

“Gray Areas; Doubts”

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Graduate Thesis Statement

This work began as a process of seeing. In 2009, I spent a brief semester at the Marchutz School of Art in France, studying under a group of plein air painters who emphasized painting from life as a meditative ritual — one that stemmed, in part, from a supreme reverence for the works of Provencal painter, Paul Cezanne. Painting under the sun in the foothills of Cezanne’s mountain, Saint Victoire, I adopted a number of my teachers’ values: in particular, a firm belief in the ability of combined sight and insight, through painting, to reveal individual iterations of a greater universal order or ‘Truth.’ I would not know that this idea fell under the philosophical umbrella of modernism (a school of thought to which my current work still owes many debts) until shortly after setting foot back in the US and experiencing the first of several aporetic crises. After what had seemed like a philosophically clarifying experience, I suddenly had doubts. My learned ritual began to change under different conditions — hazy, monochromatic weather and fractured urban environments. I struggled to adapt my thinking to postmodern views of the landscape as ever shifting, often simulated and subjective. Faced with an ever-increasing number of conflicting theoretical dialogues, I questioned how I could defend any particular dictum I’d learned as unequivocally true.

My current work has developed through continued looking both outward to my environment and inward at my conflicting attitudes toward what (and how) I see. These paintings are landscapes of doubt. Drawing from this tradition of sight and insight, the confused and quickly moving spaces of my environment become a series of passages both physical and cognitive — halfway between one location and the next, one philosophy or another. Rather than attempt to elucidate these spaces, I am interested in the intellectual potential of moments of aporia — those deliciously ambiguous gray areas in which, immobilized by doubt, we are forced to rest and reconsider.

In his essay on the important role of doubt in learning, Nicholas C. Burbules describes an aporia as the experience of encountering the abrupt limits of one's understanding. More than just confusion, aporia (often described in terms of physical sensations: feeling stuck, stalled, paralyzed, numb) signifies "a problem of having arrived at an unfamiliar location, and a riddle of uncertain signification."¹ Importantly, Burbules describes the experience of cognitive aporia in physical terms. Students who've reached an aporia are 'lost,' without a clear way or direction. They do not know 'how to go on.' Even the word aporia, Burbules points out, stems from the Greek *a-poros* meaning "lacking a *poros*: a path, a passage, a way."² Gathering imagery at random from my daily commute, these semiotic connections between philosophical doubt and the embodied experience of being in-transit are essential to how I've framed my work.

Driving, itself perhaps my only daily site for solitary contemplation, offers a hypnotic flood of imagery. On known routes, I travel with little attention to my surroundings, sometimes even arriving at my destination without remembering how I've gotten there. Routes repeat several times daily. I pass the same road marks again and again without thought. When driving, I am only arrested by sights that upset my course of habit — things that are unfamiliar, that obscure or alter the known path. To extend Burbules' analogy, I have reached "a moment where a misconception [something I *knew*] has been stripped away, and where a clean terrain now exists for the reconstruction of true knowledge."³ Rather than being about a particular location, then, my paintings speak to disorientation and *dislocation*. In order to illustrate a cognitive experience (doubt), I have drawn from the physical experience of being in transit — of being in between locations, half-present, unable to fully orient myself. This abrupt edge of my

¹ Nicholas C. Burbules, "Aporias, Webs, and Passages: Doubt as an Opportunity to Learn," *Curriculum Inquiry* Summer 2000: 172.

² *Ibid*, 173.

³ Burbules, 172.

understanding (the moment of the “stripping away”) has therefore been presented here as an exploration of *visual* as well as intellectual limits.

When seeking reference images for my paintings, I aim to gather as little information as possible while still holding enough familiar signifiers for the viewer to make out suggestions of space. This has meant addressing and exaggerating the distance between myself and my environment. I work from cell phone images taken through fogged car windows, at high speeds or inclement weather. I bury the horizon under layers of wax and paint. In my paintings, I intentionally obscure space not to halt the viewer but to provide the kind of mystery that entices one to look more closely. This is as much a metaphor for my own search for understanding as it is an exploration of visual limits. In an interview with National Public Radio’s Krista Tippett, physicist Arthur Zajonc similarly described the process of engaging with unknowns as an attempt to give distance to a sort of intellectual horizon,

"No matter how deeply we engage the world, no matter how far we manage to penetrate into the mystery, there will always be more mystery. It's always deeper. It's always wider than our possible imagination. But [the mystery is] always an invitation in. It's not a wall before which we have to give up, but rather a kind of a 'Find the door!' Where is that little chink that allows you to peer through and ... put that horizon a little further away?"⁴

Zajonc, of course, speaks metaphorically, but nonetheless our embodied experience of visually indistinct spaces provides the physical sensations we associate with doubt: we are stalled, paralyzed. We do not know ‘how to go on.’ Obscured through motion, fog and the glass of the windshield, even familiar space can change its character and take on aspects of the sublime.

In fact, notions of the romantic sublime are easily connected to my work. Many of the chaotic expanses in my paintings share formal qualities with J. M. W. Turner’s seascapes or the

⁴ Krista Tippett, “Holding Life Consciously,” Interview with Arthur Zajonc, National Public Radio, 10 Nov. 2011.

dematerialized visions of the Impressionists, and my work owes a great debt to each of these traditions. Although currently I use photographs as a starting point for my paintings, working *en plein air* has led me to become very interested in the fleeting, and the effect of atmosphere on my perception of my everyday surroundings. With romantic painters like Turner, I share a desire to represent the unrepresentable that is central to my work. If an aporetic crisis occurs at the boundary of one's understanding, then what lies beyond this boundary is perceived as infinite, a presumably limitless field of unknowns through which we lack clear passage. My work borrows formal qualities from the romantic sublime and Impressionist traditions — scenes are fogged with atmosphere, objects simplified and dematerialized, the horizon buried to suggest an infinite distance. Unlike the romantics, however, my subject matter is not grand nature. The mundane, constructed spaces from which I gather imagery are only made remarkable by their lack of clarity — what they hide from the viewer rather than their great expanse. The views I paint are framed by architecture and, in some cases, even limited by the verticality of the surface itself. Although the sheer size of my paintings references the sublime, my fascination stems from the inherent failure involved in trying to represent the limitless in the *finite*.

As Jacques Derrida points out in his discussion of the sublime in *Truth in Painting*, art is ill-suited to represent limitlessness precisely because “art gives form by limiting.”⁵ The sublime, which involves a concept of the infinite that can be understood only through reason, “appears to do violence to the imagination”⁶ in that it resists all representation. Here again, I come up against doubt — and not just my own. In attempting to determine the best method for dealing with the sublime, Derrida describes his predecessors Hegel and Kant as locked in a kind of chicken-or-the-egg debate in which,

⁵ Jacques Derrida, “Parergon,” *The Sublime*, Ed. Simon Morely (London: The MIT Press, 2010) 41.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 42.

Hegel reproaches Kant with setting out from cise and not from without-cise. To which Kant replies in principle that in order to think the without-cise, it has to be presented, even if it is presented without presenting itself adequately.⁷

The imagined conversation is so circular it's humorous. Ideas of the limitless cannot be adequately presented within art's limits, but in order to have any notion of the limitless, it must first be presented. The sublime's violence on our imagination is a forced aporia. Caught in a dialectical debate, we do not know 'how to go on.' Not one to shy from the paradoxical, however, Derrida insists "the imagination *gains* by what it loses" and proposes the question, "How could the benefit of the violent calculation be *announced* in the finite?"⁸ Borrowing formally from the romantic tradition for ways to present the sublime in *finite*, the experience of the sublime interests me because of the benefit that Derrida describes. Are soggy suburban roadways an adequate representation of metaphysical doubt? Absolutely not. But the imagination gains by what it loses. There is, perhaps, intellectual potential in these failures of representation.

In order to (however inadequately) reference the sublime, my paintings have gradually grown in size. The images I gather are more visually confused. A gradual shift from intense chroma toward mostly gray has been important to my work both formally and conceptually. This gravitation developed from an obsession with overcast skies. I am attracted to their lack of clarity and the diffuse quality of light and color. Overcast skies have the unique quality of being entirely made up of diffuse light, meaning that light moves through moisture in the air much as it would through frosted glass; it is completely scattered. The effect is an illumination of light and color combined with a paradoxical lack of clarity.⁹ Gray, for me, therefore represents a sort of aporetic condition. It is neither black nor white. In chromatic grays, it manages to sit somehow outside

⁷ Ibid., 46.

⁸ Ibid., 42.

⁹ "Scattering Light," *WW2010: The Weather World 2010 Project* (University of Illinois, 1997) [http://ww2010.atmos.uiuc.edu/\(Gh\)/guides/mtr/opt/mch/sct.xml](http://ww2010.atmos.uiuc.edu/(Gh)/guides/mtr/opt/mch/sct.xml).

the color wheel while containing all of its elements. In the past, I have been interested in how artists like Barnett Newman in his stations of the cross have used black/white contrast to signify simultaneously a presence and a void. Gray is similarly neither/nor, endlessly in between. Often in my paintings I situate gray shapes against a buried, white horizon so that it is unclear whether they represent objects or openings. I juxtapose predominantly dark or light paintings against one another, or black panels against white. Gray may carry connotations of melancholia, but for me it represents a kind of liminal state or threshold: it could at any moment transform.

In an examination of the work of conceptual artist Gary Hill, George Quasha and Charles Stein recall Hill's fixation with surfing. The surfer's obsession, he claimed, lies in finding a still point within the interior of the cresting wave and remaining there as it rolls toward shore. Quasha and Stein define a liminal state as "anywhere that something is about to undergo a phase of transition or turn into something else,"¹⁰ and liken liminal art, then, to riding a sort of endlessly breaking wave, remaining in the still space just before a dramatic change of direction. Their description begs comparisons to Burbule's aporetic crossroads, and the notion of an in-between or liminal state has led to specific aesthetic decisions in my paintings. An aporetic experience sits at a similar threshold; it is the junction between one worldview and another. Rather than provide the viewer with a way to move forward, my goal is to give pause at this cognitive intersection. By juxtaposing images from multiple vistas, I can create for the viewer a crisis of indecision. Each image is developed differently spatially and reveals or conceals different objects or paths. None of the images, however, provides a clear path to an unobstructed horizon. In order to move forward, the viewer must choose between passages each leading toward unknown conclusions. It is the difference that Burbules makes between lacking a *poros* (a passage across a chaotic expanse) and lacking an *odos* (a path between known locations):

¹⁰ George Quasha and Charles Stein, "HanD HearD, Liminal Objects," *The Sublime*, Ed. Simon Morely (London: The MIT Press, 2010) 215.

Lacking an *odos* is not the same as lacking a *poros*. These two kinds of path or passage are important because they imply two kinds of transition out of doubt: one by progress toward a fixed answer, one by movement toward an unknown destination.¹¹

Thinking back to my stay at the Marchutz School, which emphasized the ritual and meditative aspects of painting, it is easy for me to draw parallels between this idea of progressive movements toward an unknown destination and the process of painting itself.

Painting — at least painting without a precise plan for the finished product — has its own internal dialogue. My initial, strict drawing is haphazardly covered over. New layers obscure or clarify. Paint is added, then scraped back revealing its geology. Rather than working consciously toward a clear finish, painting for me involves a repeated ritual of destruction and recovery. Each successive layer of obscurity adds to the physicality and complexity of the finished surface. The thickness and texture of the paint lend a physical quality or “realness” to images that appear otherwise ephemeral. Formally, I am drawn to artists whose handling of paint is both physical *and* ephemeral: Eric Aho’s glacial paintings, for example, and Ben Aronson’s energetically gestured cityscapes. Paul Ruiz, whose paintings I very much admire, talks about burying and excavating his figures and “condemning to obscurity” each of the marks he makes.¹² Rather than approaching painting as a gradual process of refinement (or worse yet, simply *filling up* the canvas), my paintings reveal their stumbling process of trial and error. The chaos of countless decisions yields complexity.

Counterbalancing all of this chaos and obscurity, however, is an underlying desire for aesthetic harmony in my work that stems from my modernist roots. Much of my study at Marchutz was spent painstakingly examining, brushstroke by brushstroke, the works of Paul Cezanne and a smattering of other painters from the Renaissance up through the Post-

¹¹ Burbules, 74.

¹² Paul Ruiz, 4 Jan, 2012. blog.paulwruiz.com.

Impressionists. As a group, we spent several-hour seminars picking apart, for example, the opposing gestures of Plato and Aristotle in Raphael's *School of Athens*, or the undulation of a single contour along the background of a Vermeer painting. At the same time, we read excerpts from romantic poets, Japanese Zen texts and Virginia Woolf novels that each emphasized a conscious participation in the present — some, even, as a means of transcendence. Four-year's digestion of this experience has still left me with a nugget of modern optimism. Rather than copy directly from my photographs or swing far to the side of compositional chaos, I am once again right in the middle. I reproduce heavily mediated representations of a contemporary environment according to formalist laws of aesthetics. I still consider the painting ritual a form of contemplative meditation.

For me, the process of painting mimics a passage from a primer on Zen practice that has stuck with me since my time abroad:

The reason that everything appears beautiful is because it is out of balance, but its backdrop is always in perfect harmony. This is how everything exists in the Buddha nature, losing its balance against a backdrop of perfect balance.¹³

I am by no means a Zen practitioner. However this process of moving, scraping and manipulating paint, chaotically, within an ordered, aesthetic harmony is something I still think of within the framework of this strange, cross-cultural mix of traditions. Formalism as transcendence has been the formative myth of my personal growth as an artist. If nothing else, it is responsible for my continued fascination with the aporetic condition — the continual process in painting of coming up against the unknown.

The images I paint, which return me again and again to the limited loop between my home and school, engage me in a kind of repetitive, circular rhetoric. The familiar becomes

¹³ Shunryu Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind: Informal Talks on Zen Meditation and Practice* (London: Weatherhill, 1973) 32.

unfamiliar; the same small handful of landmarks is changed with each revision. Revisiting the same in-transit experience again and again, I argue with myself. My experience at The Marchutz School insists on a sacred importance to the way my eyes divide and process space as I pass through it. Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulation answers that my experience of this space is highly mediated, distanced from any real present to which I might attach significance. If I look to cognitive research, I might find that my aestheticising of space is a human abstraction — a case of projecting patterns, so to speak, into a whole lot of *white noise*. In trying to orient myself in the world around me, I am overwhelmed. But I refuse to take sides. Remaining at the intersection of conflicting dialogues means continually engaging with the liminal — what Quasha and Stein call “the art of the open.”¹⁴ T.R. Martland described it even better when defining any attempt at spiritual art as not a representation of religious certainties, but a continual engaging with mystery. It is “a constant instance of probing into the unknown.”¹⁵

¹⁴ Stein, 217.

¹⁵ T. R. Martland, “Question: When is Religion Art? Answer: When It Is a Jar,” *Art, Creativity and the Sacred* Ed. Diane Apostolos-Cappadona (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2005) 254.

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