PAINTING IN THE NAMELESS EPOCH

by

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Introduction

Many writers, critics, and thinkers are striving feverishly to coin the term for our present milieu—be it Post-Post Modernism or Meta-Modernism, but no one dominant word or phrase is able to contain the variety of styles, movements, and diversity that exists in the vast international art world of today. Critics and writers want to be wowed and entertained. Academia wants conceptually rigorous work, creating a demand that changes how artists approach work. As Mira Schor explains: "An artist today is unlikely to start a work without knowing exactly what it's going to look like and to mean."¹ Peter Schjeldahl, writing recently in The New Yorker, described the current moment as one of "No more post modernism but a nameless epoch that starts now."² He goes on, in a later article, to dismiss the art world as full "of recycled genres, styles, and ideas" and proclaims painting "a medium in peril."³ The conversation as to whether or not the medium is truly in crisis seems dominated by those with a pen in hand rather than a brush.

It is against these pressures that my present body of work was born. I acknowledge yet reject the prevailing notion that everything has been done before—that painting is dead. We are living in an age of remix where "all eras seem to exist at once,"⁴ allowing artists to pick and choose from recognizable "styles, subjects, motifs, materials, strategies, and ideas."⁵ I view this freedom as a liberating challenge: How can I contribute to the ongoing conversation in contemporary art, specifically within abstraction?

¹ Mira Schor, "Fail!," in Draw It With Your Eyes Closed (New York: Paper Monument/N+1 Foundation, 2012), 90.
² Peter Schjeldahl, "The Shape We're In," The New Yorker, December 22 & 29, 2014, 68.
³ Peter Schjeldahl, "Take Your Time," The New Yorker, January 5, 2015, 78.
Statement of Intent

I believe it is possible to advance painting; to re-invigorate the inherited language of Modernism by making use of the works of the past, reusing the tools and revising the vocabulary. My research has focused on re-examining the tropes of Modernist painting: specifically, the use of the grid and chance procedures to create an image and a direct experience that is deep and resonant for me. I'm not concerned with labels or what banner I'm painting under—I'm focused on where my work is leading me. I came to graduate school to hone my skills and move beyond what I was capable of. This body of work represents three years of hard work, struggle, and risk taking. My work has become much more complex, controlled and polished. There is an increase in visual clarity, in both hue and paint handling, that creates a clean, intense, and direct experience. My work is still changing dramatically, which makes writing about it all the more difficult.

For my thesis body of work, I focused my research on the work of Amy Sillman, Charline von Heyl, Albert Oehlen, and Terry Winters. Each of these artists have profoundly influenced my work and informed my thinking about content and meaning. They all share common threads, such as treating gesture as object and figure and working with systems and chance in order to advance abstraction. The connection goes even deeper in that we share many of the same influences, notably Sigmar Polke, Willem de Kooning, Philip Guston, and the New York School. But make no mistake—this is not nostalgia. I'm not interested in recreating or re-enacting, and here I stand by
Jasper Johns' sentiment: "it seemed to me that de Kooning did his work perfectly beautifully and there was no reason for me to help him with it."⁶

Given my acknowledged inheritance from these many and varied connections, it is no surprise I welcome the idea of the remix. While much has been written about the concept of the remix, it is certainly nothing new across many disciplines. It is even the basic conceit of a hotly contested survey of contemporary painting recently at MoMA, "The Forever Now: Contemporary Painting in an Atemporal World." Artists have been 'remixing' for centuries, and musicians continue to toil with a limited number of notes and chords yet continue to create songs and melodies—that's even before taking sampling into consideration. Endless possibilities exist because I can mix and match, pick and choose, in order to find and break new ground.

Influences

I could fill these pages with lists of events, artists, writers, photographers, and musicians that influence me and have made me who I am. In short: Charles Bukowski, Bob Dylan, The Beatles, R.E.M., Paul Auster, Lee Friedlander, Lester Bangs, riding the subway, graffiti, Robert Frank. I can't stress the value and importance of my formative education derived from countless visits to institutions like The Guggenheim, The Museum of Modern Art, and The Art Institute of Chicago throughout my life. These temples of Modernism instilled a strong love for art and exposed me to an incredibly wide array of artists, movements, and ideas. I would not be here today without having experienced the rough, thick surface of Kasimir Malevich's Red Square or Cy Twombly's

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liberating mark making. Seeing the work of these two artists freed me of long-held baggage about the meaning of art and who gets to make it, allowing me to embrace and develop my own mark making. While critics might be done with the past, I’m not. It resides in my studio everyday and provides a starting point for my journey to make new work.

There is a current of Abstract Expressionism in my work. I continue to work on a large scale; use some of the tried and true materials such as latex, enamel and oil paint, and canvas; and employ some of the tropes of lyrical abstraction. At the same time, I share an affinity for gestural abstraction. But I find myself pushing further away in search of new language and expression. I’m not one for the heroic gesture and macho swagger of AbEx, its power and meaning long diluted due to oversaturation and trite mimicry. I am running from the tired, rough, and labored look of what constitutes so much of today’s abstract painting. While I’m not ready to fully part ways with abstraction in the bold manner of Philip Guston or even Amy Sillman’s short-lived break up (Figure 1), I do try to limit the influence. The most obvious manifestation of this is the visual clarity present in my work: an intense range of high key color rather than muddy wet-on-wet earth tones and crisp, hard-edge lines rather than blurred and jagged brush strokes. There are very few drips or splatters and none of the big, bold gestures that Robert Rauschenberg so effectively deflated. Unlike artists such as Laura Owens, Wendy White, Keltie Ferris, and Richard Aldrich, my work consistently rejects the casual, unfinished look of provisional painting and is much more polished and layered.

It probably would be much easier to use Photoshop or screen-printing to make the images I want to make, but it would be a simulation, and therefore false. In a similar manner, musically, I use vintage instruments and equipment to create and capture sounds—not out of nostalgia—but for the tonal properties these things afford. The warm,
slightly distorted sustained tones an overdriven tube amp produces; the resonance of a fifty-year old semi-hollow wooden guitar. I don’t want a digital reproduction of a 1965 Fender Princeton Reverb tube amplifier. I want the real thing. I want to do something different with it, now, in contemporary society.

I approach painting with oil and acrylic paint in the same manner. I use paint because it can be thick, luscious, juicy, and opaque or wet, shimmering, and transparent and applied in a physical manner. I choose these materials because they resonate and have personal meaning for me as well as art historical references and a formal beauty. For me, the focus and challenge afforded by limited tools and materials causes a friction and allows for maximum possibilities. My favorite electric guitars have only two knobs—Volume and Tone and one pick up. But within that world, the tonal variations are infinite and amazing—just like with oil paint and a brush.

You Are Here

One consequence of having moved many times throughout my life is a strong attachment to maps. Naturally, they were a big part of learning a new town or city, of finding my way on the subway or mass transit. Some of my earliest memories are of standing on a subway platform waiting for a train while staring at the large multicolored map obscured behind graffiti-tagged plexiglass; tracing my finger along the brightly colored train line, I tried to make sense of where I was and where we were going while whoever was with me looked at the map to double check the route. I also recall my directionally challenged mother hanging a map in the kitchen of our new home—complete with pushpins—marking landmarks and roads traveled, as a way for her to learn and navigate her way around our new city. Because so many of my family members have a poor sense of direction and panic when lost or they miss an exit, I've
always had an aversion to losing my bearings, consequently, I got damn good at reading maps, looking for signs and exit numbers. That is to say, of knowing where I'm going.

My work is not about any one subject and many ingredients inform it: maps, aerial landscapes, music, trains, graffiti, architecture, rhythm and movement, the grid of New York City, and the tattered Subway map from my childhood (Figure 2). Most of my work contains some semblance of a map for me to find my way as well as lead the viewer through the piece. A map is a tool to orient, direct, and lead one toward a destination. Above and beyond the physical and visual beauty of a map, it is a means of establishing order out of chaos. Making and using a map is a way to understand what is in front of me, a tool for discovery that aids my journey toward new, unknown destinations.

My work is concerned with complexity, order, and the uncertainty of meaning. I'm making an experience, something real rather than virtual, using the basic tools other artists have used to create an image that I find meaningful. They aren't made quickly, but can look fast. Weeks and months of work generate and reveal structure. Composition and improvisation are evident as multiple layers become as Joanne Greenbaum has been quoted as saying, “a record of events in time.” Beyond merely recording events, these layers allow me to create the sensation of multiple viewpoints and perspectives, and enable the viewer to experience the work in stages. While the layers of information may be considered individually, they add up to the completed painting.

Time plays an important role in my work; both because of the methodical nature of making a painting and the time required to actually look at and experience the work.

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Each painting in this series began with a title as a framing device and a piece of colored paper pinned to the wall of the studio with notes of ideas on where I would like to take it. *Based On A True Story* (Figure 3) is a visual record to test Lee Lozano’s question “Has anybody made abstract paintings that tell a story?”8 *Above It All* (Figure 4) began with the idea of re-imagined childhood neighborhoods. Rather than relying solely on intuition or chance, work progressed with the aid of sketches and digital collage in Photoshop. All evolved through accretion and substantial editing and subtraction. My paintings offer an invitation to look and experience—they demand a slow read and invite repeated contemplation.

Making is a way to create order over and through time. However, I also paint for the sheer pleasure of looking and making. My use of polka dots and bright, colorful stripes inject whimsy, adorn and bedazzle forms, and add visual excitement. In order to be truly surprised, we need to be knocked off guard and confronted by the unexpected. Rather than playing it safe with cool, monochromatic forms, I decided to use bright colors and patterns inspired by my sock collection and the bow ties, which I used to wear to inject color and a bit of flair to the staid blue and gray suits I wore each day during my advertising career.

**Antecedents: Circulatory System**

Before I discuss the work in the exhibition, it’s useful to look at a painting that summarizes the changes that led to this present body of work. *Circulatory System* (Figure 5) comes from a series that began in June 2014 and is notable because it

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marked a shift away from overt map-like imagery to more organic bodily forms imbued with colorful references to Dazzle camouflage.

Dazzle camouflage was used on Navy ships in World Wars I and II to distort the enemy's perception of the size, movement, and direction of the ship. In this painting I distort perception and move the eye of the viewer back and forth between the layers and in and around the forms. These visual paths are accomplished in three ways: multiple focal points, stacking opaque and transparent forms over the grid, and the network of organic lines shifting through the layers.

*Circulatory System* began (as most of my paintings do) with a grid to organize the space and orient myself. Multiple perspectives and layers exist: an aerial view of a dry, map-like field with faint route lines and topographic marks; a grid; geometric shapes; and large, liquid, translucent, overlapping organic shapes. Order is brought to the composition in four distinct ways—by hard-edged lines, repetition of small opaque organic shapes that overlap, the imposition of a grid, and color. Cool, muted color, like that of fading paint on the side of a sundrenched building, provides a distant, out-of-focus ground which yields to transparent layers that increase in intensity and clarity as information gets closer to the surface.

I'm interested in the unknown that comes from making and unmaking which comes from a loss of control. My paintings begin to get interesting when I allow chance to enter the process. Like Charline von Heyl, "I want the painting to invent itself and surprise me." C* Circulatory System* was practically a completed painting, but it needed an element of the unexpected to increase the tension. Reinvention and surprise came by way of sanding away layers of information and carving out shapes and opposing patterns that yielded a palimpsest-like field in which to build new structures. In this case, making by unmaking—rotating the canvas, painting out areas and imposing obstructions

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by masking off with tape and paper to shift the perspective, in order to provide me with something to react against.

Mystery and ambiguity loom large in this work, mirroring that of real life. A network of thin sinewy lines runs in and around the forms—are they veins, or route lines? Is this a map, a blown-up section of an internal body cavity, or a series of organic shapes floating underwater?

**Based on a True Story**

In *Based on a True Story* (Figure 3), I built upon increasingly complex layers of stacked transparent and opaque forms much like the effect of having multiple windows open on a computer screen. In order to increase the sense of depth and separation between layers, the materials changed throughout the making of the piece. I began with latex paint for the background which allowed for large, fast, bold gestures and muted color fields. The middleground, composed of overlapping organic and geometric shapes and a border, demanded greater detail and clarity that called for acrylic paint. At this stage, organic shapes were superimposed over areas of the painting to allow for intricate patterns and repeating passages to build into significant structures. The focal point, painted in oil, is a slow, methodical, tightly gridded cityscape in neutral grays with opposing angles, to distort the space and push back and contain the gestural action below. The foreground contains a fragmented building with what appear to be randomly placed windows or cutouts that reveal bits of the underlying structure—loose, juicy, shimmering gestural passages; glossy, shiny patches; and chunky, matte areas.

This painting gradually unfolded from a field of gestural abstraction partially obscured by the gridded cityscape to include abstracted architectural forms suggesting buildings and a large crisscrossing grid with opposing diagonals, geometric shapes, and intricate patterns that reference an aerial view of a city as well as a map. The
fragmented buildings shift perspective, act as a veil, and confront the viewer with the feeling of experiencing a crowded city. The black band within the actual border of the stretcher acts as a frame within a frame, reinforcing the notion of a screen and is reminiscent of the letterbox format used in cinema. The hard edges of the geometric shapes reinforce and establish firm boundaries while the fluid, sweeping horizontal bands contain and compress the action within the painting.

Drips, splatters, and large gestural marks strongly reference the handmade, while high key color, precise and hard-edged lines, and geometric shapes summon the digital or machine-made. Based On A True Story reflects how I experience our overly connected, instantaneous culture. Perhaps surprisingly I respond to the visual and sensorial overload with equally complex, frenetic work.

Uncertainty abounds. In some areas of the painting the graphic blocks seem to transform into text and then recede. The map gives way to an aerial view—all very reminiscent of the disorientation that comes from travel.

Time Release

I’m searching for what doesn’t exist yet and hasn’t been seen before: the unnameable. My approach is similar to that of Keltie Ferris who posited “It’s not about things that are nameable, it’s about undoing the nameable things in life.”\(^{10}\) There are a number of ways I undo the nameable in my work, mainly through veiling and the use of multiple views and perspectives. Charline von Heyl stated that her paintings are “the invention of images that don’t exist yet” and that they “have something that looks like a

thousand things but you can't quite name it."^{11} Similarly, my painting *Time Release* (Figure 6) contains a number of things that might look familiar—a glimpse under a microscope, a scientific model containing arteries, clusters of organs and bodily shapes, or something in bloom, coming alive.

Hot, jarring color is juxtaposed with muted color fields; hard edge lines and organic shapes with lyrical abstraction. Like many paintings in this series, there is an organizing principle of containment. The neutral gray form at the bottom acts as a ledge and container and the blue band at the top right, a lid, pushing down on exploding shapes and pathways where a strong syncopated rhythm drives the work and holds the tension. Dichotomies abound, such as spontaneity and control, transparent and opaque shapes, glossy passages and matte ones.

**Above It All**

*Above It All* (Figure 4) depicts re-imagined neighborhoods from my childhood and is the most representational piece in this series, revealing multiple perspectives of land-, sea-, and cityscape. Multiple aerial landscapes are overlaid like slightly askew transparencies stacked on top of one another on an overhead projector. Many of my paintings explore this treatment as a way to disarm my penchant for order and balance, as well as to reference the stark juxtaposition afforded by collaging different forms.

In this painting, I set out to counter my maximalist tendencies by creating a work with fewer color choices and a singular focal point. My research on Charline von Heyl uncovered her desire to make work that reads as a symbol: that is not recognizable but singular, like an icon. My work has been very much the opposite, tending to have multiple focal points and imagery extending edge to edge. Here I break with the

Modernist trope of the all-over, and allow the bulging, disintegrating, red plastic construction fence to take the lead; holding back the exploding, bustling city below yet signaling a strong sense of caution. In this painting, I sought to say more with less; to walk away without resolving every aspect of the work.

Conclusion

The past three years have been incredibly productive and eye opening and have brought new questions and directions for me to ponder. My paintings and drawings, benefiting from rigorous experimentation with materials, styles and subject matter, have evolved tremendously.

Working in the studio is the closet feeling I ever have to being home. Yet I'm regularly lost in my work—the only way out being persistent, patient work. Beyond the joyous, magical, and inspirational myths that surround creation and those of being an artist, I have found the journey to be more about endurance, discipline, and risk; to continue to seek what I have not done before. My reality in the studio is closer to that of Elizabeth Murray, who described her working process as one fraught with frustration and uncertainty: "...what happens is when I start to really hate it, it starts to go someplace. It's almost as though you have to get down into that place where you absolutely hate it and want to rip it off the wall, rip it to pieces, and throw it out, to start getting into it."\cite{12}

The optimism and determination needed to bring art into the world is perhaps best exemplified by the following two quotes\cite{13} by William Baziotes that have hung on the wall of my studio for years:

\begin{itemize}
\item \cite{12} Elizabeth Murray, *Art21 Magazine*, accessed January 05, 2015, http://blog.art21.org/2013/03/22/exclusive-elizabeth-murray-bop/#.VSwjXJTF8rM
\end{itemize}
"For a hundred mistakes - if I find one thing."

"I always want to be a hungry fighter."
Dear Jackie,

I guess you didn’t know this but me and Abstraction broke up!!!! Last summer!!!! Well, I mean, I’ve been feeling like kind of confused for a long time, like years. I’m friends with all of A’s friends and stuff, and I think A’s really cool and I totally learned a LOT from A—but you know what? I don’t want to say anything bad about A, but I have to TOTALLY MOVE ON with my LIFE. I started to really feel like A’s been holding me back and even like kind of manipulative. I mean, when I moved to NYC it was kind of incredible to get to know A … but you know what? I am super worried that when you get really to the core of things, A is just super conceited and can’t talk to me. I feel really bad saying this but I KIND OF WONDER sometimes if A is just DEAD INSIDE. I don’t know, maybe A is like a meal ticket for me. I mean, I get invited to a lot of shows and things because of A, but when I’m there, A just kind of talks to other people. Like I don’t feel A can really concentrate on one person at a time—A always addresses the whole room, if you know what I mean. I mean, it’s not like Representation even knows I exist either. I feel like when I come into the room, R is like all glassy and actually really conservative; it’s a weird feeling, too. But anyway I just started to feel like I can’t be tied down and I have to play the field. I guess all of you know that I was always like that and totally non-monogamous, but that’s why you didn’t hear from me all winter. I totally learned a lot from A, and I even got to be friends w/ Cézanne who I didn’t even LIKE before and now I like totally, like, LOVE, and I super love Cubism, (I am so mad at my friend Kerstin in Berlin because she doesn’t even LIKE Cubism but I feel like Cubism is like so amazing. It’s basically a diagram, if you know what I mean.) OH, and also, I never would have understood Process without A but I just feel like A’s really old friends are just WEIRD. And kind of pompous? Or something? Well, anyway, I feel really bad telling you this, like you’ll be pissed, but I hope you know this has nothing to do with you and I really love you and the part of A’s friends that are really open like you are AMAZING and everything. But basically I kicked A out of my studio this summer, and afterwards I felt really good. I had this amazing fling, don’t tell anyone, but I had this fling with this face, and I don’t know, that was the straw that tipped the iceberg and I just went with it. I feel like me and A can be good friends after a while, though, and I am super hoping that all of A’s friends will still be friends with me, but, sometimes I almost kind of wish, you know, I was sleeping ALONE. You know what I mean????

Love, Amy

Figure 1. Amy Sillman, Breakup Letter
Figure 2. MTA Subway map, circa 1970's.
Figure 3. *Based on a True Story*, 2015, Mixed media on canvas, 71 x 64 inches.
Figure 4. *Above it All*, 2015, Mixed media on canvas, 60 x 60 inches.
Figure 5. *Circulatory System*, 2014, Mixed media on canvas, 75 ½ x 71 ¾ inches.
Figure 6. *Time Release*, 2015, Mixed media on canvas, 75 ¼ x 59 inches.
Figure 7. *Subdivisions*, 2015, Mixed media on canvas, 60 x 50 inches. (Not mentioned in text.)