

## **Breaking the Boundaries of Visual Perception**

Written by: Emily Elizabeth Milton

Due to my past and current frustration with understanding the ‘true’ meaning of contemporary art, I have decided to create pieces presenting others with the same frustration. However, with the word frustration comes a dark connotation; in my life, frustration leads to a learning experience, which in turn leads to a creative endeavor. My journey through the process of conceptualizing the concept of the conceptual artist has become a passion. I want people to look at my art, initially confused, but slowly have ideas come to fruition. My hope is that those viewing my paintings will create stories and narrations of their own, walking away with a very individualized experience. Geometric shapes of varying colors, sizes and forms comprise my paintings based on three Ann Arbor-specific locations: the Farmer’s Market, Maya Lin’s *Wave Field* and the corner of State Street and Liberty Street. Each individual place has its own essence; therefore each painting will reflect this. It is not my intention for my audience to understand every step I took to arrive at the final destination, it is however my intention to force them into a new visual understanding of landscape.

Traditional ‘location-specific’ paintings have more of a visual reference and structure to the place than my paintings do. I have used uncharacteristic grids, geometric shapes and rules to constrain myself at the start of each of my ‘location-specific’ pieces. This is mostly to present myself with a problem to solve, something that I have always struggled with. A better understanding of the way I approach each of the spaces may help in interpreting these paintings.

### **Farmer’s Market**

**September 22, 2007**

Even though I have lived near or in Ann Arbor my entire life, and both my parents work at the University (my dad for 40 years and counting) I have never frequented the Farmer’s Market. I have heard this and that about the greatness of the market, and always intended on going, but alas, I have never been an early riser. Because

of my lack of history with the event, and the complete fascination of those that attend, I decided it was time for me to go exploring. Thus I arrived at the decision to set my alarm for the morning of Saturday September 22, 2007, and brave the daring trek to Kerrytown for the Farmer's Market.

Upon arriving, immediately I was overwhelmed with all of the colors, smells, and especially the hoards of people. There were those meandering past the rows of colorful vegetables, fragrant flowers, and delectable pastries, seemingly carefree and enjoying the experience of the place. There were others who were obvious veterans of the event. Constantly on a mission, whipping around corners, stopping only when necessary, scoffing at the slow pace of the meanderers. My path around the market was sporadic at best due to the nature of the clots of people stopping; chit chatting with old friends, searching their lists for what they had forgotten and even just to get a better look at one of the more 'popular' tables.

The people were fascinating. For five hours I walked around the market watching everyone, the meanderers, the veterans, the children, the buyers, the sellers, anyone within my visual range was subject to my investigation. I acted the part of the observer, never approaching people, just viewing their movements, their personalities, and their lives. There were some that stopped me to ask what I was working on; many thought I was a part of a research group. I explained to each that I attend the University of Michigan School of Art and Design, immediately understanding would spread across their faces. Other people just stared on as I wrote in my notebook, walking past the crowds. I learned a lot about people that day.

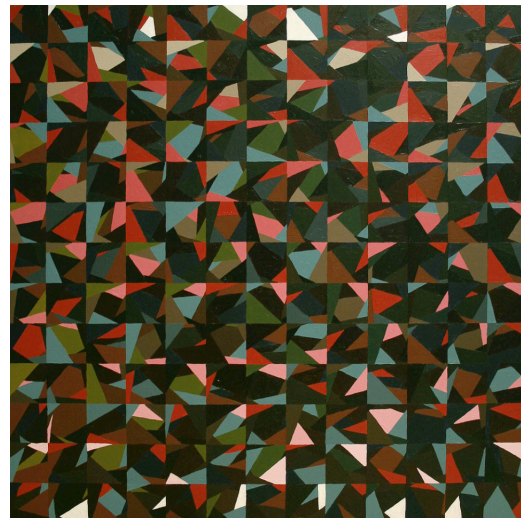


Figure 1: Farmer's Market: Three

The inspiration I drew from the Farmer's Market was not truly about the Farmer's Market, but about the broad gathering of people it draws in. The interesting qualities of the people lured me into a need to understand them. Much the same way that

contemporary art pieces draw me in by overwhelming and confusing me at first, until I come to an appreciation of the art as a visual experience.

The first group of paintings I created from this experience at the Farmer's Market concealed a problem. How was I to apply the movement of the people in a place to a painting? Working from what information I gathered at the market, I created a 'formula' of sorts to utilize my experience and apply it to painting. This entire process from beginning to end is not necessarily apparent in my work, but it is not my intention to hold one's hand when viewing the paintings. However, because of this lack of visual connection between the place and the final art piece, I wanted to delve into a new formula that will evolve into a more visual interpretation.

**Maya Lin's *Wave Field***  
**November 19<sup>th</sup>, 2007**

Unlike the Farmer's Market, Maya Lin's *Wave Field* is a place I'd explored many times before my encounter with it on November 19<sup>th</sup>, 2007. During my North Campus Orientation the summer before my freshman year is when I was introduced to the sculpture. I was mesmerized by the waves, even though all that they are made up of is dirt and grass. Some of the boys in the group went running over each mound, speaking of the great snowball fights they were going to have in the upcoming year. Now I don't know if those snowball fights actually occurred, but I do know that this *Wave Field* became a place of solitude and relaxation for me. Because of its Ann Arbor-specific quality and my strong relationship with it, the *Wave Field* was an obvious choice to become a part of my work.

Setting out from the art school on the cloudy day that was November 19<sup>th</sup>, I walked with a bounce in my step. The wind was brisk as I walked up the hill towards the waves, listening to Rogue Wave, my favorite band, on my iPod. As I stepped through the two buildings shielding my view, I immediately became relaxed. The atmosphere of the space was quiet and slow. I walked along the path to a bench and plopped myself down to yet again become the observer.

This too was a place where everything within my visual range was the focus of my exploration. A distinctly different quality of the *Wave Field* compared to the Farmer's Market though was the lack of people. Not only the lack of people, but also the lack of pandemonium made this place feel different. I started looking more at the objects that were in the space. Every once in a while a person or two would walk within range, or a car speed by on the road. I became very contemplative, because I was allowed to lose myself. I began to notice aspects of the space never seen by me before. I changed my perspective a few times. At one point I sat among the waves, watching the trees, still red and orange from the colorful October month. Leaves lightly fluttered around me in the calm wind, as I sat amongst the waves. Darkness swept over and lights began to flicker on around me. As I left, I realized how much I had learned about myself that day.

Much different from the Farmer's Market inspiration, the *Wave Field* prompted me to become aware of the physical features of the space itself. I believe it was possible to do this because unlike the Farmer's Market, the *Wave Field* was a place I had been to before. I explored myself and became aware of my constant connection to the place I reside in, which applies to all beings within a space. Therefore, much of the information I gathered involved the way that people moved among the waves and the waves themselves.

This second set of paintings presented me with a problem, somewhat similar to the Farmer's Market, the movement of people within a place reconfigured into a two-dimensional geometric painting. However, dissimilar to the first set of paintings, I set out for myself a new obstacle, that being the physical representation of a place combined with the people of that place. The creation of a new 'formula' was in order, one that utilized both aspects of this specific space. Since this 'formula' included a fairly distinguishable visual representation, i.e. the waves of the *Wave Field*, I believed a progression from the

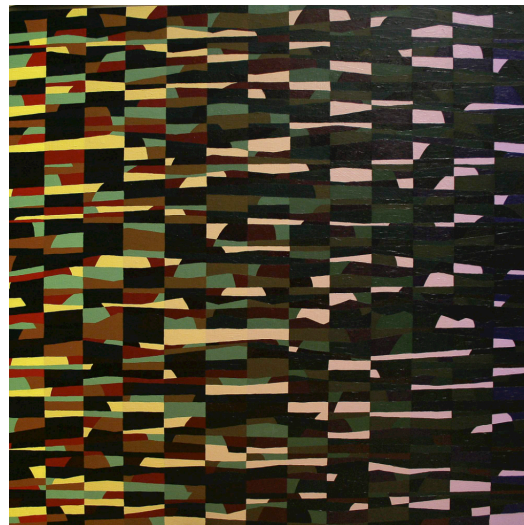


Figure 2: Wave Field: Three

less representational Farmer's Market paintings was apparent. My hope was that this would create a way for the viewer to better understand the paintings. Though I felt this combination of people and place was a step in the right direction, I knew I had to take it even further with another 'formula' based solely on place, to keep moving forward.

### **State Street and Liberty Street February 28<sup>th</sup>, 2008**

Since long before my time at the University of Michigan, the corner of State Street and Liberty Street has been high on my list of fascinating places. Memories of the Ann Arbor Street Art Fair, my brother taking me to see Aladdin at the Michigan Theater or even just going out to eat with family drew me to create a painting about this fascinating corner in Ann Arbor. However, this place has never been about the people located within it for me, it's always been about the visual experience. The Michigan and State Theater and the mural at the corner have always stuck with me, even throughout my time at the University of Michigan. My ongoing relationship with this space makes it a perfect candidate for further exploration.

The best time of year to frequent the corner of State Street and Liberty Street is in the summertime when the air is warm and the people are meandering. When I went to visit the corner on February 28<sup>th</sup>, 2008, I knew there would not be prime weather conditions for my rendezvous. However, because of my familiarity with the space, I knew before arriving that the incredible draw of this place was because of the architecture. The

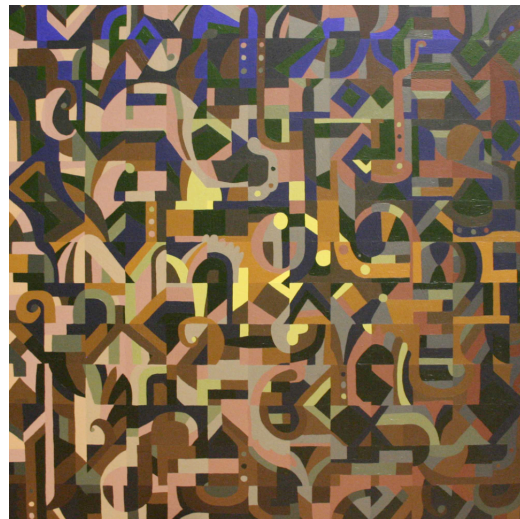


Figure 3: State and Liberty: Michigan Theater

buildings stood victoriously without the need for people on this cold winter afternoon. Unlike the Farmer's Market and even the *Wave Field*, which cannot 'be' without people inhabiting them, State and Liberty needed the existence of itself and only itself to 'be'.

As stated, for me, this corner was all about the architecture and not the relationship people moving throughout the space had with it. Therefore, when viewing

this space, I was going to take a new approach to gathering information. The information I decided most crucial was the visual data of the Michigan Theater, the State Theater and of the mural, in other words, I determined the design of the new paintings based on bits and pieces of the places as I saw them. This meant that a more pictorial image would appear in the final product.

Starting with the Farmer's Market and working up to the *Wave Field*, finalizing this project with State and Liberty made me realize the importance of working with informational data and working with pictorial information. All together, these paintings bring in information that progresses from abstracted people, to abstracted places. Individually these paintings are not as strong as the grouping as a whole. Each of these paintings are important to the process, and important to the understanding of each individual painting. The problems expressed from the previous groupings, immediately were solved once the final set were created. I don't wish for the audience viewing my paintings to understand every little line, or every single paint stroke, but I do wish for them to view the paintings as a group. My goals in this project are not to give the viewers what they want, or even what they need to understand what I have gone through to create these paintings, but to give them the opportunity to learn and explore on their own. Obviously my experiences with these places have influenced my decisions in these paintings, but in years to come, those decisions will fade even from my own memory, only leaving an imprint in the work. Therefore, I feel it unnecessary to take these for more than what they are, because in fact, they are just colored paints on a two-dimensional surface. They're only paintings.

*'In all my work I have tried to create works that present you with information allowing you the chance to come to your own conclusions; they ask you to think.'*

-Maya Lin

## **Bibliography**

<http://www.estherstocker.net/>

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maya\\_Lin](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maya_Lin)

<http://www.xylorjane.com/>