

ABSTRACT

Cora Melcher

My thesis work consists of a body of diptych paintings on paper. Conceptually, I seek to investigate how bodies, as bounded forms, experience the boundarylessness of energies and moods. Through a three-step procedural framework, these pieces investigate ideas of shared energy, boundaries of the physical body and holistic healing. The first step consists of pouring ink or watered down paint onto paper. The second step includes acrylic paint, ink, colored pencil and oil pastel to create various patterns and layers as a reaction to the initial spill. The third step is made up of what I am calling 'transplants.' In this final step, I cut shapes out of the paper, swap them with the corresponding piece in the diptych and suture them in place with embroidery thread, disrupting and shifting the composition. I use transplants as a metaphor for how we intentionally rearrange our perceptions of events in order to integrate experiences and grow towards health. The emergence of a process with somewhat predetermined steps has allowed me to be present and focus on visual concerns while in the studio. This work has emerged out of abstract expressionism. Specifically, the work of Helen Frankenthaler is discussed, as well as contemporary artists Alexandra Grant and Carrie Moyer.

Painting Transplants: Processes in Healing

Cora Melcher

Department of Art and Art History
Mount Holyoke College

Art Studio Honors Thesis
2020

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Thank you to Jacob Rhoads for inspiring so much of my artistic growth over the last three years. Without your enthusiasm and feedback I would not be an art major let alone completing a studio art thesis.

Thank you to Gina Siepel for providing such wholehearted guidance. It has been a pleasure to get to work with you this year.

Thank you to Robin Blaetz for your support in this thesis process as one of my committee members.

Thank you to the Mount Holyoke art department as a whole, including the class of 2020 majors, for being such a warm and caring community (a home).

Thank you to my parents for all the love and always encouraging me to explore creatively.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PART I: Artist's Analysis

PART II: List of Artwork

My focus has changed a lot over the course of the spring 2020 semester. At the beginning, there were multiple branches in my practice, including collage, abstract spills of paint, and bigger, more figurative oil paintings on canvas. Before arriving at my current process, I was thinking about the relationship between automatic expression (painting without planning beforehand) vs. cerebrally planned and produced work. Similarly, I was struggling with the question of how to blend and balance representational or figurative work with abstract work. I was often too attached to my original ideas because I wanted to stick with whatever literal symbolism I had decided to depict. I feel increasingly uninterested in communicating something recognizable about the world, and more interested in being present with material, color, gesture, composition. The realization that representation and abstraction are located on the same spectrum instead of binary ends helped in conceptualizing what I was doing, but it was not until I completely let go of representing figuratively that I was able to create my current process.

My current work is created through a procedural framework with somewhat predetermined steps. This means there is a general shape that my practice takes every time I start a new piece, which contains three steps. Here is a brief description of the three steps: The first step consists of pouring ink or watered down paint onto paper. Each piece is a diptych, which I am calling a 'family,' and this step determines those. The second step is largely a reaction to the first. In this step, I use abstract gestural imagery to create a vocabulary of patterns. With colored pencil, acrylic paint and oil pastel, the job of this step is to create interesting layers and contradictory textures. Finally, the third step, called the 'transplant' step, consists of cutting shapes out of the paper, swapping them with the corresponding piece in the diptych and suturing them in place with embroidery thread.

At first I was resistant to letting a format, like this one, stick across multiple pieces and time because I had a certain idea about what being creative is. I thought that working within a structure by plugging parts in was not creative enough or that it was the same as planning a piece beforehand, which I was trying to abandon. But, although the creation is not happening at the level of how I structure the process, there is a different kind of presence with materials that this structure has allowed. I do not know what the piece will look like when I begin it, but I know the way that it will be allowed to build on top of itself through the structure. This way, the pieces are a more honest articulation of some stream of consciousness because the decisions are made in real time with the materials.

This section will discuss each part of the process in greater detail. The first step, consisting of pours of acrylic paint or ink on paper, has the least amount of variation in terms of physical gesture. The colors and composition change here, but the thought process is the same throughout. The spills are mostly transparent, but often include opaque, matte or shiny parts. The places where color more thickly pools might become pealy or glossy when it dries. I am thinking about surface texture during this step, some of it remains a surprise due to the limitations involved in pouring liquid onto paper. Often there is tape underneath the spills to create straight lines and edges as counterparts to the spills. The placement of the tape is important in building the architecture of the piece.

This is also the step in which the ‘families’ are established. Each work consists of two physical pieces of paper, connected through a color palette. This is partly an aesthetic choice but started out as mainly conceptual. The idea being that through proximity, close relationships or DNA, we share or inherit energy and moods with others. ‘Family’ is the word that feels closest to what I am exploring, but I am not necessarily analogizing each piece of

paper with a whole individual person within a familial structure. I am thinking more abstractly about what it means to live in the physical boundary of a body while the boundarylessness of energies (moods and emotions) makes us all related in some way. This shows up in my work in the parts where a pattern or line continues from one piece of paper to the next, as if it's flowing through the gap between them. I am not using other people's paintings or images, because it is important that I make every part of each 'family.' I'm working with my own shared or acquired energies to make these paintings, because that's what I have access to in this body.

The choice to use paper started out as mainly aesthetic, as well as convenient for the final step of the process, but the longer I sit with it, the more important it seems. Mark Bradford is one contemporary artist who explores paper in his works as being very central to what he is doing (Hirshhorn). In his Art21 interview he says "I am an artist who paints with paper." He talks about how paper is important in communicating information and can be used in really valuable ways, like to document important events, but at the same time it is also literally "simply a bunch of fragments held together in a binder." Paper is something we can carelessly throw away and can be thought of as a scrap of nothing. Bradford is thinking about not only the material itself, but the rules and interpretations of that material in our society. Paper, having so many connotations outside of the art world, seems more accessible compared to canvas. This is relevant to my work because I am interested in slightly distancing myself from some of the historically accepted rules of what constitutes a serious painting.

The second step in the process has the most variation in terms of both gesture and thought. This is the longest phase and the decisions are made one at a time. There can be oil pastel, colored pencil and acrylic paint used. In this step, I am reacting to and communicating with

the initial spill, sometimes disrupting it and other times using it as a boundary. Fields of dots, grids, lines and other patterns appear during this phase. In this step, the relationship within the ‘families’ becomes increasingly complex. Repeated gestures, or patterns might continue from one piece of paper to the other. For example, in *Transplant 2*, the red and green piece, a diagonal line of green rectangles continues from the right piece to the left. This step in the process is related to automatism, in that when I make a decision, it’s instinctual and quick.

This step is centered around the idea of layering. Layering is important in my work as both a physical practice and a concept. Layers juxtapose or complement previous layers of color in order to transform the perception of the previous layer into something else. You can always change the surface but the past steps are all still literally there, underneath the most recent decision. In the 2D world, where everything is an illusion, layers are a tool to create depth and divisions. Alma Thomas was a painter in the second half of the 21st century who had a signature style of strokes of paint over background colors (Johnson). Her layering technique changes the viewer’s perception of both the colors in the underlayer, which in turn influences the appearance of the strokes on top. In this second step of my process, the layers do not mix or change the existence of the spills, they simply shape our visual understanding of the spills by covering or not covering areas.

The idea of collaging is also important during the second step of the process. Collaging is a good tool to break up space and to naturally fuse things which were previously separate. It has been an aspect of my practice since before the current process emerged because I found it to be helpful in merging the two spectrums of representation and abstraction. Now, in this step, I am not collaging in the literal sense, but I am using the idea of it to combine multiple languages of gesture and mark making, which might not normally go together in the same

piece, and figuring out how they can interact. For example, in *Transplant 1*, there are teal spaces, made with quick scribbly motions, next to smooth gradients of the purple and blue spill.

The third step in this process involves what I call ‘transplants.’ This step consists of cutting shapes out of one piece of paper, then cutting a matching shape out of the corresponding ‘family member,’ and switching them. I fasten the pieces in place using embroidery thread. The edges of the cuts are never measured or perfected. It is important that even these non organic shapes have a handmade feel by virtue of their irregularities.

The following section is a deeper look at the underlying concepts which guided the creation of the process. The whole procedure is largely a reaction to or interaction with an initial spill. Ink or watered down paint pools and dries on its own and mixes with the other colored spills without my hand being directly involved. To me, this is representative of processing events which we have limited control over. In the second step, I work with the situation closely, thinking on top of it. In the third step, I cut into the paper, disrupting and rearranging the reactive thought process to the initial event. This third step is where I see my references to the human body being the strongest, most visceral. The transplants with their handmade cuts and sutures are meant to open my approach to figuration. The reference to surgery is conceptually important to me. Surgery is often an invasive undergoing in order to fix something and restore a body to health. I am suggesting that the whole process is a facilitation of some kind of healing, specifically for the maker.

Early in the semester, I was gravitating towards depicting digestion as a metaphor for my artistic practice. The basic idea being that physical problems, as well as their healing, mirror psychological and emotional processes. The idea being that dreams, psychedelic experiences,

perception of moods and recollection of memories contribute to an understanding of self, but sometimes need to be physically and visually worked with in order to integrate. Digesting life experience becomes difficult when conflicting cognitive states contribute different messages to the psyche. I briefly abandoned this idea to develop the current process, but what I am doing now is at the heart of what I was trying to get at originally. The underlying emphasis on the artistic practice as a means of healing and integrating experiences has remained, but instead of digestion as the metaphor, I am using stitches or surgery. Ultimately, the process itself is about moving towards health by reacting to uncontrollable circumstances, requiring personal effort and attention to rearranging things.

An ongoing question in this process has to do with the decisions to move from one phase to the next or similarly, deciding when a work is done. The vague answer I have has something to do with the moment when any idea I have to change it is going to push it too far into being overwhelmingly messy. The line between interesting visual diversity (seeing or focusing on different aspects of the work depending on proximity) and too muchness is one that I am exploring with some of these works. In other words, in some pieces, I want there to be points where the viewer can see and understand how a cut out was moved or how a pattern makes the spill look like it's in the foreground, without everything getting too jumbled and lost. I have mostly been calling a work 'done' when there are multiple successful transplants. A successful transplant does a couple things; it has tension with the paper in which it is inlaid and it also gives the composition of the rectangle some sort of architectural structure.

This section will discuss my work in relationship to some historical and contemporary painters. When abstract expressionism was most popular in the 40s and 50s, if the artist wasn't a white man they often weren't as highly regarded or even recognized (Vigneault).

This body of work has emerged out of abstract expressionism (both gestural and color field), especially the work of Helen Frankenthaler. She pioneered a process of pouring paint onto a canvas to stain it (Khan Academy). This gesture was distinct from the male artists at the time. For example, compared to Pollock who used enamel paint, Frankenthaler's colors were soaked in turpentine (when she used oils earlier on in her career) so that they would be sunk in and embedded into the fibers of the canvas. Instead of thin, drippy gestures, she let her paint pool and dissolve with an emphasis on color choice. In her painting *Mountains and Sea*, she brought in ideas of objects outside of herself by naming her pieces as references to a landscape. Before that, heavily abstract work was thought of as being a representation of the artist's internal experience (Ridler 6). With the transplant step in my process, I am also referencing something that exists in the world, while still maintaining an abstract image.

Another artist who has greatly influenced me and my studio practice, as well as having parallels to Frankenthaler is Alexandra Grant, an LA based artist who I interned for in summer 2019. The first step in my process is largely influenced by Grant. Her approach to decision making in the studio is very intuitive and spontaneous while still working with an overarching structure. The abstract spills in my work are derivative of the spills in her work, specifically in her work *She Said to Creon (1)* for example, from her Born to Love series. There is definitely an anxiety of influence in my relationship to Grant's work and personally. I wanted to move away from doing such similar gestures while maintaining and embodying the same sort of energy in my studio. At the same time, I think referencing her as a person in my life and an artist is something that I will continue to do. As I've started to accept the discomfort I feel in referencing her work so directly, I've realized that the struggle itself is a manifestation of thinking through the experience I had with her. I saw a really specific pocket

of the art world intensely for a period of time, so of course I need to process that. Referencing her work is feeling much more necessary now than it did before I realized how parallel it is to the concepts behind the process I'm using.

Another contemporary abstract painter, Carrie Moyer, has influenced this body of work. Moyer works with pours of paint, combines flat surfaces, transparent layers and other biomorphic forms with a variety of textures in a single painting. She has been in shows which focused on Helen Frankenthaler (Butler) and her painting *Affiche #13 (Louis Unfurled)* is in direct dialogue with the lineage of the paint pouring technique. When I saw this painting, which so obviously references Morris Louis's famous gesture, I felt like I was given permission to continue to speak very obviously and directly to Grant's work.

I think it's accurate to see Moyer as someone who falls in the lineage of Frankenthaler and Louis, but the ways in which her work differs from those artists are the most impactful for me. For example, in an interview with *Hyperallergic* she talked about wanting to disrupt "the cliché ideas surrounding color field painting" (Samet). One of the ways she does this is with her choices in material. For example, she often adds glitter to her paintings. I see this use of glitter as being similar to Bradford's use of paper. She is using materials that have connotations outside of the art world. Glitter is made of plastic, which today we find in so many things around us. Moyer is rejecting some of the historical baggage that comes with classic oil painting by adding this material that is looked at as campy or crafty instead of the cliché idea that color field painting has to be some sort of aesthetically transcendent experience of forms on a canvas (Greenberg).

Moyer describes her process as starting with small collages in black and white, but she doesn't necessarily stick to the original plan (Tang Museum). In an interview with DC Moore

Gallery she said “I feel like if I am too formulaic about it, then I lose interest. If I can imagine the painting before I paint it, it’s not going to be an interesting painting.” This idea is one that I have discovered to be important and true in my own work. I have a starting place and points along the way that I check off every time, so I have an outline of what I will be doing next, but the small details of working with the materials and the overall compositions vary from piece to piece.

The most compelling aspect of Moyer’s work, to me, is the way she manipulates her pours of paint and blob-like shapes with other gestures to create moments of convincing illusionistic space. For example, in her painting *Swiss Bramble*, there is a suggestion of the spill being in the background with a blue shape in front and orange shapes which allude to the idea that the blue shape has some depth to it. Moyer combines flatness with illusions of depth in the same piece. In some pieces, the spatial rules become so complex that the viewer can not read the piece as being about process. For example, in her work *Candy Cap*, There is an understanding of space that has logic to it, but it’s perceptually confusing enough that you can never fully figure out its rules or the process which took place to create it. With my current work, in some pieces, I am interested in showing the viewer simply and exactly how something was created. For example, in *Circles with Transplants*, it is obvious steps were taken to create it. Other times, like Moyer, I am interested in complicating the piece with illusions to disrupt a direct reading of the process which took to create a piece. The process is still “figureoutable,” but it takes the viewer longer to tease apart the timeline. For example, in *Transplant 4*, the piece with gold, the transparency of the teal checkers are meant to blend with the spill enough for the viewer to have to question which came first.

The artists included in this paper, and others I draw from who were not included, are often women, queer or people of color. In the contemporary art world, artists who have gallery representation, get recognized by press, are given solo shows etc., are most frequently male (Reilly), and white (Bishara). Abstract expressionism, specifically, has strong roots in sexism, and is associated with concepts of individual artistic genius, but only by those who possess a body which fits into that white, straight, male mold (Vigneault). In Amy Sillman's essay *AbEx and Disco Balls*, she writes

Many artists- not least of them women and queers- are currently re complicating the terrain of gestural, messy, physical, chromatic, embodied, handmade practices. I would argue that this is because AbEx already *had* something to do the politics of the body, and that it was all the more tempting once it seemed to have been shut down by its own rhetoric, rendered mythically straight and male in quotation marks (Sillman 322).

It is this notion of abstract expressionist ideas being tangled in 'politics of the body,' which feels like an important reality for me to engage in, both because of the kind of work I am making and because of my identity as a queer woman. Some marginalized artists from earlier generations have turned down recent shows geared towards displaying female artists for fear that their life and work would be reduced to being looked at "through the prism of gender," (Sheets). This protective strategy is a completely valid response to sexism experienced in the art world. That's why I think it is the job of younger artists, like myself, to intentionally engage with the work of artists with marginalized identities and to acknowledge identity as a context for the work being created.

Overall, the emergence of a procedural framework has provided a context for me to investigate ideas of shared energy, boundaries of the physical body and holistic healing, while

also allowing me to be present in the studio. Transplants as a metaphor for how we can rearrange our perceptions in order to integrate experiences and grow towards health is the beginning of a larger conversation for me. I will continue to work with this structure and to further explore healing as it relates to our personal experience and how we affect each other through space.

APPENDIX



Helen Frankenthaler
Mountains and Sea, 1952
Oil and charcoal on canvas
87 x 117.2 inches



Alexandra Grant
She Said to Creon (1), 2016
Rubbing, collage, acrylic paint, colored pencil and sumi ink on paper
82 x 72 inches



Carrie Moyer
Affiche #13 (Louis Unfurled), 2002
Acrylic on canvas
50 x 42 inches



Carrie Moyer
Swiss Bramble, 2016
Acrylic, glitter on canvas
84 x 78 inches



Carrie Moyer
Candy Cap, 2016
Acrylic, glitter on canvas
72 x 96 inches

WORKS CITED

- Bishara, Hakim. "Artists in 18 Major US Museums Are White and 87% Male, Study Says." *Hyperallergic*, 3 June 2019.
- Butler, Sharon. "Carrie Moyer in Long Island City." *Dcmooregallery.com*, 28 Feb. 2016, www.dcmooregallery.com/attachment/en/56cb334384184e52558b4568/News/56d73fc859a837bd6a042261. Accessed 25 Mar. 2020.
- Grant, Alexandra. *She Said to Creon (1)*. <https://Alexandragrant.com/Portfolio/Recent-Workantigone-3000/>, 2018, Los Angeles, CA
- Greenberg, Clement. "Avant-garde and Kitsch (1939)." *Harrison & Wood (eds.): Art in Theory 1990*.
- Helen Frankenthaler, *Mountains and Sea*, 1952, oil and charcoal on unsized, unprimed canvas, 219.4 x 297.8 cm (National Gallery of Art, Washington).
- "Helen Frankenthaler, Mountains and Sea." *Khan Academy*, www.khanacademy.org/humanities/art-1010/post-war-american-art/new-york-school/v/frankenthaler-sea.
- Johnson, Ken "Alma Thomas, an Incandescent Pioneer." *New York Times*, 4 Aug. 2014, www.nytimes.com/2016/08/05/arts/design/alma-thomas-an-incandescent-pioneer.html.
- "Mark Bradford in 'Paradox.'" art21.org/artist/markbradford/?gclid=EAIaIQobChMI3LeGxJbF6AIVHYVaBR3eow19EAAAYASAAEgJavvD_BwE.
- "Mark Bradford on Painting with Paper- Hirshhorn Museum." *Hirshhorn*, 15 Feb. 2018, art21.org/artist/mark-bradford/?gclid=EAIaIQobChMI3LeGxJbF6AIVHYVaBR3eow19EAAAYASAAEgJavvD_BwE.
- Moyer, Carrie. *Affiche #13 (Louis Unfurled)*. 2002.
- Moyer, Carrie. *Candy Cap*. 2016.
- Moyer, Carrie. *Swiss Bramble*. 2016, Portland Museum of Art, Maine. (<http://www.carriemoyer.com/2017/3/26/carrie-moyer-5>)
- Ridler, Morgan. "Landscaping Helen Frankenthaler." (2006).
- Rielly, Maura. "Taking the Measure of Sexism: Facts, Figures and Fixes." *ARTnews*, 2015, www.artnews.com/art-news/news/taking-the-measure-of-sexism-facts-figures-and-fixes4111/.

Samet, Jennifer. "Beer with a Painter: Carrie Moyer." *Hyperallergic*, 20 Feb. 2016, hyperallergic.com/276823/beer-with-a-painter-carrie-moyer/. Accessed 24 Mar. 2020.

Sheets, Hilarie M. "Female Artists Are (Finally) Getting Their Turn." *New York Times*, 29 Mar. 2016.

Sillman, Amy. "AbEx and Disco Balls: In Defense of Abstract Expressionism II." *Artforum*, 2011.

"Tang Museum: Carrie Moyer Interview." 13 Feb. 2013.

Vigneault, Marissa. "Are You Qualified?" *Women's Studies*, vol. 41, no. 8, Dec. 2012, pp. 891–903. EBSCOhost, doi:10.1080/00497878.2012.718622.

LIST OF ARTWORKS

- Melcher01 *Transplant 1, 2020*
Acrylic paint, ink, colored pencil and embroidery thread on paper
Two panels 24 x 30 inches each
- Melcher02 *Transplant 2, 2020*
Acrylic paint, ink, colored pencil, oil pastel and embroidery thread on paper
Two panels 24 x 30 inches each
- Melcher03 *Transplant 2 Detail, 2020*
Acrylic paint, ink, colored pencil and embroidery thread on paper
- Melcher04 *Transplant 3, 2020*
Acrylic paint, ink, colored pencil and embroidery thread on paper
Two panels 24 x 30 inches each
- Melcher05 *Transplant 3 Detail, 2020*
- Melcher06 *Transplant 4, 2020*
Acrylic paint, ink, colored pencil and embroidery thread on paper
Two panels 24 x 30 inches each
- Melcher07 *Transplant 5, 2020*
Acrylic paint, ink, colored pencil and embroidery thread on paper
Two panels 24 x 30 inches each
- Melcher08 *Transplant 5 Detail, 2020*
- Melcher09 *Transplant 6, 2020*
Acrylic paint, ink, colored pencil and embroidery thread on paper
Two panels 24 x 30 inches each
- Melcher10 *Transplant 6 Detail, 2020*
- Melcher11 *Transplant 7, 2020*
Acrylic paint, ink and embroidery thread on paper
Two panels, 19 x 28 inches each
- Melcher12 *Transplant 8, 2020*
Acrylic paint, ink, colored pencil, oil pastel and embroidery thread on paper
Two panels 18 x 24 inches each
- Melcher 13 *Circles with Transplants, 2020*
Acrylic ink, colored pencil and embroidery thread on paper
Two panels 19 x 28 each

Melcher14

Installation Shot, 2020