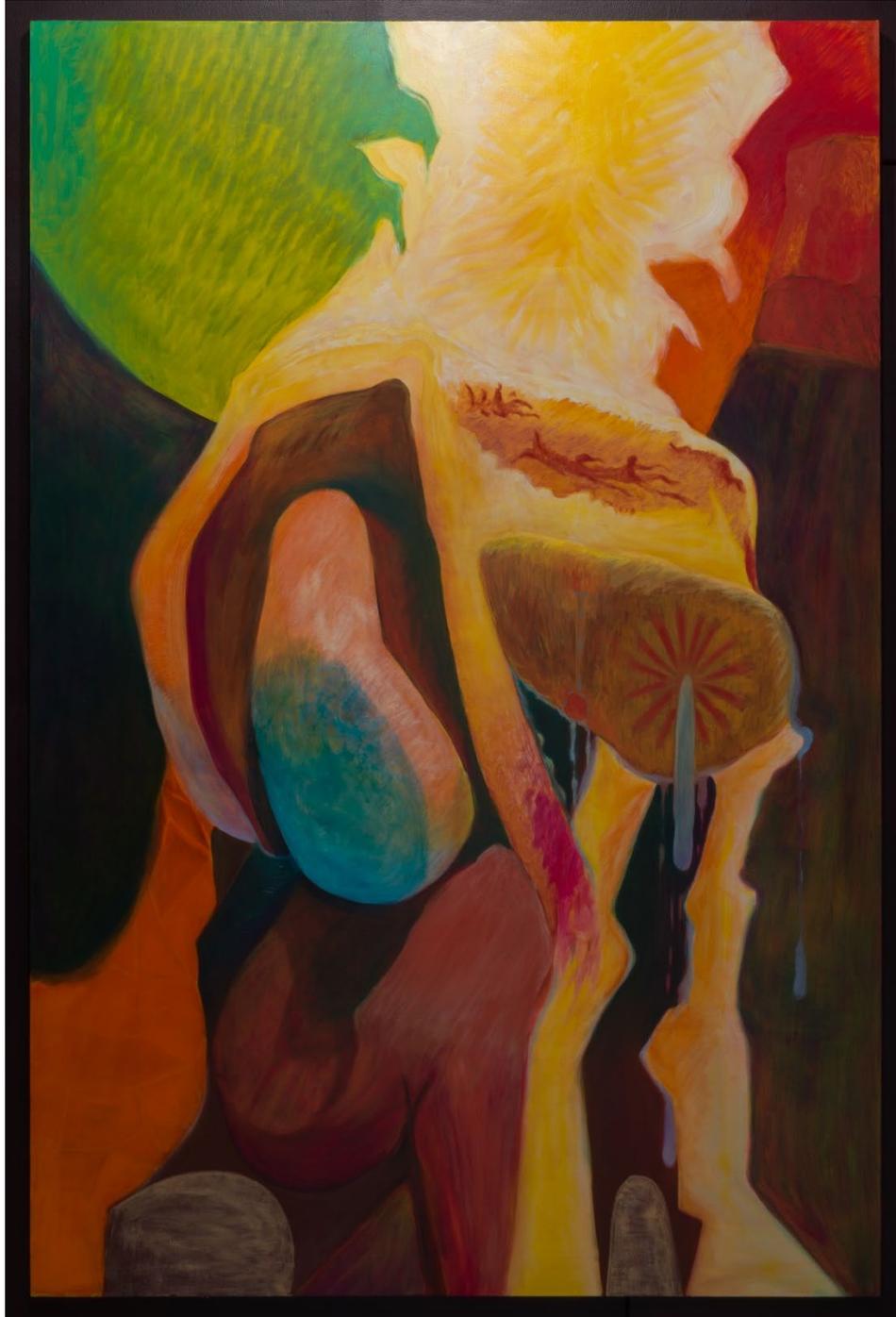
(fig 3, view of the western shrine with Lingam in the Caves of Elephanta)³⁹

³⁹ Martins, Ricardo. *Shiva Linga Shrine in Elephanta Caves*. November 9, 2008. *File:Shiva Linga Shrine in Elephanta Caves.jpg*. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Shiva_Linga_shrine_in_Elephanta_Caves.jpg.



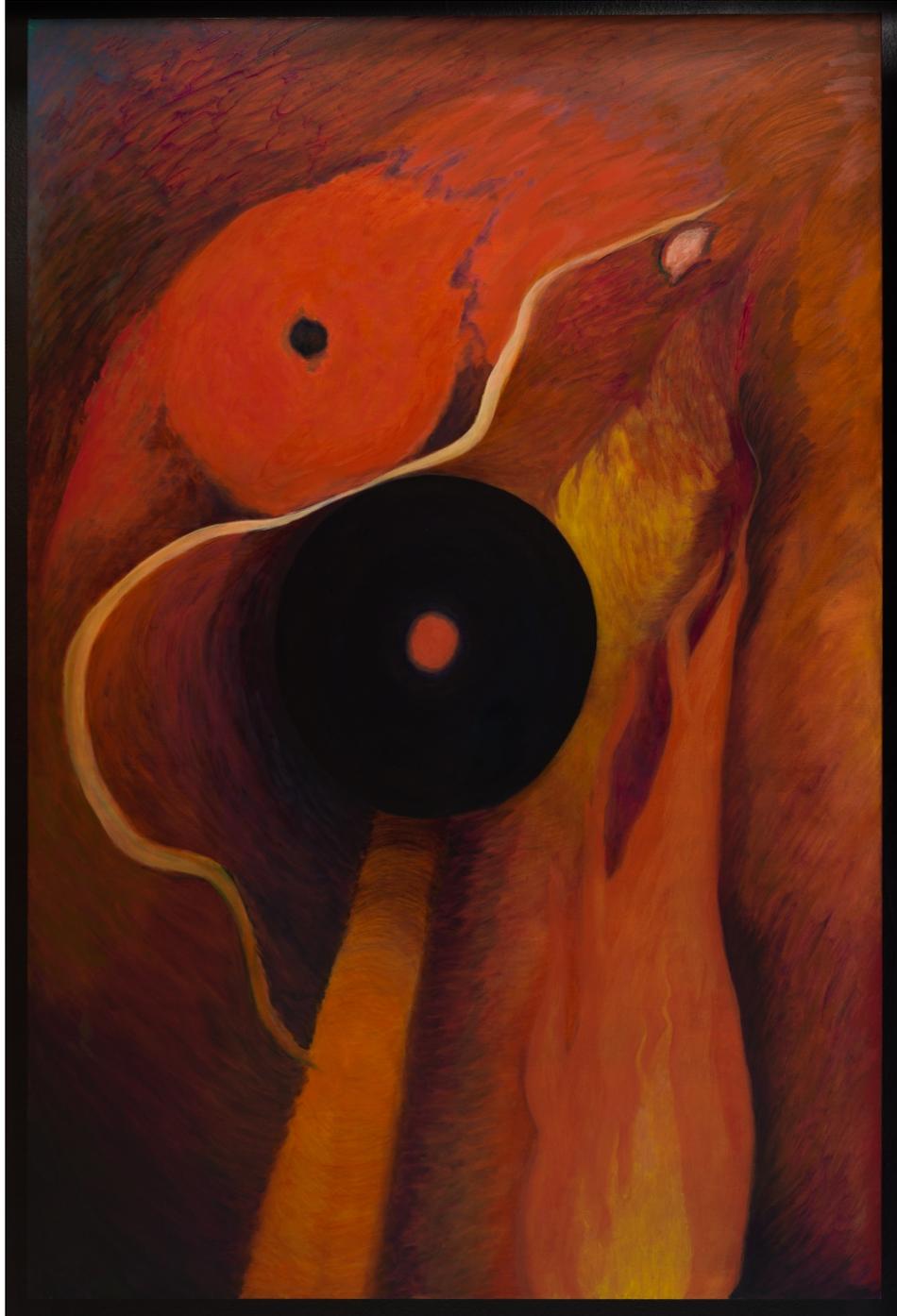
(fig 4, Installed view, *Difficult Paintings* in The Anderson Gallery)⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Picture author's own



(fig 5, *Arduous Trek*)⁴¹

⁴¹ Picture author's own



(fig 6, *No Touch*)⁴²

⁴² Picture author's own



(fig 7, *A Decision*)⁴³

⁴³ Picture author's own



(fig 8.1. *A Room For My Painting*, exterior view)⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Picture author's own



(fig 8.2, *A Room For My Painting*, interior view, with painting)⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Picture author's own

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