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TOILE

TOILE

A thesis in partial fulfillment
of the requirements of the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Art

By

Dilenia García
University of Miami
Bachelor of General Studies, 2005

May 2013
University of Arkansas

ABSTRACT

Toile is a painting series that explores constructions of taste and the semiotics of manufactured fabrics. Through the use of irony, paradox and deconstructions of rhythm, shape, color and form, the paintings are a response to the formal and historical content in the fabric. The idyllic landscape, notions of identity, sexism and liminality are some of the themes considered in the series. The paintings in this exhibition attempt to correct and mediate outdated models of representation through the exploration of painting as a process that is open and malleable.

This thesis is approved for recommendation
to the Graduate Council.

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THESIS DUPLICATION RELEASE

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my mother, father and sisters, whose endless support has been a sustaining source of inspiration.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project was possible through the contributions of numerous individuals who generously aided at different stages of development. A special thanks is due to John M. Orr, MFA, whose endless support was instrumental to the completion of this project. Special thanks are due to my mentor in the painting graduate program and thesis Director, Prof. Kristin Musgnug, MFA. To my thesis committee: Dr. Leo G. Mazow, Larry Swartwood, MFA and Sam King, MFA. My gratitude goes out as well to Jon McDaniel, Wilson Borja, Mauricio Linares, MFA and Craig A. Jaslow, Esq.

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INTRODUCTION

The etymological origin of the word *toile* stems from the French and means cloth or canvas. One of the first connotations of the word meant to cover and pertains to the use of fabrics to decorate and furnish walls and furniture.¹ For the purpose of this thesis exhibition, *Toile* refers to the fabrics the paintings are supported on, as well as the act of covering that occurs from painting. I am interested in using the painting process to respond to contemporary cultural values and attitudes. In the *Toile* series, I explore the constructions of taste found in material culture through a look at decorative printed fabrics available today for mass consumption.

Printed, decorative fabrics are generally sold in retail stores, arranged in an array of hierarchies, themes and styles. This exhibition's focus is defined in two broad categories of printed fabrics: Those with designs derived from a historical context of wealth, power and the elite, conveying what are considered to be constructions of good taste, and those addressing popular pedestrian themes, such as a monster character or the past time of fishing. Finer fabrics convey a tradition of style and history generally based on Eurocentric values; designs for these are often based on the original fabrics that decorated castles and mansions. In contrast, the second category has a casual undertone of vulgarity, commonly associated with people of lower class. Cultural values are defined in the depictions found in printed fabrics. What does it mean today to pass down through commerce images of women with low neck dresses as they hand wash the laundry, of men fishing while women nurture the children and of decorations of sombreros, beer bottles and cactus plants? The ideas conveyed in these fabrics and examples seem out of place with a

¹ <http://www.etymonline.com/>, accessed Apr 21, 2013

message of tolerance. There is an irony in how values of upper and lower class, sexism and stereotypes are promoted through decorative fabrics at a time when western societies purport a continued message towards increased acceptance. This thesis exhibition employs manufactured fabrics as a support for paintings, as a catalyst for the questioning of outdated models of representation and the exploration of painting as a process that is open and malleable.

The *Toile* series is the result of my journey in artistic exploration in the graduate painting program at the University of Arkansas. After joining the program in 2010, I had narrowed my conceptual and formal explorations by tightly constrained boundaries. In the summer of 2012, I desperately sought new questions for artistic exploration. This marked an important point in my development in the program as I recognized that my art practice should operate out of the need to find new boundaries and answers, avoiding predictability and denying my own mannerisms. Leaving the studio I opted for walking through stores and exploring the aisles. Crowded shelves filled with ‘stuff’ have always provided me with a personal understanding of the current energy in the market and an idea of what is happening in the world. Several images on placemats, which ranged from roosters and cows to chefs and flowers attracted me for their apparent ‘tasteless’ quality. I decided to use this negative reaction to direct my creative output in a new way. I would make paintings from the placemats that elicited the most visceral reaction in me. To further restrain myself from my own mark making I decided to paint with liquid medium.

Improvising I made about 12 paintings on table placemats in a few days. From this exercise two things intrigued me further. The moments in which the painting allowed the background to show through created ‘holes’ that worked as windows, these recalled for me Marcel Duchamp’s *Etant*

donnés, an installation in which the viewer must find and look through holes in order to experience the piece. The second intriguing aspect was the surface. By allowing the paint to dry and then adding repeated layers of paint, I was starting to create texture again and still leaving out the mark. This excited me as well. The *Toile* series would eventually emphasize these two concerns on a much larger scale as I transitioned from placemats to printed fabrics which provided ground for my interest in cultures and values.

PERSONAL HISTORY AS ARTISTIC SOURCE

My personal history and upbringing have greatly influenced the development of the *Toile* series. As a child growing up in the Dominican Republic, I was exposed to the heritage of Spanish post-colonialism. Tourist markets provided my first exposure to painting beyond reproductions from books and newspapers. On the sidewalk of busy streets local artists hung paintings that were sold to passersby. Most often, the paintings were intricate compositions with bright colors, depicting black men working the sugar fields. I recall the look of the scene as striking, the insanely bright, blue-green ocean, against the reds, blues, yellows and greens of the paintings. I grew up understanding that these artworks did not represent what was believed to be ‘good’ painting, and that in their high contrast, loaded style, these paintings were representations of poor taste. Today I view these works through different lens and consider the broader cultural and historical background of my upbringing. Both the primary palette and the representations of sugar-cane workers were traditionally associated with what was believed to be a lower class of migrant workers. As a result of the process of acculturation, we had been taught to reject our African ancestry represented in the manner of these paintings. The remnants of these beliefs are

still felt on the island today. My concerns over inclusiveness, exclusiveness and the definitions of cultural differences are linked to these early experiences.

ARTISTIC INFLUENCES

Most of my exposure to painting has come from the images of books and more recently from Internet sources. One of my early influences was Georgia O’Keeffe whose work intrigued me for its organic and semi-abstract approach. Early on I was fascinated by the qualities that enable the painting medium to make truthful representations of reality. Increasingly my interests leaned towards more expressionistic styles as my concern with the materiality of paint grew. The paintings of Susan Rothenberg, Phillip Guston, Cy Twombly and Terry Winters have provided inspiration to me in how these artists achieve what I find to be a sophisticated and visceral quality of surface.

Contemporary painters Guillermo Kuitca, Mathew Ritchie, Keltie Ferris, Franz Ackermann and Carroll Dunham interest me for the graphic quality of their paintings and the idiosyncratic language they create to compose fantastic spaces. In the essay *Inside Out*, art critic Katy Siegel outlines a position in contemporary painting in which artists work “from the inside” while also engaging in “what’s outside.”² My view over the work presented in this exhibition and its place in today’s art scene is in tandem with this statement and with artists who respond to the mechanical and digital aspects that permeate contemporary life. Although the question of high and low art is an old one, explored especially by the Pop artists of the 1960’s, I believe that the

² Katy Siegel, *Inside Out*. In Elizabeth Sussman, *Remote Viewing, Invented Worlds in Recent Painting and Drawing* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2005), 96

prevalence of the digital media and the accessibility of the minutia of life and the world around us makes pop and kitsch a relevant avenue of exploration.

In 2012 I visited *Pattern ID*, an exhibition held at the Kemper Museum of Art in Kansas, MO. Presented in the exhibition were artworks from artists using printed fabrics and reproductions as source and inspiration for their work. A general theme in the show was identity conveyed for me especially in the artworks of Lalla Essaydi and Kehinde Wiley. I was particularly interested in Takashi Murakami's use of symbols to create pattern paintings. However, I sought an increased degree of materiality for my own work. In the publication produced for the exhibition art historian Ellen Rudolph emphasizes the negotiation of cultural identity as a driver in the *Pattern ID* exhibition.³ Although the paintings in the *Toile* series employ material culture as a point of departure, the intent is to remain non-specific in respect to ethnicity and identity.

Formally the paintings in this exhibition are perhaps more in alignment with the work of Indian contemporary artist Bharti Kher in her bindi triptych painting, *Mother of anything*. This painting presents similar levels of elaborate materiality and ambiguity to the paintings of *Toile*. Although I was unaware of it at the time I viewed *Pattern ID*, fabric prints would be at the core of my next project and would lead me in similar formal and conceptual explorations.

³ Ellen Rudolph, *Pattern ID* (Ohio: Akron Art Museum, 2010), 11.

CONCEPTUAL DEVELOPMENT

Paradoxically, I am equally drawn to fabrics that convey ideas of fine and poor taste. My painting response in this exhibition is an exploration of each fabric's position in regard to culture and taste by considering the context of each design and attempting to transform and correct it through painting. My intent is to disrupt the idyllic setting of a pleasant, decorative fabric while elevating a vulgar one. Each painting in the series is an attempt at realizing or resolving one of these issues. I seek to reconcile the two opposites in a mediated space that denies both the elite utopia and the pedestrian chaos, for a reality that goes beyond the superficiality of the print, and into the action of painting. Although in the fabrics, utopian ideals contrast the pedestrian folklore, both share the superficiality of their intended function. Corrections of the idea of vulgarity are addressed in the series by balancing color, increasing variety in value, eliminating flatness, suggesting depth, changing the rhythm and creating ambiguity of form and shape. To counter the idea of classic perfection paint is applied to create hues that overpower the print, elevating decorative elements to a level of ridiculousness, seeking a heightened expression of kitsch. The paintings in this exhibition exist in a liminal space where both background and painting can remain ambiguous to the viewer.

In addition to the cultural values implied in the fabrics' imagery, a strong historical context can be established from the titles given to the fabrics by manufacturers who inspire their designs in original historical documents. Often times, these titles inform my process in a painting. Titles like *Glamis*, a region of Scotland where the Queen Mother of England spent her youth, at Glamis Castle. And *Brissac*, which pertains to the Chateau de Brissac, located in the commune of

Brissac-Quince in France, convey a heritage of fine taste, high class and the elite. Another loaded title is *Colonial Williamsburg*, a design the manufacturer purports is inspired by authentic period documents. Interestingly, British colonial traditions are preserved today by the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation in Virginia, which operates “the world’s largest living history museum...the restored 18th-century capital of Britain’s largest, wealthiest, and most populous outpost of empire in the New World.”⁴ This institution was created and is supported by the Rockefeller fortune. It is a curious fact that hundreds of years after achieving independence from England, both Colonial Williamsburg, and the fabric inspired by its Eurocentric traditions, continue to promote notions of the elite to a largely non affluent American base of customers and visitors. Fabrics inspired on historical pastoral scenes are again popular choices in home decorating.⁵ In respect to fabrics emulating fine, elaborate originals, today’s affordable designs represent nostalgic fakes. These fabrications reinforce a simulacrum of the idea of good taste. There is a parallel paradox in how the paintings that form the *Toile* series, supported on manufactured fabrics, allow part of the original print to remain and become demi-fakes that are also unique art objects. As such, the kitsch and the pedestrian are introduced to the gallery institution as a partial continuation of the simulacrum.

PROCESS

Throughout my education in the visual arts, I often felt pressured to make paintings consistent with the tradition of representational oil painting. This concern weighed heavily upon me as I

⁴ <http://www.history.org/>, accessed Jan, 27, 2013.

⁵ <http://www.fabricmuseum.org/>, accessed Apr, 21, 2013.

considered the process for the *Toile* series. In part, my interest in developing this work stems from the desire to introduce into my art practice material elements of the world, already charged with an inherent meaning that exists beyond my studio walls. In some levels I feel that by working with existing materials, I am given entry into a different reality than the one I would create by merely painting. I feel closer to the world by embracing an idea and a material that comes from it. Since I do not create the fabrics supports employed in *Toile*, I need to understand the nature and concerns of each pattern, in order to feel ready to work with it. This challenge presents itself in the form of new questions for each design and is therefore a constant source of inspiration. Forced to look at an existing pattern, I am able to create scenarios that have a defined start but can lead to infinite possibilities.

While sometimes the direction I will take with a painting is evident at the onset, others take days or weeks of observation and pondering. Sometimes tests are performed with smaller pieces, probing a variety of effects and approaches that help visualize the end result. With few exceptions, the paintings in *Toile* are developed in three phases or stages. After careful consideration and observation of the fabric, that might include ‘living’ around the print for days by pinning it to the studio wall, the fabric is stretched onto a support. Sometimes, the greatest clarity of thought comes to me during the pre-painting process as the paints and supports are prepared. In these moments I am able to see the direction a painting should take quite lucidly and tend to execute it, at least initially, in a rapid, frantic manner. In this early stage of the painting I make decisions both consciously and perceptually. I have found that a slow pace makes me too aware of the pattern. I want to work with it but avoid totally surrendering to its influence. This varies in different degrees from one fabric to another.

Another key aspect to using printed fabrics as material comes from the kinetic experience of touching, bending, tearing and handling of the material. While some are soft to the touch and even semi-transparent, others are stiff and difficult to stretch. The characteristics of the fabric inform the work in how I adjust and rethink the process in order to make the painting possible. Due to the fragility of some fabrics, I prepare, seal or treat as needed before beginning the painting.

The paintings are concerned with the application of layers of flat and un-mixed paint in order to create texturally rich surfaces. To do so the paint must be applied quickly before a fusion takes place. This first stage is also the most challenging as I have to decide how much to cover and how to apply the paint. As more areas of the printed fabric are erased, I begin to work reacting to the fabric, taking both ground and foreground as a whole, seeking a transition ground. At this point my pace starts to slow down and I use the time spent in color mixing considering the next step and evaluating what has been done so far. This third stage is also the least involved in actual painting. Pacing and walking around the piece, considering it upside-down, sideways, visually covering and un-covering areas to find problems, happens repeatedly until the painting seems to require nothing more.

MATERIALS

To create the *Toile* series, printed fabrics are mounted on canvas support before stretching or directly stretched on a wood support. Making decisions based on the desired effect for each painting, acrylic paint, latex paint or mixed media are used to create the work. All the stretchers

and the paintings were developed in the studio without the aid of sketches. Many of the paints employed are 'rejected' colors obtained through local retailers. The aspect of employing manufactured paint that has been rendered unwanted and transformed into a unique artwork is another aspect supporting the idea of low art becoming high art through process.

DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS

Leticia Opal (Fig. 1) is the first painting of the *Toile* series. It provided a portal to other kinds of experimentations implemented in later paintings. The title of this painting is the original name of the fabric and refers to the feminine aspect of the decorative blue-green flowers in the design.

Unlike the placemat paintings, which were done by liberally pouring paint and covering most of the found image, in *Leticia Opal* I seek to establish a synergy with the pattern. The intent was to affect the pattern in a contained, controlled way, in order to incorporate the paint into the background and create ambiguity. As such, the color choices remain within the existing palette, light greens and ivory. Often times I try to remove any dark lines because they are too suggestive of the original print in the design as is the case in *Leticia Opal*. Using paint, I outlined pools of emptiness within the pattern. Once dry, I was able to pour latex paint on the different areas of containment. These areas become solid shapes of color.

Another early work in the series is *Cisco Teak* (Fig. 2), whose title also references the fabric's name. Like *Leticia Opal*, this painting is one of the first in the group which provided grounds for further discovery in the process. The selection for this flowery, velvet fabric came by chance as someone else present had a strong response towards it. The response was of pleasure over the

beauty of the design and brightness of the colors. Although I personally did not feel a strong pull towards this pattern, I decided to work with it and use the arbitrary manner in which many shoppers buy. The challenge in *Cisco Teak* was of a very different kind. The fabric's velvet quality, its lime green and red flowers and arabesques, even its softness, all contributed to make it a highly decorative and pleasing to the eye design. The goal here was to tame this exuberance while allowing traces of the original to remain. To do so layers of acrylic paint were added in a variety of greens, covering most of the fabric, working wet on wet. I reinterpreted some of the moments I had used in the tabletop paintings, allowing for the untouched ground to peek through and incorporating dry pigment in some of the washes as texture to cover the darkest background areas. The result was somewhat unexpected. The various greens against touches of neon produced the illusion of a halo and opened up the space towards the darkness of what resembles a starry sky. This visual effect is only noticeable after looking at the painting for a few slow moments. Georgia O'Keeffe explored a similar composition, looking up at the night sky through the leaves and branches of a tree, in *The Lawrence Tree* of 1929. *Cisco Teak*, with its neon flowers suspended in the night, is, to me, also evocative of the tropical forests of the Dominican Republic and the fluorescent nebulas of the 'cocuyos' (fireflies) I used to chase about in the summer nights.

Colonial Williamsburg (Fig. 3) is a painting completed about halfway through the series. This fabric interested me in a great way from the moment I saw it because of its classic beauty. The design is based on carefully depicted ivory and brown tulips with leaves balancing the flowers on each side. I was intrigued by the origin of the design, one inspired by authentic documents from the American colonial period. For this painting I envisioned a red sea engulfing the bouquet of

flowers, disrupting the peaceful manner of the piece with chaos and wild exuberance. I wanted both the color and texture to become overwhelming to a point of disgust. This painting is the ‘hottest’ of the series due to its bright hues. It evokes fire flames and is to some that have experienced it, quite disturbing to look at for any sustained period of time. As such it is stylistically in opposition to the tasteful elegance that inspired the original. *Colonial Williamsburg* is one of the most tactile and drastically changed of the paintings. Because most of the background is covered, it exists somewhere between abstraction and representation.

One of the paintings in which I allowed myself the highest level of freedom in the application of the paint is *Leticia in Black and Yellow* (Fig. 4). This painting is a re-interpretation of *Leticia Opal*, the first painting in the series. My intent in the second version was to reach a much higher level of exuberance, creating rhythm through intricate use of lines that become webs that encapsulate the pattern as they become patterns themselves..

Humor is also a factor in how I address some of the paintings. The printed fabric of *Grand Toile I* (Fig. 5) and *Grand Toile II* (Fig. 6) depict the idyllic scenes of the countryside, with women holding baskets atop the head, washing the laundry by the river stream and men fishing and walking through swirling roads. From the French, *Grand Toile* refers to the grandiose; the design is evocative of the classic tradition as a model of representation. The scenes represented in the fabric are therefore suggestive of a simpler life, ingrained in classic tradition. In both *Grand Toile I*, and *Grand Toile II*, I painted systems of lines and shapes of color that function abstractly establishing an ambiguous relation with the fabric print.

Glamis Terrace (Fig. 7) is a painting I had done earlier in a smaller, square format in which the paint was applied in thin, monochromatic layers that mimic and fight the rhythm of the pattern. This print was particularly interesting to me due to its regular geometric quality and lack of organic features. I was concerned with disturbing the regularity of the pattern for this piece, an issue that was reinforced in the painting for the *Toile* series, due to the exaggerated vertical created by the rectangular format.

Early in the series, I encountered fabric patterns constructing the idea of the exotic and ‘the other’ as representations of tropical flora and fauna. Often these fabrics are done in bright hues and the designs are titled with phrases like *Tropical Sunset*, *Afternoon in the Tropics*, *Saint Tropez* and the like. The emphasis over the foreign and exotic in some fabrics, along with the titles, is to me a reminder of my own liminal state. As a product of two nations the concept of in-betweenness is very close to me. I have found that I no longer fit what is expected to be a true Dominican, nor do I fully fit that mold in America. In *Glamis Terrace* I am attempting to introduce, albeit in a subtle manner that avoids overt figurations, exotic elements to the idea of the castle. These hidden figurations only reward a viewer that is committed to observe the piece for a longer time, and a more intimate experience.

The fabric used in *American Elk* (Fig. 8) is one of the designs I was strongly attracted to but had no clear idea of why. In hindsight, I find there is something fascinating about the bravura of these animals and about the fact that we live a fast-paced, modern life while this species manages to adapt, and exists amidst the chaos of modern times. *American Elk* became the most challenging fabric I worked with in the series due to the intricate nature of the print and the

colors of the original design. In *American Elk* collage is introduced by cutting out and reattaching some of the animals in positions that suggest a sexual act. The action of coitus is not only a way to disturb the rhythm of the pattern. It is also a denial of the idyllic scene in which any form of real life, if construed as pedestrian or crude, is removed. These sexual encounters in the painting, are hidden by the intricate rhythmic quality of the piece and the numerous animals that populate the scene. Like in *Glamis Terrace*, the unexpected act of coitus will only be evident to a viewer who is willing to commit to the painting, thus getting to know it as I must do in approaching each fabric.

The later paintings *Olana* (Fig. 9), *Sosúa Reef* (Fig. 10), *Jungle* (Fig. 11) and *Stalactite* (Fig.12) are concerned with creating active surfaces by deconstructing the pattern and adding layers of textural complexity. Although in these paintings almost all the background is covered, some of the shapes and forms are inspired on the original fabric design. These paintings are a response to the pattern, yet are no longer concerned with retaining any of the background, but with creating abstractions of color, shape and form that are, to some extent, inherited from the original pattern.

FORMAT AND ARRANGEMENT

The artworks in this exhibit are 36 by 60 inches in size. This rectangular, traditional format reinforces the idea of the art object being introduced to the institution of the gallery. The scale and proportion are sustained throughout the series to counter differences in approach and palette. Nine works will hang on the long wall to the left of the space, three pieces will occupy the back wall (Fig. 13, 14). The paintings will be arranged to create color synergy. To control the flow of

light, the windows on the west wall of the gallery will be kept closed thereby emphasizing each artwork, and keeping the rest of the space in a soft light mood. This light arrangement reflects the studio conditions in which the series was conceived.

SUMMARY

The paintings in the *Toile* exhibition are characterized by active surfaces and deconstructions of color, rhythm and form as these relate to printed fabrics. The intent is to remain exploratory and non-specific, semi-abstract and ambiguous. I hope the work serves to build awareness of the persistence of biased representations of cultural values and of obsolete notions of history found in printed fabrics and in society in general.

APPENDIX A: EXHIBITION PHOTOGRAPHS



Figure 1
Leticia Opal
Photo by John Orr



Figure 2
Cisco Teak
Photo by John Orr



Figure 3
Colonial Williamsburg
Photo by John Orr

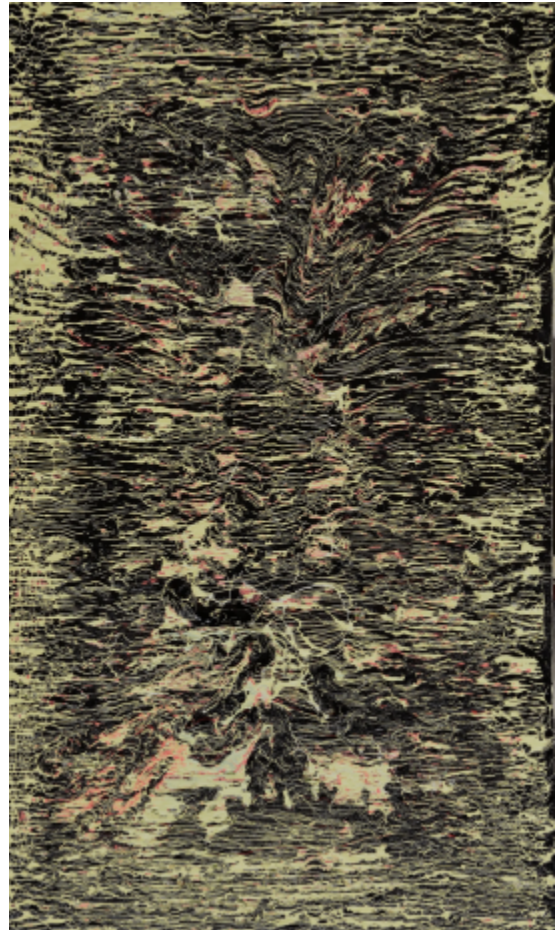


Figure 4
Leticia in Black and Yellow
Photo by John Orr



Figure 5
Grand Toile I
Photo by John Orr

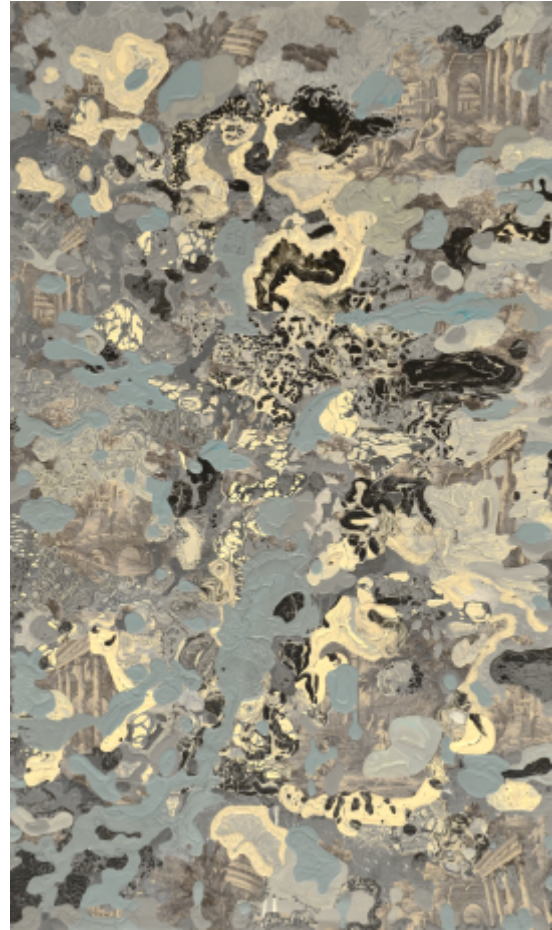


Figure 6
Grand Toile II
Photo by John Orr



Figure 7
Glamis Terrace
Photo by John Orr



Figure 8
American Elk
Photo by John Orr

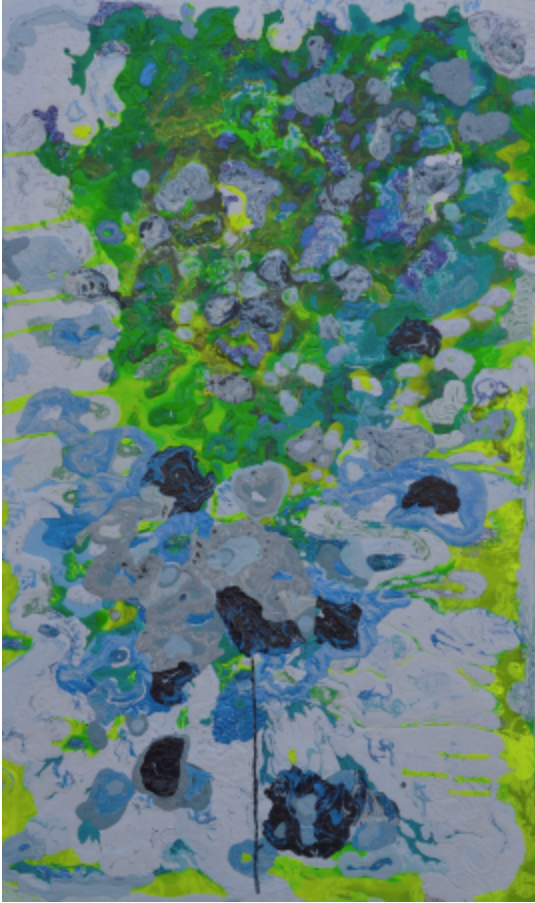


Figure 9
Olana
Photo by John Orr



Figure 10
Sosúa Reef
Photo by John Orr

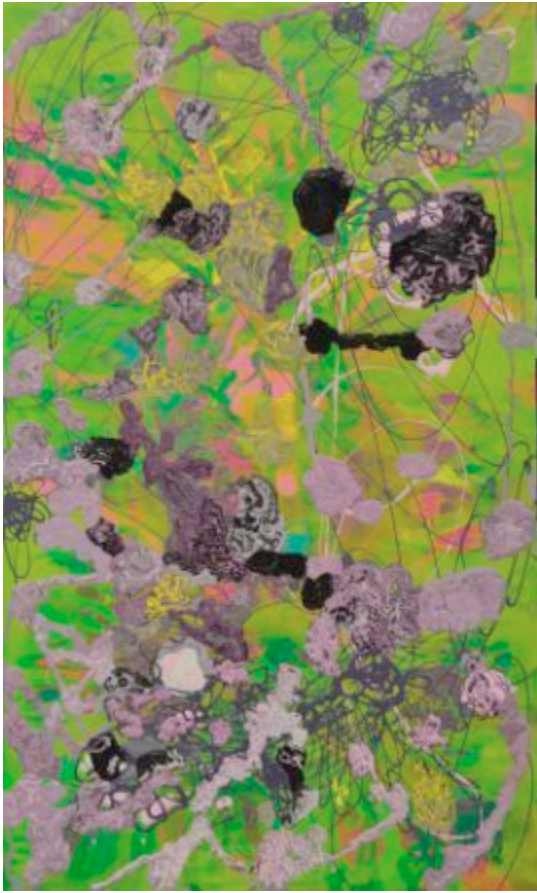


Figure 11
Jungle
Photo by John Orr



Figure 12
Stalactite
Photo by John Orr



Figure 13
Exterior view of the gallery
Photo by Dilenia García

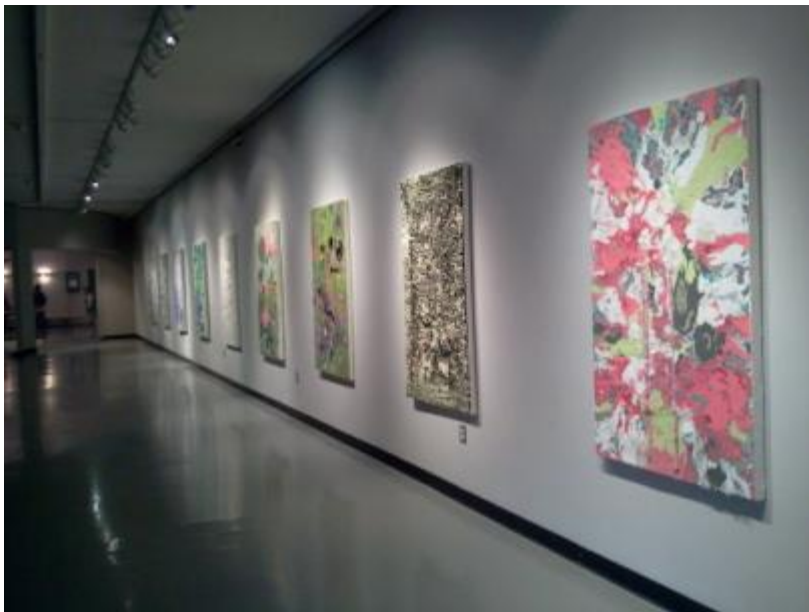


Figure 14
Interior view of the east wall
Photo by Dilenia García

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