

LIBRE

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What is it about? What is it supposed to be? These were two of the most common questions I was faced with when a new viewer looked at my paintings. Most of the time, I answered with something vague enough not to prompt more uncomfortable questions, but specific enough to satisfy the asker. The truth is, I didn't start figuring out what they were "about" until these questions were asked of me. The language I use to articulate my paintings has developed from having to defend them against irrelevant questions or misguided assumptions, and answering those questions has helped me realize what is important to me about my paintings.

I started off very uncomfortable with oil paint, but when I grew accustomed to it, I fell in love with its rich viscosity and opacity. After my introductory painting classes, I continued using oil on canvas, but focused on the flexibility of oil paint. I would begin with a geometric ground and build up forms using pastry decoration bags. I made two series using this method of painting, and when I felt there was nothing left for me to discover in those paintings, I lost interest in them. I was lost for a while, and producing paintings that didn't feel like they were really mine. I felt so disconnected with them. For one series, I began to explore synesthesia, a condition I was more familiar with during my childhood and now only occasionally experience. But the more I read about and researched synesthesia, I felt as if I was beginning to overthink and force the paintings I was producing. It didn't feel like they were coming from a genuine place. Then in a printmaking class, Barb Masden noticed the drawings I was making and suggested I look at Caspar David Friedrich's painting *The Sea of Ice*. Even then, when I knew nothing

about Friedrich's interest in the metaphysical and spiritual contemplation, there was something about this painting that captivated me in its depiction of vastness, and attention to form, space, and geometry. The painting almost put me in a trance.

Friedrich's painting inspired two etchings that I made within the next few months. I was so happy with the etchings that I decided to make paintings of them. At the time, my painting palette was out of control; there were no limitations, which resulted in two paintings that were dizzy with color. The compositions of the paintings were the same as the prints, but so many details were lost in the translation from print to painting. The paintings lacked the spatial depth, light, motion and fluidity that were present in the prints, so I decided to make new paintings – this time larger and using not only the same composition of the prints, but also the same colors in monochrome. Those paintings almost achieved the feel the prints gave me, but they didn't fulfill the need I had to create this feeling using color.

When I brought back color, I used a more limited palette. The palette in my earlier paintings was just a result of my lack of understanding about the impact color had on experience. I had made a choice to use as many colors as possible to try to create vibrant paintings, but I hadn't realized that it was keeping me from seeing the problems in those paintings – they were all flat spatially, and they could be easily read from left to right. There were no disruptions in the shapes, just edges that met and together created one plane. These were issues I tried to resolve by drawing, and I decided on a drawing that I felt began to resolve those problems and needed to be made into a painting.

Before beginning, I needed to choose a surface for the painting. I had already begun experimenting with the surface of my paintings in past semesters through the

synesthesia series, where I created multiple surfaces using plaster on canvas, gluing materials on the canvas before and during the painting process, and working with different types of fabrics. After that, I realized how much time I was spending applying gesso and sanding my canvases in order to achieve a smoother surface for my new paintings, so I looked for new materials to stretch as canvasses. The four paintings that were inspired by the prints I had made after looking at Friedrich's work were painted on different kinds of linen and fabric that were stretched the way a canvas would be. This time, I chose Masonite board because the flatness corresponded with the subject of my paintings – geometrical shapes that were painted flatly and with crisp, hard edges. When the boards started bowing and curving, I mounted one on a frame only to realize that I missed the surface's closeness to the wall.

After I had made the first painting following the print-influenced series, so many formal issues arose that I forgot to reconsider the surface, and continued making paintings on the material I had grown comfortable with. The board became a constant, a surface on which I could evaluate and resolve formal issues before taking a new leap. These paintings on board became the most important paintings I had made, because they led to questions that forced me to address why I made the decisions I was making.

I suddenly reached a point where insecurity was getting the best of me. I was making these paintings without knowing why. It seemed to me like I was the only one left painting without a clearly articulable reason, without content, without narrative. I was getting a lot of criticism on the lack of space in my paintings, and too many mistaken references to objects or landscapes. Most people who saw my paintings suggested futuristic architecture or machinery. I was frustrated, but I couldn't retaliate because even

I didn't understand my paintings yet. So I listened. I took in every question and criticism I could find, and found ways to work them out formally.

Then I went to Thomas Nozkowski's visiting artist lecture, and he said something that changed my perspective on my paintings entirely. I had seen Nozkowski's work before, and there were elements of surprise and personal connection in his paintings and drawings that compelled me. When he came to talk, he said that it was almost impossible to begin with both content and form; that you had to choose one first, and the other would follow. So I stopped worrying about what my paintings were about, or why they were being made. After all, the drawings were made instinctually and rarely with reference to anything I had seen in reality. Forms were influenced, of course, but never made to be anything recognizable.

I started to realize that it was important to make the drawings from intuition, because the forms generated in these drawings felt personal and distinct. They were a reflection of my thoughts at the time, and the resulting composition was my way of organizing my thoughts visually. But I wasn't sure if drawing before approaching the painting surface was important; I couldn't decide if these organizational thoughts could be executed without the prelude of a drawing. I was working with Marc Handelman at the time, and he challenged me to make a painting without drawing first. He reassured me that it didn't have to be a finished piece to be viewed, but to think of it as an experiment. So I started on a store-bought canvas, without gessoing or sanding it down. As soon as I put the brush to the canvas, it already felt wrong. The surface wasn't what I needed it to be, so each brushstroke looked and felt unsatisfying to me. I continued painting for a few hours before my irritation got the best of me, and I had to stop painting. When Marc

asked why I couldn't fix it, I had to think about it. If I could alter the drawings to a point, why couldn't I do the same with a painting? I saw the painting surface as something pristine that needed to be treated with thoughtfulness, while the drawings were understood to be a vehicle in the process. But in a way, my approach to the paintings imitated my reactions in life more so than the drawings; I find it difficult to fix or organize something that is in the midst of a mess. I tend to take everything away and start clean and new. I once spent three years sleeping on a couch because the mess my room had become was too intimidating to face. When I finally decided to do something about it, I couldn't just reorganize the contents. I had to take everything out of the room, paint the walls fresh, and put back what was needed.

This failed painting was a significant moment because it started to give me confidence in what used to be my flaws. Instead of thinking of my painting process as a tedious and unnecessary one, I acknowledged it as a reflection of myself, and the paintings as a manifestation for these revelations. However, the challenges and questions weren't over yet; I still needed to better understand why each decision was made, or why they shouldn't be made. After the failed painting confirmed the importance in resolving the composition before beginning the painting, Marc asked me to question whether a composition could be remade. In other words, if reassessing a painting could result in the comprehension that the composition didn't achieve the spatial deepness or complexity I wanted, could it be reorganized to succeed? To answer this, I printed a full-scale copy of a painting I had made, and cut and pasted the shapes to form a new composition. It failed; the forms did not fit together fluidly, and it the composition of lines seemed to me like a

jumbled mess with no message to be understood or experience to convey. Again, I was dissatisfied with the result and had a yearning to just start fresh.

Each painting after that seemed to be just steps towards understanding and resolving the painting before it. I noticed that when I tried to change too much, I would get confused between what was truly important and what just sounded good coming from other people. Articulating my paintings not only forced me to accept the qualities that were essential to me – like a smooth surface, opaque colors, and clean lines made with patience and steadiness through meditation - but also to distinguish between the truth and lies I was faced with when I thought about them. For a while, I was convinced that I was trying to create geometric landscapes that forced its viewers into an atmosphere where the space seemed unreal, yet convincing enough to try to navigate through. But I didn't really want them to be landscapes; I was just being told that they looked like landscapes. When my paintings started to vary between looking like landscapes, objects, nets over grounds, and architectural spaces, that's when I figured out they weren't supposed to look like anything at all.

About a year ago, Hanneline Rogeberg recommended that I read Jean Baudrillard's *Selected Writings*, which helped me acknowledge that the realness in my paintings wasn't coming from a representational reality, but from an abstract rationality of an internal experience. In *Chapter 7: Simulacra and Simulations*, Baudrillard writes, "The real is produced from miniaturized units, from matrices, memory banks and command models – and with these it can be reproduced an indefinite number of times. It no longer has to be rational... In fact, since it is no longer enveloped by an imaginary, it is no longer real at all. It is a hyperreal: the product of an irradiating synthesis of

combinatory models in a hyperspace without atmosphere.”¹ It was this sense of hyperreality that first drew me to the artists I enjoy looking at. I like looking at my favorite Ad Reinhardt paintings because they don’t ask me to imagine anything. Instead, they demand an experience that requires patience and focus in order to appreciate the change that is dependent on the viewers’ reception to the painting. When I first looked at an Al Held painting, I tried so hard to make sense of the space and imagine what it would be like to be within it, and then I realized that the magic was in the involvement with the painting, not the understanding of it. The first time I ever rode the escalator up at the subway station at Lexington and 53rd street in Manhattan, I forgot where I was. This giant Al Held mosaic that spans farther than I could see completely enveloped me and made itself my only surrounding. I think that the only way for me to get viewers to experience that kind of infinity in a painting is to make it with the same attention. John Berger wrote in *The Moment of Cubism* that, “We search – not for an explanation, as we do if presented with an image with a single, predominant meaning, but for some understanding of the configuration of events whose interaction is the conclusion from which we began.”² It’s the understanding that there is no explanation, but only an experience, that I want to communicate through my paintings.

All the variables in my paintings, all the elements of formality, have been challenged by others and myself to change, but my process of making remains the same. I was painting crisp lines and gradations, and all the while never using tape. Every time

¹ Jean Baudrillard, “Simulacra and Simulations” in *Jean Baudrillard Selected Writings*, ed. Mark Poster (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 167.

² John Berger, *The Moment of Cubism and Other Essays* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1969), 87.

someone asked why, the answer used to be because I didn't have to. But it wasn't that I didn't have to use tape, it was that I needed not to. With enough focus and composure, I could paint the lines as cleanly as they would have been painted quickly using tape as an aid to the edge. Painting this way is a fundamental component to my paintings.

I recently watched a documentary about happiness that analyzes the scientific support for how a daily meditative practice is a useful component to maintaining happiness. The action or practice can be anything that is uniquely satisfying the individual, but if done consistently on a frequent basis, allows an individual to concentrate on a singular repetitive action that results in the benefits of focus and contemplation. Painting the way I do requires time, patience, and focus. Those requirements force me to understand myself better, to slow down and observe the satisfaction I get from a sense of control.

Reading John Berger's *The Moment of Cubism* reaffirmed that this control was a vehicle to conveying the experience of painting. Berger said, "The power of art lay in its artificiality. That is to say [artists] were concerned with constructing comprehensive examples of some truth such as could not be met with in such an ecstatic, pointed, sublime or meaningful way in life itself. Painting became a schematic art. The painter's task was no longer to represent or imitate what existed: it was to summarize experience. The artist becomes responsible not simply for the means of conveying a truth, but also for the truth itself."³

When I started working with Stephen Westfall in an independent study, I felt like I was being motivated to work through my insecurities and to balance vulnerability with

³ Berger, *The Moment of Cubism*, 83.

confidence in order to find the truth in my paintings. Stephen had always asked me to work on multiple paintings simultaneously, but I always felt uncomfortable dividing my attention between several paintings. When Stephen asked me to look at the Cubists, he made me understand that taking color out and replacing it with a neutral palette could help me recognize the composition better. At first, I was uncomfortable making these paintings because I couldn't picture them being finished. It wasn't until I started working through the discomfort that I realized everything the paintings had to teach me. Taking the color out of the work forced me to focus on tonalities and the range of tone and light in the paintings. I became more concerned with cools and warms of the neutral palette, and how their placement affected the motion of the composition. By working on two together, I didn't have to force too many changes on the paintings, but I had more information to articulate. My graduate mentor, Ken Hill, also encouraged me to work on the wall. Once I had begun working on board, I had cradled my paintings in my lap, turning them as I work on them and placing them on the floor to look at in between painting. Working on the wall again reestablished a perspective that allowed me consider the depth in the painting spatially.

Many of the challenges I've faced in my approach to painting sometimes seem rudimentary or trivial, but each one of those small steps has lead to a greater understanding of why I feel the need to make my paintings at all. Heisenberg said that, "One may say that the human ability to understand may be in a certain sense unlimited. But the existing scientific concepts cover always only a very limited part of reality, and the other part that has not yet been understood is infinite. Whenever we proceed from the known to the unknown we may hope to understand, but we may have to learn at the same

time a new meaning of the word understanding.”⁴ I found my own meaning of understanding when I decided to take on a new perspective on my paintings. Once I had decided that the connection between painting and meditation was important to me, I realized that I wanted these paintings to create a sublime experience. The issue was that the paintings lacked specificity; they had no real place or particular experience to communicate, but rather a vague culmination of emotions.

When the opportunity to travel to Cuba arose, I knew that I wanted to make that experience a subject in my paintings. It was my first trip outside of the country, and while I was there I took photographs of forms in architecture and landscape that were visually interesting to me, and also conveyed its surroundings and my exploration of it. Color was something I had always struggled with in painting; I never felt like I could resolve the palette to accurately reflect the ideas that inspired the painting. But I fell in love with the colors of Cuba. Whether they were vibrantly saturated or humbly pastel, they embodied the character of their location and enhanced my experience. I felt like I could feel the colors in Cuba, so I knew that it would be important to convey that in my paintings.

After returning from Cuba, I made three paintings on Masonite board as studies for the large painting I was planning for the thesis exhibition. I wanted to experiment with the palette before considering the construction the composition, so this series utilized the composition of paintings I was inspired by. The first painting’s composition was influenced by Monet’s *Green Park*, which I abstracted by breaking the grounds into forms following color and tone in the painting. I intended for the palette of this painting

⁴ Werner Heisenberg, *Physics and Philosophy: The Revolution in Modern Science* (New York: HarperCollins), 172.

to reflect Old Havana's buildings along the Malecón seawall, but I realized that the tonal range was not strong enough to suggest complexity in depth or motion in the painting, and that the yellow being used was isolated from the rest of the palette because of its unique vibrancy. The second painting was based on Raphael's *School of the Athens*, and it ended up being the most successful in representing the location it was inspired by. The palette was reduced to four colors, and they ended up reflecting an internal light enhanced by the echoing arched structures within the painting. This painting achieved the complexity in depth and motion that the first one lacked. The third painting was not even as successful as the second; although it formed a circular momentum that was much more subtle. The palette for this painting – which had a composition that was derived from Frederic Edwin Church's *Heart of the Andes* – was quieter; its earth tones suggested its source, a nature reserve in Cuba called Las Terrazas. By looking at these three paintings, I was able to decide which colors would activate the space most and create depth and motion in the composition.

I decided my final painting had to be large because I wanted it to be something that my body could react to. I wanted it to surround my peripherals so I could be engulfed in it. When I made the frame for my painting, I had to compromise flatness on the wall for stability, which was more important to me. I struggled to make the surface and the edges as smooth as I could, but eventually had to accept that as a painting, it would never be perfect. I chose my palette after studying the series of three paintings I had made, and made adjustments according to the tonal range I wanted to achieve in this painting. Once I started painting it, it was like reliving my experience in Cuba. I could explore my emotions and visceral reactions to my surroundings and meditate on those feelings. I

finally understood what Catherine Murphy meant when she said at her talk at the Peter Freeman gallery that she saw reality in her own way, and through the development of her visual language, she was able to create her own reality. This painting embodies how I experience reality, and it set me *libre*.