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First, I discuss my role as an artist as twofold: as an observer and a creator. I then examine how abstraction in painting offers me a way to create that is complementary to the way I wish to view the world. The process of my work is explored further to clarify certain subjective definitions important to my practice, such as my personal definition of the sublime. I begin with a discussion of how I approach the canvas including the first decisions made in a painting: decisions centered around the palette. I follow with a description of the middle of the process in which forms and surface textures begin to emerge while also examining the editing process of those forms and textures. In this way, criteria for what constructs a finished piece are clarified. I then turn to broader philosophical consequences of that process: namely, what it entails to approach painting from the role of a shamaness and with what reservations I attempt to enact this persona. Through this lens, I approach art historical contexts including my connection to Abstract Expressionists and also specific contemporary painters.

EXPLORING THE SUCCULENT WILDERNESS  
OF A CONTEMPORARY MIND  
THROUGH ENCOUNTERS  
WITH MATERIAL

by

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Approved by

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Committee Chair

Thanks to the other second-years, everyone in the Magic Twig Community, my Thesis Committee, my parents, my brother, the Lunsfords and all the people who didn't kill me.

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.

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## EXPLORING THE SUCCULENT WILDERNESS OF A CONTEMPORARY MIND THROUGH ENCOUNTERS WITH MATERIAL

The only way I desire to see things in the world is freshly: to see the abstract nature of an object before I assimilate it into language. To see freshly maintains mystery: the object remains ambiguous enough that it does not explain everything about itself; it offers as many questions as answers and therefore implies perpetual regeneration. However, seeing is only half of my practice. My role as an artist is twofold: an observer and a creator. If I desire to see freshly, then it follows that I wish to create freshly. In creating, I disrupt, interrupt, play, invent and fight in order to maintain my sense of mystery and elevate my personal definition of the sublime. Through this writing, I will communicate this definition and how my painting practice strives to offer the viewer (and myself) a tangential reality that can surprise, seduce, empower and suggest a place of infinite possibilities.

First, let me expand on my dual roles as an artist. As an observer, I notice how incidental objects or markings in the world often come together to form surprising and provocative visual realities. To see in this way requires a suspension of labels (chair, orange, etc) so that I see formal relationships first. If I were to acknowledge the concept or name of an object first, it would disregard the blunt reality of what is presented. I choose to accept aberration as a condition of contemporary life without being nihilistic. I compare this to a childlike way of seeing- a way that is outside cynicism and inside

play, eccentricity, and mischievousness. The mischievousness is key. Although I accept play, I reject whimsy. I feel that whimsy is light, haughty and easily pleasing.

However, to be only an observer suspends a person in passivity. Taking on the role of creator allows me to *actively* engage in the freshness I seek in the physical world. As a creator, I can invest this childlike way of seeing in the act of painting, so that I give back what I have taken from the world. This forms a reciprocal relationship between myself and the physical world, carrying with it the potential for humility.

Abstraction grants me the arena for this enactment. It offers me ways to see relationships before I see particular objects and to bluntly pose idiosyncratic realities. The malleability of paint ensures an endless cache of surprising combinations of forms, colors and surfaces. In an analogous way, we receive an endless stream of surprising visual imagery in the world outside painting. Painting then, is not only a window onto a created world or an arena in which an individual can act but also a boundary that is not limiting (an infinite world within an infinite world).

The reciprocal roles of creator and observer and my general relationship to abstraction form the basic conditions for the specific paintings I create. The apparent contradiction of a classifiable set (painting) that offers the infinite is clearly an exciting proposition for me, yet it does not answer more specific questions of my painting practice. Through a chronological description of my process, I will clarify the criteria I have for my work and how my process relates back to these more general ideas of curiosity, invention and seeing freshly.

## **Beginning / the Color Idea**

The painting is born out of the conflict between an initial intuitive sense (a color idea) and the material itself. This is why it is important that I do not predetermine what the final ‘look’ of the painting will be. If I am not surprising myself, I am being complacent. In my work, intuition trumps dogmatic or procedural modes of creation. This complex relationship does not simply mean that I ‘go crazy’ at all times, all over the canvas. Instead, I might intuit that at a particular time in the life of a painting, I *must* approach it more systematically, pre-mixing all colors and applying them in a uniform way. Then, in the same painting, I might also intuit that I must be working wet on wet with as many different methods of application that I have at my disposal. I bring to the white canvas only a suggestion of a palette or form and the rest must be a conversation within the painting.

The use of an unexpected or strange palette is a major criterion for my work. I watch for and seek out a balance between seduction and repulsion. This often means the inclusion of both highly saturated colors and almost sickly dull ones. I always have the three primaries available in transparent colors as they offer the greatest range. They can be applied thickly and opaquely or thinly and transparently. Although these colors form the structure of my palette, during the course of a painting I remain attentive to what colors might be needed outside of this palette and will not hesitate to use another color. I see these strange or unexpected combinations as a truth of the contemporary landscape, both rural and urban, and therefore a truth of how I experience the world. However

exciting these witnessed occurrences may be, they are unintentional: the confluence of many different people and forces acting independently. In contrast, the act of creation is an act of intention. In my work, you will see colors that function independently but it is understood that the painting is truly the intent of a single creator.

### **Continuing the Process / Imagery and Surface**

This idea of the unexpected or strange does not only occur within the palette, but also within the imagery. As I begin to work, the most obvious relationships usually come first, relationships that rely too much on an expected, harmonious composition. I see this part of the process as a cleansing ritual, as something I must pass through to find the final image. I seek variety and difference, for disparate elements to coexist as parts within a whole without losing their individual integrity. By making difference a visible reality, these elements should coalesce into a transparently confounding image. For example, *Cornucopulate* began with the two very distinct areas of the painting being much closer to the middle of the canvas and not nearly as distinct. By pushing the two areas apart and making them more heterogeneous, I am negating a harmonious or stable composition. The bottom of the canvas is painted in a more regular way, playing off of a clearer geometry. On the top half, little blobs of thickly applied paint jostle each other, pushing their way off the top of the painting in a precarious way.

In *Through Your Fingers*, this same kind of decision-making led me to deal with the canvas in two new ways. The corner flaps of the painting that are typically stapled

down and gessoed were folded into strange, almost decorative flaps and painted. Small, fluffy feathers were added to provide a contrast to the hard edge of the picture plane and the roughness of the canvas. Also, I made my stretcher bars thicker so that the painting would have enough physical depth to emphasize the intentionality of painting the sides of my canvases. The delicate sliding mark rushes off the right edge where it meets a crude series of dots in the same palette, suggesting that this crudeness is actually what composes this more delicate form. These different ways of approaching the single canvas confirm the idea of multiple coexisting realities.

Forms that I create typically remain conversant with the tool of their origin, which adds to both their playfulness and their autonomy. A single mark is allowed to become an entire form. The imagery I use is often composed of basic geometric shapes or simple extensions thereof: lines, circles, diamonds, triangles, polyhedrons, blobs, waves and fans. I never want to limit myself to these particular shapes, but they are so malleable to the human eye and mind that they serve as excellent building blocks of the painting. Two circles, if painted in a particular way, can easily fluctuate between a flat reading and the suggestion of an illusionistic reading (like a clam-shell). This fluctuation of readings is a criterion for my work. To fluctuate in this way affirms my desire for perpetual paradigm shifts— for multiplicity. A color that is perceived as being further back in the picture plane may unexpectedly cut through an area that reads as being in the front. Which reading is true? The painting's insistence as a static object tells us that both are true. This is one way the painting allows me to affirm multiple realities.

In *Pulpable, Palpable*, a good example would be the blue form in the upper left of the painting. It was first painted as a field of color then I drew back into the wet paint with a clean brush so that the mark was made with texture. The form is loosely triangular and has a very peculiar relationship to the area below it, simultaneously being a two-dimensional painted form and an odd hovering mass above the sea of squiggles that jut out below.

As I recognize forms that read too simply, color combinations that are either too harmonious or too neutral, or surface areas that are treated in a homogeneous way, I destroy them. The canvas is moved from the wall to the floor and is rotated throughout the process to prevent *obvious* uses of the indicators of perspectival space. I work in this way around the canvas using brushes down to size 0 and up to the large, round Escoda #8, house-painting brushes, printers' rollers, scrapers, spray nozzles, palette knives and rags. Although I welcome new and interesting ways to apply paint, I do not seek them out exclusively. I do not want to end up with a painting that reads as simply a bag of tricks.

The painting should be ripe with these specific types of relationships and spaces; this is the way I know the painting is finished. The fact that they are specific is key. The kind of humor that should make tension in the work is dependent on bluntness, clumsiness and informality evident in the work and also confirmed in the titles. There is no dancing around the bright blue squiggle in the middle of the canvas, and there should not be.

## Considerations for Studio Practice

Now that I have described my process, I would like to expand on some of the philosophical underpinnings of that process. In order to downplay the role of the analytical mind during creation and elevate the intuitive, I have begun to view painting as a ritual act, as taking on the persona of a shamaness or priestess. There are several consequences to this kind of thinking:

- possibility for delusions of grandeur
- implication of religious belief
- painting seen through the lens of a magical act or an act of transformation
- the existence of unseen forces that are harnessed and manipulated
- the shamaness as a female power figure
- the shamaness as a figure within a tribe
- the magical act as an engagement with the physical world for spiritual purposes  
(not an act of meditation)
- the magical act occurs in consecrated spaces
- the shamaness makes use of certain ritual tools
- the existence of an alternate personality
- the shamaness will enter an alternate state in order to facilitate magical results

As an agnostic, I find this role particularly tricky. While the shamaness adamantly believes in these unseen forces, I wish for them to exist but hold no dogmatic religious beliefs. The real shamaness might also reach her alternate state through outside substances, but my mania is natural. Also, as I have stated, this is a tribal role. I lack a tribe and therefore lack a proscribed set of rites, rituals or recipes for particular magic results. If I were to stretch the definition of a tribe, my tribe would be the western painting tradition, personal or familial traditions, or contemporary American culture. All of these 'tribes' are built in some way around the individual's wants and desires rather than those of the group. To claim one as a tribe is equally isolating and freeing.

In the western painting tradition, I certainly gravitate towards those painters who dealt with a grand mythic tradition and sought to uncover greater truths of the common unconscious through abstraction such as Barnett Newman, Jackson Pollock and Joan Mitchell. However, I did not witness World War II as they did. My idea of the sublime *can* exist in Disney cartoons, “My Little Ponies”, street signs, Google Earth, craft supplies, pop music, ornament, spectacle and filigree as well as in the paintings of the artists mentioned. Instead of a model of exclusion to find the sublime, it can be a model of *inclusion*. For the abstract expressionists, this shamanistic role was in earnest. They were on a journey for the absolute, for purity and spiritual atonement through painting. For me the role is both in earnest and tongue-in-cheek. I indulge in the role but understand its ridiculousness. The idea of purity or of an absolute drew those artists into an endgame; people believed it closed doors for abstraction. The whole basis for my practice is engaged with opening them. Finding the unexplored spaces, rather than the absolute extremes, is a general way to understand my work and the work of many other contemporary painters as well.

For this model of inclusiveness I turn to Amy Sillman, Terry Winters (especially more recent work and the Set Diagram series), Pae White, Laura Owens, Shirley Kaneda (circa 1998), Susan Rothenberg, Victoria Morton, Jonathan Lasker, Mary Heilmann and Dana Schutz. I get two main things from these sources: each has a rich and particular relationship to the recognizable image versus abstraction and/or an insistence on play, informality or the absurd.

## Conclusion

How then could one find the sublime in a Disney cartoon? It is again the idea of accepting what you encounter for all that it is, not expecting it to conform to a standard or general, stereotyped form. It is simply a condition of the times that we are bombarded by inconsistencies, contradiction, absurdity and conflicting realities. I reject the easy assumption that the surface of a thing is meaningless ornament and see a vast wealth of inspiration in the skin of all things, natural and man-made. These are also things that usually come from outside of ourselves and our experiences, given to us as fully formed anomalies. I believe that a good pop song follows through with its own rules as a good painting follows through with its own very different rules. Believing this breaks down the hierarchy of the sublime and mundane in a way that energizes and informs my practice.

In contemporary American culture shifts perpetually occur in all of our senses. Landscapes hold strange assertions from the signs of roadside churches, wastelands of abandoned strip malls, and vast stretches of beautiful plant-life. Turn on the radio and start flipping; you will hear a sexually charged rap song, then a preacher, and then a strange jingle. All of these things vie for your attention and therefore take on immediacy; they must coexist in the world not because they should, but because *they do*. In this view, everything has the potential for being extraordinary. Unfortunately, I sense that people brush past anything they can file away under a category. I think you can either become numbed by this culture or enriched and fed by it *despite* its ability to shock and disgust at times.

This is all a metaphor for what happens in the paintings. I do not paint graceful flowing forms; instead there are always elements of the clumsy or informal. In *Playfight*, chunky paint butts up against transparency and irregular triangles wiggle across the bottom of the canvas—these are not idealized forms. As the mundane and absurd in life lead me to unexpected congruencies and sensations, I expect that the same is possible *within* the language of painting. To paint in this way puts the emphasis on invention and curiosity, two elements of life and of art I find to be vital.

## CATALOGUE

**1. *Building a Light out of Paste***

2008, Oil on canvas  
20 x 25.5 in

**2. *Confectionairy***

2008, Oil on canvas  
22 x 23.5 in

**3. *Cornucopulate***

2007-8, Oil on canvas  
31 x 48 in

**4. *Let Me See Through You***

2007-8, Oil on paper  
9.75 x 11.5 in

**5. *Obscuring Original Impulses  
through the Accumulation of Routine  
Experience***

2008, Oil on canvas  
16 x 14 in

**6. *Playfight***

2008, Oil on canvas  
22 x 23 in

**7. *Pulpable, Palpable***

2008, Oil on canvas  
22 x 22 in

**8. *Smooth Overload***

2008, Oil on canvas  
35.5 x 29.5 in

**9. *Shattering the Power of New  
Information with Your Own Power /  
When the Place You Jot Thoughts in is  
Discovered by a Chosen Fur***

2008, Acrylic, string, glitter  
Dimensions variable

**10. *Through My Fingers***

2008, Oil on Canvas  
28 x 22 in

**11. *Three Stages of Being Close /  
Negotiating Distance***

2008, Oil on canvas  
Three pieces: each 16 x 18 in

**12. *Totem to Break Patterns***

2008, Oil on paper  
10 x 12 in

**13. *An Uncomfortable but Exciting  
Proposition***

2008, Oil on canvas  
20 x 20 in