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ABSTRACT

I create paintings in which one landscape is disrupted by the insertion of a disparate landscape into the same composition. By way of this juxtaposition, I seek to illustrate sensory experience as fractured, multiple, and simultaneous. I also paint figures with tenuous edges, whose relation to surrounding space represents the meeting of the individual with the world, and the way the two act on one another.

I attempt to complicate boundaries between objects and space, using the shared edges of forms as sites of visual destabilization. My goal is to enact, in paint, the tension between a unified plane of perception and its fractured parts. My hope is that my paintings may activate an awareness of the fragmented nature of our perception, and by extension, the way we conceive of and situate ourselves in time and space.

Painting Perception

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I create paintings in which one landscape is disrupted by the insertion of a disparate landscape into the same composition. By way of this juxtaposition, I seek to illustrate our experience of perception as fractured, multiple, and simultaneous. My hope is for my paintings to activate an awareness of the fragmented nature of our perception, and of the way we conceive of and situate ourselves in time and space.

In beginning this body of work, my initial concern was with finding ways of dividing the canvas into segments that I could paint in isolation. I found that framing distinct areas in the composition, which I could paint independently, without immediate regard for the whole, made more manageable the puzzle of creating a single, complete and effective image. Francis Bacon said of his own version of this practice, “I cut down the scale of the canvas by drawing rectangles which concentrate the image down. Just to see it better¹.” Yet while Bacon used his framing devices as tools for better seeing and for emphasizing content, what initially served as framing devices for me quickly became the subjects of my paintings. Partitioning the canvas has given me ways to reverse or confuse the figure/ground relationship, challenging the “rigid distinction between absence and presence².” The resulting disjointedness of the images is akin to my understanding of human perception.

Before starting these paintings, I began with a small group of collages. These served as a useful starting point for discovering effective ways to isolate segments of an image, as well as provided an opportunity to explore the effects of layering on my perception of space. Via these collages, I discovered methods of framing that could be

¹ Francis Bacon in David Sylvester’s *Interviews with Francis Bacon*. (Oxford: Alden Press, 1997), 22.

² John Berger, *The Moment of Cubism* (Liverpool: C. Tinling and Co. Ltd, 1969), 6.

interpreted as windows or as independent images overlain on the rest of the composition. With collage, pieces of paper are physically placed one on top of the other, and are therefore usually more likely to register as such—presenting themselves exactly where they are, as static and fixed. However in paint there is more room for ambiguity. In paint, I can subtly adjust whether shapes read as apertures or as though placed on top of an anterior layer. As the eye travels the edge where shapes meet, there is a fluctuation between what is in front and what is behind. The final effect allows the viewer to perceive spaces in multiple ways simultaneously—an object or figure may concurrently register as a reflection, a window, or simply a flat, two-dimensional shape.

In *Rearview*, I began with a magazine image of the side mirror on a semi-truck photographed from the passenger seat, passing through a snowy, mountainous landscape. I then cut out what was reflected in the mirror and replaced it with an image of a warm, dry, landscape. In painting the image I'd created, I found I no longer needed the armature of the side mirror to carry and support the inner image of the desert landscape. The shape of the mirror alone was enough to complicate the view of space in the painting. When I eliminated the barrier between the two landscapes, their meeting created a line of its own, which could act as a destabilizing force for the viewer. Standing before the painting, one is projected into two disparate spaces at once, and experiences the meeting of those two worlds along their shared edge.

The proximity of the two landscapes contributes to the sense of optical confusion regarding what is in front versus what is behind. It is unclear whether the shape of the “mirror” is to be read as placed on top of the mountainous landscape, embedded within it, or as peeking from behind it through an opening. In this way, the painting disrupts not

only our sense of what is figure and what is ground, but it also challenges a cohesive sense of time. Since the mirror is painted from the point of view of a passenger in a vehicle, there is an implication that we are viewing the scene from within the snowy landscape. In other words, the snowy landscape correlates to a virtual present. This then begs the question as to when or where the internal desert landscape exists. The tilted rectangle of the mirror indicates a reflective object, or looking back in time, while also reading as an opening, through which we can look into future or current time. The temporal distance is pushed further by the fact that different light in each space implies different moments throughout the day or seasons.

My simultaneous displays of disparate time/space, as well as the use of juxtaposition and interjection, speak directly to my interest in Cubist paintings. Cubist painters Pablo Picasso, Juan Gris, and Georges Braque used the effect of multiple viewpoints to evoke an experience of continuous consciousness through time. In their works, objects are not painted from a single perspective but from multiple perspectives, allowing the viewer to witness the object in a perpetually unfolding past and future, as in real life, where we are able to move around an object through space. In the words of critic John Berger, “The Cubists created the possibility of art revealing processes instead of static entities³.” The image is less about an accurate rendering of an object, than it is about capturing the *experience* of seeing that object.

I understand perception as an idiosyncratic act that bridges the individual and the outer world. I am interested in depicting common characteristics of this highly personal experience. One of these elements, which I seek to emulate in my paintings, is

³ Ibid. , p. 23

our ability to project ourselves via our senses. To exemplify what I mean by projection, I imagine I am sitting in a room. From within that room, I may hear a voice through the wall, which transports me into the next room via my speculative mental image of whom the voice belongs to. At the exact same moment that I am hearing that voice, I may be looking out a window, and visually projecting myself into the landscape below. Meanwhile, I maintain the physical sensation of sitting in my chair, of feeling my body in its actual, present location. It is this varied and simultaneous awareness that I attempt to mimic visually when I collocate multiple, independent forms and landscapes within a single composition. Ultimately, disruptions in the illusionistic space of the painting become a way of in fact *uniting* the viewer's distinct sensory readings of the world, both spatially and temporally, in that the canvas comes to signify the field of perception, with the internal elements of the painting signifying discrete perceptions themselves.

In writing, there is a device called *parataxis*, which essentially means *setting side by side*. More specifically, it is “the placing of clauses or phrases one after another without coordinating or subordinating connectives,⁴” as in, “It was spring. The rains came.” The connection is implied by the proximity of the statements, and the meaning of the two phrases is kept in equilibrium due to the fact that neither is explicitly presented as causing or impacting the other. I think of the concept of parataxis as representative of the way in which we perceive, and I think of my paintings as employing a form of visual parataxis, with multiple spaces legibly existing side by side

⁴ “parataxis,” *Merriam-Webster.com*. 2014. <http://www.merriam-webster.com> (22 April 2014).

without apparent transitional signifiers. In imitation of human perception, my paintings contain a wholeness constituted by fragments.

Presenting the whole as fractured calls into question the hierarchy between figure and ground. Traditionally, a figure is represented in space, or as moving through space. I attempt to highlight the dependence between the object or figure and its surrounding field by finding ways of constructing figures using space. This exploration is perhaps most evident in my smaller paintings of faces. For example, in *Poke* I build a face by carving negative space with a dark indigo around a field of brightly colored marks, in the reversal of a process (or way of thinking), in which the figure determines the shape of the space around it. In *Teal Baby*, I construct the space around the head of the figure out of a variety of layered brush-strokes, while the solid, unmarked teal ground establishes the face itself. In *Non*, I attempt to do away with the concrete sense of outside/inside and to allow the space and the figure to blur and meld. With all of these works, I seek to examine and depict the mutually dependent relationship between the figure and the space it occupies, both visually and metaphorically.

The way that the space around a figure can determine the figure's shape relates to the way context acts upon us in life, both physically and mentally. Likewise, the way that a figure determines the shape of the space around it is representative of how a person's presence affects the spaces he or she occupies. The sense of disconnect between figure and ground in my paintings points to the near impossibility of completely aligning the abstract, interior, personal world of the individual with the seemingly concrete outer world, even as the two reflect and impact one another. In drawing, it is necessary to use negative space to build positive forms, yet the object also determines what shape the

space will take. I am compelled by how the edges between forms and spaces can meet and impact one another, at times confounding our ideas about what is in front and what is behind, what recedes and what comes forth, what reads as reflection and what reads as deep space. Most importantly, I am compelled by how such effects might evoke an experience of dislocation or identification between the self and the outer world.

I directly address the question of where individual interiority ends and where the external world begins in *Cactus I* and *Cactus II*. In these paintings, I construct the inner, “framed” landscapes in the shapes of human figures, whereas in *Rearview* and *Drive*, the geometric delineations are references to the windows and mirrors of cars and trucks. By depicting a natural terrain within the shape of a human I mean to proverbially peel back the exterior and reveal the individual’s metaphorical “inner landscape,” which may be at once in harmony or discord with its surroundings. In some cases, the inner might stand in stark contrast to the outer, as in *Cactus II*, where the blue sky inside of the figures meets the mottled orange and red of the exterior landscape. In another context, the edges might become fuzzy or blurred, as is the case with the legs of the figures in *Cactus I*. In this painting, the marking within the figures behaves enough like the marking outside of the figures that it is hard to immediately distinguish the figures as people, and as being distinct from the surrounding landscape. This visual effect serves to mimic the feeling of identifying strongly with one’s surroundings, or of being defined by one’s surroundings. By focusing my paintings on the ways that spaces and figures meet, I present a series of visual equivalents for how the individual might conceive of herself in relation to her surroundings.

In *Road Spirit*, I address the interaction between space and figure more symbolically. On top of the orange ground of the canvas I carve the shape of the head with darker pigment, yet keep areas that would normally signify edges untouched so that the boundaries between the “figure” and the “ground” start to give way. The figure/ground relationship in this painting is further confused in that perspectival space is implied *within* the form of the figure, by the receding symbol of the road. In his essay, *The Moment of Cubism*, John Berger writes, “The metaphorical model of Cubism is the diagram: The diagram being a visible symbolic representation of invisible processes, forces, structures. A diagram need not eschew certain aspects of appearance but these too will be treated as signs, not as imitations or recreations⁵.” In *Road Spirit*, space is not built by illusion, but rather signified by the symbol of the road receding to a horizon, and the lengthened shadows of the cacti. Likewise, the composite of the various symbolic elements is not so much a defined figure as it is a sign of a figure, signified by what could be called eyes, hair, etc. Here the idea is not to render a figure in space, or even to construct a figure out of imagined space, but to signify both figure and space via symbols of those subjects. Even my paintings without any recognizable human forms communicate something about the idea of the figure in space. The interaction between the geometric shapes and their surroundings serves as a symbolic stand-in for the interaction between human forms and space.

While working on these paintings, I became fascinated by two seventeenth century Dutch evotional paintings by Pieter Aertsen: *Still Life with Christ in the House of*

⁵ John Berger, *The Moment of Cubism* (Liverpool: C. Tinling and Co. Ltd, 1969), 20.

Martha and Mary, and *Meat Stall*. In these, we find the “inverted still life,” which includes a biblical or devotional narrative set back in architectural space, as through a window or door, with a still life dominating the foreground and comprising the majority of the composition. In Aertsen’s *Meat Stall*, the still life is comprised of hanging flanks, intestines, pheasants, and animal heads. Set in the background, seen through the beams of the stall, is the biblical *Flight into Egypt*. The narrative scene is not only set back and framed distinctly by the architecture, it is painted in a faster, less detailed style than the dominating still life. The still life objects are rendered with intense and vivid detail and color, while the biblical allegory is painted with a much looser hand, and with a limited palette. The effect causes the biblical scene to appear as an isolated, 2-D image of its own, perhaps even as a painting itself, hung on a wall behind the meat stall⁶. On the single plane of the painting, Aertsen allows us to at once experience a virtual reality via the illusionistic space and realist depiction of the still life, while simultaneously perceiving a more fictional, narrative space, which does not attempt to imitate reality as closely. In depicting multiple spaces in differing styles within the single, unified field of the painting, Aertsen offers us the opportunity for a multiplicity of understandings of what is being shown. And perhaps, by way of viewing the painting, the observer apprehends something of his or her own ability to perceive multiple spaces and sensations concurrently. The painting then serves not only as a devotional allegory-cum-still-life, but as a representation of the ways in which we are able to perceive and distinguish between various realities at once.

⁶ Susan Merriam, *Seventeenth-Century Flemish Garland Paintings* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2012), 68.

I would argue that a depiction of a fractured reality, such as the world in Aertsen's paintings, or those of the Cubists, is in many ways more true to life than depictions of cohesive, singular realities. We are constantly projecting ourselves backward in time via photographs, paintings, and memories. We transport ourselves out of time via computer screens and cinema. It is possible to completely submerge oneself in one's thoughts and inner realities, to subdue one's senses to the point of forgetting one's surroundings. When I stand before a painting, I find that I may enter it, and briefly leave the present moment. But it is the way that the painting returns me to my senses and their functions that interests me. Since perception is composed of many mental and bodily responses at once, I believe a painting that will most effectively activate an awareness of the senses will be one capable of embodying multiple impressions simultaneously. That which makes me feel, which acts on me sensorially, cannot possibly approach me from a single angle. Registering compromised figures—those that merge with their background, or disintegrate at their edges—reminds me of one basic function of perception: that we do not process everything we perceive about the world in one neat package. We perceive the room *and* the garden through the window. We perceive the road through the windshield *and* the road through the rearview. We perceive the interior and the exterior, the figure and the ground simultaneously. They are interdependent elements in the tapestry of our visual field.

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