

# Tanya Leighton



## Painting and Obstinacy

Review , May 9, 2018

By Andrew Witt

*Last year a number exhibitions, events and talks addressed the state of contemporary painting in Vancouver. The following essay is a belated survey of these exhibitions and events but also an analysis of the blind spots, clichés and missed opportunities that have stood out during the discussion. Paying close attention to the works on display, 'Painting and Obstinacy' attempts to short-circuit the dominant currents and tendencies of the debate by thinking through how the artworks themselves, through their formal manoeuvres and political content, shore up a new vocabulary for the reception of contemporary painting in the present.*

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What concepts should we mobilize to grasp the disorienting expansion of contemporary painting? In the current critical discourse, words from the previous century, such as 'obsolescence' and 'exhaustion' are no longer uttered to chart the medium's aesthetic horizon. Any talk of the 'depletion of the painterly gesture' or the 'deconstruction' of the conventions of looking, so characteristic of the debates over painting of the 1960s, has been evacuated from the conversation. (1) In the eyes of artists and historians alike, contemporary painting appears infused with added value, vitality and expressivity. This renewed currency, however, has not secured the medium's material consistency. The pendulum has swung, but in an

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unlikely direction. Older problems tied to the previous century have reared their head again: a return to the subject, to gesture, to materialism, and finally, to thinking through tradition and history. These questions assume the following form: What is painting now? What theoretical issues have given this question urgency? Lastly, and generally speaking, how has a reinvigorated conversation and debate over painting intensified the stakes of what art is and what art can do in the present?



Image: Doug Ashford, *Six Moments in 1967 #3*, (2010-11). Photo courtesy of the artist.

Contemporary painting can potentially encompass almost anything: mixed-media performance (DAS INSTITUT), digital prints (Wade Guyton), woven supports (Brent Wadden), or even iPad color studies (Amy Sillman). The recent trend to include everything under the sun goes against the twentieth century's tendency to disavow the name (think here of the litany of 'post-studio' practices). Theodor Adorno's famous opening sentence in *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), a text written almost fifty years ago, appears more pertinent to painting now than ever: '*It is self-evident that nothing concerning [painting] is self-evident anymore, not its inner life, not its relation to the world, not even its right to exist.*' (2)



Image: DAS INSTITUT (Kerstin Brätsch and Adele Röder), Adele Röder *COMCORRODER* (2015), Kerstin Brätsch *KAYA Mylars* (2015), Sergei Tcherepnin *Flame Creatures* (2015). Photo courtesy of the artist and Serpentine Galleries.

The interest in painting today is inextricably entwined with forces that are both critical as well as cynical. Undeterred by the periodic crises of capitalism, the medium continues to fetch astronomical prices at art fairs and art markets, serving as a gold standard for dealers and collectors. (3) Nevertheless, the desire to chart a path forward for advanced art *through* painting, still endures as a viable project. Part of this discussion has involved the rethinking of aesthetic autonomy, in which the artwork being incommensurable to the logic of the world is imagined to channel non-instrumentalized forms of life and expression located at a distance from the state and capital.

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Image: Doug Ashford, *Six Paintings and One Photo from Saturday, June 25, 2005, (2014)*. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Today, there are many expressions for this type of incommensurability, whether it is expressed as art's 'terror' (Jaleh Mansoor) or as 'the disordering of the world's restrictions' (Doug Ashford). Local tendencies, such as Charlene Vicker's aspiration to rethink the utopian project of painting within the formal vocabulary of abstraction (as stated in

her contribution to the *Crimp in the Fabric* symposium), or Rebecca Brewer's inclination to reconsider the medium through the circuitous movements of involuntary memory (as recalled in her contribution to the exhibition *Ambivalent Pleasures*), serve as two recent examples which have attempted to chart a theoretically advanced notion of painting outside of the previous strategies of the historical avant-garde. According to these two models, to speak of the medium of painting today involves not only the necessity to address the medium's material and conceptual expansion, but also the urgency to confront painting's *obstinate* power and presence. Painting and obstinacy, then.

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It feels historically expedient, if not necessary, to respond to the expansion of the medium with a series of local exhibitions, talks and informal conversations held throughout Vancouver during the past few months. These events have sought, with wildly mixed results, to clarify, theorize and map the stakes of contemporary painting. By no means have these discussions been undertaken in isolation. Over the past decade internationally, a number of publications and exhibitions have set the bar and tone for this undertaking. (4) Locally, however, a selection of exhibitions have served as the locus of these debates: principal among them include the Vancouver Art Gallery's exhibition, *Entangled: Two Views on Contemporary Canadian Painting* (September 30 – January 1, 2017). Accompanying the VAG exhibition was the artist-led symposium, *A Crimp in the Fabric: Situating Painting Today*, with a keynote lecture from theorist and art historian, Isabelle Graw.

Occupying the second floor of the Vancouver Art Gallery, *Entangled* was organized along two thematic currents, 'Painting as Idea,' curated by Emily Carr University Professor, David MacWilliam and 'Performative Painting' curated by the VAG's Senior Curator, Bruce Grenville. According to the two curators, the exhibition was not intended to serve as a historical survey *per se*, even though the exhibition adopted the sub-title, 'Two Views of Contemporary Canadian Painting.' The impetus of the exhibition was, in their words, due to the fact that 'nobody is talking about [painting].' Perhaps this statement was a slip of the tongue, since the exhibition and symposium were in part a product of a long conversation amongst local painters (MacWilliam, McIntosh, Roy, Clay, et al.). Strangely, this statement also happened to contradict the VAG's own recent history that has placed the medium at the center of a number of group exhibitions and surveys over the past decade, as well as an impressive range of notable, smaller shows throughout the city. The shows held at the VAG have included *Paint* (2006), *Painted Past: A History of Canadian Painting from the Collection* (2014), and *Ambivalent Pleasures: Vancouver Special* (2016), whereas the exhibitions held throughout the city's private galleries and artist-run centres have included Brady Cranfield and Jamie Hilder's *Night Shift*, (Or Gallery, July 1 – 31, 2012), Mina Totino's *Persian Rose Chartreuse Muse Vancouver Grey*, (Equinox Gallery, March 12 – April 19, 2014), and Rodney Graham's *Props and other Paintings* (Charles H. Scott Gallery, September 17 – November 16, 2014).

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Image: Brady Cranfield and Jamie Hilder, *Night Shift*, (2012). Photo courtesy of the artists and Or Gallery.

To even suggest that painting has ‘[come back from the dead](#),’ or is ‘[alive and well](#),’ as stated in a number of reviews of *Entangled*, was to employ a somewhat hackneyed cliché and turn a blind eye to the many ambitious shows, exhibitions and spaces which have addressed painting over the past few decades. Even the magazine *Canadian Art* put forward the rather spurious claim that, in Vancouver, ‘painterly practice has otherwise been little championed in art education or artist-run centres over the past half-century.’ As someone who has spent the past two decades in-and-out of the city’s educational institutions and artist-run centres, no claim seems further from the truth. In fact, once artists, critics and curators focus their attention elsewhere—and for a start, stop talking about how the medium has been neglected or persecuted—will the conversation be redirected towards painting’s power and potential.

Although the two separate views curated for *Entangled* were conceptually distinct, the two themes were surprisingly uniform in their look, thrust and scope, emphasising a short history of pictorial abstraction at the expense of other models, genres and histories of painting (portraiture, still-life, or landscape, for instance). The

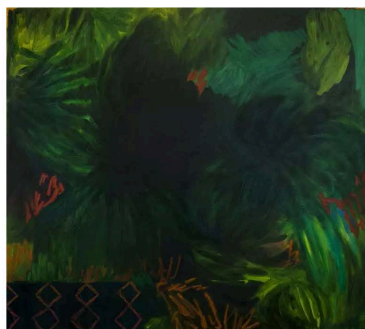


Image: Megan Hepburn, *The Garden*, (2017). Photo courtesy of the artist.

exclusion of portraiture seems especially odd in the international context, where a number of the key debates involving painting, if not contemporary art in general, have revolved around the intersections of figuration, abstraction and the politics of representation (re: Dana Schutz [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)).

Even stranger, perhaps, was the omission of any discussion of painting’s troubled relation to contemporary media, in particular digital networks and culture, which was the central focus of Museum Brandhorst and mumok’s ambitious exhibition, *Painting 2.0: Expression in the Information Age* (Summer 2016), as well as Tate Modern’s *Painting after Technology* (Summer 2015). In their own way, the two exhibitions investigated what can be called ‘the traffic in painting’—the accelerated networks involved in the mode of production, distribution, circulation and reception of paintings in a society based on commodity production and exchange. (5) But in addition, the two exhibitions also rethought the typically slower forms of attention and perception demanded by painting and pictures in a digitally mediated world.

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Image: Rodney Graham, *The Gifted Amateur, Nov. 10th, 1962, (2007)*. Photo courtesy of the artist and Lisson Gallery.

Viewed within the context of Canada 150 celebrations, the exhibition's subtitle, 'Contemporary Canadian Painting,' appeared as a misnomer. For a show that rolled out a nationalist qualifier, it was odd that the exhibition did not include any indigenous artists, especially in light of the failed attempts by the Canadian state and its institutions for reconciliation, in which the work of Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, Charlene Vickers or Kent Monkman, for instance, seems more pertinent than ever.



Image: Charlene Vickers, *Sunken Gardens, (2016)*. Photo courtesy of the artist and Fazakas Gallery.

It could be argued that these under-investigated strands of both media and politics were the consequence of the related but divergent frames of the two thematic currents of the exhibition—'painting as idea' and 'performative painting'—two themes that may seem more appropriate to the latter half of the twentieth century and its histories of painting than to our present moment. Although a concept such as the 'performative' is far removed from Harold Rosenberg's original theory that defined painting as a type of *performance* in the 1950s ('[The American action painters](#)' (1952)), the *performative* is associated with the work of theorists Judith Butler and Donna Haraway, which charts a mode of 'doing' and 'making' outside of representation. In contrast to Rosenberg's concept of *performance* (which Grenville's curatorial programme distances itself from), the *performative* is not firmly anchored to any notion of medium specificity. What this concept means for contemporary painting and its reception, for instance, as differentiated from other media such as sculpture or photography, is by no means clear. No doubt, the concept could just as easily be mobilized in the discussion of contemporary sculpture. (6)

With all of these elisions and missed opportunities, a number of questions still persist: Why painting and why now? And perhaps, more importantly, why abstraction as the central aesthetic current?

Isabelle Graw's keynote lecture for the conference, *A Crimp in the Fabric: Situating Painting Today* (28–29, September 2018), addressed these questions within a Marxist argument and perspective. Graw's project is founded on the belief that painting represents a commodity of a 'special type' all the while attempting to argue how the medium is not merely reducible to the vicissitudes of the commodity form. Her principle critique of contemporary painting is the tendency for the

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genre's discourse to project a 'vitalist fantasy,' a tendency to treat actual paintings as if they were imbued with life or subjectivity (ie. thought, presence, agency etc.). This vitalism tethered to the medium projects a fantasy, in Graw's words, of a life lived 'without negativity.'



Image: Brady Cranfield and Jamie Hilder, *Night Shift*, (2012). Photo courtesy of the artists and Or Gallery.

Graw's vitalist notion should be read as a tendency of contemporary painting rather than as a comprehensive history. Missing from her lecture was a vision of a *non-vitalist* conception of painting, or, to put it in her words, a mode of painting that projects a life lived *with* negativity. This condition is what Adorno once called art's 'asociality' ('the determinate negation of a determinate society'). (7) Graw's elision of the negative seems odd since one advanced history of modernist painting has continually envisioned the medium as one of negativity. Think here of Kazimir Malevich's apocalyptic conceptualization of his black monochrome as a 'desert,' Agnes Martin's 'annihilation' of form (to use art historian Annette Michelson's phrase), Ellsworth Kelly's adoption of [non-compositional strategies](#) (monochrome, chance, and the grid), or, to provide a local example, Brady Cranfield and Jamie Hilder's month-long performance at the Or Gallery, *Night Shift* (July 1–31, 2012).

This singular focus on the relationship between painting and vitalism also overlooks the central argument of UBC professor Jaleh Mansoor's recent book on the Italian neo-avantgarde, *Marshall Plan Modernism: Italian Postwar Abstraction and the Beginnings of Autonomia* (2016). In a novel reading of the gestures of the Italian avant-garde—such as burning, piercing and cutting

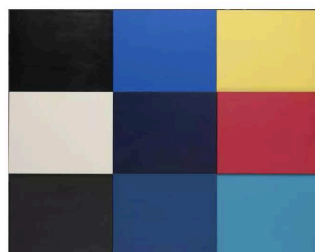


Image: Ellsworth Kelly, *Méditerranée*, (1952). Photo courtesy of Tate Modern.

of the support by artists such as Lucio Fontana, Piero Manzoni and Alberto Burri—Mansoor argues how the volatility of the artwork in post-war Italy served as a 'repository of historical symptoms,' as well as a unique strand of resistance against capital and the state in which these gestures were politically and socially mobilised. And like her contemporaries in the studio, Mansoor's project is tied to a rethinking of aesthetic autonomy as a prefigurative political gesture.

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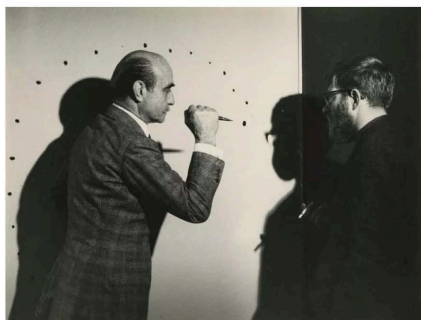


Image: Lucio Fontana, *Le Jour*, (1962). Photo courtesy of the artist.

Autonomy is a central current in these contemporary debates. Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge's magisterial study of the political economy of labor power, *History and Obstinacy* (1981/2014), elaborates how the subject counters capitalism's daily and violent forces of expropriation with obstinate feelings and characteristics. Negt and Kluge's concept of *Eigensinn* can be loosely translated into English as 'one's own sense' (sometimes translated as autonomy). With this definition we should emphasize how the characteristic of obstinacy incorporates feelings of stubbornness and irreverence. Obstinacy is not a 'natural' characteristic, Negt and Kluge argue, but these feelings emerge from experiences of destitution and expropriation, and it is in this mode that we are forced to think obstinacy as a form of autonomy. In contrast to artistic modernism, where art's separateness from life and its uselessness is self-consciously mobilized as autonomy. In our contemporary period, aesthetic and political autonomy is now inexplicably entwined with everyday life. The autonomous, in this particular case, is distinctly social, collective and historical.

In our particular historical moment when the violence of capitalism has 'migrated inwards,' permeating all aspects of everyday life, the subject increasingly confronts expropriation with stubborn and impervious gestures and attitudes. To quote Devin Fore's thorough [Introduction](#) to the work Negt and Kluge's work, 'obstinacy' should be understood as the 'underside of history':

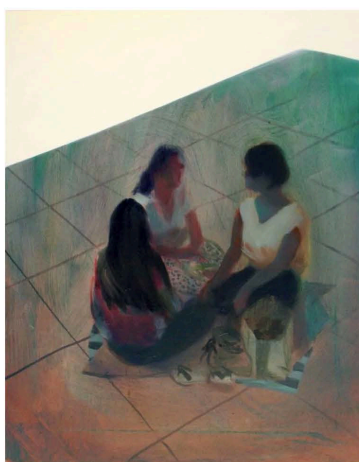


Image: Alison Yip, *Picnic in the Shade*, (2008). Photo courtesy of the artist and Monte Clark Gallery.

"For each entry in the valorized record of human culture—a record that, as Benjamin wrote, is always a documentation of barbarism—a countervailing act of obstinacy pushes back against the thrust of so-called progress; for each luminous vista cleared by instrumental reason, a dense scotoma of stupidity emerges to blight the view; for every human trait that is singled out and capitalized, a resistant trait gathers force underground." (8)

To address the obstinate strands and tendencies within painting is to speak to the underground currents that snake through the medium's history.

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The obstinate, however, does not signify the ineffable or inexpressible—a perspective that was advanced during the aforementioned symposium, *A Crimp in the Fabric: Situating Painting Today*. It did not help the symposium that the only position on offer was the artist's own. Aside from Isabelle Graw's keynote lecture, it was a conscious choice for the organizers not to invite curators, art historians or art critics to present papers. Even though each painter was invited to address a pertinent issue about the medium, the thirteen artists who were invited to speak only spoke to their individual practice as painters. Historical analysis was checked at the door. As a consequence, the desire to have a conversation about painting was superseded for a self-reflexive conversation about the singularity of the artist's own work.

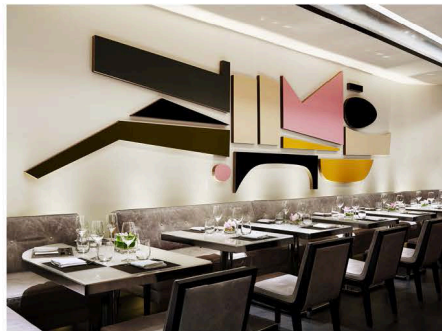


Image: Rodney Graham, *Anamorphic Psychomania Variation I*, (2010). Photo courtesy of the artist and Lisson Gallery.

For the final panel of the symposium, 'Hands Stuck in the Mattress,' most of the panelists recalled the well-worn cliché that language is insufficient and inadequate in describing the formal operations and qualities of a work of art. The underlying assumption was one that accepted the empty claim that language 'dissolves' or 'falls apart' in front of a painting. (9) Taken as a whole, the perspectives on offer felt myopic, if not deeply cynical—cynicism, of course, being the prevalent position amply available to contemporary thought and experience. To an outsider looking in, it seemed disingenuous to lament the fact that 'nobody is talking about painting,' and then invite no one to talk about the historical problems and questions of contemporary painting.

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There is a peculiar way that artworks evade their public at the point of their presentation, but occasionally come into relief in a belated manner. One recent show that '[flew] under the radar,' to quote one review of the show, was Alison Yip's exhibition *Hagazussa* (2017) at Monte Clark Gallery. In a way, Yip channels the obstinate force of painting by working through outmoded compositional strategies. The question that the artist asks is not how to bring the new into the world, as it is often the case with historic avant-garde, but rather, how to be untimely in the present. In a contradictory fashion, to act in an untimely manner is to be both belated but also ahead of time. Painter Amy Sillman once claimed that the contemporary painter is often pulled in a conflicting range of temporal directions. As a painter, Sillman writes, 'you have to simultaneously diagnose the present, predict the future, and ignore the past—to both remember and forget.' (10)

Evidence of this desire was emphasised in the title of Yip's show, *Hagazussa*, an old Germanic word for 'fence rider' (also witch), but also with artist's peculiar use of a range of compositional strategies, such as trompe l'oeil, reverse perspective, Cézanne-like brushwork, and flat decorative patterns. Yip's resuscitation of outmoded pictorial strategies demonstrates how certain traits, feelings and gestures can go *underground* (like most studio work), only to have them reconsidered and revisited in the present.



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Image: Alison Yip, *Hagazussa*, (2017). Photo courtesy of the artist and Monte Clark Gallery.

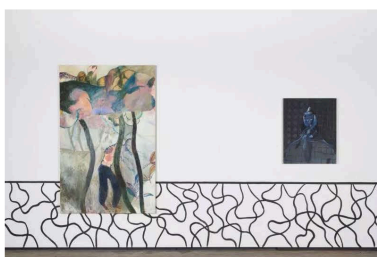


Image: Alison Yip, *Footsie Chain*, (2013). Photo courtesy of the artist and Monte Clark Gallery.

Reverse perspective, for instance, popularized by the photographic avant-gardes of the 1920s, was imagined both as a construction of a new vision but also as a wholesale assault on a bourgeois subjectivity sutured to the humanist ideology of linear perspective. And unlike linear perspective, which is often marshalled with order and hierarchy in mind, reverse perspective—as one early commentator on the technique has observed—produces an ‘eccentric space.’ In Yip’s work, the picture’s ‘eccentric space’—composed sometimes also in *trompe l’oeil*—unravels outwards, in direct opposition to the rules of classical perspective which forces space to recede internally from within the picture.

Image: Alison Yip, *Recipe*, (2016). Photo courtesy of the artist and Monte Clark Gallery.



Otherworldly, but still of this world, Yip’s vision is so disorienting because it often foregrounds a ghostly human figure—or at times, a hybrid figure that shares human and animal traits—within an abstract yet quasi-realist space that shuttles between recession and projection. This borderline state is often intuited by Yip in her repeated reference to twilight scenes and states. The moment of twilight not only breeds transformation (day transforms into night), but also conjures a moment of *transfiguration*. Like any ‘witching-hour,’ it is a time where corporeal and psychic states loosen. One should add that this crepuscular vision of

nature was also present in Megan Hepburn’s recent paintings on show at Duplex gallery, where nature was rendered with dark *chiaroscuro*, pulsating with a radiant but estranged light.

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Locked into these moments of transfiguration, Yip draws our attention to a litany of irreverent traits and gestures (a stooped drinker, a convulsive dancer, a fence-walker)—figures shown during moments of sensuous vibrancy and defiant autonomy. These figures are ones of pathos, shown in both struggle and suffering. When viewed together as a mass, however, these characters—spectral and aglow—commune in a fleeting dance-like movement. Yip's vision can be understood as a type of *dark illumination*: a vision which shines its oblique light onto that which is often ignored but still is nevertheless present.

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By no means was it coincidental that two works featured in the exhibition *Entangled* make reference to the 'underground,' as evidenced in Rebecca Brewer's *Bones Stuck Underground* (2017) and Sandra Meigs *The Basement Piles* series (2013). The painter is imagined here in all seriousness, like an obstinate mole, insofar as they seek to activate undervalued 'faculties of labor,' to use Negt and Kluge's phrasing. They have gone underground, but have temporarily come to the surface (like a repressed symptom), mobilised during unexpected historical moments. It is for this reason, perhaps, that art historical writing on painting seems well suited to think the *unconscious of history*—a model of history that works through the elisions, excesses, and impurities constitutive of 'official' history.

It should come to no surprise, then, that Brewer and her contemporaries often cite models of painting not taken from our past century. No simple chronology works here. In this mode, history reveals itself through a series of knight moves and tiger leaps. The model on offer can be as disparate and anachronistic as the fusion of the prehistoric with the 15th Century. Instead of dismissing these works as a postmodern pastiche of cultural styles and modes, the artwork should be thought as of the picture plane. It is here where Matisse and McIntosh demonstrate their intolerance towards the historical conventions of perspective.



Image (left): Elizabeth McIntosh, *Prop Window*, (2017). Image (right): McIntosh, *Window*, (2017). Photos courtesy of the artist and Carriona Jeffries Gallery.

In a sense, Matisse's *Open Window* achieves something that modern painting in twentieth century cannot get over: the equalization of figure and ground. As a product of design, each gesture is made in relation to the total surface—the plane—not as a consequence of structural demands of linear perspective. To push the relation between Matisse and McIntosh to a greater degree, one can make the comparison with Matisse's *Red Interior: Still-life on a Blue Table* (1947), where irregular lightning shaped zigzags break through the frame and proliferate throughout the interior. What makes McIntosh's *Window* so inexplicable, however, was that within her picture a formless mass had taken over the surface of the picture, as if some strange geological force had crystallised within the interior.

It is not surprising, then, that McIntosh's most recent work (not on show in the VAG's exhibition), imagines painting as a residual or leftover mark. McIntosh's diminutively sized canvases—an anomaly in her typically larger and grander mode—reuses the remaining paint from a brush that she used for other works. A history

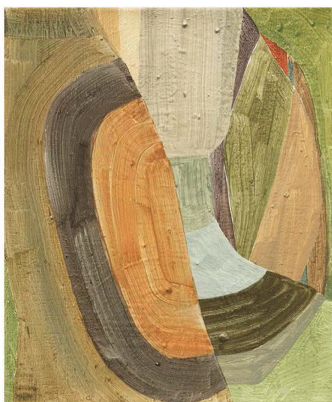
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of painting as leftover, or provisional, aligns closely to Briony Fer's argument of the artwork as indeterminate in her extraordinary catalogue, *Studiowork* (2009), for the Fruitmarket Gallery retrospective on Eva Hesse. The work of the artist's studio—in the case of Hesse, cluttered, with a range of test pieces, studio leavings, and residues—is envisioned as a 'subterranean world,' in Fer's words, which puts pressure on where the work of art begins and where it ends. (11) It is a vision of the artwork as contingent and non-synchronous. In a similar mode, McIntosh negates painting's triumphant history for a vision that is made from leftovers, as if painting was, in fact, provisional (to use art critic Raphael Rubinstein's concept).

Image: Stephanie Aitken, *Calypso*, (2012). Photo courtesy of the artist.



Likewise, Stephanie Aitken's contribution to the *Entangled* exhibition constellates a range of painterly gestures to index the polymorphic capacities of abstraction. Similar to McIntosh's work, the model of painting on display here was one which registers a restless attitude towards its modes of production. Spaces on the canvas were primed and re-primed, layered and erased, lacerated and re-sewn in what resembles a continual state of re-working. One method, which she calls 'spot-priming,' re-applies slabs of linen over formed sections of the support,

which is then subsequently painted over with washed-out layers of paint. The edges of the support were noticeably torn and degraded, as if to exemplify an agitated attitude towards its painterly mode and material.



Image: Patrick Cruz, *Titig Kayumangi (Brown Gaze)*, (2017). Photo courtesy of the artist and PlugIn ICA.

One of Aitken's studio mates, Steven Hubert, has called her palette a type of 'primordial ooze.' Hubert's observation is keyed, similarly, to the underground currents of painting—what can be envisioned as painting's 'deep time'—a mobile and liquid force that works through its indeterminate prehistory. Even though Aitken associates her work with vitalism, in no way is this a straightforward description of the medium's work and materials. A subterranean current pulses through her work, one that disregards preciousness for an obstinate vision of abstraction and its history. Toronto and Vancouver based painter Patrick Cruz has also echoed this sentiment in his usage of the prehistoric as an influence in his most recent paintings and multimedia works. The prehistoric in this mode, is not

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imagined as a prelapsarian ideal, but as a source infused with comedy and tragedy. 'Nuclear Age to the Stone Age,' as Cruz once [remarked](#).



Image: Marina Roy, *Dirty Clouds*, (2017). Photo courtesy of the artist and Wil Aballe Art Projects.

These subterranean currents of abstraction also pervade Marina Roy's latest group of paintings recently on display at the Wil Aballe Art Projects (November 16 – December 16, 2017). The subterranean in her series was influenced, Roy tells us, by the representational difficulties of dark matter. As Roy states in the press release to the exhibition, the group of paintings came out of a discussion between artists and physicists on antimatter. 'The matter we see around us,' Roy writes, 'is what is left over from billions of years of creation-annihilation, energy passed between fermion and boson, and other elemental and energy states known and unknown.' And when matter first formed, it also formed a negative imprint — anti-matter. From Roy's inquiry a question still persists: how to provide form to this negative imprint?

Contemporary physicist, Lawrence Krauss, has reminded us how the material of the earth, as well as our own bodies, is made from the dust of exploded stars. Alongside Roy, the most poignant image of painting's relation to the cosmos comes from Helio Oiticica's *Bolide* (1964), or 'fireballs' series. To engage with the material of paint,



Image: Marina Roy, *Dirty Clouds*, (2017). Photo courtesy of the artist and Wil Aballe Art Projects.

Oiticica claims, is to work with the dust of Suns. Similar to Oiticica, Roy physically engages with these traditions by grinding her own pigment, predominantly red oxide and bitumen. Instead of poeticizing these materials, or reflecting on the mystical or transcendental tenor of this exercise, Roy emphasizes the contingent and unwieldy nature of her practice: 'I throw some paint down and make a mess,' the artist stated in a recent artist talk.



Image: Helio Oiticica, *Bolide*, (1964). Photo courtesy of Tate Modern.

What we make of this mess, however, is precisely what is up for grabs. The *Dark Clouds* referenced in Roy's title, then, is at once *metaphorical* as it is *literal*, as much dark to the imagination as it is dark to the physicists' model. For the press release to the show, Roy recognizes her own limitations in finding an appropriate painterly model to address the dark and obscure forms of anti-matter. As

illustrations of physical phenomena therefore, Roy's series fails to convince.

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Nevertheless, when considered as paintings they are compelling experiments; not compelling as metaphors *per se*, but as studies in the possibilities and limitations of abstraction. This theory of the image advances the argument that pictures do not merely reproduce reality, but rather operate to actively create our reality. Roy's work, like most of the paintings discussed in this review, poses a challenge to the critic and historian: one that forces the writer to match the obscurity of the artwork with eloquence.

Indeed to talk about painting is difficult, but this difficulty is what makes the medium so appealing, so enticing, so worthwhile and urgent as an aesthetic and social project. Like a hand skimming the surface of an ocean, the work of art always holds the capacity to operate as a moment of clarity in the midst of chaos—a moment that persuasively and forcefully conveys the complexity of a life lived. Enigmas and blind spots will always persist, but writing often serves as the most vivid and generous medium to think through



Image: Megan Hepburn, *Craig's List*, (2017). Photo courtesy of the artist.

the strange sensuousness and obstinacy of everyday life (in which the reception of painting can be a part). If writing has any power at all, it is found in its capacity to act as a spark, or flash, that illuminates and opens up experience and perception. 'What one offers in a description,' art historian Michael Baxandall once remarked, 'is a representation of thinking about a picture more than a representation of a picture.'<sup>(12)</sup> Such writing does not simply explain away the artwork's difficulty, but draws us closer to the artwork's inexplicable nature, adding a greater level of complexity to the encounter. To suggest otherwise—that painting exceeds language—forecloses the debate, but also surrenders to cynicism and cliché. The impasse of the current conjuncture demands nothing less than a new theory of painting.

(\* I want to thank Alexandra Fraser, Amy Kazymierchyk, Justin Devries, Lauren Lavery and Nathan Crompton whose conversations have been influential and encouraging during the writing of this essay.

1. My analysis is informed by Benjamin H.D. Buchloh's observations in his article "The Primary Colors for the Second Time: A Paradigm of the Neo-Avantgarde." On the dialectical movements of painting, Buchloh writes: 'Mechanical and organic aspects of the painterly procedure are the two oppositional terms between which modernist painting has shifted since Manet with ever increasing radicality. Whenever the seemingly *mechanical* aspect of the application of pigment on canvas was emphasized, when the brushwork was presented as labor, when the brushstroke appeared as a fragmented unit of repetitive activity, the approach was cyclically hailed or condemned (dependent on ideological and aesthetic investment of the critics and audiences) as the end of painting. Whenever, by contrast, the apparently organic aspects of the painterly procedure were reins tributes, when the brushwork presented itself as a gesture of symbolic liberation, as the scriptural performance of unconscious forces, this position of expressivity was celebrated by the anti-modernist factions as a recovery of the ties between aesthetic, emotional, and sensuous experience against the positivist rationality governing the modernist practice of painting.' See: Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, "The Primary Colours a Second Time," in *Formalism and Historicity*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017), 345).

2. Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, Ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedermann, (London: Athlone Press, 1997).

3. It is not coincidental, then, that the painter's brush is the central pivot around which Westbank Corporation has positioned its condominium advertisement, *Fight*

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*for Beauty*. The director of the short video promoting the show, Lukas Dong, has placed the painter, Tristesse Seeliger, as the privileged subject who is shown during various stages of production. Dong has slowed down each brushstroke to a snail-like pace as if to endow the gesture with divine status and grace. The painter's brush is guided by the words of Shane Koyczan, muzak-performer-and-ad-man-for-hire. Like all ads, Koyczan's words float freely, without intensity.

4. Alongside countless one person shows, these exhibitions have included such examples as *Painting 2.0: Expression in the Information Age* (mumok June 04, 2016 – November 06, 2016), *The Forever Now: Contemporary Painting in an Atemporal World* (MoMA, December 14, 2014 – April 5, 2015), and *Phantom Limb: Approaches to Painting Today* (Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, May 5 – October 21, 2012). The flurry of exhibitions and the events in Vancouver should therefore be read as a participant within this contemporary trajectory.

5. The phrase 'the traffic in painting' is borrowed from Allan Sekula's discussion of 'the traffic in photography.' See: Allan Sekula, *Photography Against the Grain: Essays and Photo Works 1973–1983*, (Halifax: The Press of Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1984).

6. Generally speaking (and looking beyond the exhibition *Entangled*), one could argue that it is a consequence of the evacuation of formal analysis and historical rigour from exhibition making and so-called 'art writing'—and with it the

pertinences of critical judgement—that curators and writers fall back onto contemporary philosophy to undertake all of the text's heavy lifting. Where immanent critique and historical analysis used to dwell, now stands huge blocks of text taken over by the latest and most *en vogue* philosophy. Read on a local level, this phenomena appears as ever present, permeating press releases, artist talks and exhibition catalogues. Art historian David Joselit has recently called this phenomena, 'Art history without art.'

7. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 308.

8. Kluge, Alexander and Oskar Negt, *History and Obstinacy*. Translated by Richard Langston. (Cambridge: Zone Books, 2014).

9. Initially, one of the panelists first stated he was 'not interested in talking about painting' (even when he was invited to talk on a panel about 'talking about painting') and then proceeded to describe his genesis as a painter in art school.

10. Amy Sillman, "On Color," *Painting beyond itself: The Medium in a Post-medium Condition*, (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016), 110.

11. Briony Fer, *Studiowork*, (Glasgow: The Fruitmarket Gallery, 2009).

12. Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 5.

Feature Image: Elizabeth McIntosh, *Window*, (2017). Photo courtesy of the artist and Catriona Jeffries Gallery.