

BIRMINGHAM, STEPHANIE R., M.F.A. My Relationship to Paint. (2007)  
Directed by Mariam Stephan. 9 pp.

This paper is organized into three topics. These topics are my history, influences, and criteria as a painter. In these topics, I will analyze the evolution of my thought process over the course of my two years in graduate school.

MY RELATIONSHIP TO PAINT

by

Stephanie R. Birmingham

A Thesis Submitted to  
the Faculty of the Graduate School at  
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro  
In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Fine Arts

Greensboro  
2007

Approved by

---

Committee Chair

APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Chair \_\_\_\_\_  
Mariam Stephan

Committee Members \_\_\_\_\_  
Nikki Blair

\_\_\_\_\_  
George Dimock

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date of Acceptance by Committee

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date of Final Oral Examination

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
MY RELATIONSHIP TO PAINT.....	1
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	8
CATALOGUE.....	9

## MY RELATIONSHIP TO PAINT

My history as a painter involves a development through questioning within my practice. While working on my undergraduate degree, I moved away from figure painting into painting the landscape. This gave me the ability to explore a variety of marks and surfaces in space rather than being confined to the singular form of the body. At the beginning of graduate school, I continued to work with the landscape. In these paintings, I tried to get to the final image right away.

It was acceptable to me at the time to work through a painting as fast as possible in order to get to the image. I began to feel doubtful and began to question why I had to continue using the landscape as an image. I had begun to rely so heavily on my paintings' anecdotal relationships to the landscape that I could not see what I was making. I reacted to this dilemma by leaving painting in the landscape altogether. I began a search to find my own way of organizing a visual space based on abstract and formal constructs. The concrete and literal motif of the landscape was no longer needed as a mediator between me and the medium. This one question of intent opened up new demands about what is acceptable in my paintings. I began to see the taboos that I had about painting more clearly, and I began employing limitations in order to learn past them. These limitations included not painting from life and reducing my color palette to one color.

Once I left the landscape motif, my paintings and drawings began to slow down. Things I took for granted while painting now became apparent through my slow and

deliberate decision making. These things included size of mark, shape of mark, variety of surface, acknowledgement the two dimensional plane of the canvas, and color.

Essentially I began to scrutinize how an image is created. Some of the taboos that I used to hold included that serious paintings should be visually pleasing, black and white should never be used in a painting, I can only tint a color with yellow and never white, I could never use anything besides a brush to paint with, I never put earth tones on my palette because they are ugly, white is the purest ground to paint on, and that I can only make decisions guided by whether I like them or not.

In order to learn about the image, I had to challenge these taboos, so I set up limitations within my work, such as using a reduced color palette. For a while, I only painted with red, which helped me explore warm to cool relationships within one color. This helped me deepen my own understanding of using multiple colors within my work. As I read Yves-Alain Bois' *Painting as Model*, new ideas opened up for me about how I make and look at my own paintings. In an excerpt from *Painting as Model*, Bois quotes Hubert Damisch in a description of Pollock's "all-over" works:

"Lines that plow the canvas through and through, in a counterpoint that no longer develops in width but *in thickness*, and each of which has no meaning except in relation to the one that precedes it—each projection of color succeeding another as though to efface it" (p.80).<sup>1</sup>

With this excerpt in mind, I began to see the paintings not only as images of other things, but as objects unto themselves. These objects reflect and develop slowly out of their own thickness of paint, rather than making the image the primary concern, as I did

in the earlier paintings. Painting for me is no longer tied to efficiency and quickness. It is about navigating a world that is slowed down and the steps I take are definitive and deliberate. Just as in the description of Pollock's paintings, the meaning of my paintings is contained within their making. This then allows me to see the painting as the image, rather than seeing only the imposed image.

The paintings of my influences are not easy to understand. I do not want my paintings to be easy either. Before I got to this point, I was influenced by Impressionist artists like Pierre Bonnard. I could only see the beauty in his work and that is what I sought to create in my landscape paintings. Right before I made my break from the landscape, I took a trip to New York City. There I was influenced by a Yayoi Kusama painting, whose repetitious image was outside of something she had observed. It helped spark the question of why I was relying on the image of the landscape. Also, a James Turrell installation, at the Museum of Modern Art, made me feel disorientated but then calm. I wondered whether a painting could function in this way for me. Thinking about these two encounters made me realize that these were my first confrontations with actually looking at contemporary abstract work and trying to relate it to my own work.

Now, I see myself in a lineage of painters whose work does not just rely on beauty. Jean Dubuffet is such an artist who challenged traditional ways of working with oil paint. His practice is an early example of someone who expanded his ways of using medium through adding sand, dirt, ashes, and plaster into his oil paint. He used the medium's tactile qualities to directly manifest the image. For me he is a model who

asserts how the first mark on the canvas can not be taken for granted. The first mark's viscosity, color, and surface are just as important as the last mark.

Contemporary painter, Jake Berthot, has also been influential for me. The way he uses large areas of color versus a little bit of the same color everywhere has been important to my own work. I used to organize color in a way that was based on painting from life, which was a little bit of every color everywhere. Berthot's work allowed me to open up to using color in a way that references a painted space.

In an interview, Berthot makes the following statement: "...it [painting] has more to do with simultaneity of feeling and seeing that leads to thought, rather than thought leading to feeling and seeing...All I know is that I don't want to make metaphor nor copy nature."<sup>2</sup> I feel this is where my thought process aligns with Berthot's. I am learning to engage with the image after it is made and not before.

Berthot's paintings use the motif of the landscape and the grid as a starting point to move away from but not too far. Berthot uses the grid because he is not interested in finding structure through the process of working. In my work, I find structure in response to the relationships of marks to marks and color to marks to the confines of the rectangle. While Berthot moves away from structure, I move toward structure.

Another contemporary painter, Howard Hodgkin, has been a huge influence on my work. Hodgkin is an example of a painter who finds structure from the inside out. Finding order from the inside is a way of working that I align myself with. His work opened my work up to having broken marks. These marks are not just next to each other, but interact through the thickness of the painting. His work challenged me to recognize

the tension between the edges of the canvas in relation to the pictorial space of the painting. For example, in my painting *Blue Sunset*, marks accrete at the edges of the painting while the center of the canvas falls back into a spatial void. This causes the edge to be recognized as a frame of marks piled up over time, and reinforce the objectness of the painting.

My criteria is another aspect of my studio practice that has developed over these two years in graduate school. This includes my working process, the paintings' histories, and the accountability I hold my paintings to. I do not want to re-present things in the natural world but discover relationships through my materials and process that mirror my experience in that world.

At the beginning of my development of criteria, I was interested in conveying a form that recognized an equality of space within the painted landscape. This meant the negative and positive space somehow carried the same weight. The way I approached this did not fully question color since it was still linked to some notion of perfection and beauty through pleasing color. My decisions resulted in an evenly balanced distribution of color and mark. At this point, I decided to move away from observation and representation in order to see what sense of order of mark and color I considered most necessary. This required finding my own organization within each painting. I began to see myself not creating an evenly distributed structure of mark and color, but a structure organized through movement of marks. Marks opened up to moving in other ways than just up and down, as they do in the landscapes. This was mostly in debt to the exploration of mark and accumulation through many small graphite drawings. The graphite was a

slow process, since working up to dark tones happened gradually. This working style was reflected within my painting practice, as my decisions became slower and more deliberate.

My paintings at this time were exploring warm to cool relationships through red paint. They incorporated the marks to the forms where the image was most important. Even when I broke away from the red paint into a multiple color palette, preconceived image bound the marks into their form. The mark and color stayed descriptive of whatever form I chose, which was usually a tube form. I questioned whether these images were really necessary.

The way I thought about images changed after reading Bois' *Painting As Model*. I could now see the painting as the image. Reflective from the raw canvas upward, the canvas for me became a site of invention. For example, in *Yellow and Pink* I create a painting whose marks plow through each other, through wet onto wet paint application. I did not bind these marks to an image, but they developed into order through the act of painting. My image is still important to me, but it is not a primary concern. I don't align myself under the heading of process. I see myself as separate because I allow each painting to develop autonomously.

When all levels of the decision making become intertwined, I believe that is the point where the painting can exist on its own. My primary concern is to find my forms through the process of painting and this cannot be premeditated.

Today, the question of what it means to paint has meaning in my own practice. A quote by Berthot describes aspects of my current thought process very well:

Milton Resnick always said to me, paint to the place where the painting becomes the boss and the painter merely the servant and then you really are painting. In other words, if the painting is already realized, it is not where it should end, but is rather the point where the painting begins. This for me is also the lesson of Cézanne, for he had great clarity in that what appears to be solid at the same time remained open. I believe that in order to enter into this realm of painting one has to have the courage to confront and deal with contradiction. One has to have the courage to embrace both visibility and ambiguity. This is what makes painting a hellish and impossible endeavor, but when a painting is realized, if only for a fleeting moment, it is an exquisite pleasure.<sup>3</sup>

This carries weight for me because it is not painting guided by verbal thought or words. It is painting guided by visual language; the paint put down on the canvas.

---

<sup>1</sup> Bois, Yves-Alain, Painting As Model. 1991.

<sup>2</sup> Berthot, Jake, "Jake Berthot in Conversation with Ron Janowich," The Brooklyn Rail Feb. 2006, 13 Apr. 2007  
<<http://www.thebrooklynrail.org/archives/feb2006/ART/01berthot.html>>.

<sup>3</sup> Berthot, Jake, "Jake Berthot in Conversation with Ron Janowich."

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Auping, Michael, et al. Howard Hodgkin Paintings. Thames and Hudson, 1995.

Berthot, Jake. Interview. The Brooklyn Rail Feb. 2006. 13 Apr. 2007  
<<http://www.thebrooklynrail.org/archives/feb2006/ART/01berthot.html>>.

Bois, Yves-Alain. Painting As Model. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991.

## CATALOGUE

Birmingham, Stephanie. *Blue Sunset*. Oil Paint on Canvas Panel. 2007

Birmingham, Stephanie. *North Carolina*. Oil Paint on Canvas Panel. 2007

Birmingham, Stephanie. *Bad News*. Oil Paint on Canvas Panel. 2007

Birmingham, Stephanie. *Warm Spot*. Oil Paint on Canvas Panel. 2007

Birmingham, Stephanie. *Humid*. Oil Paint on Canvas Panel. 2007