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Thesis/thesis document 2

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Thesis/thesis document 2

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SMU Division of Art
Spring 2019

Submitted to the graduate faculty of Meadows School of the Arts in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Art, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, TX.

Master’s Committee:

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Each section in the following text begins with a memory of making. I consider these memories both artwork and analysis of artwork, and have titled this writing, a parallel understanding of the processes and occurrences that accumulated to form the work completed during the course of my MFA, *thesis document 2*.

Such descriptions uphold the physical, mental and temporal reality of the painting process, which is defined, not by its bounds, but by negotiations of edge and abyss, self and other. These memories may be read with the text of the thesis or one may read them separately and in any combination after digesting the thoughts I present.

**Introduction**

*I work daily on a series of paintings and drawings that I carry between NorthPark Mall, my apartment, and my studio on campus. Some are extremely heavy. I hoist them over my head, or I swing them between my arms every ten seconds, the time it takes for my muscles to tire. I work on the paintings, crouched on the floor at home, seated on a stool in my studio, on a bench in front of Victoria’s Secret, talking to children, passersby, and store management. Weakly I ponder the bounds of my gaze in space. Tired, I comprehend that vision is delimited by a shape more oval than rectangle, the shape my stretched arms draw in air. I list to the right and left, struggling to maintain balance and awareness on the bench as I complete a set of marks, my bicep aching, my shoulder twitching, my mind beginning to fail. I stopped eating regularly when I could no longer move my body after surgery, and my health, or at least my strength, has decreased simultaneous with an increase in my physical painting practice. Small movements of my body correspond to a dwindling of mass, which serves the feminine ideal of our culture and corresponds intermittently with the image of Victoria’s Secret, though the brand often advertises a sort of robust, athletic sexuality, underscored but not driven by a delicate, starved morphology. I’ve studied the store and its image for months now, observing its psychological mechanisms at work in my own mind as well as on the minds and bodies of others who move through its spaces, whose minds are touched by the virtual spaces it creates through image. I feel I have somehow sacrificed my visceral self, the full flexion of my active corpus, for a slowness that has produced another kind of object—an object that contains and connects every point of flesh with every motion of my tool in gesture, different from the thoughts and messages of preceding weeks, which preserved my flesh in a kind of dumb suspension made of signs and uttered syllables. I obsessively control my movements, isolating muscle groups in service of an image. I obsessively control the movement of my hand and of my eye, isolating muscle groups in service of an image, the painted surface that now holds a vision of my living space. I obsessively control the movement of my legs and ass, isolating muscle groups in service of an image, the undulating mass of flesh adorned that moves through landscapes I inhabit. I wither and expand with the viscous writhing on the surface of my panel. I stop to eat at night, weighing portions. Panels emerge, conglomerate nets of experience, concentrated in miniscule, picture-sized works or exploding uncomfortably across swathes of wood and fabric that force my arms into pressed extension, shaking.]*

I am stunned by the unceasing complexity of vision, thought, and physicality offered by the experience of space and motion, and my methods as I complete this writing center on the
immediate, physical power of the body to produce and affect relations by the concentrated, visceral
data of the painted image. I am concerned with painting’s role in the expansion of the image as a
transcendental political mechanism, particularly suited to the disruption of incantational,
commonplace ways of seeing disseminated by governments, institutions, and businesses in the form
of propaganda and advertisement such as Victoria Secret’s unpopular “Perfect Body” ad campaign
(fig. 1).¹ Through an association of power (the perceived direction of others’ thoughts and actions
through sexual desirability) and form (the body of the model), the brand ignites a series of mass
motions, undulating across society as individuals exercise, purchase, binge and purge their bodies in
pursuit of a type of flesh, the image from which such flesh derives its strength. Both the association
of power and form as image and the physical adornment of the body with clothing items function as
a type of collage. Such collage moves between the concrete (the body, clothing) to the abstract
(image) with ease, affecting our paths, thoughts, and relations as it travels across our screens and
through our minds.

It is the action of collage, used to create a superficial complex of visual, affective data for
the purposes of self-promotion, that draws my interest to Victoria’s Secret as a construction site for
image. The brand’s approach to image, a study in illusion, makes it the ideal foil for the function of
my recent paintings and performances.

Consider for example, Dostoyevsky, Victoria Secret, Bedroom (fig 2).

fig. 2. Dostoyevsky, *Victoria Secret, Bedroom*, oil and pen on panel, 24”x24”, 2018-19.
fig. 3 *Victoria Saint*, performative painting experiment, dimensions variable, 2019. Documentation by Lyndsay Knecht.
Completed over the course of six months in several spaces where I found myself between November 2018 and February 2019, this painting uses many techniques employed by the Victoria’s Secret brand to create the image of femininity for which it has become known. Like the brand, I occupy public space, aware of my appearance as a white, ultra-feminized female-presenting body, drawing in a local mall outside of a Victoria’s Secret location as part of a long-term performative experiment called *Victoria Saint* (fig 3). As Victoria’s Secret mobilizes the gendered body in service of the creation of an image, I move minutely and individually rather than broadly, en masse. I use my physicality to deliver image, collaging the space of the mall with the space of my apartment. The resulting picture, however, is not as flashy or arousing as a Victoria’s Secret advertisement. It is small and unassuming, and it exists first as a thing. One must travel to the space where it hangs in order to experience it fully. Its online presence is limited and almost entirely unknown. This time, however, the body--my body--is produced as visible and powerful by its own action. Rather than disappear beneath a pile of meaningless tropes in the process of image production, the fate of the Victoria’s Secret model, I emerge from the trope of white femininity through a practice of sustained physical action in the form of painting. The final image is not a clear statement of an understood identity or idea. Rather, it is ambiguous and tactile, void-like and without manifesto.

It is the object of my recent work to demonstrate this visceral power of image production through a purposeful conflation of painting and performance practices. Throughout this writing, I will invoke an idea of constant physicality in all acts of artmaking. By insisting on this physicality, I propose the fundamental sameness of each of my methods, whether I write, draw, paint, or move through space in an act of direct performance.
I consider this flesh-bound nature of image production through a study of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, known for his view of painting as a vehicle of direct meaning.² Within this framework I observe painting as a potentially powerful form of resistance, a means of denying the strength of advertisement and propaganda through assertive physicality and conscious performance. When consciously embodied, painted images facilitate a powerful cerebral challenge to a common sensory understanding of the world, which is increasingly determined by the corporate drive to consumption, a fundamentally physical set of actions put into motion by the abstract power of the image, an advertisement. Paintings, understood as performative documents, offer one alternative to the visual norm.

To elaborate this understanding, I’ll discuss my interest in consciousness as a tenet of my painting and performance practice. I will then situate my notations on consciousness and subjective experience in painting through a connection with painting history, specifically the physical and optical traditions of Cubism, from which my most recent work derives its line of inquiry. Each of these thoughts I couch in an understanding of painting as somehow total, containing a quality of everything that directly challenges any notion of truth or meaning as certain, clear and absolute. This understanding refuses the discrete and prefers the obscure unapologetically. Ultimately, my thoughts and my paintings, which I view as the same, ponder something unknown but apparent through mysteriously visible occurrences, such as vision, the body, the environment, and the self. In discourse, touch, and image, I generate a thing that will always evade my total grasp, but which, captured in the form of recognition, glimpses completeness from a single, ever-shifting point of view.

Consciousness:

[I traveled across an unbroken landscape, wet with dew, too supple to be true, and it was ultimately unreal to me. I passed through this space, my mind distant even as I was there, the verdant horizontality bent slightly at the edges where I thought I could perceive the curvature of the earth. I saw at this time and remembered some of the reasons for making. I thought I saw a real vision of a painting I’d made over a year earlier. I imagined painting, and a return to it, but was trapped in a rote and unproductive physicality. My vehicle was my tool, moving and drawing me across the plain, but I was not satisfied. I recorded myself and was repulsed by my own image. I preferred the feeling of my tires on the ground, my feet on the ground. I preferred my words in a text message to the sound of my voice. I preferred more the smudged mark of a blue brush to the hyperbolic horror of sight, smell, touch. I drew such full breaths then, cut such a deep rut in the land, consumed and excreted with such pulsating force, but my experience was eventually dull.

I entered into myself through a slow withering and mediation that took place over the course of months. Through a physical reduction, an abundance of metaphoric data purged, originating from what I imagine as a virtual pool of accumulating, experiential detritus in whatever mechanism or language or ether the mind uses to organize itself.

As I traveled, besotted with the immature thought of loss, completion, and orgasm—a fear of a thing I perceived on the horizon but couldn’t quite discern and that I knew had come to destroy me and my desires—I prepared for the actual trial of the thing, which turned out to be endless work and responsibility rather than a spectacularly final apocalypse, something easier to handle. I cried like a child, humiliated in the mountains, mercifully alone and without witness. The baseness of my weakness is incommunicable here, so I protect myself even as I write to describe my despair, the total loss of self-reliance.

In the gentle dark of a stranger’s home, I barely managed to produce two little drawings in humility, one of which I donated to my hosts. Upon completion of the works, a belief in my own divine power immediately renewed and over the next few days I produced several mediocre and lazy sketches with a ridiculous, boisterous confidence. But as my feeble hand foundered against the soft, easy, flimsy, stupid material of one of those green Strathmore drawing pads, the unease of reality fell over me again. I perceived myself in the small mirror of my hostel, naked. I tried to sexualize myself and to adore my appearance, vainly, desperate to generate some sense of worth or comfort. That didn’t do much so I used a camera, which confirmed my inane vulnerability. The episode would have been sad if I hadn’t been protected in aloneness. I convinced myself of the meaning of it all and enjoyed the cool night air of Cloudcroft, New Mexico.]

The Oxford English Dictionary defines consciousness as “the faculty or capacity from which awareness of thought, feeling, and volition and of the external world arises; the exercise of this.”
The specific psychological definition adds to this, “the aspect of the mind made up of operations which are known to the subject.”

Following this traditional view, I think of consciousness as an awareness of the subject, an agent within the medium of space-time. Physical self-awareness underlies my investigations in painting and performance, which appear to me as especially suited probes for the understanding of landscape, ecosystem, and environment in which we find ourselves, whether ensnared or at ease.

To understand how consciousness relates to my practice, I will first describe my broad approach to image production through a combination of writing, painting and performance. I will then outline three theories of consciousness that have influenced my work followed by a description of the project *Victoria Saint*, which mingles performance and painting in a subversion of commercial space, patriarchal structure, and traditional art practice as a function of subjective conscious experience.

I view space and time as the fundamental limitations of any work—of any human action or existence, and consciousness as the only measure of these all-encompassing conditions. The preceding description of a road trip I took alone last summer encapsulates an experience of making that wound a giant area and an extended period in thought and reflects a particular type of image production which expands temporally and spatially by movement and memory. I view this act of making as a mental dragnet which combines elements of performance and painting through written description. Here, thoughts, memories, and experiences become connected across broad expanses of space-time through writing or marking. The openness of such processes allows access to many times and many places, and the product is often a-specific, personal, and emotional. Observational painting, on the other hand, often takes place within a closed and controlled setting and is bound by

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a tighter set of material limitations. Additionally, observational painting must negotiate the clumsiness of the body. The task here is less cerebral and more agonistic, endured rather than subsisted. Similarly, any performance, enlivens the body for viewing and for making simultaneously, exposing the body to the public arena and demanding the tempo of physical coordination without the possibility of poetic calculation. Performance confronts time, demanding a type of contingency-compliance. Painting falls into time anticipating its own end, its fundamental privacy. Each manifestation depends on the unavoidable strictures of space and time. Within these inescapable paradigms of the physical and of the abstract, writing, painting and performance unravel lightly the fabrics of the social and the individual, the spiritual and the abject, the tactile, painful experience of making and the resulting diaphanous sign.

Obscured by the weakness and imprecision of the body, my recent paintings address not the personal interior of the subject, what is often described as an expressive mode of art making and equated with ideas of consciousness, but the connection between internal and external. This viscous transmission of thought, material, affect, and even of the body or mind of other beings is a constant, seamless motion, which, at certain points, results in the coincidental production of images and objects. Important to my current conception of painting is the metaphoric connectedness of body, object, and image. Such connectedness makes ordinary distinctions between painting and performance less clear, and sometimes seems to negate them altogether. A number of components of graphic experience mingle inside consciousness, which also falls into observation as I make.

Philosopher Brian Massumi’s notion of affect underlies many of my recent experiments in painting and performance. Affect can be applied to the space of painting, that is the space between the consciousness of the maker, object, and environment. Massumi’s affect addresses the seething, ambiguous and interpenetrative qualities of this space. Building upon process philosophy, neuroscience, and the work of Seventeenth-century Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza, Massumi’s
1994 book *Parables for the Virtual* complicates the common idea of emotion or expression, so often used to fill art’s mysterious spaces, and suggests an alternative set of processual relations between the external and internal realms that could offer an account for otherwise impenetrable area of creative activity.\(^4\)

Massumi describes affect as

> a temporal sink, a hole in time, as we conceive of it and narrativize it. It is not exactly passivity, because it is filled with motion, vibratory motion, resonation. And it is not yet activity, because the motion is not of the kind that can be directed (if only symbolically) toward practical ends in a world of constituted objects and aims…\(^5\)

Another definition reads as follows:

> [affect is a] loop, a nonconscious, never-to-conscious autonomic remainder. It is outside expectation and adaptation, as disconnected from meaningful sequencing, from narration, as it is from vital function. It is narratively de-localized, spreading over the generalized body surface, like a lateral backwash from the function-meaning interloops traveling the vertical path between head and heart.\(^6\)

These definitions are obscure precisely because they attempt to describe phenomena of consciousness, its limitations and particular powers, without the use of conclusive, epistemic explanation or description. Though complex, these definitions connote openness and motion, characteristics of affect which allow for a fluid understanding of consciousness. Affect can be analyzed, though perhaps not with the kind of language typically used for analysis. Affective language, like poetry or as a thought, enters the unsettled space of painting by its ability to indicate a thing without needing to define it. This type of analysis emerges in direct opposition both to our common understanding of emotion, which tends to limit thought by suggesting an insurmountable imperviousness at the psychological level, and to traditional reasoning that flatly fails in the realm

\(^6\) Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 37.
of the visionary realm with which painting often deals. Furthermore, it addresses the opaqueness of concepts used to describe painting, latent with emotional connotation. Poetical analyses such as those accompanying this thesis do not produce certainty but probe the physical experience of painting through metaphor. This process expands thought around images rather than reducing and confining it. Massumi’s work in affect theory de-contains notions of consciousness through description of the mind, body and environment as inevitably connected through physical process, a tangible certainty reflected in my painting and performance practices.

Daniel Dennett’s work on consciousness has influenced my study of painting and performance in equal measure. He views the “self”, traditionally understood, as an unnecessary limitation to the observation of beautifully intricate biological, mental, and physical processes of living.\(^7\) Describing the self as a “narrative center of gravity”, Dennett brackets the physical, emotional and metaphorical problem of our subjective experience as a sort of between-component of the neurobiological network that is ultimately deceptively significant.\(^8\) His research is echoed by recent inquiries of philosopher Alva Noe and psychologist Kevin O’Regan, who argue for a notion of perception as action, discarding the assumption of a self to which images appear in favor of what Dennet calls “parallel processes [that] give rise not to a benign illusion but to a supreme medium of supernatural communication through abstraction.”\(^9\)\(^10\)

The process-based, self-denying notions of consciousness proposed by Dennett intrigue the part of me that views painting as physical phenomenon, ascetic and transcendent as it leaves the body, leaves consciousness, leaves the space of what is known. However, the relevance of such elevated communications is tested, not by the heights of obscurity to which they ascend, but by their

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\(^10\) Blackmore, *Consciousness*, 79.
bearing on the social: that is, painting that forgets its author in a feat of transcendental severance only operates by a re-embodiment, an entering into the mind’s eye of another physical consciousness, that of the viewer. Such an exchange seems rooted in questions not only of physics, philosophy, and brain science, but also of social responsibility. To describe and understand this connection between material observations of science and the real-world consequences of cultural self-awareness, I looked to explanations of original discontinuity of the individual self-understanding, first through a study of the concept not as a neurobiological phenomenon, or as the territory of psychology or philosophy, but as political and social tool.

Consciousness may be understood not only in terms of self and self-awareness, but in terms of the relationships between self and other proposed by the radical philosophies of Franz Fanon and Simon de Beauvoir. This view of consciousness notes that the particular self to which philosophical descriptions of experience refer is white and male, and that the self-experience of otherized members of society differs in nature. Both thinkers describe a type of split awareness felt by women and non-white members of society, described as double-consciousness, a term originally coined by W. E. B. DuBois in his 1903 work, *The Souls of Black Folk*, and the implications of such a seeming dissolution of the self both for the individual and for society.

In *Black Skins, White Masks*, Fanon narrativizes the moment at which he became aware of his position within a racist culture, losing his unified self-sense, the proposed original consciousness, free and unaware of its appearance or of its judgment. Simon De Beauvoir, acquainted with DuBois’s text and an admirer of his philosophy as well as Fanon’s theory and

14 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, Kindle.
activism, applied this splitting of self-perception to the experience of women in *The Second Sex.* Here, consciousness functions as an element in the production of power dynamics rather than as a mystery of perception and experience. To Beauvoir and Fanon, consciousness was a practical and powerful tool of social agency.

By setting aside the observable material phenomena of the brain and of physical descriptions of the universe, social models of consciousness are able to observe the relational function of the self in society. Whether or not the self is an illusion, its existence precipitates concepts of ethics, morality and responsibility that lose their meaning in the harsh lab light of science. The power of consciousness, often questioned by researchers in philosophy and neuroscience, appears undeniable when viewed in the political context, where marginalized bodies experience the self not as the certain and singular pilot of the body, but as a fraught obscurity, multiple in its apparent perspective and fragmented in awareness. In denying the significance of the self—in calling the subject “a useful abstraction”, an imagistic illusion—science and philosophy negate a source of social power for marginalized bodies, for whom the self is the obvious carrier of potential action.

I see this unclear territory between philosophy, physicality, and society as a space to which painting and performance are uniquely suited. Like science, painting and performance deal with the minutiae of the material world. But unlike science, these methods claim equal dominance over the realm of metaphor and abstraction. They are able to observe what cannot be immediately sensed or perceived by an insistence on contemplative actions which demand alternative modes of observation, whether extended, truncated or otherwise problematized. The materiality of art

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15 Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 1-6
16 “The phrase ‘the power of consciousness’ is common in popular discourse. The idea is that consciousness is some sort of force that can directly influence the world—either by acting on our own bodies, as when ‘I’ consciously decide to move my arm and it moves…One way to explore this idea is to ask what would happen if you took someone’s consciousness away.” Blackmore, *Consciousness*, 12.
17 Blackmore, *Consciousness*, 79.
becomes immediately emotional and social, a powerful rather than limiting nature of the disciplines’ techniques.

For example, in the work *Victoria Saint* (fig. 5), begun this past spring and described in *thesis document* 2, I use my body as a mechanism of sense, perception and contemplation to probe large areas of my immediate landscape and broad cultural paradigms without the restriction of variables necessitated by scientific processes. This work combines methods of performance, painting, and drawing to deeply probe mechanisms of the image and their intersection with the body. Arising from an interest in the physical exertion and even asceticism apparent in the image cultivated through the body of the Victoria’s Secret model, *Victoria Saint* is a long-term performative experiment in which I physically inhabit commercial space, appearing self-consciously as a woman artist in the act of drawing. Seated in front of the Victoria’s Secret store at NorthPark Mall in Dallas, a location I visited two to three times weekly between January and March 2019, I practiced rigorous, unbroken observation as I drew for hours in an attempt to engage time and space using a deliberately slowed physicality. By altering the rate at which one normally moves and looks in commercial space, I became aware of an alternative reality of the mall, a void of consumption. Though full of shoppers, the spaces rendered in my drawings appear empty but for the endless variety of objects for sale contained within their bounds (fig. 4). Video documentation of my presence in the mall, which records the same action of drawing evidenced by the figureless images I created while seated at the store, shows a crowded, rapidly shifting and lively environment. When engaged in the act of drawing, I moved at a rate disconnected from the frenetic activity of consumption and saw an essentially empty space, full of things but without individual souls. When detached from the task of observational drawing, I became immersed in the rate of experience dictated by the structure of the mall. I became aware of the crowd and was immersed in it, involved and complicit. This shift in awareness illuminates one effect of painting, drawing, and
performance practices on conscious experience of the external world: the perceived passage of time shifts depending on what I choose to attend to, and this shift in rate produces different visions of reality. Such observations are impossible using scientific methodologies, which disallow a subjective perspective, negating the information collected by my physical self-experience in the particular space of the mall.

Furthermore, considering the limitations of consciousness as described by Dennett and others working from the perspective of science, the physical act of painting as undertaken in works such as *Victoria Saint* call direct attention to the essentially social nature of space and image. Consciously occupying the space outside of Victoria’s Secret as a female-presenting white body, I then probe the cultural fabric of the environment by gradually problematizing action. For example, I progressively increased the size of my panel over the course of the project, beginning with a notebook sized work, demurely seated and modestly dressed. As I continued to draw over the course of months, however, my workspace grew exponentially along
fig. 4 Sparkle Bar, pen on panel, 13”x6”, 2019
with a deliberate shift in dress, including exposed lingerie, torn, tattered and old clothing, un-brushed hair, uncovered wounds, and little girl’s attire such as bows and glitter. Again, the subjective approach possible in the act of public drawing, a performative occupation of programmed commercial space, is not possible from the scientific notion of observation, which directly disallows involvement of the subject as a variable of observed reality.

I compare the observational practices of art and science not to discredit scientific methodology, but to point out the particular focus each discipline places on the act of observation and data collection, actions possible through the exercise of consciousness. Though physical processes of looking, storing, repeating, limiting, focusing, etc. are engaged by both art and science, each are restricted by their understanding of subjective conscious experience. By noting this relationship, I hope to broaden my understanding of how consciousness may be activated in an artistic sense and setting so that it may be fully used, its real limitations approached rather than those based on cultural assumptions about art-making.

My exploration of consciousness has led me to limit action in my painting and performance practice. I do this to test the effects of small and large movements, marks and gestures. I find that consciousness is most powerful at the brink of expression or externalization—in the moment of receptivity, restraint, and pause. It is in this moment that the bounds of reality are tested, rather than at the moment of extreme exertion. I cultivate a familiarity with this mental area—the realm of receptivity—through a contemplative action of painting. Eventually, small, private actions translate to broader public engagements in the form of performative experiments such as *Victoria Saint*.

**Cubism**

*I meet a man and fall in love. I ask him to paint with me, using his body and his vision to supplement my own, to hold me up against the image I compete with, for comparison. As I weaken he seems engorged, full of sizzling, anxious passion, food, and blood. I droop over his substantiality, nervous and jittery, high on fear and tension. Like paint and like the paintings of these weeks, I spread, disintegrate, and recombine only on the surface of the panel, the sturdy*
illuminator of trace and place. We work side by side for seven days in public spaces, making images with our bodies together, sometimes twenty feet apart, where he works on his car across the parking lot while I paint on my easel and talk to men who approach me, interested. He watches. He comes to me and touches me sometimes, showing closeness, dominance, ownership.

I own the vision of all the space, all the people, all the movements, of my own, wasting body.

Other times we touch while we draw together, linking arms and crossing like one organism, seeing together, intersecting gazes, speaking over one another. He inspires motion in me, but while I work under his eyes and with his mind haunting me I slip beneath a fog—I can’t quite see.

My right hand loses feeling for a week, my face loses feeling. I see my doctor and we discuss my body, we discuss my art and stress. I laugh and almost cry, shaking again with my buxom, gentle doctor, a new mother who eats and breeds and lives in full-bodied health. I shake, my tinny electric non-physicality in need of her warmth, a substance to carry my current. I ask for care, but my relentless mind wanders always to dingy areas of existence that need description or illumination. I feel my vision, scanning the room greedily for color, light, touch—things I can recalibrate alone for the production of a self, narrative, or image. I am prescribed birth control pills. I fill the prescription dutifully and move lightly from the Walgreens parking lot to a nearby thrift store. The man I love moves with me. We talk and laugh, crossing concrete barriers between lots that separate businesses. He describes his winter.

On Wednesday, I took him Baylor Scott and White Surgicare for a neck procedure. I sat next to him in a private little room, blue curtains drawn around us. We laughed about purple nitrile latex exam gloves. He wore a gown and a hat. We watched each other and looked on small spaces of exposed skin. His sunken eyes, his scheming smile, broken hearted bluish flesh, unbounding inner being, opening to me in spite of itself, showing its weakness and asking not for love but for the cold caress that precedes it. He also studied my arms, my prominent turquoise veins. My inner arms, my back, my shoulders. His IV pinched his arm where skin met vein met needle. I read to him the script from Carolee Schneeman’s Interior Scroll until the doctor entered.]
fig. 5 *Girl with a Mandolin*, Pablo Picasso, oil on canvas, 100.3 x 73.6 cm 1910.
In 1910, Pablo Picasso made *Girl with a Mandolin*, one of a series of visually fragmented works completed in France during the summer of 1910 (fig. 7).\(^\text{18}\) Hanging the painting, he made a proposition. I imagine that the proposition radiated from the wall and through his studio, through the spaces where it first appeared to the artist, his friends, and his collectors. Its message, ambiguous and manifold, first permeated the ether, then penetrated the minds of those who looked at it. This cubist argument, an assertion in the form of an image, stated something clear, something abstract and reproducible as a simple sentence: from many perspectives over time, our vision produces a fractured object, which, through the act of painting, translates as a new kind of image.

Simultaneous to this thoroughly legible argument, however, Picasso also proposed the particularity of a single body as it existed over the course of moments. This observation, put into words, is not so much an argument as it is a description of evidence, too local and too individual to make a statement. Picasso describes best this simple reality of Cubist practice as essentially physical, noting in a 1923 interview with American critic Maurius de Zayas,

> Cubism is not either a seed or a foetus, but an art dealing primarily with forms, and when a form is realized, it is there to live its own life. A mineral substance, having geometric formation, is not made so for transitory purposes, it is to remain what it is, and will always have its own form.\(^\text{19}\)

The completeness of a thing, the image which Picasso describes as inherently physical, so multiplex, even innumerable in its momentary reality, yet singular and cutting as a vehicle of abstract meaning, raises the problem of mind and body, empirical and transcendental, through a confounding proposition of visceral, visual communication in the form of a painting.

I turn first to Analytic Cubism because this work marks a point at which image, body, and object met and formed paintings. Last fall I found myself in a similar position, and from this point I


have progressed to a deepening of physical, visual, and spatial understanding. Similar to my experience of observational painting methods, the materialization of Cubist paintings emerged from a study of painting as physical. It viewed the body and its movements, both small and large, as they produce marks. Picasso made images that radiate not messages but evidence. Evidence does not need a protagonist to speak. The substance of such realities, evidence needs only a body to reveal it, an arm to open the door behind which it is concealed, eyes to wash over it, a consciousness to then extrude it, an act of depiction. Such actions may be as small and humble as the lifting of a brush. Picasso used his body to show. He observed his environment in very simple terms, using a set of visual restrictions. He did not differentiate between the cultural concept of the gaze and his physical vision, and I have begun to engage my sight with similar primeval attention. His investigations concerned objects. He applied his vision to contained areas of mass, form, and volume. The aggregation of his marks in relation to these physical things produced a dissolution of the object and a loss of the old image-type, which had been a window like vision. The image was reconstituted as ambiguous and tactile, rough, uncertain and bulky.

In the fall of 2018, I began work on a series of paintings and drawings meant to ground my consciousness in the physical. For three years preceding this moment, I had allowed my mind to range away from what Van Gogh called nature, from the apparent world (fig 6, fig. 7). Initially productive, this impulse to abandon observation in favor of imagination

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fig. 6 *Front desk drawing*, pen on printer paper, 3” x 3.5”, 2015

fig. 7 *Womb Room*, installation, dimensions variable, 2017.
fig. 8 *backyard*, oil on panel, 17” x 29”, 2019
fig. 9 Lori(e), oil and pen on panel, 36” x 60”, 2019.
eventually required that I return to an understanding of my immediate surroundings through contemplation of my own perceptual awareness (fig 8). I did this not to gain an understanding of myself, but to cultivate a new perspective on that which is external to me. The works I made in this spirit of staid observation de-contained my perspective. Cool and philosophical, paintings such as Lori(e) illuminated the ambiguous space between myself and everything else (fig 9). I remained in this space between entities and experience as I worked.

These paintings, through a preference, first, for observation and then for contemplation, dissolve the familiar image by a fracturing and multiplication of perspective. This is the result of sustained observational method. As I paint using the observational method, I deal not with objects, not with masses and forms as did Picasso, but with voids, the lines that cross them, and the images produced by the crossing of lines through voids. Reconstituted in this way, my image is plural and physical, though it opens to the gaze of the viewer, acting more as window than as surface. By opening literal spaces as voids through directional line, metaphorical and contemplative spaces open as well. As Picasso dissolved the object by his embodied practice of gazing, I dissolve entire images and even entire spaces, moving less minutely—in broader swathes—across the landscape as I work. In Girl with a Mandolin, the girl, Fanny Tellier, is viewed from countless angles and each of these angles correlate across a small surface area (the painting). In Victoria Saint, the space of Victoria’s Secret correlates with the space of my apartment and with the space of my studio in an endless spiral of directional line (the movement of my body) and planar image (my gaze recorded through mark on the surface of the panel). In both cases, the idea of predictable vision, what images always become after a time, is lost, but manages to reconstitute itself as meaningful by a process of moving and looking, by a process of rigorous adherence to information as it materializes before the subject, the painter, with rigorous contemplation of the processes that delineate the entering and exiting of this information from the body of the subject. This meaning outside the norm is the result
of embodiment and observation, in controlled concert with self-awareness, an understanding of consciousness, the body, and their limitations.

Conclusion

[In the cavern of my stomach, there is a sluggish rattle. I round my back, pull my neck from its seat at the base of my shoulders, create a chamber between the crown of my head, the points of my knees and the floor, the lines of which converge somewhere roughly one foot above the ground and five inches below my forehead. My eyes close and I see in the dark. A doubled trapezoid across black, diffuse magenta. The space feels curved but oblique, like it does with eyes open across a landscape. Another type of magenta pushes from the points of my knees and ends in book stacks (left), shadowed carpet (right). Open shut, open shut eyes. Papers cross across the room over the soft blade of fallen blinds where a person used to sit, marking, rounded back, mind bent downward toward a heavy object heavier with every layer of glue, with each motion of the hand through the air, with no subject, with inattention, without looking the person scanned a grim topology and drew, timidly, a lamp. Quieter and quieter, growing into the roots of the ground that had begun to grow up about the person, more and more solid, remembering marks across the arm, a sawing that revealed bone.

Somewhere at night pressure held it at arms-length squeezing in a blue-black forest of cloth. It spread across the fabric kicking weakly, not protesting dancing, giddy, squirming in its place. It raised itself over the mass of fabric, less certain of its place, now, in and out of consciousness, distraction, attraction that worked physically like glue and magnets, batteries to lick like games with pressing that continued till stock still it rested. They both rested.

Misunderstanding cues meant to lead them to denial they punctured spaces off-limits by trespassing and transgressing.]

Images made through embodied painting practices redirect thought, vision, and movement. They divert the path of ideological argument, muddling the over-simple, the violently clear. Their shakiness shows the inherent frailty of the human constitution, and our love for the corporeal often finds itself in a love of humbly drawn images. Fundamentally physical in nature, embodied painting practices generate tactile visions of contemporary reality that challenge the common image of our world.

In conclusion, I propose that paintings made by the consciously embodied methods I have described offer a vision full enough of information to compete with the confrontation of juxtaposed images which face us in the form of social media, internet news, and near constant screen interface. As corporations such as Victoria’s Secret collaborate to produce rectangles within which exist
infinitely complex juxtapositions of information in the form of text and image, I collaborate with the spaces and ideas immediately next to me, constructing similarly complex visions of space, rectangularly confined yet without message or discrete meaning. Now, as I view my I-phone screen, where I have opened the Associated Press app, I count ten rectangles, variously bursting with visual information ranging from an Amazon grocery advertisement, floating on a bed of roughly 200 bright white pixels that hover over my news content, to the seal of the United States government, propped and angled for easy viewing on a podium behind which Donald Trump addresses the nation after a failed nuclear summit with Kim Jong Un.

Hand-made images offer an antidote to the mania of vision and consumption I have just described, but only if they are generated by a rule as powerful as that employed by the structures that create the content filling our screens. To be sure, the impotence experienced upon the realization that one may not easily create an image as visually arresting, sexy, glossy or exciting as those that populate our screens by the act of drawing or painting is devastating and initially results in a sense of hopeless, clumsy stupidity. I observe this phenomenon in painting classes almost daily. The student sees her fumbling line as evidence of an inherent lack of power in the face of vermillion curves, turquoise planes and glowing text that emanate from her iPhone, concealed in the front pocket of a bag, perhaps, to be hidden, shamefully from the teacher, but always in view. It is the task of the painter to re-envision the imbalanced shakiness of the body, its imperfection, smallness, and inherent frailty as not only valid but essential and most powerful of all communicative forces.

My paintings and performances seek a vision and an image that challenges the force of self-propulsion and our nonconsenting involvement in the waves of consumption produced by such force. In such efforts, the power latent in the individual body does not seek to assert itself in a counter-assault relying on the propulsion of a competing self but comes instead from a profound
willingness to eliminate even a sense of self in the process of image production. It is the perceived separation, not only of mind and body, but of mind, body, and image that curtails our belief in the possibility of a type of resistance that is neither propagandistic nor reactionary. Responding to this gap in understanding, my recent work not only re-invigorates the image by its dissolution and reconstitution through processes of rigorous, embodied observation, but also reconstitutes the connection between body, image and society by a physical, visual action, the product of which is, in my case, a painted image.
Bibliography


