

Subversion & Commemoration

Eugene Hill

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the Master's of Fine Art in Painting

Kendall College of Art and Design
Ferris State University
April 2021

Introduction

I work with paint, canvas, photoshop, and photography to create installations and individual pieces that blend the genres of painting and conceptual art. Two oppositional philosophical objectives guide my practice. The first is to undermine and complicate conventions, and the second, to enter traditional systems, often viewed as correct to the point beyond reproach by their founding hegemonic culture, thus introducing nuance. I aim to point at the bias and blind spots of convention and canon, revealing the extent to which they are still in need of refinement. My work could be classified as postmodern for this reason— it looks back at art history, particularly the genre of painting, and echoes them with a critical edge. I deploy self-reflexivity, irony, and parody as tools of reimagination and critique. In the exhibitions *The Artist is Present* and *Placed / Misplaced*, I have attempted to add to the aesthetic vocabulary of painting while challenging its conventions. *The Artist is Present* asks questions about what it means to make material art in a digital age, situating material work alongside digital counterparts presented via wall-mounted iPhones. *Placed / Misplaced* interrogates the conventional placement of paint and canvas within the gallery context and displays three atypical arrangements of these two traditional painting features.

The second objective, held in tension with the first, is to create art that resonates with ideas and narratives that lead to human flourishing. I have encountered art that made me feel existentially full, less alone, like someone just shot a flare that's lighting the dark path forward. I believe art ought to be wielded as a force of redemption just as it is wielded as a force of revision. *The Center Must Hold* is an attempt to fulfill this second philosophical objective in its visualization of the American two-party political system. The exhibition aims to highlight the importance and growing fragility of individualism in an increasingly polarized political system.

I hope accurately outlines the structure of the two-party political system, provides viewers with a non-partisan aid for thinking critically about our political moment and commemorates the value of individualism.

My creative goal is to get viewers to look more closely at, or think more deeply about, something worth their attention for critical and redemptive purposes. I am interested in creating art that explores the space between subversion and commemoration, between skepticism and belief. This invites the question, “Which ideas ought to be subverted and which should be commemorated?” While I do not think a general rule can sort ideas into these two categories, I believe finding the answer requires holding a dialectical tension between pairs of opposing concepts. Past and future, irony and sincerity, cynicism and sappiness, clarity and mystery, conservation and progress: the way forward artistically is to never land on one side or the other of these pairs, but rather to live in the tension between them, applying one or the other circumstantially.

Art Belief System: Is & Ought Statements

In the sections that follow, I discuss the formal devices and concepts that I have instantiated in my work. However, I feel that there is a system of beliefs about what art is and ought to do that exists above, and has, in fact, led me to these particular devices/subject matter. The bullet points below are an attempt to encapsulate that higher-order set of beliefs that defines value in art:

- Art is communication
- Art ought to remember who it's for
- Art ought to do something that hasn't been done before
- Art ought to comment on shared reality

- Art ought to be assessed on its own, without an awareness of the creator and their intentions for the art
- Art ought to be about what it is to be a human being

Irony

Irony is generically defined as “A form of speech in which one meaning is stated and a different, usually antithetical, meaning is intended.”¹ There’s a difference between what is literally said and what is figuratively meant in an ironic statement. This disjunction between what is said and what is meant poses an interpretational problem. If the speaker actually means the opposite of what they say, how is the viewer supposed to know that the speaker doesn’t mean what they’re literally saying? Linda Hutcheon lays out this interpretive obstacle clearly in *Irony’s Edge*, “This is why irony cannot be trusted, it undermines the stated meaning by removing the semantic security of ‘one signifier, one signified’ and by revealing the complex, inclusive, relational and differential nature of ironic meaning-making.”² An ironic expression has one signifier with two signified meanings, the literal and the ironic meaning are both available to viewer.

This paradoxical doubling of the signified meaning in ironic expression creates covert opportunities to level critiques of dominant cultures/discourses. Hutcheon states, “Irony is a way of speaking a dominant discourse but meaning something else. So you get listened to because you’re speaking to the dominant force from within and subverting it at the same time.”³ Irony is

¹ Alex Preminger, “Irony,” in *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 406-407.

² Hutcheon, Linda. *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony*. London: Routledge, 1994, 13.

³ Joe Galbo. “Linda Hutcheon Full Interview.” October 24, 2014. Video, 23:26. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8s-qv6Z1Ik4>.

a wicked tool of critique and revision because its twin-signified structure allows it to signal complicity with a discourse while simultaneously critiquing it. Hutcheon posits that the literal signification of the ironic statement typically signals its complicity with the dominant discourse, and the figurative ironic signification then levels the critique.

This notion of irony has been hugely influential for my practice. Its influence manifests most clearly in *Placed / Misplaced*, which can be divided into two significations and parsed similarly to a verbal irony. The first component is the stretched canvases hung traditionally in the gallery space, thus implying fine art and painting convention. The atypical paint applications form the second component of the installation, which carries its critical edge. The paint's placement to the edges of the canvas, to the wall beside a canvas, and on the canvas but also exceeding beyond the canvas's perimeters into the gallery space is ironically "missing" the canvas from the perspective of painting convention. If only one of these two elements were present, the irony would misfire and fall flat. Without the canvases and gallery context, the critique would have no target, and without the atypical paint application, the installation would have no critical edge.

The attribution of irony is always contingent on the interpreter possessing a supplementary piece of information, often contextual, which eliminates the possibility that the speaker means what they literally say.⁴ For example, "It's a beautiful day outside!" can only be interpreted as ironic if the interpreter knows via context that it's actually rainy and cold outside. Because shared context is necessary for irony to be parsed, and audiences are always diverse, representing a multitude of backgrounds and bodies of contextual knowledge, it is a practical certainty that the irony will remain undeciphered by portions of the audience who are not privy

⁴ Colebrook, Claire. *Irony: The New Critical Idiom*. London: Routledge, 2004, 13.

to key pieces of supplementary contextual information. Humorously enough, it's often the portions of the audience that have the knowledge to decipher the irony that are in least need of comprehending its critical edge.

Experimentation: Two-tiered Artistic Practice

My practice is divided into two levels, the first is experimental composed of one-off works and the second level is the exhibition, which I would consider the real, published work. Ideas form in the experimental level and incubate in iterations produced over time. If an idea or concept is durable, it will work its way into full expression at the exhibition level. Mark Tansey has constructed a similar two-tiered methodology in his two-floor NYC studio. The second floor is devoted to preparatory sketches and composition mockups, and the first floor is dedicated to the production of final paintings.⁵ The organization of my art practice, separated into experimental and exhibition levels, reflects the organizational structure of Tansey's studio.

Text vs. Image

Ostensibly, text and image are the two foundational building blocks of meaning in artistic expression. As painting and poetry, illustration and essay, photograph and novel demonstrate, the most celebrated artistic forms are indebted to text, image, or a combination of both. Initially, I believed text and image to each constitute a distinct medium with unique strengths and weaknesses. I intuited an understanding that went something like "text carries the ability to deliver complex meanings with specificity, and image holds an inherent ambiguity and sensual gut-punch." While it is difficult to delineate the exact differences between text and image as communicative mediums, it's clear that they share the same goal to convey meaning. W.J.T.

⁵ Danto, Arthur. *Mark Tansey: Visions and Revisions*. Harry N. Abrams: New York. 1992, 129.

Mitchell states, “All the arts may aspire to the condition of music, but when they set out to argue, poetry and painting hold the stage. One reason for this is that they both lay claim to the same territory (reference, representation, denotation, meaning).”⁶ Text and image are different symbol systems with the same function, to represent meaning.

My perspective of the rationale behind incorporating both text and image into works like the compartment paintings in figures 1 and 2 crucially shifted after reading W.J.T. Mitchell’s theory of the imagetext. He states, “The relationship between words and images reflects, within the realm of representation, signification, and communication, the relations we posit between symbols and the world, signs and their meanings.”⁷ Mitchell posits a relationship between image and text that is mutually descriptive. Image and text point at one another just as a symbol points to its referent in the world and a sign points to a particular signification.

The decision to incorporate both image and text into paintings stemmed from the desire to develop an internal conversation within a painting. Pairing images with textual phrases and captions is one way to generate an internal dialogue within the painting, or a “W of the signs,” as Mitchell would call it.⁸ In the compartment paintings, image and text are placed into a one-on-one relationship by the structure of black lines that corral each component into compartments and divide the space of the canvas. For instance, in figure 1 “Toolbox” is paired with the image of a color palette, and “Excoriation” is paired with the image of a punctured canvas. I found it extremely satisfying to play with concordance and discordance between the pairs of warring signs in each compartment. I think it’s more interesting for the viewer to witness a conversation

⁶ Mitchell, W.J.T. *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986, 47.

⁷ Mitchell, W.J.T. *Iconology*, 43.

⁸ Mitchell, W.J.T. *Iconology*, 47.

taking place with the canvas as opposed to receiving a statement or proclamation from it. The fundamental differences between text and image as mediums—combined with their shared claim to representation, and a diagrammatic organization that places the text and image into relationships—is that it creates the opportunity for a painting to carry internal conflicts of meaning.

Flow State: The Spectrum of Interpretation

Every artwork falls somewhere on a spectrum of interpretation that runs from a single interpretation to myriad interpretations. The location where the art object falls on this spectrum impacts the viewer's level of comfort in the interpretative process as well as their ability to receive the artist's intended meaning from the art object. For instance, an abstract expressionistic work would land fairly deep into the many interpretations side of the revelatory spectrum, whereas a classic representational portrait would lean towards the single interpretation side of the spectrum. If the artist's goal is to accurately communicate an intended meaning, they will have more success doing so by using representation and text to limit the number of possible interpretations. Alternatively, if the artist's goal is to capture a transcendent ineffable experience, they'll find more success engaging with abstraction. I strive to strike a balance on this interpretive scale in my work.

Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihaly's theory of the flow state regarding human learning is useful for understanding how the spectrum of interpretation impacts the transmission of meaning from art object to viewer. Figure 4 illustrates the theory of flow state with a graph. The y axis measures the difficulty of the task and the x axis measures the user's capability or skill. If the task is more difficult than the user's capability they become anxious and disengage. Conversely, if the user's capability is greater than the difficulty of the task they become bored

and disengage. The flow state is the theoretical sweet spot where the viewer feels comfortable enough with the material to engage it, but there's enough novelty to keep them from becoming bored.

I believe a flow state should be established between an art object and viewer. Csikszentmihaly describes the flow state saying, "Time flies. Every action, movement, and thought follows inevitably from the previous one, like playing jazz. Your whole being is involved, and you're using your skills to the utmost,"⁹ The achievement of this flow state partially hinges on the content of the art object, and partially on the viewers capability. I believe the onus falls on the artist to take care of their part of the interaction and construct an object that balances clarity with mystery. The artist should leave enough breadcrumbs for the art recipient to find their way to the meaning. An ideal work for my practice contains enough clarity to orient the viewer so they don't disengage on account of anxiety, but also carries a sufficient amount of mystery so that the viewer doesn't become weary.

Self-Reflexivity

Self-Reflexivity, or the act of making reference to one's self, is the primary strategy for imbuing an artwork with a sense of metacognition. In the postmodern era, meta-art has boomed in popularity. Now we can read metanovels that are about being novels, watch metafilms that are about being films, and look at metapaintings that are about being paintings. WJT Mitchell writes on metapictures describing them as "...pictures that refer to themselves or to other pictures, pictures that are used to show what a picture is."¹⁰ When an artwork adopts a self-

⁹ Gierland, John. "Go With The Flow." *Wired*, September 1, 1996. <https://www.wired.com/1996/09/czik/>.

¹⁰ Mitchell, W.J.T. *Picture Theory*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994, 35.

reflexive voice it allows the content presented on the canvas to interrogate the constraints of its own medium as well as the axioms of convention that surround it. For instance, Figure 4 is a meta painting that points at the fact that paintings are two dimensional compositions that guide your eye in a particular path around their surface. It's a painting about how paintings by nature and convention aim to direct the viewer's eye in a certain way.

WJT Mitchell posits that metapictures "...depict and deconstruct the relation between the first-order image and the second-order discourse"¹¹ In other words, a metapicture directly engages and is capable of commenting on the discourse that surrounds pictures, which is to say its commenting on itself. I find the idea that a piece of art can be its own critic extremely compelling. Self-reflexive works of art largely render the art critic's job redundant in that the work is already examining its own theoretical preconditions and assumptions.

The Artist is Present (Fig. 5-7)

The exhibition brings together three different components and presents questions about what it means to produce art in a digital age. Two of the three components come from current work, the third will unfold during the exhibition's life as performance:

- Abstract material work
- iPhone presenting original digital work, and reflecting the abstract material work with their forward-facing camera
- Digital performance (The artist is present via a text conversation on one of the mounted iPhones. Viewers can type what they please and artist will be respond.)

¹¹ Mitchell, 68.

The material abstract works were created by the deconstruction and reassembly of single completed abstract canvases. Drawings and paintings reaching back to the start of my practice were broken and then glued or tied back together with strips of canvas. Aside from the undeniable message that “painting is dead,” signified by the broken and mistreated aesthetic, these works also pose questions of identity and value. A solitary abstract drawing or painting holds a set value. Does value compound or diminish when two works are manipulated to become one? I find it fascinating how seamlessly the once distinct pieces merge and read as whole after their assembly.

The slouched posture and discarded positioning of the material works along the perimeter of the gallery leads viewers to interpret the work as degraded and decaying, which plays well against the other two physically elevated, and wall-mounted digital components of the exhibition. Three iPhones are mounted on the wall opposite the heap of abstract work, and digitally reflect its material presence. As the viewer steps into the space between, they have the material object on their right, and its digital reproduction on their left. The proximity of the material and digital representations of the same object set-off a comparison for the viewer to ponder their distinct natures, and their own relationship to the work as they cannot accurately view the iPhone screen without stepping into the camera frame themselves.

The digital pieces displayed on the iPhones were created via mixed processes of photography, painting, and Photoshop manipulation, hence, digital marks conflate with analogue brush strokes; images both intact and distorted are sampled from online and photographic sources. I’d like for the viewer to be confused as to how these pieces were created. Displaying digital work on iPhone screens points at the contemporary method of consuming art via digital screens. Viewers often enter art galleries with hopes of being led to profound experiences

through interaction with the object itself. *The Artist is Present* confronts the viewer with the stereotypically cheap “shadow of the thing” digital reproduction—a format they often consume—but only because it’s convenient, not because it’s their preference. The rectangular shape of the iPhone plays well mounted on the wall in a gallery context, reading as miniature digital canvas. *The Artist is Present* invites them to consider their own digital habits, and how those habits effect the consumption of art.

The exhibition takes its’ title *The Artist is Present* from Marina Abramovic’s performance retrospective at MoMA in 2010, in which she sat at a table across from gallery goers one at a time, making direct eye contact in silence. One iPhone mounted on the wall will be open and fixed to a text conversation with my cell phone. Viewers were free to type any questions or comments they wish, and the artist had the opportunity to respond. Abramovic was interested in the power of physical presence apart from language; the reverse of this idea, . language apart from physical presence, is explored in *The Artist is Present*. Technological development is furthering the human ability to engage in matters which exist at a great distant from their immediate physical environment.

Placed / Misplaced (Figures 9- 11)

The installation entitled *Placed / Misplaced* attempts to reimagine the structural arrangement between framed canvas and paint. Artists have applied paint to canvas in a variety of ways, but almost always on the side of the canvas that faces the viewer. The application of paint to the front surface of the canvas is one of painting’s core conventions. In *Place / Misplaced*, acrylic paint, oil paint, and spackling mixed with acrylic are placed into three atypical structural arrangements with framed canvas and gallery wall. Each arrangement occupies a distinct wall of the gallery, and presents a different questioning of the conventional

arrangement of paint, canvas, and gallery and invites the viewer to reconsider the concepts of placement and misplacement in art.

Formal Description

1. Full Misplacement - One canvas is displayed without modification, standing empty next to a grouping of thick abstract smears of oil paint in primary colors. The composition is cropped to equal proportion with the adjacent blank canvas. Smears falling on the perimeter are cut to the rectangular dimensions.
2. Edge Misplacement - Paint is applied to only the edges of two canvases in globs, which were allowed to move and drip under the force of gravity. The edges of one canvas received white paint, and the other canvas, black.
3. Partial Misplacement - Two canvases are displayed in the gallery with overlaid geometric patterns that transgress the canvases' edges.

The blue grid of dots spread from the canvas onto the surrounding gallery wall and the orange diagonal pattern of bars protrude into the three-dimensional space of the gallery

Conceptual Meaning

1. The edge misplacements emphasized within this installation highlight those four sides of the frame that are seldom considered in conventional painting compositions. The paint covers the liminal point at which frame edge meets gallery wall. Blurring the point at which the framed canvases meet the wall with paint conceptually unifies the gallery space with the framed canvases.
2. The full misplacement of paint from canvas to proximal distance on the gallery wall deprives the canvas from an immediate structural relationship. Proportion is the only

unifying element between paint and framed canvas. The painted composition would fit perfectly if superimposed over the canvas.

3. The geometric patterns similarly obscure the distinction between canvas and gallery space as they exceed and envelop the canvas in scale. The canvas stands as only a part of the whole piece which extends onto and into the gallery space.

No artist statement is included in *Placed/ Misplaced*. “Placed/ Misplaced” is the only text framing the visual work. This omission is an experiment stemming from an interest in the way image and text function together to make meaning. I believe *Placed / Misplaced* is a low-resolution framing device that’s sufficient to cue the viewer to the larger themes of the installation, while leaving plenty of room for discovery and interpretation.

The Center Must Hold (Figure 12)

The *Center Must Hold* uses abstraction and a sculptural reimagining of framed canvas to visualize the two-party political system. In the logic of the installation the sculptural “canvas” forms represent the structure of current U.S. political parties, and the paint applied to the structure’s surfaces represents America’s citizens. Four formal variables shift across the spectrum. The arrangement of these variables is intended to communicate the polarization of the American political system, different qualities of the Democratic and Republican parties, and the fragility of the moderate political center.

- *Canvas Shape*: The series of canvases begins with a conventional size painting on the far left, tall and wide with almost no depth, with subsequent iterations becoming progressively shorter, thinner and deeper as the sculptural forms move to the viewer’s right within the gallery installation, so that the canvas furthest right is extremely short, thin, and deep. The two canvases displayed within the gallery on the lefthand wall and

the two on the righthand wall are arranged in oppositional pairs so that the forward surfaces of the red canvases fit into the openings of the blue canvases on the opposite wall. This “lock and key” relationship between the two pairs of canvases metaphorically suggests that the political extremes carry only a portion of the whole picture.

- *Color:* The blue paint on the left hand wall, the red paint on the right hand wall and the blend of red and blue paint on the center wall denote the location of Democratic and Republican parties along the political spectrum.
- *Location of paint on canvas:* On the left wall of the gallery, paint is applied to the perimeter of the canvases, and on the right wall, it’s applied to the entire front face. This is meant to allude to the Democratic party’s propensity to consider the people that exist on the margins of society, and the Republican party to look after the interests of big business and those at the insulated center of society.
- *Style of paint application:* On the far left and far right canvases paint is applied in heavy globs, whereas in the center middle canvas it’s applied in tiny distinct pixels. This structure conveys the dominance of tribalism at the political extremes and individualism at the political center.

Conclusion

I hope my art is solution-oriented in its contribution to the cultural conversation that’s assessing ideas and drawing conclusions about which ones are worth holding onto, and which ought to be prohibited from implementation. While some people will inevitably disagree with positions presented in work, or worse shrug in response, I have strived to make the work resonate with what I can best discern is true about the world. There’s a substantial thread in our current culture that posits reality is wholly subjective thing and therefore cannot be shared. This

perspective siloes people into personal, hermetically sealed containers of perception and truth.

The thought that the subjectivity of reality precludes human commiseration and celebration feels patently false if you've ever been to a birthday party, or a funeral, a concert, a movie, a play, or a good art exhibiton. I hope there are sentiments in the work that you recognize with your bones, and in the best case scenario, that you find an idea that will be useful to you as you navigate life.

Above all other artistic goals, I aimed to create the work so that, if you're anything like me, there will be something concrete there for yo

List of Images

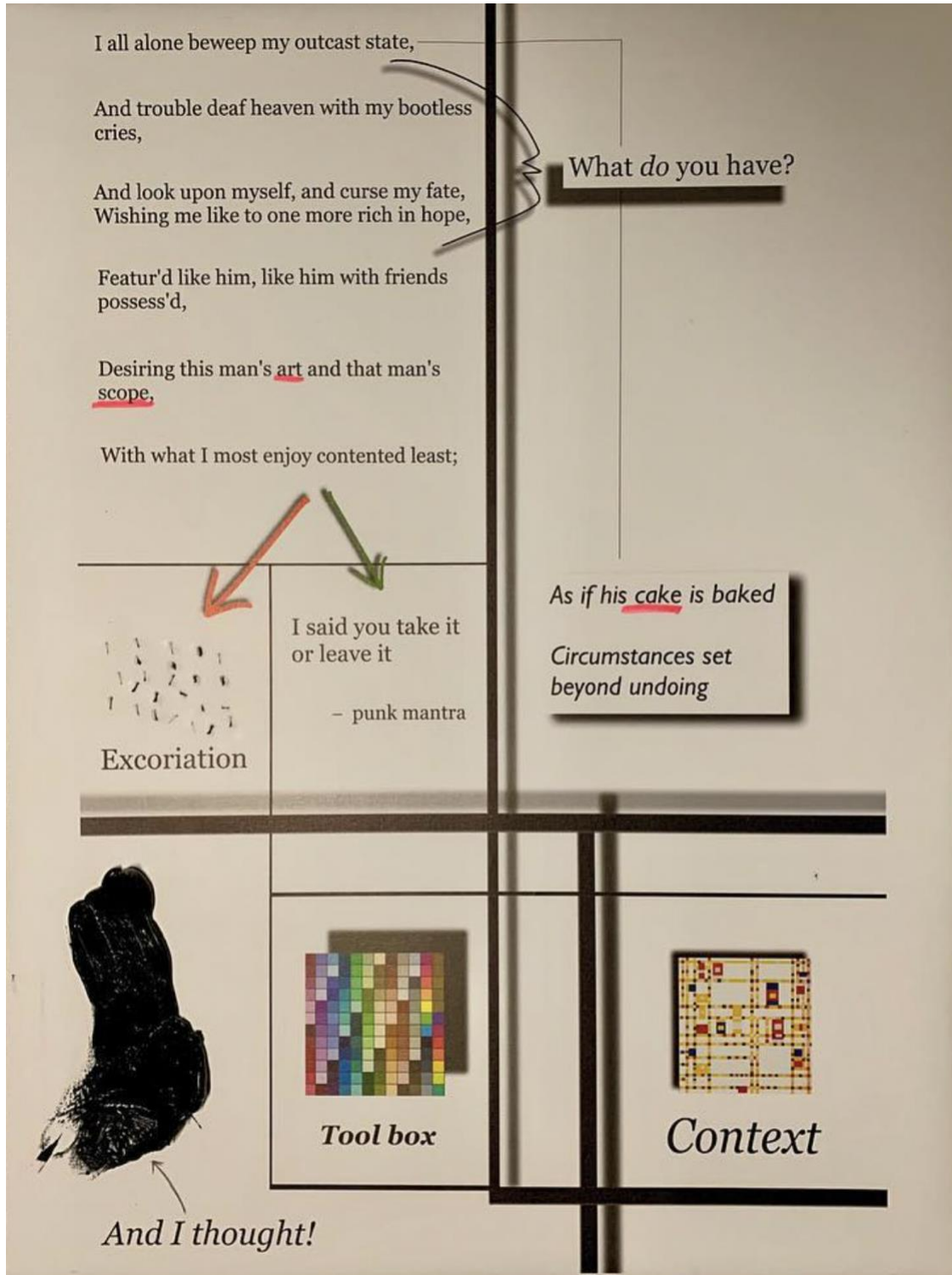


Fig. 1, Hill, Eugene, "Untitled," stretched canvas, oil paint, inkjet printing, highlighter, November 2019, Grand Rapids, MI.

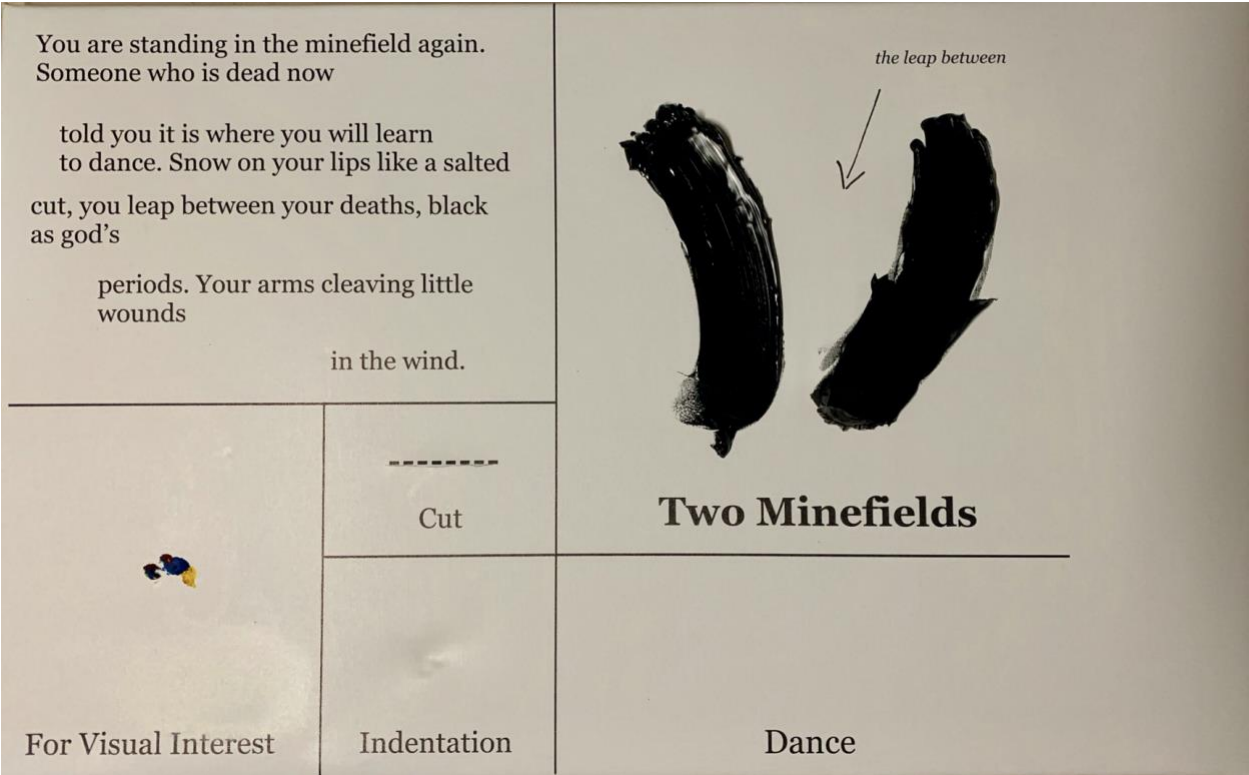


Fig. 2, Hill, Eugene, "Untitled," stretched canvas, oil paint, inkjet printing, highlighter, November 2019, Grand Rapids, MI.

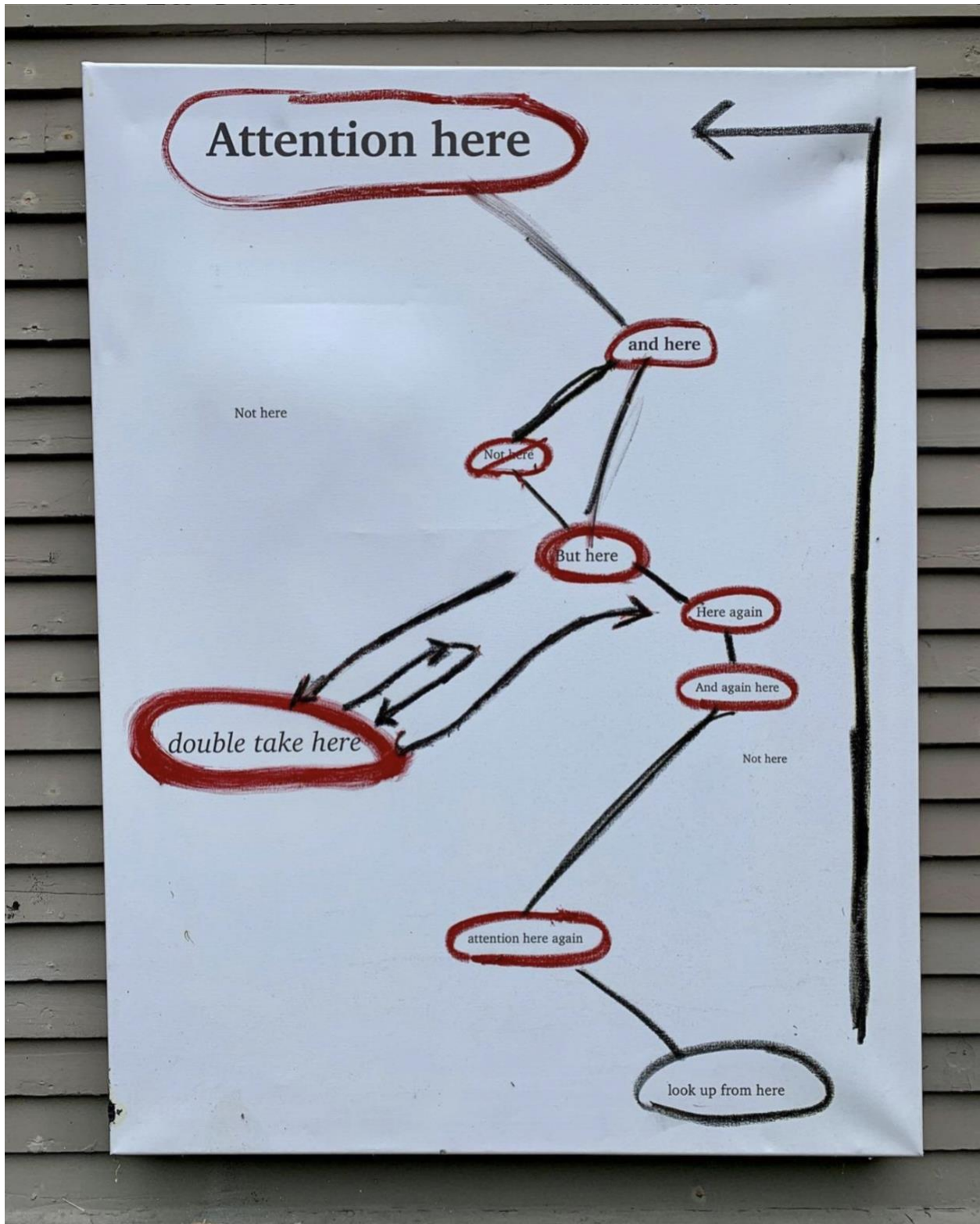


Fig. 3, Hill, Eugene, "Untitled," stretched canvas, oil stick, inkjet printing, April 2019, Grand Rapids, MI.

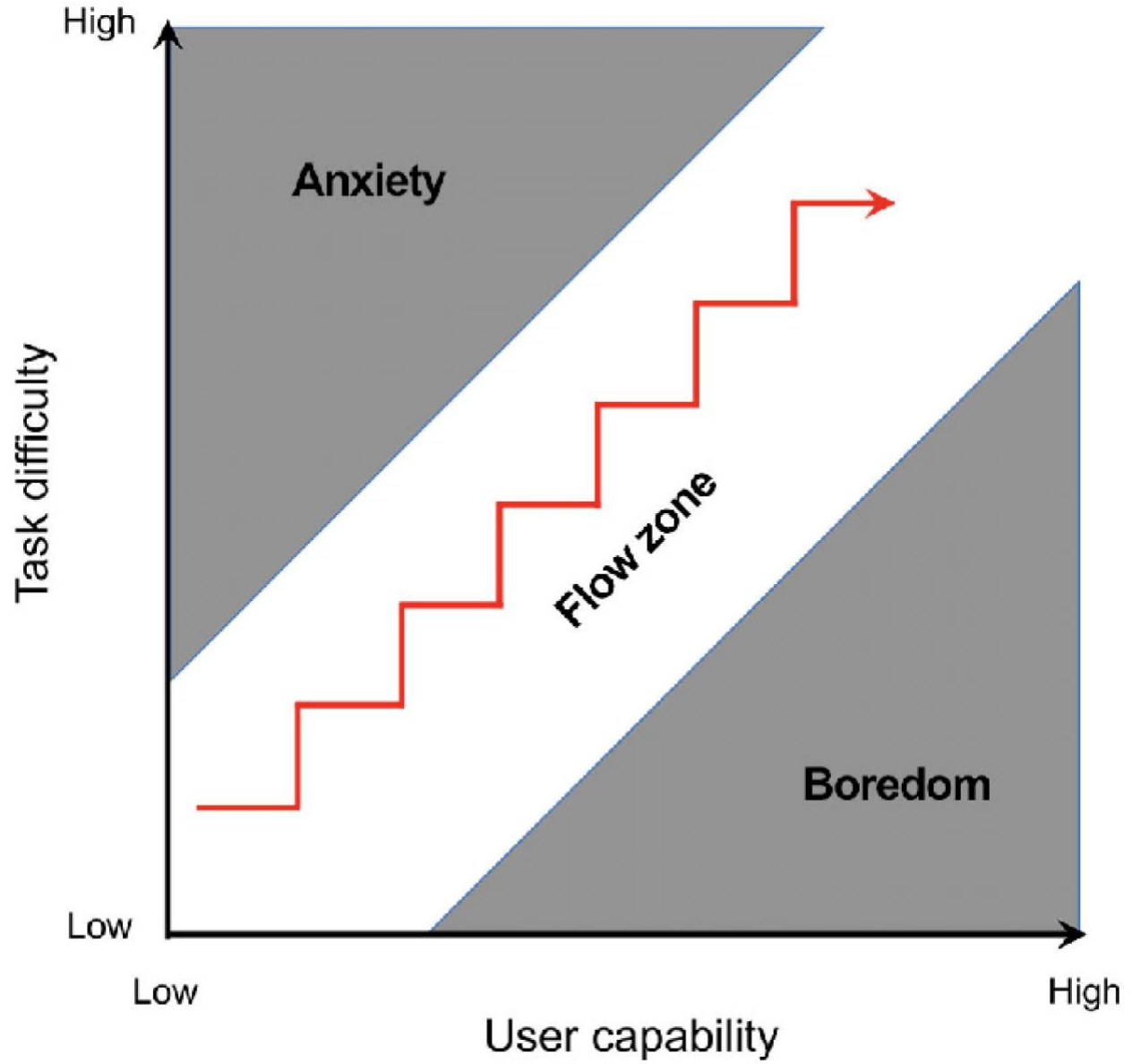


Fig. 4, Csíkszentmihályi, Mihály, *Flow State*, printed datagraph, 1990, in *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, Csíkszentmihályi, Mihály, 74 New York: Harper Collins, 1990.



Fig. 5 Hill, Eugene, *The Artist is Present (Exhibition View)*, broken abstract canvases, wall mounted iPhones, USB charging cords, November 2018, Grand Rapids, MI.

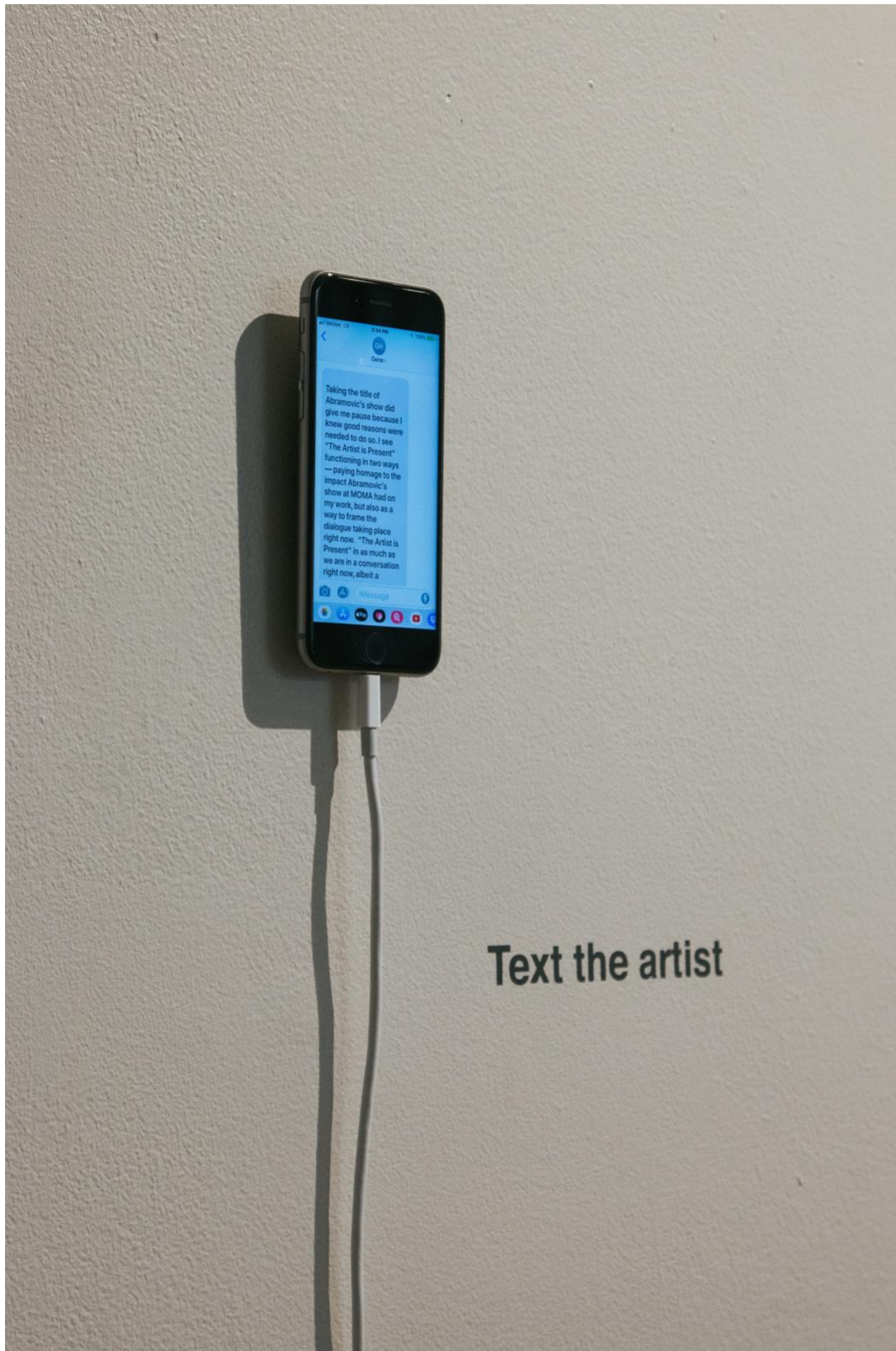


Fig. 6, Hill, Eugene, *The Artist is Present (detail #1)*, text conversation between gallery-goer and artist, November 2018, Grand Rapids, MI.



Fig. 7, Hill, Eugene, *The Artist is Present (detail #3)*, wall mounted iPhone displaying broken canvases on forward facing camera, November 2018, Grand Rapids, MI.

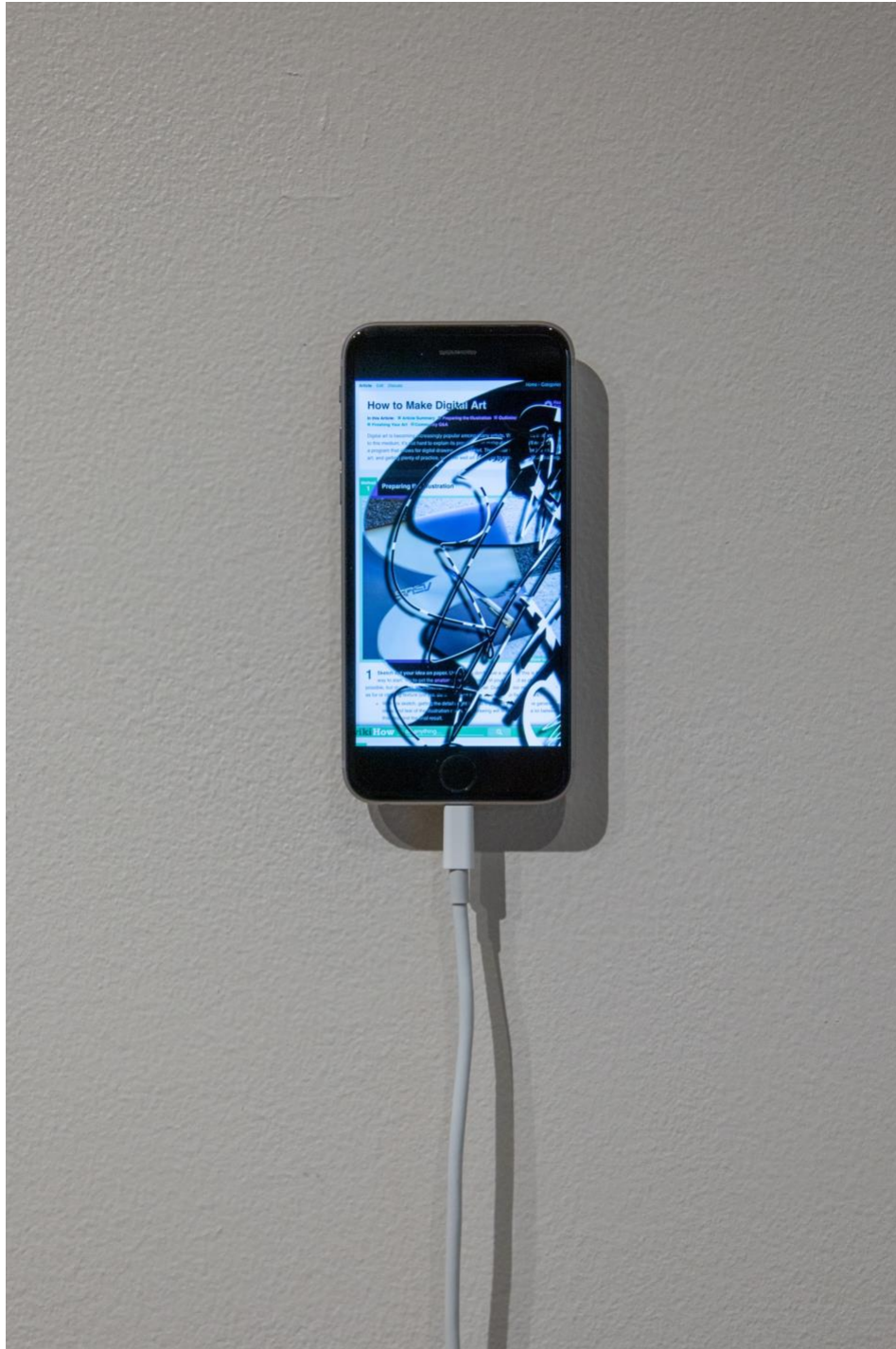


Fig. 8, Hill, Eugene, *The Artist is Present (detail #4)*, wall mounted iPhone displaying digital collage, November 2018, Grand Rapids, MI.



Fig. 9, Hill, Eugene, *Placed / Misplaced (detail #1)*, blank stretched canvas, oil paint on gallery wall, October 2019, Grand Rapids, MI.

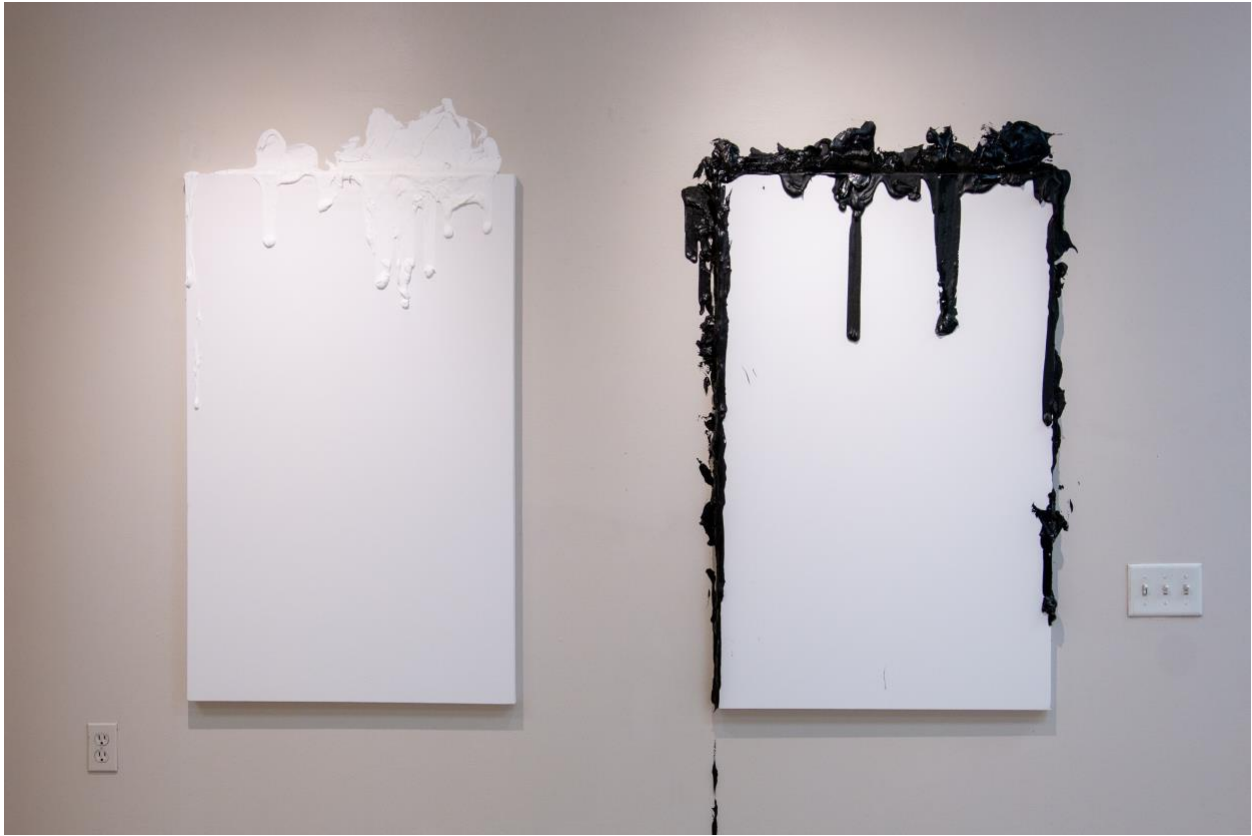


Fig. 10, Hill, Eugene, *Placed / Misplaced (detail #2)*, two stretched canvases, oil paint on gallery wall, October 2019, Grand Rapids, MI.

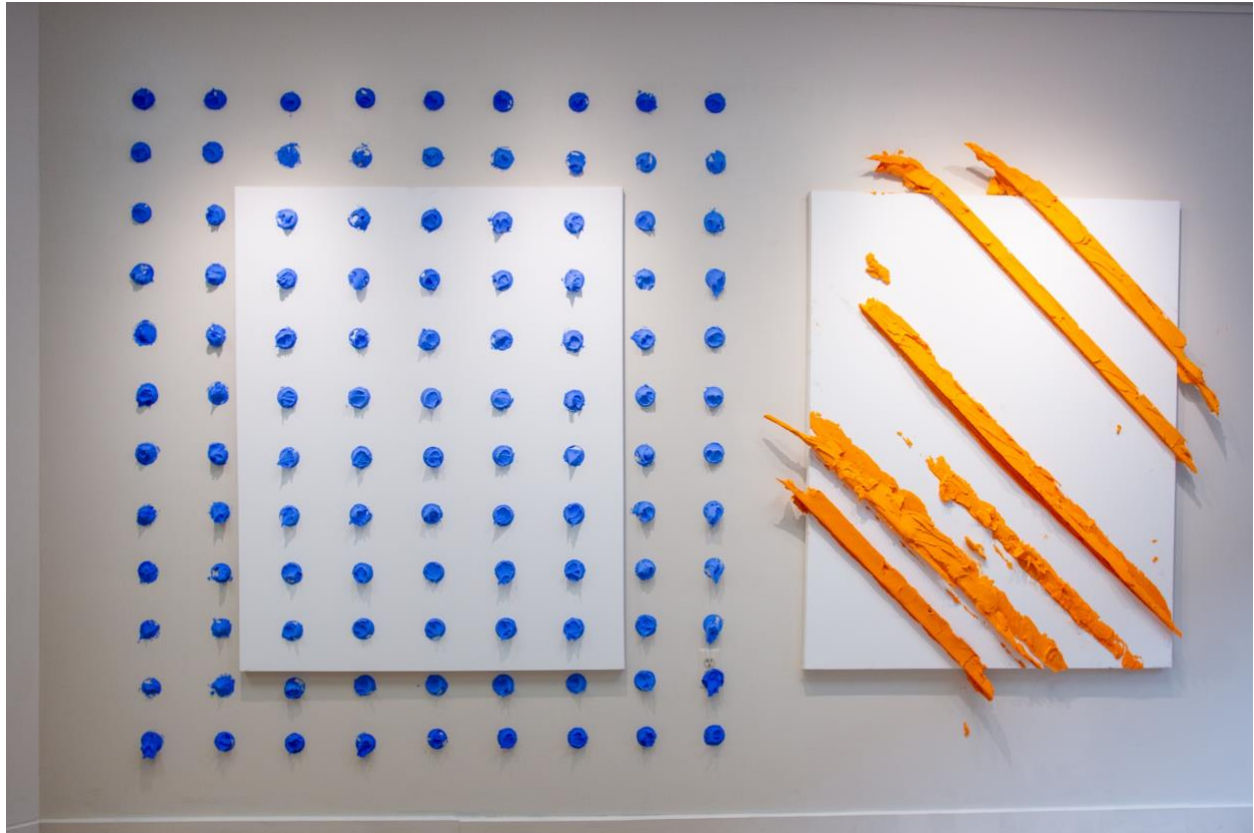


Fig. 11, Hill, Eugene, *Placed / Misplaced (detail #3)*, two stretched canvases, acrylic paint mixed with spackling, October 2019, Grand Rapids, MI.



Fig. 12, Hill, Eugene, *The Center Must Hold (Exhibition View)*, 5 plywood forms skinned with canvas, acrylic paint mixed with spackling, needlepoint markers, November 2020, Grand Rapids, MI.

Bibliography

- Colebrook, Claire. *Irony: The New Critical Idiom*. London: Routledge, 2004.
- Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. *Finding Flow: The Psychology Of Engagement With Everyday Life*. New York: Basic Books, 1997.
- Danto, Arthur. *Mark Tansey: Visions and Revisions*. Harry N. Abrahms: New York. 1992.
- Gierland, John. "Go With The Flow." *Wired*, September 1, 1996.
<https://www.wired.com/1996/09/czik/>.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony*. London: Routledge, 1994.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *The Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. London: Routledge, 1988.
- Joe Galbo. "Linda Hutcheon Full Interview." October 24, 2014. Video, 23:26.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8s-qv6Z1Ik4>.
- Jung, Carl. *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*. London: Harcourt, 1955.
- Mitchell, W.J.T. *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986.
- Mitchell, W.J.T. *Picture Theory*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994.
- Rorty, Richard. *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.
- Scott, Biljana. "Picturing Irony: The Subversive Power of Photography1." *Visual Communication* 3, no. 1 (February 2004): 31–59.
- "Irony." *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 1st ed., 1972, pp. 406-07.
- Sperber, Dan. "Verbal Irony: Pretense or Echoic Mention?" *Journal of experimental psychology*. General 113, no. 1 (1984): 130–136.

