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As the Sun Yellowes the Green of the Maple Tree

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As the Sun Yellowes the Green of the Maple Tree

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

by

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Abstract

As the Sun Yellows the Green of the Maple Tree is a body of paintings investigating communication, improvisation, play, and painting's capacity for transformation.

Reflecting on my childhood spent with my brother, Austin, who experiences sensory differences due to autism, I establish a painted space that is both forcibly disjointed and meaningfully connected, invoking the uncertainty and complexity of perception and communication. Through chromatic nuance, physicality, representational ambiguity, and visual tempo, I invite the viewer into the act of slow looking—to encounter each work as a living, breathing, individual entity.

In the studio, I invent rules and aleatoric devices, mimicking an engagement with board games or puzzles, and pursue a jazz-like improvisation within these restrictions. The result is an open, scrambled experience of space, like a jigsaw puzzle built from pieces sourced from multiple boxes. Spatial relationships and potential meanings seem to shift with every glance, suggestive of my own experiences reading imaginative and poetic writers like Haruki Murakami and Italo Calvino.

Provisional grids support tessellating blocks of color to create relationships of alternating friction and calm. I sew scraps of work together in a lyrical rhythm reminiscent of quilting, invoking logics of multiplicity and interconnectivity. Josef Albers observed that color behaves like a human “in two distinct ways: the first in self-realization and then in the realization of relationships with others.”

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Introduction

There are three main values that I seek in all painting: slowness, openness, and liveliness. All these values present themselves in many different formats. Slowness could mean the painting was created slowly perhaps inviting the viewer to spend more time dissecting the surface, or slowness could be contained in a painting that was created rapidly but possesses qualities that force a more temporal engagement. In my work, I seek to increase the variety of these qualities to grow the potential for deeper sensorial experiences. A painting should be considered as a living, breathing entity that has a voice that can only be heard fully through prolonged looking or multiple viewings.

Openness is another quality that can assist in providing an opportunity for slowness or prolonged looking. This concentration on openness stems from my love for jazz and poetry; two other mediums that require slowness and consideration to be fully experienced and created. I hunt for moments in the paintings that provide a multiplicity of potential meanings which the viewer must hunt and find. These ‘easter eggs’ provide an opportunity for a work to play out completely differently during each viewing session. These shifting readings can be determined by anything from a shift in the current mood or updated life experience of the viewer. This however does not mean the work is open to an infinite number of possible receptions, but rather the work contains a deep range of potential starting points, ending points, or potential solutions. The quote from one of my favorite French poets, Mallarmé, comments on this specific value, “To name an object is to suppress three-fourths of the enjoyment of the poem, which is composed of the pleasure of guessing little by little”.¹

¹ Umberto Eco, *The Open Work* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 8.

Lastly, the quality of liveliness is something all these elements work together to achieve. Perception is always participatory. Neither the perceiver nor the perceived is entirely passive in the event of perception, even in the case of what we often define as an inanimate painting. Although, to give these objects the full opportunity to engage us and provoke our senses we must question this definition. To define these paintings as inert or passive “we thus block our perceptual reciprocity with that being (painting)”.² I want my paintings to feel like they are caught between stillness and motion. If you look away too long the whole image could change, elements might seem to be falling or floating off the canvas or just barely being held up against the surface by a strong wind behind your back.

I make these paintings and hold these values to better understand the relationship I have with my autistic brother. When young, I was always confused why we couldn’t do certain things that many other families could like going to an amusement park or concert. Not immediately realizing the debilitating effect on my brother those high-sensory environments had on him. I quickly learned how to recognize those sensory triggers as we grew older. Where my family could go was always dictated by the sounds, crowds, and lights that would be present there. The distance that has been placed between us by moving to Fayetteville, Arkansas for graduate school made me conscious of how constantly aware I am of my sensorial environment. Even though my brother is not here with me I have found myself still making plans determined by those same sorts of stimuli.

This training of my awareness has led to the work often combining disparate sensorial spaces in a single painting or in the intentional pairings of multiple works that are at times forcibly disjointed or meaningfully connected. The work utilizes shifts of color, collage, and

² David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous* (New York: Random House, 1997), 56.

visual tempo to create body-affecting experiences and seeks to employ the viewer to become hyper-aware of sensory input both during the viewing experience and afterward.

The Value of Slowness

Slowness has been left behind in our capitalistic, attention-hungry society. Speed and volume of production are constantly the measures of success. Slow looking is a skill that is being lost, but it is an act that holds more importance now than ever. Painting and stationary work can induce a viewer's engagement in the process of slow looking just as much as temporal and time-based work. Stationary work can engender slow looking through content, through its making, and/or through its viewing.

The irony now is that many people want to slow down, but they want to slow down as quickly as possible. Even actions in our daily lives that are by nature slow, we try to speed up. It seems people are increasingly horrified with the potential of being bored. If you're always consuming yourself with a task, you won't be bored. I will argue, however, that boredom can be a strong tool both as an art maker and viewer. Boredom allows space for possibility. The painter Robert Irwin would utilize boredom, created through repetition, as a motivational tool. "I started spending the time just sitting there looking. I would look for about fifteen minutes and just nod off, go to sleep. I'd wake up after about five minutes, and I'd concentrate and look, just sort of mesmerize myself, and I'd conk off again."³ That process assisted Irwin in avoiding overloading a painting with too much-preconceived content or endpoints and allowing the work to tell him what it needed thus intensifying focus and concentration. In this case, it is assisting the maker to

³ Lawrence Weschler. "The Late Lines," in *Seeing is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees: A Life of Contemporary Artist Robert Irwin* (University of California Press, 1982), 76.

produce results that wouldn't necessarily have come out of constant focused production. But boredom can also assist the viewer in seeking out things in a work of art to quench that thirst for interesting content. While boredom could potentially lead to mental wandering and invite distraction, this boredom and distraction could awaken attention. For my practice in the studio, I find boredom to be a tool for discovery and invention. When I find myself bored or stuck on a painting problem I will often turn to manipulating and creating my own tools for mark making that eventually end up lending themselves to the work. I attach many one-inch chip brushes to a piece of wood making a long eighteen-inch brush or build a six-foot-long squeegee from an old snowplow part.

I don't think my brother can be bored because everything holds his interest. I can't recall a time when he even uttered the words "I am bored". Taking a walk with him can be the most engaging experience whether you are walking half a mile around the block or going for a hike in the woods. That half-mile is transformed by having my brother along because every little thing is noticed. Moments commonly thought of as mundane or boring are suddenly interesting when given the time to see them. When I moved down to Fayetteville in the summer of 2018 to begin graduate school, he rode along in the moving truck with me. To entertain himself, and as a result, entertain me as well, he created a chart to track multiple objects or types of vehicles found on the highway. Of course, there were the usual license plate states, but he also had items on his lists like trash bags, dead armadillos, furniture, and blown tire debris. He religiously kept records of everything for the entire drive. This tendency is relayed in my invention of tools, games, and puzzles in the studio. Finding ways to reawaken interest in something usually labeled as mundane or create new methods to forcibly slow down the process of making.

The French novelist Gustave Flaubert once stated, "Anything becomes interesting if you look at it long enough." There are also instances in which the art calls the viewer to participate in a temporal experience thus handing the responsibility to the viewer to engage in slow looking. For example, the work of James Turrell affects the environment, and the environment affects the work in real-time. Painting or static work has a much harder time initiating an extended viewing due to the lack of a durational component that sets the time for viewing. A viewer must have the willingness to spend time with a stationary object, as opposed to Turrell's work, where to experience the work fully, you must stay for a set duration. My two-sided paintings seek to create a more temporal experience than the work that is hung on the wall. They require the body to move around them to be seen and to compare the relationships between the opposing sides. I suspend these paintings from a single anchor in the ceiling, which means they respond to the air's circulation in the room and the passage of viewers. The result is an ever-changing relationship with the space as a whole and the paintings that are seen past or through the painting you are focused on.

In *Slow Art*, Arden Reed claims that painting can signify or engender duration in three different modes: by content, through its making, or its viewing.⁴ Even though a painting can only capture a single moment, some paintings feel as though they are moving or utilize the image to infer what is to come or what came before. The way a painting is made can allow a viewer to be let in on the construction of an image. The duration required is often a question of whether painting, the noun, or painting, the verb, is on display. Painting, the noun, would be a painting where the way it is made is hidden. It is trying very hard to be purely an image. Good examples

⁴ Arden Reed. *Slow Art: The Experience of Looking, Sacred Images to James Turrell* (University of California Press, 2019), 27.

of this harken back to the old masters such as Diego Velázquez or Titian, for whom exact duplication and pristinely glazed surfaces were paramount. There was no acknowledgment of the fact that what you are looking at is in fact paint. Brushstrokes are non-existent, and the painting is made slowly in thin successive layers. For 20th century abstract expressionists and action painters such as Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning, there is a hyper-focus on the material and displaying painting-the-verb. There are drips, splashes, splats, and scrapes. Viewers can infer what position the body of the painter was in when they made each mark and can, in a sense, enter the body and mind of the painter. These paintings are often made with more speed when brush is touching canvas, yet they beg to be looked at slowly.

When compositional relationships are ambiguous and hard to discern, a painting can beckon the viewer to spend more time with it. Much of Agnes Martin's work is a great example of this. When viewed at a distance, her painting *The Tree* looks to be simply a gray canvas, but by getting closer, the viewer can see that it is made up of a strict grid drawn with graphite. The grid itself is giving the canvas the majority of its tone. In my work, I employ the grid as well, albeit less rigidly, to create a strong sense of tempo, rhythm, and speed that references that of a jazz score or quilt top. The paintings also engage strong compositional shifts that direct the viewer through a maze with a multitude of solutions. I often seek to display painting-the-verb through *pentimenti*, history left exposed on the edge of the canvas, utilizing scraps of canvas in finished paintings that once served the role of drop cloth below another, and applying to the canvas pieces of the peeled-up paint residue from the plastic sheeting on my studio floor.

In *What Painting Is*, James Elkins compares the process and experience of making a painting to alchemy. The transformative power of the elements that the alchemists possessed is the same as what an artist possesses within paint. Due to painting's permanence and frozen

nature, a painting has the potential to allow the viewer to participate in a more rewarding experience than what can be gathered during the viewing of a time-based project. The relationship of the alchemist to alchemy is intimately tied together unlike that of a chemist who holds a clinical distance from their subject. According to Elkins, "This is one of painting's powers since the stillness of a painting can set the mind free in a remarkable way—paintings give us the license to reflect in ways that volatile arts, such as movies and plays, cannot. A film bombards the senses with new configurations, while a painting remains still, waiting for us to dream the changes it might possess."⁵ The speed of making can influence the time spent viewing.

One of the largest paintings in this show, *Connect / Disconnect / Reset*, appears to have been created quickly, but it required long extended periods of contemplation before making a move. Subtle carefully considered color shifts such as the bottom left yellow corner in *Connect / Disconnect / Reset* is barely perceived unless the viewer is standing in the right position and looking closely. There are moments in many of the tender grid paintings that the directional mark making subtly changes the hue of a color when viewed at an oblique angle and often creates a continuation of a shape located adjacent. *Tender Grid #7* has a blue shape at the bottom right of the composition that has been painted with the brush strokes on the left going horizontally left to right and the rightmost side being painted in vertical brushstrokes. The perpendicular brushstrokes create a shape within a shape that lines up with the edge of the rectangle directly above even though the shape as a whole is the same hue and value.

Slow looking allows for a painting to affect the body. "Looking at a painting is rather like listening to music—both compositions take time to absorb."⁶ Tina Campt also explains the

⁵ James Elkins. *What Painting Is* (Routledge: London 1999), 214.

⁶ Reed. *Slow Art: The Experience of Looking, Sacred Images to James Turrell*, 25.

potential practice of listening to images. She is speaking upon photographs, but this idea of listening as opposed to looking applies to painting as well. It is a practice of looking beyond what we see and adapting our sensory experience to the other affective frequencies present in an artwork.⁷ When painting(-the-verb) is on display, it can bring the viewer in on a more bodily, affective, and physical level. My paint application doesn't hide the fact that it is paint. With that evident exposure of the process, the viewer can imagine peeling back the painting layer by layer and retracing the steps I may have taken to arrive at the final image on view. Even though the painting is still, it can perform like a moving picture. The experience of looking at an image can change over time.

The Value of Openness

Painting and poetry both share a similar sense of economy, openness, and wholeness. Umberto Eco explains the same sort of qualities present in instrumental open music and how the works “offer themselves not as finite works which prescribe specific repetition along given structural coordinates but as open works which are brought to their conclusion by the performer at the same time as he experiences them on an aesthetic plane.”⁸ A centering on the value of openness presents the opportunity to allow feeling and sensory experience to take over rather than an immediate need to intellectualize and interpret the work in front of you. According to Susan Sontag, interpretation inherently carries with it a sense of arrogance.⁹ As opposed to creating some sort of new integrated form where poetry/language is fully integrated with

⁷ Campt, Tina. *Listening to Images: An Exercise in Counterintuition* (Duke University Press, May 2017).

⁸ Eco, *The Open Work*, 3.

⁹ Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation, and Other Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1996).

painting, the knowledge gained with the exchange between art forms is where the priority lies. I am using this interchange to focus affect and thought.

This idea plays out in a painting like *On the Carpet of Leaves Illuminated by the Moon*. The composition seems to be caught in a state of floating above the surface. The implied line from one shape leads the eye to multiple other exit or entry points to continue the visual investigation. There are moments of misdirection such as when the edge of a shape is broken by a spray-painted gesture throwing the viewer off their intended course. The recipe or roadmap for viewing my work is constantly shifting. Embedded visual keys allow for many potential endpoints and beginnings. I am a composer supplying the viewer with nothing but the time signatures and chord changes for their visual exploration. In a sense, the work is completed by the beholder. The reception of a work of art becomes a performance providing many moments that carry a multiplicity of potential meanings which the viewer must hunt and find. This process becomes one of slowness and careful looking.

Another one of the beautiful qualities that poetry possesses is the room for us to adapt our world to the affective world proposed by the written text. “This is all the more true of poetic works that are deliberately based on suggestiveness since the text sets out to stimulate the private world of the addressee so that he can draw from inside himself some deeper response that mirrors the subtler resonances underlying the text.”¹⁰ My favorite writers engage with this sense of ambiguity. I want my paintings to feel like the space of a Haruki Murakami or Italo Calvino novel; open and unsure of where you are and what type of space you are present in (i.e., reality, dream, mental, or some other unknown space).

¹⁰ Eco, *The Open Work*, 9.

Calvino's novels often have a sense of self-referentiality. You, the reader, are being addressed and become the protagonist which makes you hyper-attuned to the fact that you are experiencing a world through something as simple as ink on a page.¹¹ You suddenly are placed into a space outside of yourself. I seek to have a similar sense in the paintings where you shift between being hyper-aware of yourself viewing and states of daydream. "The daydream transports the dreamer outside the immediate world to a world that bears the mark of infinity."¹² This definition of the daydream provided by Gaston Bachelard is particularly present in the novels of Haruki Murakami. Murakami builds worlds that shift between many states of being and have the sense of infinity.

Some of the largest work in the show produces the largest sense of daydream or infiniteness. The work when viewed at a generous distance encompasses your entire field of vision. This provides an opportunity to shift into a trancelike daydream state that allows for the engagement of the body's senses. One of the reasons for employing the grid in these large pieces is it increases the feeling of infinity. The grid gives the impression that the painting could extend in all directions and not be restricted by the edges of the canvas. The boundaries of the painting in this sense just become arbitrary and the work on view becomes a mere cropping of the entire possible image.¹³ I am careful however to not let the grid become mechanical or removed from my hand. My friendly, solicitous, tender grids provide the opportunity to create a very real sense of negotiation between two shapes of color placed next to each other reaffirming the optical effect those colors already had or creating a tension between the optical and the physical. This

¹¹ This is particularly true in *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* by Italo Calvino where the book opens with a prescribed set of instructions to fully experience the book. I don't think anyone can do this unironically but Calvino.

¹² Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (New York: Penguin Books, 2014), 201.

¹³ Rosalind Krauss, "Grids", *Art Forum*, May 1972, 60.

grid-of-the-hand also allows there to be a clear sense of process. You can often see, around the edge of the topmost layer, the residue from previous colors that are now below. Tessellating, seeping bodies of color mingle and levitate, resulting in lifted, sometimes dissonant harmonies. These relationships and reactions occur simultaneously like an entire improvisational jazz arrangement played as the receiver encounters each pitch and chord of color.

The Value of Liveliness

Being attentive to the changeable and expansive nature of painting is an important aspect of my practice. My ethos lies close to that of Merleau-Ponty. Merleau-Ponty was a French philosopher who is best known for his contributions to phenomenology, predominantly phenomenological approaches to the body, perception, and consciousness in relation to nature. In relation to art, he was particularly “conducive to discussions of art that were attempting to move beyond the Greenbergian faith in ‘opticality,’ and towards a dramatization of the kinesthetic and participatory response of a viewer immersed and active within the same physical space as the object.”¹⁴ I want my paintings to embody a kind of liveliness that encourages an active relationship with the viewer. This value of liveliness allows affect to be assimilated in the body of the viewer. Affect is an intensity that cannot be explained in experiential terms, it is a vivacity that accompanies both perception and experience.¹⁵

The brushstroke itself carries with it the evidence of activity and suggests a physical connection to my process.¹⁶ I am interested in marks that were made quickly read slowly and

¹⁴ John Krma, “Drawing Time, Trace, Materiality and the Body in Drawing after 1940” (PhD diss., University College London, 2007), 28.

¹⁵ Krcma, “Drawing Time, Trace, Materiality and the Body in Drawing after 1940,” 33.

¹⁶ Isabelle Graw, “The Value of Liveliness” *Painting Beyond Itself: The Medium in the Post-medium Condition* (Frankfurt: Sternberg Press, 2016), 99.

marks that were made slowly read quickly. Shifting speed creates tension in the paintings, slowing the viewer as they contemplate my trickery. The brush mark is an indexical sign that points to the presence of the painter, who is physically absent in the moment, but present within the painting.¹⁷ Painting has the ability to compress life and labor time and allow us the possibility to experience both simultaneously. Although, the artist also has the opportunity to fool the viewer into thinking there was more or less time invested through the usage of pentimenti, veiling, and erasure. I have been utilizing the grid in my work by increasing a sense of liveliness contained within color and tender geometry. The shapes bend, squash, squeeze and pull other shapes inhabiting space adjacent. Shapes seem as though they may not be in the same location next time if you take your eyes off the painting for a moment. The shapes and colors begin to represent a negotiation of a relationship tying into my history of negotiating the relationship with my brother growing up. At times it was still, calm, and restful and at others, it may have been tenuous, gritty, and active.

Sewing also becomes a moment to bring in a widely understood visual tactility. Similar to the negotiation between shapes and colors in the tender grid paintings, the sewn works raise the notion of linking. This process invokes the logic of multiplicity and interconnectivity.¹⁸ Sewing and collage also allow me to combine materials that don't necessarily mix such as oil pastel with water-based media and graphite on raw paper with thickly painted acrylic. Each of those materials carries the potential for very specific mark-making that each brings its own sensibility and affect. This method of attachment can allow for more forceful combinations.

¹⁷ Graw, "The Value of Liveliness," 80.

¹⁸ Tamar Shafir, "Surgeon, Seamster, Sorcerer: The Embodied Practice of Collage," in *Radical Cut-Up: Nothing is Original*, ed. Lukas Feireiss (London: Sternberg Press, 2019), 211-226.

Conclusion

My interest in slowness, openness, and liveliness drives everything I do in the studio. These three central values to my practice all show up in different capacities from painting to painting.

Sometimes these values only surface only when certain paintings are paired together. As described in the essay, both the quality of openness and liveliness oftentimes lend themselves to increasing the potential for slowness. Openness provides multiple entry points, ambiguous form, or confusing spaces for the viewer to consider requiring an extended period of viewing for complete understanding. Liveliness emphasizes the changeability of a painting and how it can affect both the viewer and the final image. The brushstroke carries with it the energy and movements of the artist that can then be followed by the viewer. These paintings are made to better understand the relationship I have with my autistic brother and the way that experience of growing up has provided me with hyper-awareness of my sensorial environment.

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