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The Branch on Which the Blossom Hangs

Thomas Sterling Coffey

University of Arkansas, Fayetteville

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The Branch on Which the Blossom Hangs

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

by

Thomas Sterling Coffey
Harding University
Bachelor of Fine Arts in Painting, 2015

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This thesis is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council:

Sam King, M.F.A.
Thesis Director

David Andree, M.F.A.
Committee Member

Marc Ethan Mitchell, M.F.A.
Committee Member

Abra Levenson, Ph.D.
Committee Member

Abstract

The Branch on Which the Blossom Hangs is a body of paintings which address the relationship between landscape or physical presence and the primary experiences of emotion and perception. Through this examination of phenomenology and the malleability of the perceptual apparatus, the paintings express my feeling of dislocation caused by a cycle between depression, dissociation, and mental well-being. They question how an individual relates to their environment. The paintings seek to elicit the allusive and embodied qualities of poetry, framing and evoking a broader experience without defining it. By using the recognizable visual language of landscape, abstracted to the point of familiarity if not identifiability, and immersive, human scale, the works envelop the viewer in a space in which they cannot comfortably situate themselves. This elusive quality is vital – to accurately express these fluctuating states, they must balance a sense of both distance and belonging.

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Place, Perception, and Inner Vision	2
Poetics	7
Painting	8
Bibliography	12

Introduction

I am interested in painting's potential to have diverse meanings based on interpretation. I use this variety of meaning to create an outlook on both the exterior and interior world, responding to daily changes in condition and perspective. My work is motivated by a feeling of distance and dislocation from my surroundings, as though life is operating at a different pace than I am, almost as if everything is too big and moving too fast for me to be able to grab hold of. My practice is about seeking connection, attempting to ground myself in the immediate without being dragged away or overcome by it.

In the poem "He Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven," William Butler Yeats describes his wish to take the night sky and spread it under the feet of the person he loves. The act described in this poem is the same desire that motivates my work – the attempt to reach out and grasp something vast and distant, to take hold of it and transform it into a tangible expression of feeling.

I make paintings which approach my surroundings with a poetic sensibility, negotiate my sense of spatial and emotional dislocation, and draw close to my subject matter through tactile material. They share my sensory and emotional experience of my environment by creating atmospheres which can be joyful, overwhelming, frantic, peaceful, disjuncting, or some combination of these all at once.

My work has changed considerably during my time in this program, both in form and content. In the beginning, I was creating representational work which documented my struggle with depression and suicidal ideation through obscured self-portraits. Following that, I began making paintings of abstracted, ambiguous landscapes, which I thought of as being a type of world-building. Those transitioned into pieces which were not about an ambiguous or distant

landscape, but the land which was most immediate and personal to me – my backyard. The paintings I am currently making have some connection with all these pursuits. The production of these different bodies of work has been punctuated by several intense depressive episodes. Naturally, my perception of the world has changed drastically as my brain chemistry has re-balanced. The work now serves two purposes: to express my changing perception of my surroundings, and to try to understand my relationship to the world through making.

Place, Perception, and Inner Vision

One of the most distinct and yet counter-intuitive aspects of perception is its unreliability. This is especially true of visual perception – we imagine that the eyes are passive sensors, recording whatever information passes in front of them. This model of perception could be described as, “the observer looks at the object.” This seems to be a straightforward and defensible description of sight, but perception is much more complicated. It accounts for the barest mechanics of vision, the collection of light, but does not account for the processing and interpretation of that visual information. Describing sight in this way is like describing a computer only in terms of its hardware, with no mention of the software that utilizes it and gives it function. This definition is also problematic in that it assumes the observer and object are cleanly separable things – a distinct self looking out at the world (more on this later).

Twentieth-century abstract painter Hans Hofmann wrote extensively on the operation of perception, stating that “seeing with the physical eyes borders on blindness. We see, indeed, with all our senses. All our senses are dependent on each other in their action upon the mind where they join and overlap...”¹ James Elkins, art historian at the School of the Art Institute of

¹ William C. Seitz, *Hans Hofmann*, p. 14

Chicago, echoes this sentiment in his book *The Object Stares Back* (1996). “Recent medical experiments have shown that a great deal of vision is unconscious: we are blind to certain things and blind to our blindnesses. Those twin blindnesses are necessary for ordinary seeing: we need to be continuously partially blind in order to see. In the end, blindnesses are the constant companions of seeing and even the very condition of seeing itself.”²

According to Hofmann, these limitations are compensated for by something he calls spiritual projection or the inner eye. I interpret “our power of spiritual projection” as the combination of empathy, which he describes as “the imaginative projection of one’s own consciousness into another being or thing,” and sensory engagement. This is the core, I think, of his idea of “inner vision.” Our senses do take in individual types of information, but without very specific conditions, such as floating within a sensory deprivation tank, we do not experience them in isolation – it is nearly impossible to completely separate or nullify our senses. Even if we could do so easily, our own mental activity would rush in to fill the gaps. All sensory information goes through a process of interpretation and association. To focus on one method of experience in the exclusion of others seems a rather empty prospect when compared to the richness of our own mental activity.

This type of elevated sense is the phenomenon that Hofmann characterizes as “inner vision.” It is not strictly sensory, nor is it entirely mental, but some new melding of the two; it places sight and mental processing together as part of a larger perceptual apparatus. I seek to consciously engage this mode of perception in my paintings, combining visual and other sensory stimuli and their associated memories and emotions, and leaving some record of these in the work.

² James Elkins, *The Object Stares Back*, p. 13

Returning to an earlier point, just as physical and mental processes of vision are not completely separable, neither are observer and object. There can be no clean distinction between the two, because they are part of the same system of perception, part of the same exchange. If I were to go outside into my yard and look toward the back fence, I would see a large tree growing from rich, dark soil. I, the observer, see the object. However, in looking at the tree, I might begin to think of the body of a deer below its base, buried there after our neighbor struck it with a car. The object suddenly changes, then; what was a tree is now a headstone. Furthermore, when it becomes this *memento mori*, I might recall that event and consider my own mortality. I am no longer the same observer that began observing – the act of looking changed me. By simple virtue of light passing between us, both of us have transformed.

In describing this process of perception as transformative exchange, Elkins writes, “These are not things that happen sometimes, or under special conditions. They are not subtle nuances or refinements to the way we look at objects. Instead, they are the conditions of seeing itself. A picture *is* the ways and places it is viewed, and I *am* the result of these various encounters.”³

It should be noted that this line of thinking regarding the subjectivity of perception is not original to me – much ink has been spilled by writers and philosophers on this subject over the last two centuries. The question of what effect modernity and postmodernity have had on the observer is not a new one. Indeed, as far back as the early nineteenth century, the individual as observer became an object of investigation; subjective vision, “a vision that had been taken out of the incorporeal relations of the camera obscura and relocated into the human body,”⁴ signified a shift from “the geometrical optics of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to physiological

³ Elkins, 43

⁴ Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*, p. 16

optics.”⁵ In the realm of art history, this shift is often discussed through models of representational painting – the analytical, perspectival geometry of the Renaissance as compared to the embodied optics of Impressionism.

For the past two years, my work has been deeply connected to my environment, the space immediately around me every day. Much of the reason that my work reflects on nature is because the relationship between individual and nature echoes that of observer and object. Our societal concept of nature is dependent on that model of perception. Much of Western thought presupposes that the material world is something other than ourselves, a “strictly mechanical realm, [...] a determinate structure whose laws of operation could be discerned only via mathematical analysis.”⁶ This idea of detached measurement, of “disinterested sciences,” goes back to Galileo, who wrote that “this grand book the universe [...] is written in the language of mathematics, and its characters are triangles, circles, and other geometric figures without which it is humanly impossible to understand a single word of it; without these, one wanders about in a dark labyrinth.”⁷ This view splits the individual – the calculating mind – and the environment – everything that the mind measures. This results in the bizarrely narcissistic idea that nature is everything that is not us, rather than a massive, encompassing system in which we are but small participants.

In describing nature’s role in her creative practice, poet Mary Oliver wrote, “A certain lucent correspondence has served me, all my life, in the ongoing search for my deepest thoughts and feelings. It is the relationship of my own mind to landscape, to the physical world – especially to that part of it with which, over the years, I have (and not casually) become

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ David Abrams, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, p. 32

⁷ Galileo Galilei, cited in Edwin Jones, *Reading the Book of Nature* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1989), p. 22

intimate.”⁸ Correspondence is, I think, the perfect word. When clouds roll in and the sky is overcast, and things begin to turn dim and gray, my mind and body respond with a similar heavy, sleepy haze. Conversely, if I feel chipper the next morning, I might say that “I woke up and the birds were chirping,” as if my good mood caused the world to be brighter and more full of life.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty wrote about this sympathetic relationship extensively. His field of phenomenology, philosophy concentrated on direct experience, is inseparably linked to the study of perception.

My gaze pairs off with colour, and my hand with hardness and softness, and in this transaction between the subject of sensation and the sensible it cannot be held that one acts while the other suffers the action, or that one confers significance on the other. Apart from the probing of my eye or my hand, and before my body synchronizes with it, the sensible is nothing but a vague beckoning⁹ [...] in so far as my hand knows hardness and softness, and my gaze knows the moon’s light, it is as a certain way of linking up with the phenomenon and communicating with it. Hardness and softness, roughness and smoothness, moonlight and sunlight, present themselves in our recollection not pre-eminently as sensory contents but as certain kinds of symbioses, certain ways the outside has of invading us and certain ways we have of meeting this invasion...¹⁰

The act of perceiving causes not just mental, but physical responses. Observing the weight and texture of a form provokes us to touch it, to feel it, to imagine it in our hands. Elkins wrote that he is most keenly aware of this temptation when viewing paintings in a museum. “These are the almost inaudible urgings of my possessive eyes [...] My eyes and mind and body and fingertips all respond to the picture, or rather they *want* to respond, and the picture keeps stopping them, shutting them down and trying to keep them quiet.”¹¹

It is for this reason that I embrace extremes of texture in my painting. In *Home with the Leaves*, the differences in surface are stark. The citrus yellows and greens of the background are

⁸ Mary Oliver, *Home*, p. 22

⁹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 214.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 317

¹¹ Elkins, 24

flat, with a slick, enamel-like sheen, whereas the deep indigo blues and warm reds and violets of the foreground are thick and coarse. Large amounts of earth and sand are mixed into the paint, giving it mass that builds up to two inches off the panel and a rough, matte surface. In making a painting that is rich in physicality, I am hoping to create the tactile response that Elkins and Merleau-Ponty describe, in which the viewer's desire to physically engage with the painting mirrors my own desire for connection and grounding.

My painting practice operates at the confluence of these ideas: that perception is malleable, equally informed by both inner and outer life, and that it has the ability to change myself and my surroundings in harmony with each other. I use spatial distance to describe emotional distance in my work because my experience of one is often dependent on the other.

Poetics

When asked what goals I have for my paintings, how I want them to be perceived or experienced, or what I want them to *do*, my answer is often that I want them to achieve a state of poetry. Having already referenced W. B. Yeats and Mary Oliver in this text, this is perhaps unsurprising. When I consider how paintings might operate under the paradigm of poetry, a writing I find myself returning to is *Lightness* by Italo Calvino. His essay very eloquently expresses one of the aspects of poetry that I wish to achieve in painting, which is its lightness. Partially because of its ambiguity (as it is not bound by specificity of meaning or chronology), poetry can sort of float above heavier, more concrete language. In a Q&A session with University of Arkansas MFA students, poet and Hyperallergic critic John Yau said he believes one of the biggest failings of English literature education in America is that students are taught that poetry is a puzzle to be solved. "What does the author *really mean* when they say *xyz*?" Rather than allowing room for the text to be evocative, sentences are pulled apart and

meticulously analyzed, each metaphor carefully and rigidly pinned down. This is precisely not how poetry is meant to function. Poetry's quality of lightness stems largely from its small footprint, its economy of means. Through careful selection of a small handful of words, poets open the door to vast ideas. The poetic experience is not illustrative, but allusive; it calls up memories, associations, and reflections in the reader's mind that go beyond linguistic definition.

I think of Calvino's account of Cavalcanti in relation to this. While walking in a graveyard, Cavalcanti is surrounded and accosted by a group of men seeking to start a fight with him. "Gentlemen," he tells them, "you may say anything you wish to me in your own home." Then he nimbly leaps over one of the nearby tombs and escapes. "What interests us here is not so much the spirited reply attributed to Cavalcanti," Calvino states. "What strikes me most is the visual scene evoked by Boccaccio, of Cavalcanti freeing himself with a leap '*si come colui che leggerissimo era*,' a man very light in body."¹²

I do not want my paintings to serve as a simple concept-delivery device, an easily digestible plan-and-execute equation. This direct conveyance of meaning is the duty of prose. My hope is that they maintain enough ambiguity that instead of being pinned down and killed by easy understanding, they can instead nimbly leap away and defy simple definition.

Painting

This move toward the evocative and away from the literal has been part of the character of abstract painting for generations. Indeed, the divide between prose and poetry is not dissimilar to the divide between representation and abstraction. Many painters have had the moniker "Lyrical Abstraction" applied to their work, from Wassily Kandinsky to Joan Mitchell, Cy

¹² Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, p. 12

Twombly, and Jean-Paul Riopelle, indicating a long-lasting set of shared priorities, if not a school of thought in the typical sense.

My work is influenced by many painters from the early half of the twentieth century, from early American modernists and Stieglitz Circle artists such as Arthur Dove and Marsden Hartley, to the New York School and Second-Generation Abstract Expressionists like Philip Guston, Milton Resnick, Joan Mitchell, and Larry Poons. Their resonance with my thinking and work comes not just from the expressive mark-making and carefully modulated color we share, but also from their response to the natural world. Dove and Mitchell in particular turned to landscape as a means to investigate forces invisible to the eye, whether that was the gravitational effect of the moon on the tides, or in Mitchell's case, remembered feelings of "love and death and all that crap."¹³ Her work has a lyrical quality, achieving in painted image what great poetry does, distilling large, intangible phenomena into a single moment of feeling.

I consider myself to be in conversation with many contemporary artists who are conducting similar investigations, both formal and conceptual. Emma Webster and Allison Gildersleeve are two such painters, who reconfigure landscape and environment into abstraction to negotiate feelings of distance and belonging.

Since I am questioning the relationship of the individual or part to the whole, micro-macro relationships are very important to my work. Quite often, the relationships are ambiguous or fluctuating. A painting could seem to be referencing the texture of a piece of tree bark, or the topography of a large region, or move back and forth between the two. Many pieces are produced through the accumulation of small marks, which waver between coalescing into larger implied shapes and lines or retaining their distinct identity within a field of similar noise. The

¹³ Patricia Albers, *Joan Mitchell: Lady Painter: a Life*, p. 6

marks also serve as an index, an imprint of the artist's hand, speaking to my own bodily experience in the world and in the production of the paintings.

The Branch on Which the Blossom Hangs is a reference to Dave Hickey's essay "Pontormo's Rainbow," a text which advocates color as a substitute to or reprieve from language.

The branch upon which the blossom hangs may be long or short, rough or smooth, strong or weak according to our expectations, but the redness of the blossom is irrevocable, and the word "red" tells us next to nothing about it. [...] Thus, when color signifies anything, it always signifies, as well, a respite from language and history – a position from which we may contemplate absence and death in the paradise of the moment.¹⁴

Color serves a similar experiential purpose in my work; in moving away from a more traditional landscape palette to one that is broader and more highly-saturated, I am creating paintings which are loud, and sometimes alien. The palettes are familiar, but not nameable, and frequently cause a dislocating vibration of complementary contrast between neighboring forms.

Materially, the paintings are quite heavy, their surfaces thick and craggy. While I incorporate large amounts of wax, plaster, and mediums into my works, I am not doing so out of a desire to create objects as opposed to paintings (a distinction of which I am suspicious), but simply to alter the paint's physical characteristics. Texture and materiality here are testament to "the weight, the inertia, the opacity of the world"¹⁵ that Calvino describes in *Lightness*. This is something of a paradox, as the work also embodies the titular lightness in its ambiguity. These seemingly antithetical forces operate in conjunction with one another; the heaviness and body of the paint speak to worldliness and physical presence, but the abstracted forms and ungrounded composition of the paintings lightly elude literal interpretation – they are Cavalcanti's leap. In

¹⁴ Dave Hickey, *Air Guitar*, p. 50

¹⁵ Calvino, 4

balancing these ideas together on one surface, the works reflect the perceptual malleability discussed earlier. They speak to both the physical, embodied experience of the world and to the evocative, allusive quality of poetry and feeling.

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