

New Paintings

Bernadette Witzack

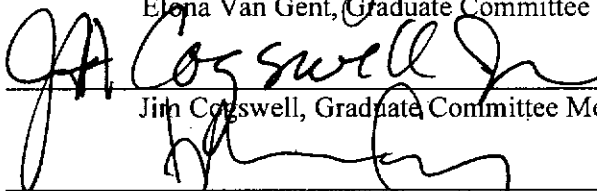
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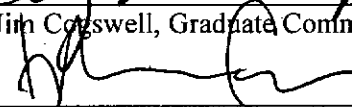
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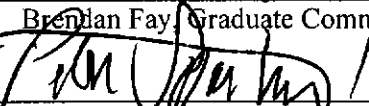
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Abstract

In this written thesis, Bernadette Witzack discusses the background, methodology, process, creative work and context of the series of paintings composing her thesis exhibition *New Paintings*.

Keywords: abstract painting, improvisation, process-based art, spontaneous painting, provisional painting, acrylic painting, creativity, flow, bodily sensation, color, texture

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Introduction

In this written thesis, I will discuss the background, methodology, process, creative work and context of my thesis exhibition *New Paintings*. I will begin with my artistic background and detail my transformative experience at Anderson Ranch Art Center. I will go on to discuss the methodology with which I approached my thesis work and explain my improvisational process. Following this, I will discuss several paintings from my thesis exhibition *New Paintings* in depth. I will conclude by placing my thesis work in context with contemporary abstract painting.

The impetus for my thesis exhibition was to delve into the medium of paint through my exploratory, improvisational process to find unexpected, novel outcomes to visual problems. To achieve this goal, I focused on learning through experimentation and risk-taking with new materials, techniques and formal elements such as color, texture, form and line. I was interested in learning the most I could by constantly challenging myself to try new combinations of painting styles, consistency of paint, surface texture and color combinations. My thesis work was also an intensive investigation into my improvisational process and decision-making strategies. As I searched for context for my process, I discovered research on improvisational jazz musicians. This led me to a deeper understanding of my process and helped me to understand the importance of thinking with my body while painting.

My ultimate intention for the work in *New Paintings* was that the complex juxtapositions between color, texture, form and line provide a viewer with an experience of visual exploration, non-linear thinking and full interpretive agency. I hoped that if I approached a new medium in an exploratory manner, the work would be fresh, with novel, unexpected solutions. I wanted to create paintings that were innovative, different and even strange, providing a unique experience for my viewer.

Background

Before my workshop at Anderson Ranch Art Center in August 2012, I mainly worked with dry media (graphite, pen, colored pencil, marker) drawing and collage on paper. My practice vacillated

between small drawings on Post-it notes to large-scale installation/wall drawing hybrids. *Beyond, Between and Becoming* (Fig. 1) is an example of a large-scale wall installation created in the fall term of my second year of graduate school.



1. *Beyond, Between and Becoming*, 2011

While studying for my BA in Studio Art at Beloit College, I fell in love with line. In my sophomore year I took a figure drawing class in which I learned blind contour drawing. I became obsessed with a wrist-based, rickety line. I would scratch out many marks in quick succession, varying the pressure I put on the pencil, the thickness of my line and the direction of the arc to create infinite varieties of forms on Post-it notes. To complete the drawing, I would begin to see a specific form or pattern emerge from the paper. I viewed many of these forms as creatures with animal- and human-like appearances (Fig. 2).



2. Post-it notes, 2000-2012

This wrist-based drawing became my signature style and served as my main technique for twelve years, from my sophomore year in college to the summer after my second year of graduate school. I continued to pursue this particular technique because it offered a balance between relinquishing and regaining control. When first beginning a new drawing, I would immediately put down some initial marks to have something to react to. In my paintings, I am still using this improvisational method of beginning with something that I let out of my control and then finding a picture in it. I will go into more detail on my improvisational process later in this document.

I shied away from painting early in my career for several reasons. I found the necessity of mixing paint, keeping brushes clean and wiping away drips to be distracting. I also disliked both brushes and canvas. Brushes reduced my ability to create clean, crisp contour lines, and I found it difficult to control the viscosity of paint on my paintbrushes. Even more than brushes, I disliked working on canvas. The slack of the canvas would not register slight changes in pressure because canvas moves when touched. I also disliked the texture of canvas; the pattern of the weave below the color dulled intense colors and softened the crisp contour lines I desired.

The Structured Accident

During the first week of August 2012, I took the workshop “The Structured Accident” at Anderson Ranch Art Center. This workshop profoundly influenced my creative practice and altered my

plans for my thesis work. The workshop's premise was for students to respond to a series of prompts that encouraged new possibilities and emphasized risk-taking through working quickly and intuitively. I was enthralled with the class description. I knew that if I was going to develop as an artist, risk-taking was essential. Even though I was afraid of paint, I enrolled in this course because I was ready for a challenge and welcomed a new direction in my creative work.

Our teacher, Allison Miller, gave an inspiring artist talk the night before our first class. Her presentation was interesting and engaging, an ideal mix of sharing her influences while also explaining her process and artwork. The following quote, recorded in my notes during Allison's talk, was integral to the methodology I adopted in my thesis work: "My work really improved when I decided that the studio was the one place in which I could not make a mistake. I tell myself that every move, every decision just leads to the next decision. Every painting just leads me to the next painting." Allison's words shrank my fear of making mistakes and allowed me to refocus on learning. This quote remained with me throughout my thesis work.

When we walked into the painting studio on our first day of class, we were greeted by a huge still life taking up the entire middle section of the room. It consisted of several large orange and grey ladders with a brown folding chair and a large grey folding table suspended in the air. Brown butcher paper was wrapped around different parts of the ladder, as were two sheets, one with bright, bold stripes of purple, magenta, green, brown and blue, and the other a Pepto-Bismol pink. Allison asked us to start painting as soon as we got to our easels and set up our palettes.

After about an hour, Allison asked us to switch paintings with one of our classmates. We could do anything we wanted with the other person's painting, except change the orientation. After about forty-five minutes of painting, we switched back to our original paintings, worked for another half hour, and switched again to finish the painting begun by our partner. In our critique, we realized the purpose of this exercise was to focus on what the painting needed first rather than falling back on our own personally developed artistic style. This was an important lesson for me. I would often fall back into what I thought I

did well, my contour-line drawing style. This exercise helped me realize the possibility of developing my artwork beyond my particular aesthetic.

Before that first day ended, we each choose one index card with instructions about how to begin our largest painting of the week, which was 30"x40". Allison told us we would choose four more cards like this throughout the week. The cards said things like "paint the edges first," "punctuate with black" and "simple subtraction." We would begin each work session on our large painting by fulfilling the requirements of the card, but were free to interpret them in anyway we wanted to. This method of working gave us parameters to structure our otherwise intuitive decision making process and led us to new pathways and conclusions.

My breakthrough happened on the second day of class. I was working on a small 20"x24" painting on panel when Allison came by. She noted the consistency of my brush strokes and suggested I introduce more variety. The next time she stopped by we both agreed that the piece was crowded with too many marks and colors. Allison suggested I find a way to add negative space back to the painting. She noticed that the contrast between the saturated acrylic paint and wood grain of the panel was the most interesting aspect of the painting.

I first tried to paint the wood grain back in, thinking it would look like negative space. Attempting to mimic the intricate pattern and color of the wood grain proved too difficult for me as a novice painter. Next I attempted to scrape away the plastic-like layers of acrylic to reveal the wood grain below. Since I was taking a class that required experimentation and risk, I did not consider that I could ruin or break my painting. I simply followed my instincts and began to scrape and dig into the piece.

I experienced an immediate bodily reaction, a palpable feeling of release with the first scrape of the palette knife. The ability to edit spontaneously by physically impacting my work was the single most important discovery I have made in my creative history. I was reassured that I would be able to achieve the same direct bodily connection working with wood, paint and carving implements that I had enjoyed with graphite on paper. I will go into more depth on this connection between my improvisational process and the importance of thinking with my body below in the *Methodology* section.

The discovery that I could edit a painting on wood in such a direct and physical way helped me get over a barrier that had discouraged me from painting. Part of my hesitancy in working with paint was fear: I was afraid of losing the ability to utilize my improvisational process. I felt my work was always best when I had a direct connection between my body and the surface I was working on. This connection had always been the strongest for me when using the simplest of tools, an ever-sharpened pencil on paper. After my discovery at Anderson Ranch, I gained confidence in my ability to facilitate my creative process when working in paint on wood.

Methodology

When the fall semester of my thesis year began, I was unsure about the direction of my thesis work. I began the term making drawings and collages on paper even though my experience at Anderson Ranch was fresh in my memory. One night in mid-September I dreamed that I was painting on wood with highly saturated paint the consistency of a melting milkshake. I awoke the next morning with the realization that my hesitation to begin painting again was due to my lack of the right materials. That afternoon I drove to an art supply store in Detroit, spending \$400 on Golden Fluid Acrylics (saturated liquid paint), acrylic mediums, wood panels and a variety of painting implements including the rubber squeegees that became my favorite paint applicators.

A few days later I began the paintings *Swaddle* (Fig. 5) and *Curdle* (Fig. 4) as an investigation of my new materials. I was very excited about both of these paintings. I quickly became engrossed in the possibilities of painting, and the idea of pursuing painting for my thesis work shifted from feeling terrifying to exciting. After an informative critique of these paintings in late-October, I decided I was up for the challenge of creating all new work for my thesis exhibition. I committed to improvisational painting for my thesis work, realizing that I would never have a more opportune time to throw myself into such an intensive creative learning experience.

I developed a strategic set of constraints for my thesis work: a target number of paintings, a limited amount of time, a specific process and a limited set of media and tools. I deliberately limited my

materials in order to expand the techniques, actions and processes attempted in the new work. My goal was to create two to three paintings per week over a ten-week period between December 2012 and February 2013 from which I would curate my thesis show. In total, I finished twenty-four paintings, curating sixteen into my thesis exhibition. My logic was that a large number of works would provide the most opportunity for learning and development as whatever was unresolved in one piece could be attempted in the next.

The following quote, from *An Incomplete Manifesto for Growth* by Bruce Mau was my mantra: “Forget about good. Good is a known quantity. Good is what we all agree on. Growth is not necessarily good. As long as you stick to good you'll never have real growth.” I found myself repeating this quote to myself often through the making process of my thesis work. Self-doubt would often begin to creep in when I was about to begin a new piece or make an important decision on a piece that was almost finished. To regain my confidence, I remembered that I wasn't trying to make “good” (perfect, completely resolved, traditionally accepted) paintings. My real goal was to learn as much as I could about painting and about my process by producing the most unexpected solutions to visual problems I was capable of.

Materials, Tools, Scale

I worked mainly with acrylic paint, acrylic mediums and gels, spray paint and latex paint for my thesis work. I chose acrylic paint because it is versatile and dries quickly. Versatility was important to me because I could achieve the most complex combinations of texture, opacity and consistency possible. I used many different kinds of acrylic gels and mediums, mixing them with Golden Liquid Acrylics for my desired consistency. I also mixed up as much as fifty different colors at once, putting them in separate jars to avoid the interruptions of paint drying up on the palette or mixing new paint colors while working on a painting.

Tools included short- and long-handled brushes, rubber wedge-like squeegees, palette knives, paint rollers, sponges, rags, woodcarving implements and a palm sander. I worked almost exclusively on wood because it allows for a wide variety of textures. Unlike canvas or paper, wood does not move or fall

apart when pressure is applied. Paper had been limiting to my work. I found that any enthusiastic, physical actions resulted in shredded, crumpled masses of pulp. A wood surface can be built up by applying thick paint and mediums and dug into with carving tools to create relief.

After challenging myself to move from dry to wet media, I deliberately limited my scale to keep one variable fairly constant. The work in *New Paintings* are all small to medium sized, ranging from 11"x14" to 36"x48", with many pieces measuring 20"x24". Because these paintings were fairly small, I was able to move them by myself. This was important because I often changed the orientation of my pieces while improvising. My paintings are also human-scaled to both draw a viewer to intimate engagement with the work and allow a viewer to take in the whole painting at once.

Paint has opened up many two-dimensional variables for me that I had not been able to fully explore with dry media. When working with pencil, larger forms would always have to be created with small, incremental marks. I relied on colored tissue paper and oil sticks if I wanted to have larger areas of color. With paint, I am able to create unbroken blocks of color, giving me a body of material to work with. The ability to quickly cover larger areas of a surface has allowed me to more effectively work with figure/ground relationships. With dry media I tended to rely solely on line for composition and texture and often defaulted to an all-over composition. Paint has also helped me discover that formal variables can be two things at the same time, for example, color as form and texture as line. Paint has allowed me to create more complex relationships between the formal elements on my surfaces.

Process

Creativity researchers Getzels and Csikszentmihalyi did a ten-year study of students at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, finding two styles of art making, problem-solvers and problem-finders (Sawyer). Problem-solvers make a detailed plan before beginning and execute it as they create. Problem-finders search for their visual problems while painting, improvising their solutions (Sawyer). I am a problem-finder because I find improvisation and creative problem solving in the moment to be incredibly challenging, exciting and rewarding.

I start a painting according to a desire for a specific color, composition or sensation. I am most decisive about my palette; I almost always see a color in my head before I start. In the beginning, I enter a space of openness and connection where I have this incredible certainty and confidence about every move I make. I know exactly what to do next without being conscious of why or how I know. It is like my eyes and hands are directly connected, are making the decisions together. Colors, shapes and movements enter my consciousness one after another and as long as they keep coming with solidity and certainty, I follow them without doubt or questioning. In this part of the process, I have an intense feeling of connection between my body and the art piece. Rebecca Morris, an emerging abstract painter, describes this feeling as joy: “Where happiness holds a bad reputation in contributing towards good art-making, I believe that ‘joy’-a totally different experience- is the real secret to painting” (Grabner).

The stage of my process described above is very similar to “flow,” a term coined by Csikszentmihalyi. Six things are present in an experience of flow: intense concentration, merging of action and awareness, loss of self-consciousness, sense of personal control and agency, the work to master the activity, and the experience of the activity is intrinsically rewarding (Csikszentmihalyi). Flow experiences also always involve a growth principle; to maintain a flow state an individual must continuously seek increasingly greater challenges (Csikszentmihalyi).

After this experience of flow, there is a point where my process shifts. About one-third or halfway through a piece, I consciously recognize that I have achieved an interesting composition. This is when the painting begins to settle into what it is going to be. I arrive at this place intuitively: there is no formula or time limit I adhere to. I have recently begun to recognize this moment in my process where I know that if I do not make myself stop, I will lose the piece to overwork. It is here where I make myself stop to consider what the painting needs and plan my next steps.

When I pull myself out of the improvisational mode and begin to work slowly, doubt and second-guessing invariably rush in. This is the most difficult part of my process. With many

paintings I am able to cycle back into the flow-like stage of my process at least once, sometimes two or multiple times, before I conclude a piece. My process is organic and changes with every piece. The end of a painting is usually a stage of deliberate, measured decision-making.

Though I knew something very powerful happened when I was creating, I was not able to completely understand or articulate where my inspiration was coming from and how I was making my decisions. I knew objectively that I was making all of these decisions, but it honestly felt like things were just coming into my head right before I did them. I also suffered from a lack of confidence in my process, feeling that it did not measure up to more conceptual processes.

I knew I would need to be able to write and talk articulately about my process after graduate school. I searched for information on intuitive/process-based painters in many different online journals and books but found very little. I was directed to articles on Abstract Expressionism, Surrealism (automatic drawing), and painter Amy Sillman (who I will discuss in the *Context* section of this document). I discovered the term “improvisational painter” in Amy Sillman’s writing (Bordowitz and Sillman) and immediately became excited about this new term, knowing I found something important.

Broadening my search, I began to research improvisation in other creative fields and discovered a series of studies on jazz musicians by cognitive scientists. Charles Limb, a researcher and doctor at John’s Hopkins University, used magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) to look at the brains of solo jazz musicians (playing free jazz, a style of jazz with no structure). During an interview with Wisconsin Public Radio’s *To The Best of Our Knowledge*, Limb explained the changes that occur in the brain when jazz musicians improvise:

When the solo musician is improvising as opposed to memorizing, the brain changes remarkably. A large part of the frontal lobe shuts down; this is where the self-monitoring, self-inhibitory region is found. This other area turns up, an autobiographical, self-referential area. We interpret this to mean that when you're improvising, you're telling your musical story. You are using your own voice, your own signature, your life experiences, your musical background, and your skills to tell this musical story. And

that's why it is autobiographical without using words when you're improvising. You really are trying to generate more ideas, rather than shut them down, you want to turn on the faucet, rather than turn off the faucet. I think that's part of why these self-monitoring areas turn off, because you're less concerned with making a mistake than you are with not playing safely. The goal is to go somewhere you haven't been before musically.

Jazz musicians use their voices, life experiences, musical background and skills go to new places with their music. I cycle through a similar non-linear, associative process, using my visual interests/influences, life experiences, and artistic background to create paintings I have never seen before. I use the terms “life experiences, visual interests and artistic background” in the broadest possible sense. I am not consciously conjuring up specific life experiences or visual memories and creating abstract paintings from them. Rather, my experiences/memories/artistic background cycle in and out of conscious thought as I paint.

It is important to separate my conscious mind from making when I am working in order to allow my associative mind to take over. Just like the improvisational jazz musicians, I have to turn off any self-monitoring, self-inhibitory thoughts in order to go to new places with my work. Though I am not always completely aware of how I am making my decisions and where my inspiration is coming from, I can talk about a few things that I am certain influence me, and will describe this in the next section.

Inspiration and Decision-Making

Though my work is abstract, it is based on the subjective reality of my experience of being a living person in this world. I am extremely interested in the visual world around me. I often notice novel visual details and attempt to consciously file them away in my mind for future artwork. I take and collect photographs of fabric, textures, color and found visual configurations such as the cracks on the sides of buildings, the lines of frost on morning windows, and the colorful, multi-textured plate of salad right

before I begin to eat it. While I do not reference these directly before starting a painting, I keep many of these pictures in my studio for inspiration.

I am attracted to bright, vibrant colors and draw both visual pleasure and energy from saturated color. I am inspired by the intense, unnatural colors found in pop culture, fashion and the digital sphere and the naturally bright colors of fruit and vegetables. I notice the beauty of a bright red pepper in my salad or the particular purple of the house across the street from my bedroom window. Often, right before I start a painting, I see a particular color in my head. Sometimes I remember where I saw that color recently, other times I have no idea why that particular color is in my mind. Texture, form and line are also inspired by daily experiences such as an interesting composition found in the sidewalk cracks on my morning walk or the lines of a bare tree against the winter sky.

As discussed in the *Background* section of this written thesis, my artistic background has consisted mainly of an investigation of line on paper. In addition to drawing, I also focused on photography and puppetry in college. The drawing and photography experience influences my work to be more graphic than painterly. My interest in puppetry and bringing inanimate objects to life (as well as the creaturely Post-it notes I draw) continue to surface in my paintings, which have a feeling of animation and life. The work in *New Paintings* was influenced by these skills and knowledge, and many years of material and compositional experimentation and investigation.

Life experiences could range from the Miro and Klee paintings I was obsessed with as a teenager, to a feeling of frustration, anger or excitement I want to express, to a particular relationship that I am trying to negotiate. Often memories surface when I am working. Life experiences also include my subjective experience of inhabiting a human body in the world. In the past I was painfully self-conscious about my body. I am acutely aware of my physical sensations and very sensitive to pressure and touch. Physical activity is an integral part of my daily life. I think the best when I am moving and am most creative when my body is in motion.

In my paintings on wood, I act out feelings, thoughts and emotions through my body. Often while working on a piece, rather than a visual inspiration or thought, I will have a physical, sensational thought

such as the desire to feel a certain physical sensation or perform a particular action with my hand, wrist or arm. This becomes translated into the texture on my paintings through the pressure I apply with my hands and tools. Improvisational painting has been a way for me to connect to and inhabit my body. The following quote, from *Empathic Vision* by Elizabeth Bennett, elaborates on the relationship between painting and sensation:

Deleuze subverts the opposition between thought and sensation, arguing that whereas philosophers think in concepts, artists think in terms of sensations. Sensation is generated through the artist's engagement with the medium, through color and line in the case of the painter, so that it is not the residue of self-expression, or a property of some prior self, but emerges in the present, as it attaches to figures in the image. 'Sensation is what is being painted,' Deleuze asserts, 'what is being painted on the canvas is the body, not insofar as it is represented as an object, but insofar as it is experienced as sustaining *this* sensation.'

This passage helped me understand that my work is the result of a complex process in which I am thinking with my body. Through the intensely physical, material quality of my work, I think, express and communicate in sensation. The work in *New Paintings* evoke a tactile as well as visual experience, simultaneously stimulating two areas of the brain at the same time, the senses of sight and touch. This results in a sensory-based experience for viewers as they attempt to understand and unravel a piece a myriad of associations and feelings are stirred up.

Creative Work

The spontaneity of my improvisational process infuses my paintings with energy and motion by sustaining the moment of non-resolution. The works in *New Paintings* are closer to verbs than nouns, transforming into self-defined visual entities with idiosyncratic personalities. The presence in my paintings is felt through the formalist structures of vibrant color and visceral

tactility that animate my work. As colors overlap and forms collide, paint on surface is transformed into a space of motion and associative reference.

Humor can be found in the idiosyncratic shapes and buoyant colors of my paintings, yet there is also seriousness and weight in the compulsive, forceful incising of the surfaces. Tension between my effortless painting style and the intensity of the physical actions of scraping and carving results in paintings that are rich with contrast and contradictions. The work in *New Paintings* slip between image and material, figuration and abstraction, figure and ground, animate and inanimate.

Two distinct qualities shared among all of my paintings are an emphasis on complex textural passages and bold, saturated color. The intense tactile quality of *New Paintings* grew out of the reductive editing that I discovered at Anderson Ranch. Building up and tearing down a painting's surface leaves traces of past layers visible so that a viewer has a more full picture of the life of a piece. My palette includes saturated, intense colors in high contrast and complementary color combinations. I often use pairs of complementary colors and combine neutral grays and whites with saturated, vibrant hues straight from the tube.

I included sixteen of the total twenty-four completed paintings in *New Paintings*. I wanted to include a broad cross-section of my completed work, ranging from the painting that I spent the most time on to the least amount of time and paintings that were especially outstanding examples of what I learned through making. My criteria included paintings with the most interesting, contrasting combinations of color, texture, form and slippage between figure and ground. In the following *Creative Work* section, I will provide close readings of several of the paintings in my thesis exhibition in order to explain moments of learning, give insight into my decision-making process and provide the reader with a few of my personal interpretations of the paintings.

Paintings

3. *Opal*, 2013, acrylic, latex and spray paint on oriented strand board (OSB)

Opal (Fig. 3) has some of the highest relief work in *New Paintings*. The most three-dimensional area of *Opal* is a dark navy blue shape to the left and below center. It was created by mixing thickening medium with acrylic paint and pouring it onto the panel, drying it quickly with a hair dryer. The manganese blue sections were applied with a roller when they were tacky to create peaks. A section of multi-colored brown/green line work above the yellow blob was created by scraping the surface of wet paint, adding dynamism and motion to the painting. This piece went through more than four distinct iterations. The multiple layers of vibrant paintings beneath the top layer add depth and interest.



4. *Curdle*, 2012, acrylic and screen-printing ink on panel

The two main colors of *Curdle* (Fig. 4) are poppy red/orange and electric blue. If *Curdle* is a stage, the red/orange section and blue section are competing to be the starring role, and green is the villain who arrives during the second act. This was the second painting I began and it was worked and reworked intensely. While making this piece, I discovered that more layers of color built up before and during the sanding process, the more interesting the variations when you remove them. This can be seen in the variations in color in the poppy red section of the painting. In addition, when paint is sanded down to the board, lines from the texture of the brushed gesso under the colored paint are revealed. These lines become motion lines like those in a cartoon or animation adding energy and motion to the piece. An interesting tension occurs in the main figure of the piece as it is both the most solid part of the painting and also disappearing at the same time.



5. *Swaddle*, 2012, acrylic and latex on OSB

Swaddle (Fig. 5) was the first painting I completed on oriented strand board, OSB. I was immediately drawn to the texture of OSB, the cracks and fissures in the wood mimic marks and drawn lines. OSB also allows for much variety in texture when varying paint opacity, viscosity and application techniques. The titian buff (tan) shape coming down from the top of the panel and the cadmium red/magenta blob in the middle were formed quickly, defining the painting. I understand these two shapes as metaphorical of a relationship in strife. The tan form at the top simultaneously traps and attempts to merge with the red blob while the red blob simultaneously splinters the tan form and attempts to escape.



6. *Betty*, 2013, spray paint and acrylic on canvas

Betty (Fig. 6) presents a viewer with a perceptual challenge: the difference between the perceived and actual process results in confusion between figure and ground. The red form in the center rushes out to meet a viewer and acts as figure; however, the grey is actually painted on top of the red. Feathery brown brush marks push the red figure back and the misted yellow center recedes, pushing the red form forward once more. The grey on the outer edge of the painting acts as ground, but flips to figure at the place where the blue arrow emerges on top of the red circle. The charged aqua arrow creates a complex viewing experience, confounding the relationship between red and grey, figure and ground.



7. *We Can't Hide Our Asses*, 2012-2013, acrylic on panel

In *We Can't Hide Our Asses* (Fig. 7) I've begun to introduce depth, spatial relationships and movement through shifts in color, texture and relief. In this painting, the diagonal/gestural curves of the background are a swirling cacophony of instability and chaos. In contrast, the opaque purple figures in the foreground simultaneously plunge forward into the viewer's space and stop the viewer in their tracks, flattening the painting. The tension between figure and ground in *We Can't Hide Our Asses* is magnified by the contrast between different types of paint application. The scumbled, gestural black, grey, gold and light pink of the background are juxtaposed with the cartoon-like flat purple masses in the foreground.



8. *All the Unacceptable Things*, 2013, spray paint, acrylic and sand on canvas

All the Unacceptable Things (Fig. 8) reverses the usual hierarchy between figure and ground. A large portion of the canvas is swallowed by a gray engulfment. Below, a misty rainbow-cloud rolls across a cartoon sky. The grey and rainbow-mist sections take turns acting as figure and then ground, due to the active pink section at the top of the painting that becomes another layer of matter. I view *All the Unacceptable Things* as metaphorical of a relationship. The large grey engulfment is covering, enclosing, and swallowing the rainbow-mist area, which is trying to escape.



9. *Eraser*, 2012, acrylic and screen-printing ink on panel

In *Eraser* (Fig. 9) four distinct textural/colored areas evoke four distinct sensations: the flat yellow of the background, the slick, plastic-like hot pink forms, the compulsive scratching of the neutral area and the stickiness of the thick black paint. *Eraser* was the second painting I completed at Anderson Ranch. Our teacher asked us to blindly choose a tube of paint out of a bag for the background color. I pulled out Cadmium Yellow. After painting the background with the thick yellow paint, my first impulse was to tone the yellow down by adding a neutral color. Then I realized that another saturated color on top of the background would challenge the dominance of the yellow. I loaded a large filbert with hot pink screen-printing ink to make a full brush mark on the right side of the painting. This resulted in a pink protrusion that could too easily be interpreted as a tongue or a penis. To solve this problem, I undermined the importance of the pink protrusion by painting a similar shape of the same color on the opposite side of the panel, using a flat brush to differentiate the shapes.



10. *Rough*, 2012-2013, Spray-paint, acrylic and graphite on panel

In the process of creating *Rough* (Fig. 10), I realized the potential of spray paint to create depth. More interested in sharp contrast than subtle modulations in color and shape, most of my work does not have deep space or a feeling of atmosphere. I was able to achieve this misty cloud-like texture by using a fine spray of white spray paint over a primarily black and pink background. *Rough* was the painting in my thesis exhibition most evocative of a landscape.



11. *Rose Blotch*, 2013, acrylic and latex on canvas

Rose Blotch (Fig. 11) was executed in one painting session. After pouring paint onto canvas, I used a printmaking squeegee, mimicking the canvas shape yet remaining inside its boundaries. I had to press the squeegee down hard against the canvas for a consistent layer of pink, which left a negative impression of white from the stretcher bars coming through the canvas. This white imprint acts as a frame to the darker red inner blotch, like a pair of suspenders. Before the pink paint was completely dry I used a roller to apply the darker red paint to achieve the tacky, textured center. Pink and red vibrate together against the stark white ground; the inner red blotch floats in front of the light pink background.

Titles

My titles always come after my paintings. Some come into my head fully formed. I agonize over others for weeks, changing word order and repeatedly swapping out synonyms. I adopted a wide range of strategies for naming my pieces. The titles range from phrases to verbs and names. *Rose Blotch* is named for her features. The larger, outer pink circle is rose-colored. The darker red inner circle reminded me of a blotch, a discoloration or blemish on the skin. *Rose Blotch* also sounds like a woman's name and suggests

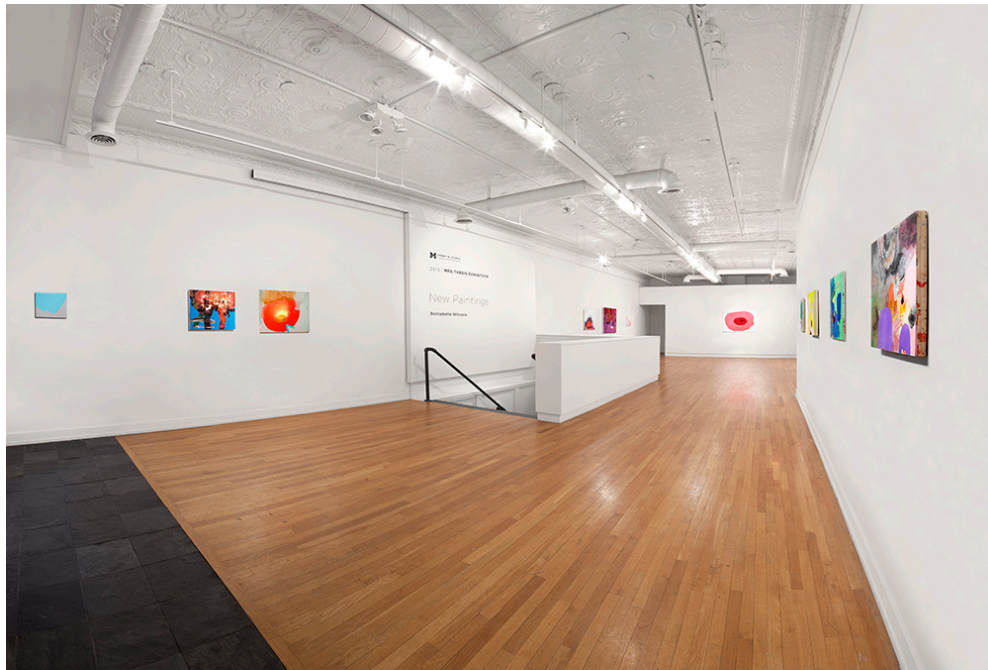
a personality. I did not put titles next to my paintings on the wall of the gallery. I wanted the work to speak for itself before language was suggested to a viewer. I desired that the work remain open to the personal interpretation of each viewer. I included the titles in a gallery guide that a viewer could reference if interested.

Curating

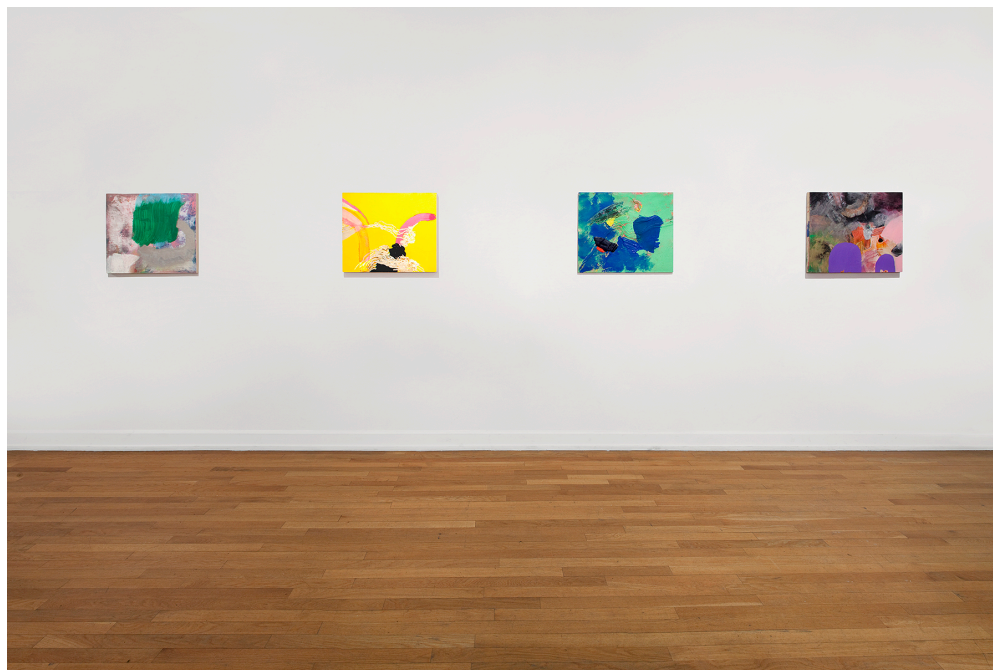
I began making placement decisions by considering the relationships between the interior compositions of the works, their colors and paint handling techniques. Pieces that seemed to be in conversation were hung together. I also made curatorial decisions based on the size of the painting and the architectural constraints of the Work Gallery.

Rose Blotch was the largest and most minimal painting in the show and strong enough to stand alone on the back wall of the gallery. *Rose Blotch* was the anchor of *New Paintings*; like a vortex, she was a force drawing the viewer into the gallery. The four paintings (Fig. 13) along the North front wall all shared the same scale, 20"x24". This regularity was a foil to the contrasting colors and disparate internal compositions of each piece. *Betty* and *Curdle* (Fig. 14) shared a palette, yet were opposites on the duration of time spent working on each and the degree of control versus spontaneity. *Curdle* was a twenty-hour painting worked on over two months, *Betty* was a four-hour painting finished in two days.

The following images are a series of installation shots from *New Paintings* which took place March 15-April 5, 2013 at the Work Gallery in Ann Arbor, Michigan.



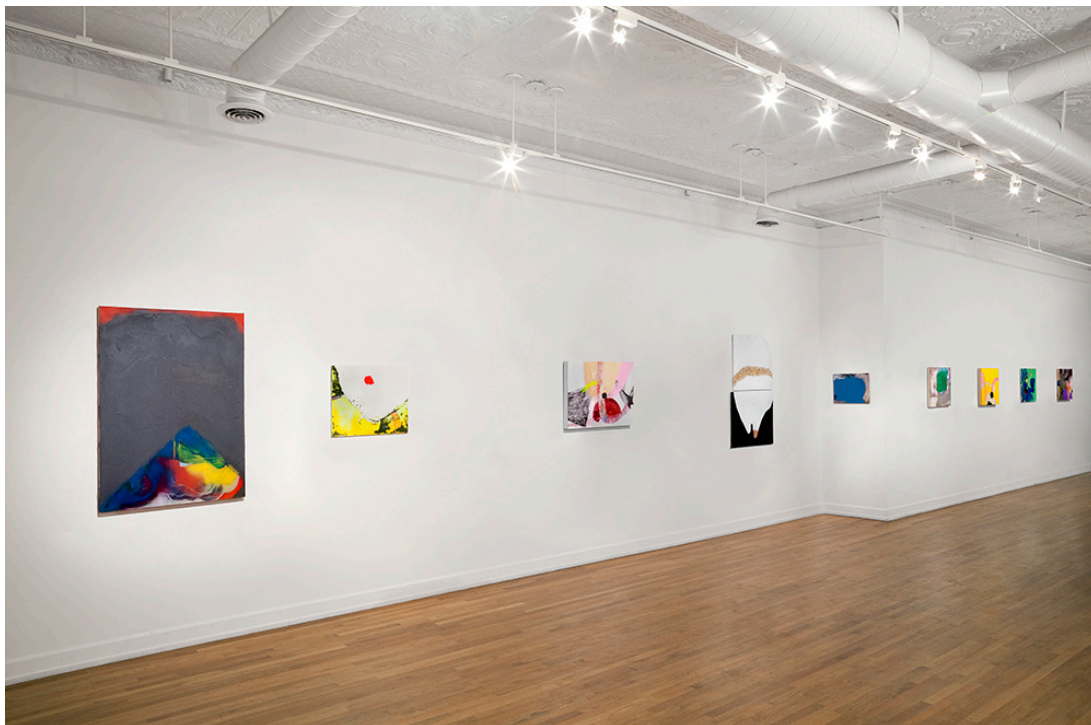
12. *New Paintings* installation shot, 2013



13. *New Paintings* installation shot, 2013, North front wall



14. *New Paintings* installation shot, 2013, South front wall



15. *New Paintings* installation shot, 2013, North wall



16. *New Paintings* installation shot, 2013, North middle corner



17. *New Paintings* installation shot, 2013, Northwest corner



18. *New Paintings* installation shot, 2013, Southwest corner



19. *New Paintings* installation shot, 2013, South back wall

Context

Several new movements in abstract painting including Provisional Painting and the New Casualists influenced my thesis work. These painters are more interested in the questions in painting than the answers, focusing on process and subjective experience. Several specific contemporary painters including Allison Miller, Amy Sillman, Mary Heilmann, Thomas Nozkowski, Pia Frias and Charlene Von Heyl have also influenced me. Art historical influences range from Kandinsky and Matisse to Miro, Klee, Jorn, Tapes, Frankenthaler and Guston.



20. Kandinsky, Vasily *Composition VII* 1913

If Kandinsky's claim that his watercolor *Composition VII*, 1911 (Fig. 20) was the first abstract painting is taken as fact, artists have now been creating abstract painting for over one hundred years. Though Kandinsky started out systematically, his process changed as he grew more confident with his work (Golding). Kandinsky increasingly welcomed chance and the unexpected "...feeling 'intuition' and thought 'calculation' work under mutual supervision" (Kandinsky). He worked in a "trance-like state" (Golding) and "...preferred not to 'think' while working" (Kandinsky). One hundred years later, artists are still employing a spontaneous process to achieve innovative new works of art.

I first became aware that process-based painters were taken seriously by the art world when I started reading about my teacher at Anderson Ranch, Allison Miller (1975, Los Angeles). Miller's paintings are never planned or sketched beforehand; rather they are allowed to grow through the process of making (Pagel). Her work is composed of simple patterns, plain shapes and layered space (Yau). The tension in her work comes from the play between symmetry and asymmetry, oil and acrylic, hardedge and freehand, opacity and translucency, flat spaces and depth (Holte).



21. Miller, Allison *Dinner at the Palms* 2007

In *Dinner At The Palms* 2007 (Fig. 21), Miller has composed a stage-like space where lines flow across the painting in an organic pattern. Her hand-painted lines are often left incomplete, lending her work a fragility that contrasts with the solidity of the geometric forms (Pagel). In Miller's own words, "I am not trying to depict a state of mind, but maybe the amalgamation of the thoughts that have been prodded on by the painting itself, decision by decision" (Nickas).

As I continued to research, I found the blogs *Abstract Critical*, *The Painter's Table* and *Two Coats of Paint*, and discovered Provisional Painting and the New Casualists. In 2009, an influential article

about a new trend in painting was published in *Art In America*. The article “Provisional Painting” was written by art critic Raphael Rubinstein, who followed it up with a similar piece, “To Rest Lightly on the Earth” in 2012. As the title of the first article suggests, Rubinstein began to notice a critical mass of painters focusing on temporary, conditional solutions in painting that were “opposed to the monumental, the official and the permanent” (Rubinstein).

Rubinstein cited Richard Tuttle, Martin Kippenberger, Mary Heilmann and Joan Miro’s work in the exhibition *Joan Miro: Painting and Anti-Painting, 1927-1937* at MOMA (2009) as precursors to provisional painting. Rubinstein suggests that in works like *Painting (Cloud and Birds)* 1927 (Fig. 22), Miro experimented with a “lack of finish, aggressive color, crude figuration and extensive doodling.” Miro was motivated not primarily by an urge to negate painting, but to reinvigorate and redefine his own art (Rubinstein).



22. Miro, Joan *Cloud and Birds* 1927

Though Rubinstein theorized that provisional painting was in some ways a refusal of modernism’s grand narrative of linear progression, he made a clear distinction between the new

temporality in painting and endgame theory: “Provisional painting is not about making last paintings, nor is it about the deconstruction of painting.” Like Miro’s experimental work, provisional painters are motivated by personal development in their work, rather than following an agenda of destroying painting or reacting to giants of painting who have come before them (Rubinstein).

Painter and art critic Sharon Butler published “The New Casualists” in *The Brooklyn Rail* in 2011. Butler named several young emerging painters as examples of those working within what she deemed an “open proposition, making restless, awkward paintings that focus on process in playful, unpredictable ways.” Butler went on to describe the New Casualists' work as “courting imperfection and subverting style to reassess basic visual elements like color, composition and balance” (Butler).

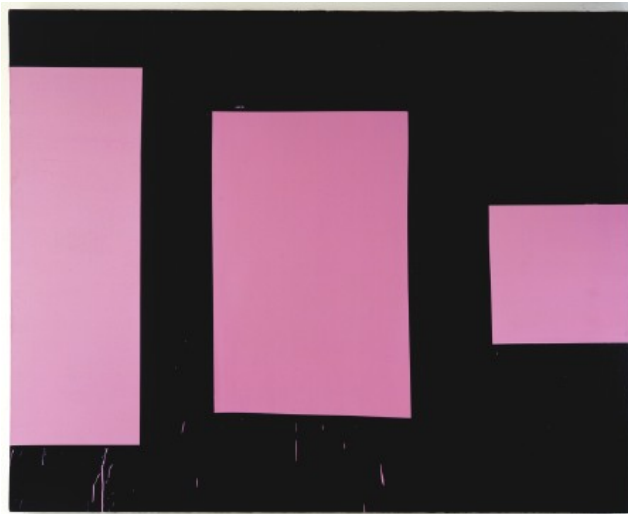
Discovering the work of the New Casualists was empowering. The methodology that propelled my thesis work was to strive towards development of my paintings through experimentation and risk-taking. This is also the philosophy of the New Casualists, who value personal development and their own processes over trends and what has been accepted in the past. This methodology is about opening up the possibilities of painting, about positioning oneself in a space where there is no answer and sometimes not even a clear question.

Painter, Painter, an exhibition featuring work by sixteen emerging abstract painters, opened in February 2013 at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. On opening night, three guest critics, Michelle Grabner, Jan Verwoert and Bruce Hainely, gave lectures and hosted a question and answer about the state of abstract painting today. The critics expressed surprise at the ease at which emerging painters today are unconcerned with responding to movements of the past, neither feeling burdened by or compelled to actively rebel against the modernist master-narrative of the heroic formalist seeking the essence of painting (Lefkowitz). Rubinstein and Butler both noted a similar trend in their articles.

Verwoert suggested a new philosophy for painting that he deemed “crab walking.” Verwoert’s argument was that since artists like Marcel Duchamp and Ad Reinhart have already “finished the game, effectively winning art history by painting the last painting” they left those who come after with no where to go. Verwoert asserts that in order for contemporary painters to be relevant, rather than painting being

an end in itself, today's painters have effectively made a lateral move, placing painting "adjacent to or next to culture, media and music," a way to sidestep art history and the heavy burden of the history of painting (Verwoert).

Verwoert discussed painter Mary Heilmann (1940, San Francisco) as an example of his new philosophy of crab walking, positioning her work as beside culture and beside the home. He spoke of Heilmann's canvases as a place of staging, of hosting the public and the social (Verwoert). Heilmann's painting *Save the Last Dance for Me*, 1979 (Fig. 23) borrows pink and black from the disco/nightclub of the late 1970's, "for Heilmann, color functions as an interface between the personal and the cultural, the individual and society" (Hausler). In this painting, simple geometric shapes and their relationship to each other and the frame of the canvas become metaphorical for relationships and emotion (Meyers). Mary Heilmann conceptualizes her geometric shapes as "fragments of a tale," building her compositions on multiple fields of associations and embracing both the personal and cultural associations a viewer might bring to her work (Hausler).



23. Heilmann, Mary *Save the Last Dance for Me* 1979

The painter Amy Sillman (1955, New York) is very open about her process. As discussed earlier in this document, it was from Sillman that I discovered the term improvisational painter. Sillman unabashedly describes her love of Abstract Expressionism and asserts the possibility that the formal

elements of abstract paintings can be vehicles for emotion and communication (Bordowitz and Sillman). In the following quote, Sillman explains how she understands her work: “My work is always psychological...even if it’s in the sense of a formal predicament, that a shape is at the edge of another, or teetering into a different color. There is some kind of discomfort...the object is endangered, its stability is imperiled in some way...that’s the way I read my work.” (Berry and Ellegood).



24. Sillman, Amy *Psychology Today* 2006

Similar to Sillman and Heilmann, I often view my shapes and forms in relationship to each other and with multiple associations to daily experiences. For example, in the painting *Swaddle* 2012 (Fig. 5), I view the tan and red forms as two distinct personalities engaged in a complicated relationship, a couple breaking up or a child asserting independence from his/her parents. Color, shape and texture become metaphor for experiences and relationships. I view my work from this relational viewpoint as a way to make decisions, not as information that is needed for a viewer to understand the work. I intend for my work to be open to interpretation: the viewer’s understanding of a piece is just as valid as mine.

New Paintings shares a similar process and methodology with painters such as Allison Miller, Mary Heilmann and the Provisional Painters/New Casualists. However, my process and paintings are unique in the emphasis on bodily sensation. In the introduction to *New Elements In Abstract Painting*

(2009), Bob Nickas asks “If representational paintings show us how the world looks, could abstract paintings show us how the world feels?” How the world feels is one of the driving forces behind *New Paintings*. Through my improvisational, associative process, I create paintings that communicate feeling, sensation and emotion through color, form and texture. This translation of feeling is not only emotional, but sensational, originating on the inside of the body, an expression of what can only be felt rather than known. In a world that grows increasingly abstract and digitized, improvisational painting engages both the body of the artist and the viewer in sensation, reaffirming the centrality of the body and the senses.

Conclusion

I now understand that the decisions I make during my improvisational process are based on my visual influences, life experiences and artistic background. To continue to achieve unexpected, novel outcomes to visual problems I will consciously expose myself to new experiences, images, media, tools and techniques. I will also strive to create more complex, contradictory formal elements in each painting.

Specifically, I plan to incorporate geometric forms into my paintings as contrast to the prevalent biomorphic shapes. I will experiment with increasingly disparate color combinations, including pastels and neutrals in my palette. I will add blended color to my paintings, in contrast with the graphic feel of my work. In addition, I plan to expand into textiles and incorporate fabric into my work, “dressing” my paintings. I am interested in working with fabric because of the association with the body; fabric conceals, exposes and causes bodily sensation.

Through several months of intense work structured around a specific process and methodology, I have come to understand who I am as a creative thinker and maker. I am now in an ideal position to effectively direct my future development as a painter.

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