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## **Liable to Change**

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Liabile to Change

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

by

Jody Travis Thompson  
McNeese State University  
Bachelor of Arts in Art, 1996

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University of Arkansas

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## **Abstract**

*Liabile to Change* is a body of paintings in which I explore diverse approaches to the representation of visual space. Depictions of space and movement change throughout the pictures by combining various artistic conventions, such as trompe l'oeil realism and non-objective, geometric abstraction. Oil paint, resin, beeswax, and other materials create built-up surfaces which contain the history of their making. Interaction between various finishes and light on these surfaces changes based on the viewers' proximity to the painting. Images of monkey bars, lattice, golden ratio and flower of life patterns provide a structure through which line, form, and space are represented. The disruption of logic created within these structures serves to provide multiple ways of viewing the paintings. These compositions also provide opportunities to visualize the mutability of perception and logic. Through relating my experience of third-person memory following a fall, proximity in space and time is shown to shift and change the perception of an event. This freedom of navigation within the picture plane can be interpreted as a metaphor of wide access to information on the internet. The ability afforded to the masses to assemble their own understanding of cultural memory is blurring the binary construction of collective memory. In this way, the basic principles of fuzzy logic provide a new perspective in visualizing issues surrounding present-day collective memory construction. Through this body of work, I am not addressing physical disruption on the surface of the canvas, as well as disruption of perception systems. My depictions of destabilized perception systems stand as a metaphor for an unstable/unregulated information hub—the internet—and the fallibility/malleability of human memory.

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## Introduction

Reflections on memory and the physical mobility of space inspires this body of work. Materials used in the paintings perform the previously mentioned concepts by representing light, form, line, color, and texture. A visualization of mutability of perception, movement, and logic is the driving force behind formal decisions made in the pictures. Pictorial logic is built and disrupted through the interplay of abstraction and realism across the collective body of paintings. The combination of trompe l'oeil realism with non-objective, geometric abstraction removes the perceived authority of either extreme.

In both individual works and the body of work as a whole, there is no predetermined way of visually navigating through the pictures. This concept recapitulates the effects the internet is having on traditional construction of collective memory. Communicative and cultural memory have traditionally fulfilled distinct and separate roles in the formation of collective memory. In light of current social and cultural norms, the use of fuzzy logic theory may be beneficial in presenting a new way of viewing collective memory as a gradient rather than binary. Details associated with what we know is no longer solely dictated by elite specialists. Although we live in a moment of great informational, financial, and relational expansion, this often comes at the cost of our sense of certainty.

Before attending graduate school, my personal, dogmatic opinions dominated my studio practice. I believed oil paint was superior to all other materials, particularly in the context of painting. In my view, the inclusion of non-art materials in the making of a painting lowered the validity of the object as being a “real” painting. I confined my research and investigation to traditional Italian Renaissance methods, which further reinforced my stance. After years of consistently painting portraiture and figurative work in this manner, I began to desire a new

experience. Alone in my studio, I attempted to paint in ways which were outside of my standard methods. Many attempts to produce different types of pictures failed. The results too closely resembled the rest of my work. It did not occur to me that I could not enlarge the scope of my practice until I expanded my narrow views of what I thought painting should be.

In the graduate school environment, I realized that in limiting the scope of my research, as well as my connection with the outside world, I had restricted my ability to develop myself as an artist. The desire to expand was by no means a refusal of my previous way of painting, but in order to evolve, I had to temporarily set aside everything I thought I knew about art, and keep an open mind. I experimented with various materials such as beeswax, resin, duct tape, and makeup, which resulted in material-driven, abstract paintings. From this experimentation, I became interested in these materials' interactions with light. I noticed that light's interactions with various finishes changed based on the proximity of my body in space around them. Also, I noticed certain materials created veils, which could hide information in one area of the surface, while revealing textures in others.

I also experimented with how I would begin a painting. Previously, I began by envisioning what the picture would look like when completed, and took the appropriate steps to achieve the desired result. In order to work against that way of making, I relegated my decision-making process to allowing the materials to determine the next course of action to take when painting. After a period of working in this way, I realized that I was becoming dogmatic in this approach as well. Remaining open to expanding my studio practice further, I looked for more ways to disrupt my process. I strategically contradicted my own intuition when making. I introduced projected light onto the surfaces. I mixed abstractionist and realist painting methods. Blending rendered, pictorial space with aspects of material-driven abstraction allows singular

paintings to operate in multiple ways. The viewer can perceive the illusion of three-dimensional space in the two-dimensional picture plane, while at the same time experiencing the interaction of real light on the surface of the canvas, which intermingles with illusory, *trompe l'oeil* light effects. Throughout this time, I researched perception and memory. However, the material performance of these concepts took precedence over what scholarly research was saying about them.

### **Monkey Bars, Navigation, and Third-Person Memory**

The freedom I experienced in combining different painting agendas reminded me of the freedom of movement I experienced as a child when navigating the areas within a jungle gym. I found in a personal, childhood experience a motif that addresses the malleability of perception and memory, and which also provides a literal framework for formal invention. As a child, I would experiment with movement throughout the complex spaces created within a set of monkey bars. One of the many ways that I would move through the structure was to look down through the interior from above. At one point, I fell back through the center. The force of the impact of the bars on the way down caused me to lose consciousness. My memory of the event has expanded. I perceive this experience as three boys - myself and two friends. I recall a single moment in time from multiple points of view.

Movement of the viewer's body in space around the painting alters the perception of the painting's surface through the combination of varying degrees of finish. Techniques such as *trompe l'oeil* are employed to imply literal space. However, as the viewer gets closer to the surface of the painting, the materials are handled in such a way that realism changes into material abstraction. Subtle differences in finishes reflect light in various ways that are only visible when

observing the surface of the painting from up close. Combining these applications into a single work provides the viewer with an experience which continues to change as they move their body around the painting. Opportunities for varied experiences offer, as Sheryl Sandberg said, “the ability to forge a unique path.” (2013)<sup>1</sup>, when interacting with the work. In her book, *Lean In* (2013), Sandberg references jungle gyms as a way to explain her career path. A ladder permits only incremental, up and down motion. In a jungle gym, the range of motion is wider, and the path is not so clearly prescribed. An important aspect of expanded mobility is experienced when deciding which way to move. The performative aspects of the jungle gym and the mutability of perception as it relates to memory are evident when considering the impact schema have on navigation of both literal and metaphorical space.

My memories of the fall in the jungle gym are split into multiple points of view. Cognitive psychologist Elizabeth Loftus’ (1979)<sup>2</sup> work on memory distortion and false memories shows that human memory is malleable. Third-person memories are episodic memories: events in an individual’s past that are recalled and experienced from an outside point of view. A high degree of vividness is key to the perceived soundness of the memory. In his work, *Remembering: A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology* (1932)<sup>3</sup>, the British psychologist Sir Frederic Bartlett furthered the idea that memories of past experiences and events are, in effect, mental reconstructions. Bartlett concludes that instead of being direct retrieval of observations made at the time, individual practices and cultural points of view affect how memory is perceived. Bartlett found that instead of being like a photographic image which has

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<sup>1</sup> Sandberg, Sheryl, *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead*, 2013, Alfred A. Knopf, New York., pg. 53

<sup>2</sup> Loftus, Elizabeth F., *The Malleability of Human Memory: Information introduced after we view an incident can transform memory*, *American Scientist*, Vol. 67, No. 3 (May-June 1979), pp. 312-320

<sup>3</sup> Bartlett, F.C., *Remembering: A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology*, 1932, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK



been stored and retrieved, remembering relies on what he calls *schemas* to produce a perception of what happened. In the context of my paintings, the built-up surfaces of the canvas and their relationship to reflected light becomes the schema. In order to fully understand what happened, the viewer has to understand how previous layers of paint impact the reflection of light. While previous layers are painted over, the texture remains and alters the reflection of light on the surface. Perception of the original appearance of previous layers is less important than the residual effects, or memory, of their structure.

### **Navigation, The Internet, Collective Memory, and Specialists**

As illustrated in *Liabie to Change*, the flexibility of navigation allows for multiple avenues of understanding. However, increased accessibility of information brings with it a need to update existing modes of understanding ourselves. Advanced technology provides increased access to a greater supply of information in a shorter amount of time. The ability to authenticate our experience is a function that social media can provide. Social media scholars, John P. Girard and JoAnn L. Girard (2011) write about this expanding access to information: “Social media allows for a hypothesis or opinion to be opened up for questioning and a conversation through comments, rather than being just a single story.” (Girard & Girard, 2011, pg. 47)<sup>4</sup> The role of self-expression by the masses brings individual voices together to form one mass or whole, i.e., becoming a group of specialists. While this is helpful, it is still important to question the credibility of any assumptions. Authenticated information is necessary in order to make

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<sup>4</sup> Girard, John P., Girard, JoAnn L., *Social Knowledge: Using Social Media to Know What You Know*, 2011, Information Science Reference (an imprint of IGI Global), Hershey, New York.

informed decisions, or before discarding or adopting a viewpoint. In the world of social media, credibility stems from intentions, and it is incumbent upon the reader to verify a claim.

Similarly, social interaction via the internet can result in the necessity to sift through extreme amounts of information. Through the increased ease of access of information, the internet is disrupting the traditional dynamic of communicative and cultural memory. The tension between this binary is being loosened by the ability of the internet to not just retain visual knowledge, but to overwhelm the individual with information.

The ability to access and share information by any individual with a computer device is one of the ways in which traditional structures of collective memory are disrupted. Collective memory, as advanced by the philosopher and sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1992)<sup>5</sup>, speaks to the construction of identity by a social group through the sharing of information. This model of collective memory is composed of two distinct parts which serve distinct functions: (a) communicative memory and (b) cultural memory. Communicative memory, as opposed to cultural, is personal, and is an effect of taking in visual imagery through communication and social interaction. Day to day interaction versus long term carrying of information through tradition are examples of the different ways that communicative and cultural memory are expressed in social realms.

Whether relying on oral or written traditions, specialists play a significant role in institutional construction of cultural memory. Specialists have traditionally been viewed as highly skilled individuals in their fields such as shamans, priests, scholars, rabbis, and others.

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<sup>5</sup> Halbwachs, Maurice, *On Collective Memory*, 1992, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, The Heritage of Sociology; A series Edited by Donald N. Levine, Morris Janowitz, Founding Editor

The requirement for specialized individuals to carry the memory of a culture came from the need for an organized society to transmit a specific set of traditions as dictated strict scripts. In this way, the institutional character of cultural memory does not apply to communicative memory.

Communicative memory is non-institutional; is not supported by any institutions of learning, transmission, and interpretation; is not cultivated by specialists and is not summoned or celebrated on special occasions; it is not formalized and stabilized by any forms of material symbolization. Communicative memory lives in everyday interaction and communication and, for this very reason, has only a limited time depth which reaches typically no farther back than eighty years, the period of three interacting generations. (Assmann 2008)<sup>6</sup>

Communicative memory takes place within social settings through interaction between individuals. There are no traditional, official societies or organizations that determine how the information is to be taught, passed along, or explained. Rather than requiring qualified specialists, communicative memory develops and evolves through reciprocal exchanges of information through the interactions of individuals. This type of communication does not follow a specific format. It happens naturally in a manner which is not predetermined. The role of the specialist speaks to the tendency to categorize information in cultural memory. The result is a fixed way of looking back on or dealing with prior knowledge. In this way, specialists determine how we should understand knowledge from what is assumed to be a trusted and accurate view of the past.

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<sup>6</sup> Assman, Jan, Czaplicka, John, *Collective Memory and Cultural Identity*, New German Critique, No. 65, Cultural History/Cultural Studies, (Spring—Summer, 1995), pp. 125-133, Duke University Press

## The Internet, The New Specialists, and Fuzzy Logic

As demonstrated in postmodern art, the breaking of strict rules that determine use of materials in painting provides a way to visualize the lack of requirement for an elite specialist. My camouflaging of makeup as oil paint is meant to illustrate this flexibility. Similarly, the internet and social media challenge traditional models of cultural and collective memory by allowing communication between individuals to take on the role traditionally held by specialists in cultural memory. Instead of someone else determining how the masses should understand the knowledge that is accessible to them, an individual with a computer device can decide for themselves what information is essential. The ability to research or expand access to social interactions across the globe allows these individuals to construct their understanding through direct communication with others. For instance, Girard and Girard (2011) refer to bloggers as “the new masters in a modern and distributed system of learning.” (Girard & Girard, 2011, xxi)<sup>7</sup> They go on to say that anyone who blogs “frequently will tell you that they mix formal material with insights and indiscretions into their histories and beliefs.” (Girard & Girard, 2011, xxi)<sup>8</sup> In this way, the internet provides the option of mass communication to individuals which undermines the role traditionally played by specialists.

The ability afforded to the masses to assemble an understanding of knowledge creates a fuzzy middle ground between communicative and cultural memory roles. Lines between personal revelations in traditional models of communicative memory and the lack thereof in cultural memory become blurred. Girard and Girard (2011) refer to this as a “socio-technical

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<sup>7</sup> Girard, John P., Girard, JoAnn L., *Social Knowledge: Using Social Media to Know What You Know*, 2011, Information Science Reference (an imprint of IGI Global), Hershey, New York.

<sup>8</sup> Girard, John P., Girard, JoAnn L., *Social Knowledge: Using Social Media to Know What You Know*, 2011, Information Science Reference (an imprint of IGI Global), Hershey, New York.

system not a semantic engine” and that these “mimic the common room and the water cooler but extend over both time and space to magnify their utility a thousand-fold.” Rather than knowledge and memory passing down as an unchanging tradition, individuals have access to information through “multiple applications that interact with each other seamlessly.” (Girard & Girard, 2011, xxi)<sup>9</sup> New patterns of finding information are not designed but rather come into being which opens up access to unexpected information.

While concentrating on the interaction of abstraction and realism, I wanted to make sure that I was not limiting myself by excluding their extremes. A possible way of visualizing the need to accept or support various levels of uncertainty and possibility that the internet affords would be to consider what is known as fuzzy logic theory. (2016)<sup>10</sup> Dr. Lotfi Zadeh of the University of California at Berkeley was the first person to look at fuzzy logic — a way of dealing with computing that is based on different amounts of truth instead of the binary true or false. Additionally, the system of fuzzy logic in Zadeh’s research looks at the application development of artificial intelligence. This system of logic addresses the relationship of natural language to artificial intelligence (natural language is any language that has evolved in a way that is not premeditated).

Modernism is the world-view that absolute truth exists. Postmodernism is the world-view that there are no absolutes. Fuzzy logic seems to fit in the middle by acknowledging absolutes while at the same time allowing degrees of membership. This flexibility allows fuzzy

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<sup>9</sup> Girard, John P., Girard, JoAnn L., *Social Knowledge: Using Social Media to Know What You Know*, 2011, Information Science Reference (an imprint of IGI Global), Hershey, New York.

<sup>10</sup> Rouse, Margaret, *Fuzzy Logic*, 2016, SearchEnterpriseAI, <https://searchenterpriseai.techtarget.com/definition/fuzzy-logic>

logic to combat the extremes of both modernism and postmodernism, and thus prove a benefit to society in ways far beyond what is envisioned by most fuzzy logic researchers. (Simon 2006)<sup>11</sup>

The basic principles of fuzzy logic provide a new perspective in understanding present-day situations that relate to collective memory and its connection to structures of logic that have many values. Instead of ultimate truth, the internet affords individuals the ability to blend information, history, and images in order to present new and distinctive ways of understanding knowledge pertinent to their experiences. When viewed through the conceptual lens of fuzzy logic theory, *Liable to Change* visualizes the idea of mutability by representing a confluence of visual logics which function ambiguously within the picture plane. In establishing a zone of possible compatibility between extremes, a tentative balance can be conjured.

## Conclusion

My desire to expand my studio practice and grow as an artist stemmed from the feeling of being confined by a limited view of what art had to be. This feeling pushed me to expand the scope of my studio practice as well as expand my world view. Through this process, I discovered the freedom not to discard extremes, but to navigate among them. The paintings included in *Liable to Change* utilize disruption as a way of continually forcing me to question my decision-making processes when making a picture. Embracing fluidity in how I respond to the interaction of formal design elements with the physical qualities of the materials I am using, gives me the freedom to move between two widely culturally held extremes: abstraction and realism.

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<sup>11</sup> Simon, Dan, Truth, American Culture, and Fuzzy Logic, Conference Paper, 2006, <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/4248600>

By abstracting perception and memory, this work invites reflection on the effects the internet is having on the construction of collective memory. The multidirectional form of communication of the internet allows for an expanded world view rather than confining individuals to a prescribed way of viewing their culture. The ability to access and share information from anyone online is one of the ways traditional structures of collective memory is disrupted. Similarly, the internet and social media challenge conventional models of cultural and collective memory by allowing communication between individuals to take on the role traditionally held by specialists in cultural memory. The ability afforded to the masses to assemble an understanding of knowledge creates a fuzzy middle ground between communicative and cultural memory roles. The basic principles of fuzzy logic provide a new perspective in understanding present-day collective memory situations. Rather than denying the existence of a right or wrong, my goal is to move skillfully within visual and metaphorical ambiguities. This body of work attempts to reconcile myself, and perhaps the viewer, to uncertainty.

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