CRAFTING THE PERCEPTUAL EVENT

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A THESIS ESSAY SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF APPLIED ARTS

in

VISUAL ART

EMILY CARR UNIVERSITY OF ART + DESIGN

2015

ABSTRACT

This thesis project is a material inquiry into the perceptual consequences of colour, pattern and shape, as well as a personal investigation of the terms of Western abstraction. In this paper, I will describe and contextualize three bodies of studio work I have developed during my time as a graduate student. I will articulate how these projects reanimate certain Modernist tropes, especially the concepts of non-objective form and colour-as-subject. I will also link my works to an additional set of concerns, which include the spatio-temporal implications of modular structure and three-dimensional form, and the significance of labour-intensive material craft in the digital age.

Stripe Set is a series of painted canvases with the same composition but different colour palettes. As a modular work, this project can be reconfigured in response to architectural situations and opportunities of exhibition context. It queries notions of originality and multiplicity while delivering an experience of chromatic intensity that calls a viewer's attention to their embodied situation. The *Polychrome Lozenges* are a series of serigraphs on cotton paper that explore the boundary between object and image while paying homage to the history of striped painting within the 20th century canon. The *Intermedial Experiments* are a collection of works made from wood and fibreboard that blend combinations of drawing, painting and sculpture to generate instances of perceptual surprise. In addition to coming off the wall into literal space, these pieces mark a significant shift as they depart from arbitrary colour palettes to consider how specifically sourced colours can link abstract artworks to our everyday perceptual experiences.

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Colour is, first, a sensory event. Colours are true sensations, not abstractions or ideas.

-Linda Holtzchue

The same colour in two different contexts is not the same colour…This means that the identity of a color does not reside in the color itself but is established by relation.

-Rudolf Arnheim

We might say that pigment is that motion spontaneously produced by substance in conjunction with light…This is the pharmakon: an indiscrete threshold where our bodies exchange information with an environment.

-The Office for Soft Architecture

A Small Theory: People observe the colours of the day only at its beginnings and ends, but to me it's quite that a day merges through a multitude of shades and intonations, with each passing moment. A single hour can consist of thousands of different colours… In my line of work, I make it a point to notice them.

-Markus Zusak, The Book Thief

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

My work is primarily a material inquiry into the perceptual consequences of colour, pattern and shape. In the studio, I employ quasi-scientific procedures to test combinations of these elements, always seeking a kind of optical density, or perceptual charge that is difficult to describe but easy to recognize when I am successful in finding it. In support of this studio work, I pay close attention to the interactions of colours and shapes in everyday life, always looking for opportunities to translate and amplify ordinary experiences into abstract artworks.

Examined through a slightly different lens, my practice can also be understood as a personal investigation of the terms of historical abstraction, as my work reanimates certain Modernist tropes, especially the concepts of non-objective form and colour-as-subject. I am interested in working through these ideas in order to pay homage to the canon of 20th century abstract painting while simultaneously reconsidering the conceits associated with the tradition.

In the pages that follow, I will describe and analyze three bodies of studio work I have created, tested and exhibited through the MAA program. I will situate all three projects in within an art historical context, consider some of the philosophical and theoretical questions they have raised, and delve into issues around material process, for as the French-born art historian and critic Yve-Alain Bois has argued, "the specificity of the object involves not just the general condition of its medium, but also its means of production in its slightest detail" (xix). Where they illuminate how my work has developed during this period of graduate study, I will also include some of my own thoughts and reflections, for as I have followed my curiosity to explore the methods, materials and art historical contexts that most interest me, I have also found myself on a journey of personal discovery.

In her book *The Infinite Line: Remaking Art After Modernism*, the British art historian Briony Fer argues that the break between Modern and Postmodern approaches to artistic production can be understood as a shift between a collage aesthetic and a serial one (2). Of particular interest to

Fer is the idea that serial artworks "open onto different temporalities" and "dramatize the temporal through animating and transforming the most everyday and routine habits of looking" (3). Ideas around seriality, temporality and everyday perception will be relevant to the discussion of my MAA artwork, for while colour has been at the core of my practice for several years, the operations of repetition and change, along with the spatio-temporal implications of modular structure and three-dimensional form, have only recently emerged as important, thereby expanding and transforming my way of working and of thinking about my work.

The Inception of *Stripe Set*

I began to work on the *Stripe Set* project in the fall of 2013. Initially, I was looking for a way to explore the perceptual effects of various colour combinations while also questioning the notion that artworks must be innovative in order to be worth making. In order to explore these ideas, I began to make a set of oil paintings on canvas with the same composition but different colour palettes. According to my initial logic, by painting a large number of panels that were neither the same nor different, I could complicate the binary opposition between terms like 'original' and 'derivative' while providing myself with a quasi-scientific procedure to compare how different colour combinations work to generate optical effects and evoke other kinds of subjective response. As the work progressed, I became aware that ideas around embodied perception and labour-intensive material craft would also become germane to the project.

In terms of composition, the paintings of the *Stripe Set* series are reductive and geometric. Each panel features a sideways chevron superimposed against a ground of optically active stripes. However, the collection actually divides into two groups, as half of the chevrons point to the right and the other half point to the left, which makes it possible for any opposing pair to be hung as a bilaterally symmetrical diptych. This reflective doubling begins the work of knitting individual units of the group together into larger wholes, for depending upon which left-to-right order is chosen, a diptych can feature either an "X" shape or a striped diamond. Furthermore, when a larger group of panels are brought together, these "X"s and diamonds activate as alternating motifs that connect, like links on a chain, to form a repeating pattern that flows through the entire group.

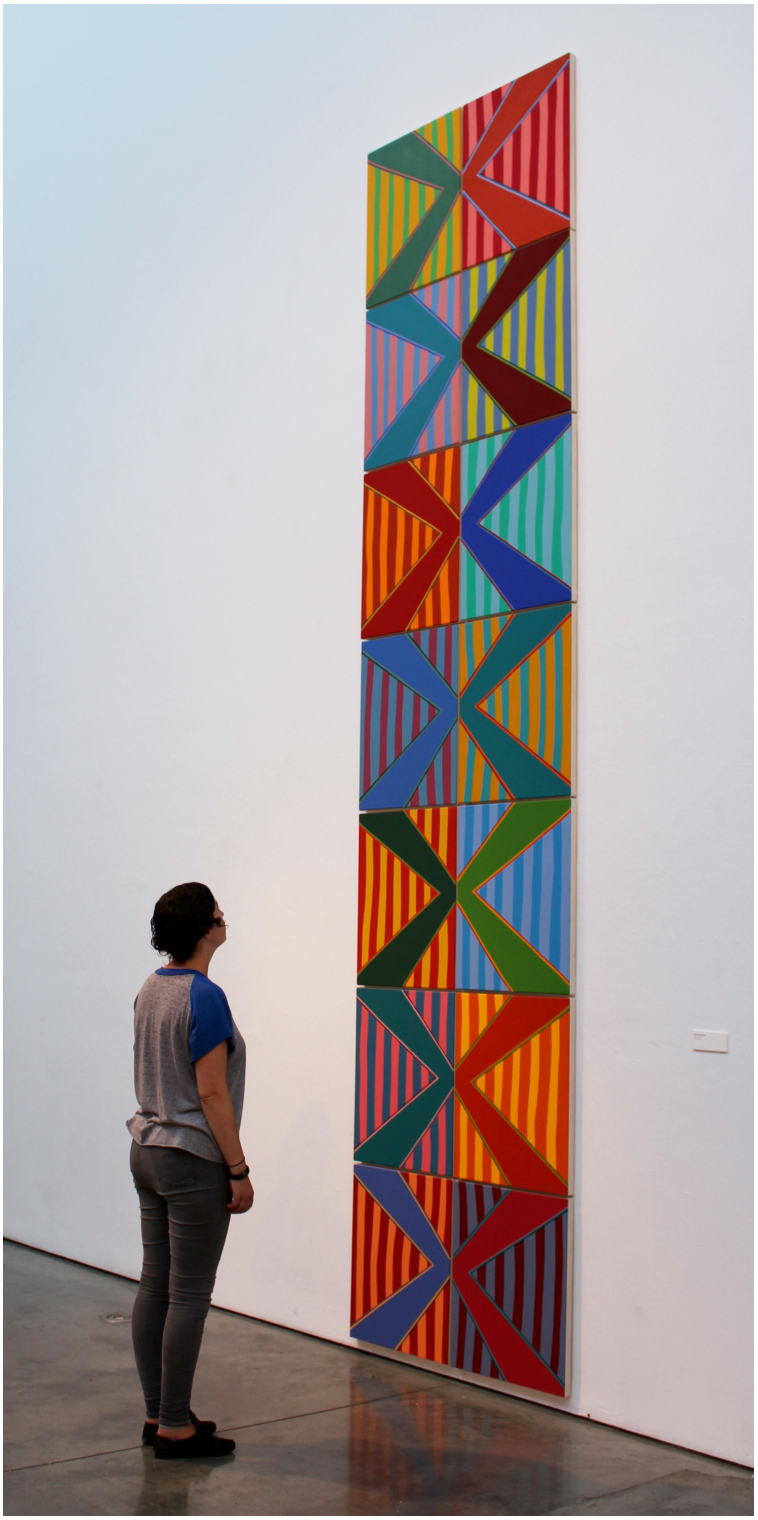

Fig. 1: *Stripe Set,* 2014. Oil on canvas, 14 panels, 24 x 20 inches each. Installation, Concourse Gallery, Emily Carr University.

As a collection of modular units, this work can be configured to respond to different architectural situations or to generate a chosen perceptual effect. For example, a large grid hung at eye level will address a viewer differently than a linear arrangement along a corridor, as the operations of time and embodied perception will be distinct in each case. In my estimation, the distributed installation of a serial work like *Stripe Set* offers a viewing experience that has much in common with our everyday habits of looking, as we move around and assimilate a sequential collection of partial views.

Fig. 2: *Stripe Set Variation (way out),* 2014 – 2015. Oil on canvas, multiple panels, 24 x 20 inches each. Installation, Landing Gallery, Emily Carr University.

Significantly, this implies a different temporal rhythm than the "Modernist" viewing paradigm as championed by the American critic Clement Greenberg, who argued that a painting should be received instantaneously as a pictorial force that strikes the viewer "all at once, like a sudden revelation" (Greenberg 81). *Stripe Set* resists this kind of viewing and is geared towards a durational encounter, for even when installed in a tight grid formation, the interplay of repetition and variation in the work invites the viewer to "wander around"[1] in a series of visual cuts and dislocations that allow for comparisons to be made between the individual panels.

[1] The British psychologist and painter David Maclagan has characterized the process of visually "wandering around" in a painting as an oscillation between global and local takes, which has been experimentally demonstrated to involve "a complex set of saccadic eye movements" (36).

Fig. 3: *Stripe Set Variation (horizontal lattice),* 2014 – 15. Oil on canvas, 12 panels, 20 x 24 inches each. Installation, Landing Gallery, Emily Carr University.

In the early stages of the project's development, I was interested in creating a modular work that could be differently arranged, much like the tiles in a building project or the units of fabric in a patchwork quilt. While I continue to appreciate the work's resonance with such non fine art sources, the more interesting theoretical implications of a modular structure did not really dawn on me until I was completing the first eight panels of the series in the spring of 2014. Today, as the paintings continue to accrue, the in-built flexibility of the project has emerged for me as its most interesting facet.

Installation and the Perceptual Event

Significantly, the modular structure of the *Stripe Set* project demands that each permutation of the work remain hypothetical until it has been placed in a spatial context, where it relies upon the presence of a viewer to actualize it. Considered in this way, *Stripe Set* does not really become 'operational' until it has been sited, at which point the opportunity emerges for an optical-corporeal event to take place between the work and a viewer. During the summer of 2015, I explored the variable installation potential of *Stripe Set* by hanging ten different configurations of the work at Emily Carr University during the Month of July. This experiment allowed me to test my experience of the paintings removed from the site of their making in the studio and receive feedback from people who viewed them in a range of different configurations. Viewer responses to this experiment confirmed my assertion that each arrangement of the canvases can be considered the potential site of a distinctive perceptual event, as several people commented upon how much the work changed with each new installation.

I am indebted to the British painter Bridget Riley (b. 1931) for introducing me to the idea that a painting can be understood as the site of an event. She first wrote about this notion in 1965, during the phase of her career when she was painting the black and white optically active canvases that would make her famous. In an essay entitled "Perception is the Medium," Riley wrote, "I feel that my paintings have some affinity with happenings…I want the disturbance or 'event' to arise naturally, in visual terms, out of the inherent energies and characteristics of the elements which I use" (90). This way of thinking about artworks is consistent with the claim made by the French artist Marcel Duchamp (1887 – 1968) that the presence of a viewer is necessary to complete a work, as well as with arguments about *the death of the author*[2] that have permeated recent critical art discourse. However, by carefully considering the implications of modular form, I have moved past a superficial understanding of such ideas[3] to a position where I would now argue that the work *only* occurs in time and space, at the moment when a viewer and the material constituents of the piece open up to each other, at the moment of perception.

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[2] see Roland Barthes in Works Consulted.

[3] My previous engagement with the idea of "the death of the author" was confined to the notion that artworks offer multiple points of entry and are subject to individual interpretation, placing the construction of meaning with the viewer rather than the artist. I feel that *Stripe Set* has allowed me to integrate a more sophisticated level of understanding in relation to those arguments.

Of course, this claim can be made with reference to any artwork; however, I find it particularly illuminating in my own case, because it helps to explain why I gravitate towards vibrant colour and stimulating surface pattern. It now seems clear to me that I am primarily interested in constituting perceptual events, for myself first and then for other viewers, and furthermore, that I am curious to discover whether it is possible to produce events that cannot be comprehensively explained or described through language. While this curiosity bears the mark of my impatience with "the often-quoted post structuralist maxim that unless you can articulate something it does not exist" (Meecham and Sheldon 4), I also have deeper, more personal reasons for being interested in the question: I am driven by the desire to understand a type of perceptual phenomenon that I experienced regularly as a child, and still occasionally do as an adult.

When this kind of experience occurs, I will momentarily slip into a state of visual acuity that can transform an otherwise banal household object, for example, into a fascinating form-in-itself that is replete with sensory information but void of meaning, as if I am getting a fleeting glimpse into some fundamental quality of being. A key feature of this state of consciousness is the seeming absence of language-based thought, as my mind will momentarily take a bread from its habitual naming and evaluation, and I will find myself suspended for a few seconds in a state of *presence* that is characterized by an intense level of sensory awareness. I am very curious about moments of heightened attention such as these, perhaps *because* they are so difficult to capture in verbal terms, as if they contain a sensorial excess that can only spill over the rim of a semiotic code. In my work, I am interested in trying to generate optical-corporeal events that have something in common with these curious perceptual experiences in my life.

Repetition and Change

I remember the first time I heard a poem by the American writer Gertrude Stein (1874 – 1946). As an undergraduate in an art history class, I was listening to a colleague present a paper about a connection between Stein's literary style and the painting methods of the French Post-Impressionist Paul Cézanne (1839 – 1906). As students of modern art history may recall, rather than adhering to the academic convention of favouring the figure over the ground, Cézanne

aspired to treat every inch of his canvas with equal attention. According to my classmate, under the influence of Cézanne, Stein went on to develop a literary version of the same idea by composing texts that she conceived as distributed fields of equally important elements. Although my classmate's argument was well developed, her talk left me feeling somewhat dissatisfied, as the 'field' metaphor had failed to account for how the experience of listening to Stein's poem had affected my consciousness.

I remember that I found the poem annoying at the start, with its seemingly nonsensical repetition of words and phrases. However, after a few moments, something started to change. As the speaker paused for breath between phrases, I began to notice my own breath, and then I became aware that the rhythmic singsong string of words was subject to slight changes from one line to the next, as if the poem's incremental advance was achieved by looping back through versions of itself that were *not* exact repetitions, but rather subtle gestures that disclosed a little more with each return of the motif, until at last a kernel of truth could be revealed at the heart of the work. I left the classroom feeling I had just learned something profound about the fundamental nature of consciousness as it arises in time. Looking back on this important early encounter, it now seems to me that Stein's text could have been more aptly described by a metaphor that could articulate its potency as an emergent series of durational events, bound together by the interplay of repetition and change.

> *In the inside there is sleeping, in the outside there is reddening, in the morning there is meaning, in the evening there is feeling. In the evening there is feeling. In feeling anything is resting, in feeling anything is mounting, in feeling there is resignation, in feeling there is recognition, in feeling there is recurrence...*
>
> *-Gertrude Stein*[4]

[4] This excerpt is taken from *Tender Buttons*. See Works Cited.

I think this idea has something useful to contribute to a discussion of *Stripe Set*, for I believe that by repeating the same composition throughout the series, I am calling attention to the play of difference between the various palettes while engineering a situation where a viewer can encounter the panels as a durational sequence of perceptual events. Furthermore, I think the repetitive structure of the work makes the tacit argument that the project will not really be complete until as many panels have been painted as there are possible combinations of visible colours. With five colours per panel, and at least 100,000 distinct colours visible to the human eye,[5] that is a lot of potential iterations.

It is this vast potential for variation within already established parameters that I find most intriguing about the *Stripe Set* project. According to Fer, "The idea of infinity itself presupposes an incomplete subject, and the work of repetition marks the impossibility of completion" (58). For me, *Stripe Set* holds the potential to resist closure indefinitely, and although I have yet to come fully to terms with why I find this idea so compelling, I suspect that by producing collections of non-identical multiples, I am working through the question materially in order to figure it out philosophically.

[5] According to David J. Calkins, director of research at the Vanderbilt Eye Institute in Nashville, Tennessee, "The tremendous variability in the spectral composition of light reflected from surfaces lends itself to eliciting a gamut of more than 100,000 discriminable colours, and the variation in the names we assign these colours is limited only by scope of human experience." See "Mapping Colour Perception to a Physiological Substrate." *The Visual Neurosciences.* Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993.

Fig. 4: *Stripe Set Variation (right left right)*, 2014 – 15. Oil on canvas, 15 panels, 24 x 20 inches each. Installation, Landing Gallery, Emily Carr University.

Art Historical Relations

The visual and spatial operations of *Stripe Set* are available to any viewer, regardless of art historical background. However, there are levels of context that may become available to a more informed viewer, since the project resonates with a variety of works in the tradition of hard-edged abstraction, as well as with several 1960s art movements[6], including Colour Field Painting, Pop Art and Op Art. While a thorough analysis of how this work aligns with and diverges from all of the predominant themes of 20th century abstraction is outside the scope of this paper, a few specific examples will begin to place *Stripe Set* within a field of art historical relations.

Particularly illuminating, I think, is the way the project intersects with the idea of non-objective form that was advanced a century ago by the painters and poets of the Russian avant-garde. According to the New York-based curator and art historian Masha Chlenova, in the first decades of the 20th century a collective of composers, writers and artists dedicated themselves to producing artistic form "as such" (200). Aligning themselves against the allegorical objectives of the Symbolists who dominated the art world of their time and place, these radical thinkers resolved to invent an art of the *real*, which for them meant creating autonomous forms, emancipated from symbolic representation or any fixed connection to meaning (Chlenova 200). Conversant in structural linguistics, these artists sought to liberate the signifier (unit of artistic form) from the signified (conventional meaning) and to ground works in their *material* components, which in painting were understood to be the fundamentals of colour, line and surface texture (Chlenova 206).

The *zaum*[7] poets of this group profoundly affected the thinking of the Russian painter Kasimir Malevich (1879 – 1935). Velimir Khlebnikov (1885 – 1922) was particularly influential, with his technique of fragmenting language into the basic units of sound, letter and word and then recombining these units to create new forms, for according to *zaum* ideology, basic language units were understood to possess their own direct, expressive power. Following this train of

[6] Although I was not aware of them when I first composed the structure for the *Stripe Set* project, it has come to my attention that the work carries a particularly strong reference to a series of "X" paintings produced by the American artist Miriam Schapiro in the late 1960s.

[7] *Zaum* is an abbreviation of the Russian word *zaumnoe* (transrational) (Foster et al. 689).

thought, Malevich developed a lexicon of simple geometric shapes that he combined through a new style that he called *zaum realism*, and later, *Suprematism* (Chlenova 206).

Like the Suprematist paintings of Malevich, the panels of *Stripe Set* rely on a reductive formal vocabulary of shapes that have been placed on the canvas with no referential content. Also like Suprematist works, and unlike the arrangements of flat planes advanced by Greenberg's mid-century anti-illusionistic formalism,[8] the pictorial elements of the project rely on a syntax of figure and ground relationship.[9] Whereas for Malevich, this meant arranging his units of geometric form in a field of white conceived as infinite space (Malevich 293), I compose each *Stripe Set* panel by suspending a chevron figure against a continuous field of alternating stripes. Moreover, in my composition, as both stripes and chevron appear to extend beyond the frame, the image can be read as the cropped fragment of a larger system, perhaps like the language fragments *zaum* poets liked to isolate and rearrange in their writings. Pushing this argument a little further, I will suggest that when a group of panels are brought together, they link up in a repetitive configuration of letter or sign-like elements that fail to coalesce as actual words and must therefore rely on the expressive force of their formal qualities, which include line, surface texture and, above all, colour.

[8] Greenberg famously theorized that the self-critical impulse of Modernism required that each artistic discipline confine itself to using only the characteristics specific to that discipline. In the case of painting, he argued that the fundamental characteristic was that of two-dimensional "flatness." See "The Case for Abstract Art" in Works Cited.

[9] The vocabulary of figure/ground relationships is derived from gestalt theory, which has come to me through the seminal works on visual perception by the German-born psychologist and film theorist, Rudolf Arnheim. See Works Consulted.

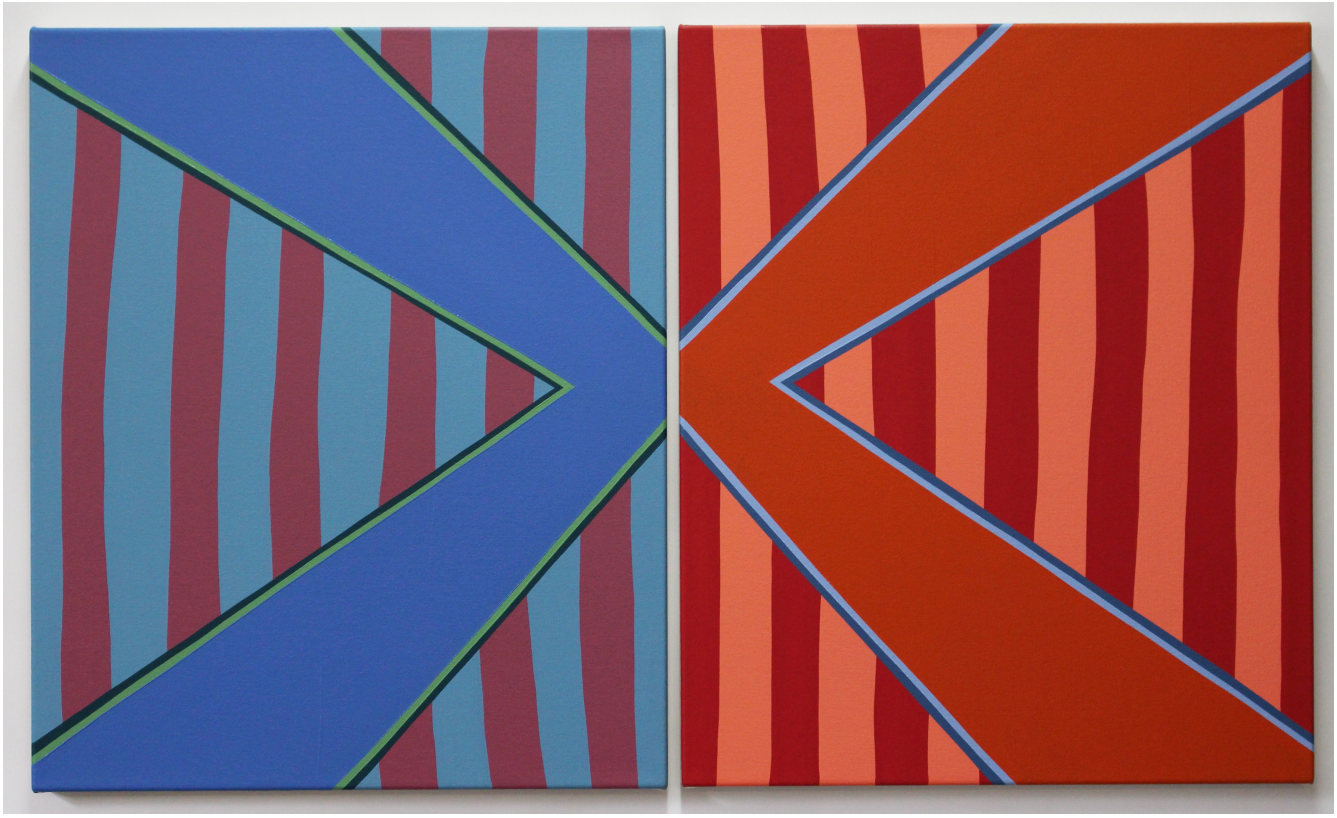

Fig. 5: *Stripe Set Diptych (twilight spicy intersection)*, 2014. Oil on canvas, 24 x 40 ¼ inches.

So far I have only touched upon the issue of colour in *Stripe Set*. The next art historical reference will begin to fill this gap, as the project owes much to the working methods of the German-born American "empirical" colourist Joseph Albers (1888 – 1976). In my view, Albers is responsible for one of the most important colour-oriented projects of the 20th century, a series of hundreds of paintings and silkscreen prints executed between 1950 and 1976 under the title *Homage to the Square* (Gage 264). These works repeat a very similar, reductive composition of hard-edged nesting squares in a variety of palettes which, in spite of what one might assume, do not rely upon a pre-established system of colour theory (Gage 265). In fact, in his seminal text *The Interaction of Color*, Albers argued that the perceptual relativity of colour renders any rational system of colour harmony inadequate to the needs of the artist (1). Instead, he stressed the importance of empirical experiments that, with time and repetition, enable the student to develop "an eye for colour" (1).

Aside from the obvious repetition of a single composition in a manifold of palettes, there are aspects of Albers' project that resonate strongly with *Stripe Set*. Firstly, the emphasis Albers placed upon an experimental method that involves the application of trial and error is consistent with my objectives for the production side of my project. Furthermore, as did Albers with the many iterations of *Homage to the Square*, I compose the palettes of each *Stripe Set* panel individually, focusing on internal colour relationships.

I begin with an arbitrary background colour and then select a contrasting colour for the stripes. The next step will be to anticipate a third colour for the chevron, keeping in mind that I need to find the 'right' balance between hue, value and saturation if I wish to enliven the stripe colours, but not clash with them. Through these choices, I endeavor to strike a note between visual intensity and discomfort, so that the work will attract attention but also sustain a durational viewing engagement so that certain perceptual effects will be given time to occur.

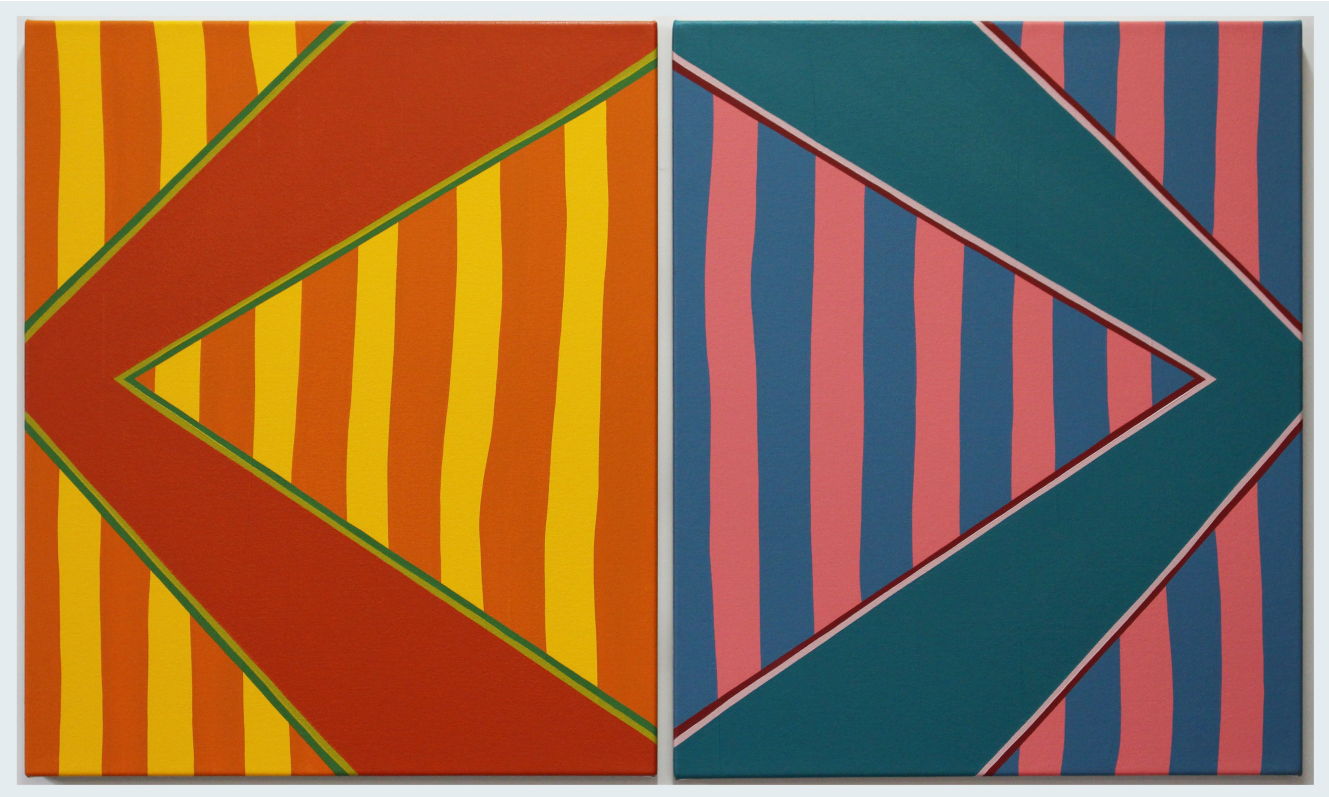

Fig. 6: *Stripe Set Diptych (citrus candy diamond)*, 2014. Oil on canvas, 24 x 40 ¼ inches.

While there are several points of similarity between *Stripe Set* and *Homage to the Square*, the two projects are also very different from each other. Perhaps most obviously, Albers did not conceive of his paintings as units of a modular composite, unlike the panels that I composed specifically to form a repeating pattern. Another major distinction lies in the more fluid borders between colours in *Stripe Set,* which reveal a different sensibility than the perfectly straight lines we have come to expect from works in the tradition of hard-edged abstraction. Instead, my stripes demonstrate a handmade wonkiness that not only contributes to their optical action, but also signals to an informed viewer that the work is not meant to be taken too seriously. The playful quasi-psychedelic wiggle of Dr. Seuss-esque stripes conveys a sense of informality, which is underscored by the prevalence in the work of cheerful colours like orange, turquoise and lime green. In my estimation, these choices imbue *Stripe Set* with a playful "Pop" sensibility, calling to mind the palettes we might expect to find in cartoons, in fashion and in interior décor, while the modular building block structure keeps the project from feeling over-determined or austere, for as one viewer has commented, "it seems a lot friendlier than it would if it was all in one piece."[10]

I think any ambitious artist working in abstraction today must be aware that they are placing their work in dialogue with a tradition that has been characterized by manifestos and lofty rhetorical claims. For example, the artists and thinkers of the Russian avant-garde believed they could advance social revolution through their non-objective works,[11] while for Piet Mondrian (1872 – 1944) and his de Stihl associates, the goal was to purify and essentialize the arts, especially painting and architecture, in order to blend them into a single form and instigate a new utopia (Foster et al. 151). Later, as objectives shifted from collective to individual, the painters associated with the mid-century New York School were tireless, if we believe the critics who wrote about them, in the pursuit of subjective transcendence and the "self-aggrandizing heroic gesture" (Verwoert 95). Coming along in the wake of such histories, I have found it important to temper my preoccupation with the kind of perceptual intensity I have already described with a healthy dose of irreverence. As I hope I have begun to demonstrate, my objectives are humbler and more lighthearted than those professed by the pioneers of Western abstraction, as I do not

[10] The Canadian artist and educator Germaine Koh made this comment in July 2014, during the critique of a *Stripe Set* iteration that I exhibited in the ECUAD Low Residency MAA Exhibition, *Fragments of a Former Moon*.

[11] For example, according to art historian Masha Chlenova, the impulse to ground artistic form in its material properties was proposed as "a tool for an active, even aggressive intervention into everyday life, which they aimed to turn into a more dynamic and immediate experience" (200).

seek to place them theoretically within a spectrum of revolutionary ideals or applied social critique.

Perhaps most significant to the discussion of how *Stripe Set* departs from Modernist themes is the way the work's modular structure resonates with the serial strategies of Minimalism and Pop Art. Of special interest to me is the way the project embraces the idea of multiples, but still departs from the mechanical modes of production favoured by artists like Donald Judd and Andy Warhol. Instead, *Stripe Set* relies upon a carefully hand-painted aesthetic that, while resisting designation as either mechanical or expressive, preserves a record of the touch and time that have gone into its production. I would argue that this work asks us to consider the *contemporary* implications of multiplicity, for if the artists we know as Minimalists adopted seriality in the 1960s to critique the subjective and gestural excesses of Abstract Expressionism (Colpitt 17), and Pop artists used similar means to reflect upon the post-war proliferation of media images and commodity forms (Hopkins 115), what does it mean to make a serial work today, slowly and carefully by hand?

Subversive Devotion: Touch and Time

In his seminal essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," the German critic and philosopher Walter Benjamin (1892 – 1940) famously argued that a singular work of art could be distinguished from a reproduction by virtue of the "aura" surrounding the original (218). For Benjamin, although mechanical reproduction emancipated artworks from their traditional role as ritual objects, enabling them to reach mass audiences and enter the realm of politics, these changes could only be achieved at the expense of their "aura," with its associated concept of authenticity as made manifest by the artwork's "presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be" (Benjamin 220). Furthermore, Benjamin argued that the work of art's unique existence must include "the history to which it was subject throughout the time of its existence" and "the changes it may have suffered in physical condition over the years as well as the various changes in ownership" (220).

I am very interested in the notion that an object is surrounded by the "aura" of its unique presence, which, having been set in motion by its mode of production and other histories, is able

to crystallize at the moment when the object is encountered by a conscious perceiver. I would argue that a handmade object can deliver a particularly rich encounter in this regard, because it carries the trace of the maker's presence and touch. In an age when technological reproduction has expanded beyond what Benjamin could have even imagined to encompass screen-based images and other modes of digital proliferation, I am very interested in the implications of the handmade. While I confess to an affection for traditional methods of craft, my real interest in such matters is not driven by a romantic notion about the artist's unique subjectivity or the inherent value of an 'authentic' mark. Instead, I am beguiled by the notion that at this particular moment in history, there is something subversive, absurd, and sensually self-indulgent about taking the time to make something by hand that could be more efficiently and perhaps 'better' made through some combination of mechanical and digital means.

Like most of my paintings, the panels of the *Stripe Set* project are made very slowly and carefully over the course of several months, one colour at a time with drying time between layers. In speaking about his career-long engagement with the monochrome, the Canadian artist and art historian Ian Wallace has described painting as "the landing pad of subjectivity" because the application of pigment to a surface can be understood as the indexical trace of the artist's subjective presence (Wallace). Taking this formulation a little further, I would like to suggest that when my layering process is taken into account, *Stripe Set* panels reveal themselves as registers of a *sedimentary* presence, as the most recently-painted elements lie on top of earlier layers, which can be examined in sequence as if moving backwards in time until the original ground colours are reached. Further, when we think about these paintings as material records of touch and attention, the nature of the mark I use to make them also emerges as significant.

When Jasper Johns (b. 1930) began to work in encaustic in the 1950s,[12] he was declaring a position against the gestural excesses of Abstract Expressionism, ironically using a thick wax medium to slow down, reify and impersonalize even the smallest stroke of his brush (Foster et al. 404). In a sense, my methods have something in common with the impulse behind Johns'

[12] It is worth noting that Johns was also embedding printed materials into many of his encaustic paintings, thereby simultaneously inserting and hiding fragments of language. For the same of my current argument, I have focused on the artist's position in relation to painterly expressionism, however, the matter of hidden content in Johns' work is a worthy topic of research in its own right.

encaustic, for my paint handling is both slower and less autographic than anything we might associate with Expressionism.

Over the years, I have developed techniques to lay down slow, smooth bands of colour that reveal a handmade sensibility only along their borders, where I encourage an overloaded brush to trail a ridge of paint to serve as a haptic trace of the work's material history. Although I have less control than I might prefer over how this handling of material will be interpreted by others, I like to believe that by employing this manner of gestural restraint, I am decreasing the odds that my work will be read through the lens of a painterly flourish. While I am deeply involved in the implications of the handmade, I am also motivated to eschew the kind of subjective mark that conjures up ideas about self-expression, because for me the trace of the hand is a lot more interesting when it resists this cliché and functions instead as a humble record of lived presence, repetitive touch, and the passage of time.

Although vibrant colours and optical effects may be the first things to strike a viewer of *Stripe Set*, it is my hope that the temporal layering and caressive facture of each panel will invite a thoughtful viewer to spend a few moments considering how these paintings were made, for as the British painter and psychologist David Maclagan has argued, "the actual aesthetic features of a painting – such as its pressure of line, density of colour, coherence or incoherence of form – have their own independent psychological contribution to make" (8). While I maintain that the irregular stripes and building-block structure convey a lighthearted sensibility that keep the work from feeling overly austere, I would also like to suggest that the careful, sensual handling of material signals a tactile and repetitive practice that borders on the devotional. If I have done my job well, the work will be able to hold the seeming opposites of playful experiment and devotional touch in a productive tension that can be apprehended not only by myself as the maker, but also by a viewer who is willing to take a closer look.

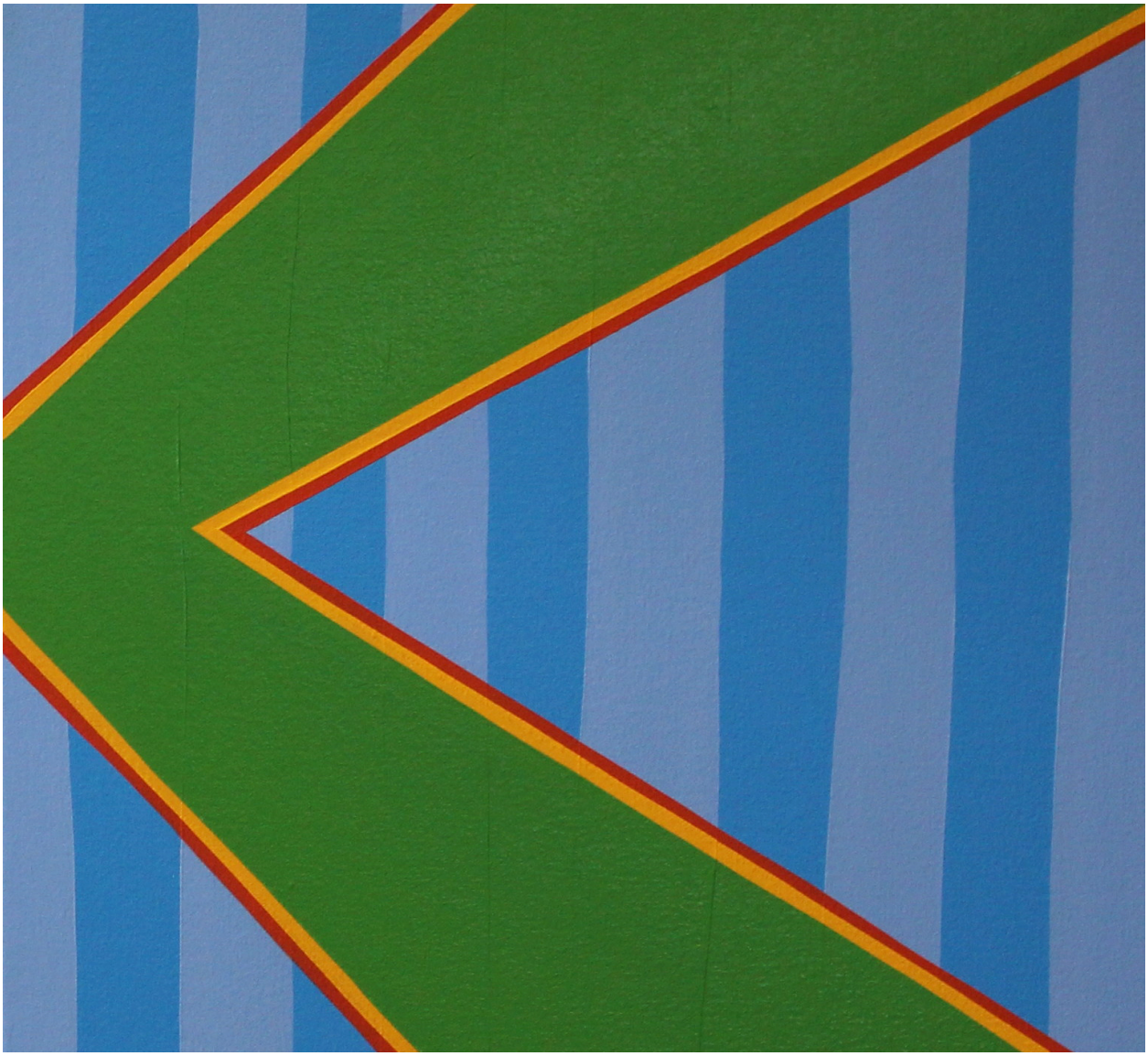

Fig. 7: *Stripe Set Panel #19 (detail),* 2015. Oil on canvas.

CHAPTER TWO

Repetitive Labour and the Polychrome Lozenges

As I have said, my intention at the beginning of the *Stripe Set* project was to engage in an extended colour experiment, however, as the panels started to accumulate, other concerns began to emerge as significant. The issue of repetitive labour was one such concern, as while I was making the paintings, I began to think about other additive processes that could highlight colour relationships, which led me to question whether the brush was actually central to my project as an artist. In order to investigate this question, in the fall of 2014, I went to work in the printmaking studio and produced a set of non-identical multiples under the title *Polychrome Lozenges.*

I had only minimal printmaking experience before I initiated this project, but I was aware that my favourite method of placing flat planes of oil paint with drying time between layers had a lot in common with serigraphy. Mindful of this parallel, I set out to revisit the border zone between originality and multiplicity I had been exploring through *Stripe Set*, this time through silkscreen printing, a medium that is conventionally used to produce identical multiples. I was eager to transgress the ethos of identical mass production that is traditional to printmaking, much as I had been transgressing the ethos of unique originality that is traditional to painting. Also, on a personal level, by taking a strategy I had developed in paint and adapting it to print, I hoped to discover a bit more about the impulses behind my work. I wondered, would removing the vestiges of painterly facture make this project feel unrelated to the rest of my work?

Arguably, a serigraph or silkscreen print sits somewhere on a continuum between the handmade and the mechanically reproduced image. In my view, serigraphy has much in common with painting, as both mediums employ manual tools to apply pigmented fluid to a surface. However, a printed image is typically less spontaneous than a painting, as by the time the printer begins to apply colour to a surface, all of the decisions involved in layout have already been made. In order to disturb this expectation and leave room for unscripted decisions at every stage, I planned a simple composition that would allow me to improvise adjustments throughout the printing

process. Furthermore, in planning the composition for this project, I wanted to create a series of works that could serve as an idiosyncratic homage to the various histories of striped painting within the 20th century canon,[13] and so I paired the lozenge shape, which has been a recurring motif in my paintings, with a pattern of continuous stripes.

In order to execute the striped design, I created two screens with simple rectangular openings, one wider than the other, and proceeded to print these shapes onto heavy cotton paper, using an additive process that allowed me to spontaneously decide whether or not to produce a third colour by overlapping the edges of any two adjacent hues. As the work progressed, it quickly became apparent that I could open up an additional avenue for surprise by manipulating the levels of transparency and opacity of my inks, which made it difficult to predict exactly how the colours would mix in the margins of overlap. Also, my composition allowed me to vary the widths of my stripes to complicate the tempo of the visual rhythm[14] and create sensations of expansion and compression between these repeating elements. While the high level of mechanical control involved in the serigraphy process make it possible to generate identical stripes and identical prints, I ended up using the screens to generate a large series of quite differently-striped monoprints.

[13] I am particularly interested in the works of the Quebec-Canadian painter and Plasticien Guido Molinari, the Op Art paintings of the British artist Bridget Riley, the Colour Field paintings of the American artists Gene Davis and Kenneth Noland, and the striped works associated with institutional critique by the French artist Daniel Buren.

[14] According to the British design writer Alan Pipes, "visual rhythm is created by the movement of the viewer's eyes across and around a composition, taking in the repetition of elements that have been placed with some kind of structured variation" (244).

Fig. 8: *Polychrome Lozenges* in the studio, 2014. Silkscreen ink on cotton paper, 20 x 9 inches each.

It bears mention that silkscreen technique requires the repetition of simple a simple gesture, for it is the printer's task to pull ink through a screen in order to bring pigment into contact with a surface. During the process of applying stripes to the paper that would become the *Lozenges*, I noticed that each enactment of this gesture was being recorded by the appearance of a single coloured rectangle, and as I worked to lay these shapes down one by one into the hundreds, I remembered Ian Wallace[15] and began to think of each rectangle as an index of presence and attention. Following this daydream a little further, I began to think about additive process as analogous to the accretion of memories, as we layer new experiences over the old, sometimes overlapping only along the margins and sometimes obscuring all but a trace of the past. While I would not expect these musings to make it across to a viewer of the *Polychrome Lozenges*, I mention them here because they signaled the emergence of something new in my thinking about the operations of memory within my work. These thoughts would contribute to the development of my *Intermedial Experiments* a few months later.

[15] See page 16 of this text.

The Element of Surprise

There was a big surprise in the process of making the *Polychrome Lozenges*. Because the composition involved large areas of flat colour, often with several layers of overlapping ink, the paper began to curl under the exposure to so much water-based colour, and when I began to cut the white background away from the *Lozenges*, this effect became more pronounced. At first this situation appeared to be a serious technical problem; however, upon reflection, I was able to recognize the surprise of the curling paper as one of the more interesting aspects of these prints as physical objects. In my estimation, as concave planar forms with striped interiors, these works are now open to a range of associations, depending upon how they are viewed.

For example, if exhibited vertically, a *Polychrome Lozenge* will curl playfully away from the plane, as if trying to sneak off the wall and escape the restrictions of a two-dimensional existence. If placed on a horizontal surface, the same printed object will begin to resemble a vessel that *contains* colours, rather than a surface that merely supports them. This unexpected element becomes more pronounced when the *Lozenges* are viewed from an oblique angle, as the roll of the paper will cause the stripes to appear as curves that slowly straighten out as a viewer approaches the customary position in front of the work. Perhaps most exciting to me at the moment, this element of perceptual surprise can be compounded and intensified by the decision to join a collection of these works together like a chain of concave paper dolls, for under these conditions the *Lozenges* will form a line with peaks and troughs that occur at regular intervals like a rhythmic succession of multicoloured cresting waves.

Fig. 9: *Polychrome Lozenges*, 2015. Silkscreen ink on cut paper, 9 pieces, 20 x 9 inches each. Installation, Charles H. Scott Gallery, Emily Carr University. Photo: Scott Massey.

I think of the *Polychrome Lozenges* as a playful counterpoint to the self-serious attitudes that are typically linked with historical works of abstract painting. When this piece was exhibited in the Charles H. Scott Gallery at Emily Carr University, I received feedback that the shapes resemble something familiar from the everyday world, which is itself a transgression of the Formalist ideal that abstract works should operate as autonomous self-referential forms with no suggestion of representational content.[16] Apparently, for some viewers, the shapes resemble skateboards, or artificial fingernails, or medication capsules, which are not the kinds of associations we tend to connect with 'serious' works of formal abstraction. It has also been suggested that the vibrant colour and optical activity of the work carry a reference to psychedelic drugs and altered states of consciousness, which is a reading that I am happy to embrace. For me, the *Lozenges* also call to mind ideas around bodily pleasure and desire, as they invite a kind of slippage with décor or even high-end retail display, especially when exhibited on a stylish white table as in the image above. In any event, for a series of static objects, the *Polychrome Lozenges* present a wealth of

[16] See Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting" in Works Cited.

opportunities to generate a sense of movement. While this work resonates with any number of contemporary projects under the banner of 'expanded painting,'[17] I feel a particular kinship with the process-heavy, pop-inflected installations of the American artist Polly Apfelbaum.

A Methodological Kinship

Apfelbaum has perhaps become best known for the works she refers to as *fallen paintings*, which are highly coloured, floor-based installations made up of hundreds of individually cut and dyed shapes in synthetic velvet.[18] While these painting/sculpture hybrids have been much lauded for their effectiveness in collapsing the boundaries of Modernist medium-specificity, it is the manner in which Apfelbaum has fused reconfigurable installation with perceptual intensity and labour-intensive process that I identify with most strongly.

As composite pieces made up of scores of repeating elements, Apfelbaum's *fallen paintings* have the kind of flexible installation potential that has emerged as critically important in my most recent projects. Like *Stripe Set* and the *Polychrome Lozenges*, Apfelbaum's works demonstrate the capacity to respond to the architectural givens of different exhibition spaces. Furthermore, they remain open to the vagaries of chance and spontaneous decision-making, since the artist likes to place the individual units of her installations without the aid of a pre-established map. She has said "My work is improvisational, intuitive, process oriented. I want to see every possibility and then I'll make up my mind" (qtd. in Lloyd ar21). From this we can surmise that the final siting of a piece has become integral to Apfelbaum's production logic, as her works cannot be considered complete until every constituent element has been placed. Furthermore, in the terms of figure and ground relationship, Apfelbaum's installations have effectively enlisted whole galleries to operate as grounds for her (object) figures. This way of thinking has recently captured my imagination, and I anticipate pushing this idea quite a bit further in future projects.

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[17] In his 2002 essay entitled "Where is Painting Now," the Stockholm-based scholar and curator Daniel Birnbaum has described the contemporary situation for painting as an expanded field wherein "painting no longer exists as a strictly circumscribed mode of expression (because)…Painterly practices emerge in other genres, such as photography, video, sculpture, printmaking and installation." See Works Cited.

[18] To view image examples of Apfelbaum's *fallen paintings* and other works, please visit her professional website at http://www.pollyapfelbaum.com.

In addition to their capacity to transform with each new exhibition, the multicoloured shapes of Apfelbaum's *fallen paintings* also change in appearance as a viewer moves around, as the texture of the velvet causes their colours to shimmer and shift according to the angle of incident light. According to the Berlin-based art critic Martin Herbert, this optical instability contributes to the interest of the work, as does the vibrancy of Apfelbaum's palette, which he has described as "Matissean" (85). For the London-based art historian T. J. Demos, Apfelbaum's floor installations unleash a "destabilizing force (as)…intense optical sensation and evidence of painterly process dazzle the viewer" (176). In my view, Apfelbaum's work can be best articulated as a series of elaborate and optically intense material experiments that decimate the boundaries between high and low culture and, in keeping with one of the central aspirations I hold for my own work, subvert the notion that art must be lofty and super-serious, as she makes her installations out of shiny non-art materials and brings them literally 'down to earth' by placing them on the floor.[19]

I also understand Apfelbaum's work as a meditation on the tension between the moment of inspiration when a new idea comes into view and the hours of steadfast labour that may be required to bring a project into form, as she has said that she enjoys labour-intensive process and "finds tedium liberating" (qtd. in Lloyd ar21). This level of devotion to material craft resonates very strongly with a key methodological driver of my own work, for as I have already suggested, I try to create objects that not only bear the trace of human touch, but also emit an undercurrent of psychological tension that a viewer will notice if they consider the focused care and attention that have gone into the production of the work. It might be more efficient to engineer perceptual events between viewers and readymade or mechanically reproduced components. However, I am committed to producing the *handcrafted* event because it not only activates the viewer's perceptual faculties, but can also forge an asynchronous, tactile link between the artist's absent body and the viewer's present one. This seems especially poignant to me today, as Western culture continues to trend aggressively towards the instantaneous, the digital, and the virtual: I find a subversive poetics of touch within the handmade work that I am interested in preserving.

[19] Apfelbaum has referred to the floor as "an emotionally charged, low, irreverent space, a place where you throw things, where you drop your dirty clothes." Furthermore, she has acknowledged that "Something precious like an artwork was not supposed to be on the floor" (qtd. in Marcoci, 42).

Fig. 10: *Polychrome Lozenges (detail)*, 2015.
Silkscreen ink on cut paper, 20 x 9 inches each.

CHAPTER THREE

Intermedial Experiments

As I have described, during the process of making the first panels of the *Stripe Set* project, I began to open my thinking to the spatial and temporal implications of seriality and modular structure. Around this same time, I also started paying much closer attention to how perceptual events occur in everyday life. I wondered whether an abstract vocabulary might be up to the task of capturing the tenor of such events, in spite of the fact that historical abstraction has been linked to the paradigm that autonomous artworks function in a different register than everyday life.

Before enrolling in graduate study, I had developed a procedure for gathering visual cues from quotidian sources and combining them through memory and invention to create abstract paintings. However, the idea to try transposing a single everyday perception onto a single work of art did not emerge for me until my first year in the MAA program. In the winter of 2014, I worked through this new idea by producing a body of works on paper that I framed as quirky and subjective translations of everyday objects and scenes. These drawings and paintings allowed me to explore the ways in which memory and imagination inflect our perceptions of things in the world;[20] however, I felt I had missed something important by failing to address how things actually present themselves *to our bodies* at the instance of perception. It became clear that my next series of experiments would involve working with three-dimensional form.

I made my first prototype for the *Intermedial Experiments* in the spring of 2014 when I created a three-dimensional work entitled *Loop*. As a hybrid object comprised of a graphite wall drawing connected to a planar "U" shape that hovers a few inches above the floor, this piece inserts itself into literal space in a way that was quite new for my work at the time, as I had not yet made the *Polychrome Lozenges*.

[20] This is the central argument of my unpublished essay of 2014, entitled "The Creative Instance of Perception."

Fig. 11: *Loop*, 2014. Acrylic paint on fibreboard with graphite wall drawing, 86 x 35 x 24 inches. Photo: Trevor van den Eynden.

When I started to work on this piece, I had been thinking about the definition of a painting as a material object that exists in real space. This issue was of particular interest to me at the time because I had been exploring the spatial and temporal implications of modular structure in relation to *Stripe Set* while researching the history of Modernist abstraction.

As students of art history may recall, the development of abstract painting has been characterized by instances when the pioneers of the genre aspired to represent spiritual realities or to evoke states of transcendent ideality through their works. Wassily Kandinsky comes to mind as one of the most fervent advocates for the metaphysical power of abstraction, as he believed that letting go of the materialist impulse behind representation enabled artworks to address viewers on a deeper level, thereby assisting them in their spiritual growth.[21] As I reflected upon this history, it seemed curious to me that so many of my predecessors in abstraction had felt it possible to articulate non-physical ideals through a material form like painting. Therefore, the impulse to create a work that resonated with these histories while inserting itself as an overtly physical presence within the exhibition space captured my imagination, and I decided to produce a graphite drawing that appeared to be in the process of sliding off the wall into the room.

When the Minimalists began to make "specific objects"[22] that occupied real, rather than transcendent or illusionistic space in the 1960s, they were consciously assimilating the operations of time and embodied perception into their works in a way that had been denied by formalist criticism. In her discussion of the iconic 1965 work by the American artist Robert Morris (b. 1931) called *Untitled (L Beams)*, the American art historian Francis Colpitt has highlighted the fact that "the configuration is perceptually altered as the spectator moves around or between the elements…(as) relationships between spectator and object change" (95). As I was making *Loop*, I considered the decision made by Morris to create sculptural works on a roughly human scale in order to facilitate a one-to-one encounter between the viewer and the piece in real space (Morris 831). I also considered the Brazilian artist Hélio Oiticica[23] (1937 – 1980) who, according to the Brazilian art historian Renato da Silva, had shared Morris' interest in the writings of the French philosopher and scholar Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908 – 1961). Apparently, both artists had been influenced by Merleau-Ponty's 1945 book *Phenomenology of Perception* to assemble planar materials as three-dimensional artworks that could interface with embodied perceivers within the built environment (da Silva). I took inspiration from these

[21] See Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* in Works Consulted

[22] See Donald Judd, "Specific Objects" in Works Consulted.

[23] The paint colour I selected for *Loop* carries a direct homage to Oiticica, who favoured warm hues, especially yellow and orange, for their capacity to advance towards the viewer (da Silva).

precedents. Moreover, my decision to complicate the boundaries between drawing, painting and sculpture in the making of *Loop* was in part inspired by the Brazilian Neo-Concrete poet Ferreira Gullar, who in dialogue with Oiticica theorized a special kind of object that could surpass traditional artistic categories like painting and sculpture in order to provoke direct phenomenological experience.[24]

Merleau-Ponty's most influential contribution to the branch of philosophy known as phenomenology was to locate the root of human subjectivity within the physical body itself, as he argued that our experiences as conscious body-subjects encode all of our perceptions with an underlying a *priori* structure. One of the central tenets of Merleau-Ponty's thought is the contention that we understand objects in the world through a kind of "bodily intentionality" that pre-consciously assesses how we might move through or utilize the spaces and things that we encounter.[25] I found some convincing evidence in support of this claim when I exhibited *Loop* in the Concourse Gallery at Emily Carr University during the summer of 2014.

For one thing, the resemblance of the work to a sled or skateboard seems have captured the imagination of more than one child, as I found it necessary to remove small footprints from the surface of the piece on more than one occasion. I was also able to overhear a number of viewers make reference to the work as a doorway or portal into another dimension, which I found very encouraging, considering my original intention to connect *Loop* to concepts of transcendental space as they had been expressed within historical abstraction. After this initial foray into three-dimensional form, I found myself eager to make more painted objects, adopting the term *Intermedial* to describe works that sit somewhere on a continuum between painting and sculpture. I see this expansion of my practice as the next logical step in my research, as it follows up on the capacity of *Stripe Set* to activate architectural space and call a viewer's attention to their embodied situation. The *Intermedial Experiments* also promise to advance my investigation of strategies to create a work that can present itself to the body of a viewer as do ordinary things in the world.

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[24] See Ferreira Gullar "The Theory of the Non-Object" in Works Cited.

[25] In his introduction to the book *Maurice Merleau-Ponty: Basic Writings,* the British scholar and philosophy professor Thomas Baldwin offers an accessible summary of these ideas. See Works Consulted.

Sourced Palettes

Aside from coming off the wall to share space with a viewer, the most recent *Intermedial Experiments* mark another significant shift in my work, as I have started to explore the implications of using sourced rather than arbitrary colour palettes. The Canadian artist Renée Van Halm has been a particular influence in this regard, as she has developed a number of projects over the years that blend her considerable skills as a colourist with research methodologies that inflect her work with elements of social and political commentary.

Two projects in particular come to mind. The first of these, entitled *Currencies,* is a contemporary interpretation of the Victorian custom of displaying ceramic plates as decorative accents. For this project, Van Halm researched the history of colour trends in interior décor in order to identify the most popular hues in each decade of the 20th century. She then applied these colours to a series of semi-abstract disk shapes, noting that colours have a 'currency' that can make them seem dated after a few years, thus stimulating the desire to redecorate.[26] In a second project, Van Halm sourced palettes for a series of gouache paintings of domestic interiors from the magazine advertisements of expensive brands like Gucci and Armani in order to further explore connections between colour and consumerism (Van Halm). She has said "We have this relationship with colour that is somewhat subliminal, in that we like one fridge over another or one article of clothing over another, and we attribute it to individuality...We are almost unable to acknowledge how determined it is outside of ourselves" (qtd. in Laurence 61).

I have several ideas about how to inflect my own work with undercurrents of content by using specifically sourced palettes, some of which I am currently developing, and some that I hope to work with in the future. For example, for one current work in progress, I am using colours derived from historical wallpapers in order to evoke a sense of nostalgia and link the piece with ideas about domestic space. A second idea involves deriving palettes from my personal collection of highly coloured Mexican tablecloths in order to explore David Batchelor's contention that Western culture suffers from "chromaphobia"[27] while simultaneously linking my gallery-based

[26] For more on this project, see Bruce Grenville's catalogue essay for the exhibition *Weak Thought* at the Vancouver Art Gallery, November 14 1998 – January 31, 1999.

[27] See Batchelor, David. *Chromaphobia* in Works Consulted.

work with everyday perceptual events. Perhaps most interesting to me at the moment, I am also working with a series of my own photographs as a way to source colours.

As mentioned above, when I was employing additive process to print the *Polychrome Lozenges*, I found myself in a daydream about the act of layering pigment as a metaphor for the layering of remembered experiences, which led me to wonder whether it might be interesting to make a series of painted works with colours imported directly from my own memories. For more than a decade, I have been travelling back and forth to spend the winter months in Mexico, and as many artists have noted before me, the quality of light near the equator is completely unlike that which we experience in the Northern hemisphere. On the Pacific coast of Jalisco state, it has been my observation that the influences of humidity and noise, not to mention the sheer ferocity of the sun, have a way of blending into a phenomenological experience of the everyday that is quite different from what we might typically expect in Vancouver. At the risk of bordering on the esoteric, I will say that I have noticed an electricity, even a pulsation, to the way colours look and feel on a hot day in the tropics. There is no doubt that these observations have found their way into my work over the years, but recently, I have become interested in trying to capture a specific instance of this perceptual intensity within a single work, and have been using colours derived from my own photographs to try to do this.

Fig. 12: *School Wall in Barra de Navidad on February 25, 2015.* Photograph.

I chose to photograph the scene above because I was fascinated by the odd combination of turquoise and olive green on the outer wall of an elementary school in Barra de Navidad. As I walked by this wall on a daily basis, I was repeatedly struck by the strange glow that this juxtaposition of colours was producing against the concrete paving stones on the shady side of the street. In keeping with these observations, for the work *Untitled (Reclining Lozenge),* I focused on the hues that were most prominent in my memory of the scene, as I had experienced the wall as the source of cooling emanation that bathed the entire area. The process of deriving colours from this source helped me to recognize that I am not by temperament inclined to adhere to a strict procedure of reproducing the palette of a photograph, but rather that I am interested in deriving palettes from my subjective memories of everyday experiences, using photographs only inasmuch as they are helpful in reinforcing those memories.

Fig. 13: *Untitled (Reclining Lozenge)*, 2015. Oil paint on fibreboard, 10 x 24 x 40 inches.

In terms of form, I see an amusing connection between the vibrant cool of this palette and the semi-figurative position that is suggested by the angle between the planes that make up *Untitled (Reclining Lozenge).* Depending upon how one looks at it, the piece can resemble a streamlined beach chair, or a bent surfboard, or more in keeping with my own idiosyncratic sense of humour, an animated sausage-being who is either taking it easy or trying to get up off the floor. It is worth noting that the stripes on this form reveal the same kind of handmade sensibility that we saw in the earlier *Stripe Set* project, which may contribute a biomorphic undertone to the work, although the figurative allusion may also be coming through in the way the pattern resembles the stripes we might expect to find on fashionable t-shirts or socks. In any event, I see this piece as a playful and lighthearted early experiment into the procedure of sourcing colours from a memory.

Fig. 14: *Café Tablecloth in Barra de Navidad on February 25, 2015.* Photograph.

As I was making a second work with colours derived from a photograph, entitled *Stripey Loop*, I used a similar procedure as I had in the first instance, selecting the hues that I felt were most important in my memory of the experience. In this case, I had been inspired by the radiance of a striped tablecloth at an outdoor café. I was curious to discover whether I could capture the level of visual intensity I had perceived in the tablecloth by applying its predominant colours to a form that would amplify the sense of movement.

Fig. 15: *Stripey Loop*, 2015. Oil paint on fibreboard, 38 x 24 x 38 inches.

As I consider the completed work, I would argue that the overall shape of *Stripey Loop* is making a significant contribution to the optical action of its painted pattern, as the bands of colour appear to stretch into triangular wedges as they make their way around the curves of each "U" shape. In my view, the way the pattern changes as it circumnavigates this painting/sculpture hybrid implies a clockwise motion that seems to have been temporarily suspended, as in the children's game where moving participants must freeze when they are being observed.

Like the yellow *Loop* piece, this work also activates an important relationship between itself and the wall, and by inference the history of wall-based abstraction. However, whereas the earlier work gave the appearance of being caught in the act of slipping into the room, this more recent piece has transitioned completely into actual space, although it still leans against the wall as if reliant upon its two-dimensional antecedents for context or support. In my view, this work also carries allusions to architecture and furniture, as the rounded "U" shape carries the echo of arched passageways, while the form in its entirety can be read as the abstracted fusion of a table and a folding chair. These associations make sense to me as markers of the everyday experience that served as the initial inspiration for the work, for as I suggested much earlier in this paper, I am very interested in the way ordinary things can appear quite strange when examined with heightened attention or through the lens of an unusual state of consciousness.[28]

These musings align quite well with one of the central tenets of phenomenology, which holds that perception is never a matter of passively receiving sensory information from a fixed world, but rather that we are active participants in the shaping of our own perceptions, even in the simple terms that we pay attention to some things while dismissing others. According to Maclagan,

> "Our experience of the visible world is…not just a matter of registering impressions or responding to external stimuli, it also involves the mobilization of a whole range of psychological effects – feelings, memories, imaginative constructions of one kind or another…These complexities of vision are both enhanced and transmuted when it comes to our response to works of art" (35).

In the case of *Stripey Loop*, it has been my aspiration to externalize some of these imaginative constructions and psychological effects, as I have tried to create a work that conveys the kind of movement or energy that I perceived in that glowing tablecloth by the side of the road in Mexico.

[28] See page 7 of this text.

Tasty Colours

The final project of my MAA thesis artwork represents a departure from anything I have made before, as it moves away from my customary procedure of placing contrasting colours next to each other in order to generate perceptual intensities and optical effects. Instead, *Tasty Colours* has taken shape as a collection of small fibreboard blocks that can, like the *Stripe Set* project, be configured in any number of different ways. Unlike any of my previous works, however, this piece also invites a tactile and participatory engagement from a viewer.

When I was cutting out the larger pieces of fibreboard material that would become the *Intermedial Experiments*, I kept all of the scraps with the idea that I might be able to find a way to use them. Eventually, I decided to shape them into a collection of small rounded blocks that could later be glued together into some kind of painted sculptural relief. However, when I began to sand the individual pieces, I recognized them as a source of considerable tactile pleasure, as their softly rounded shapes fit very comfortably in the palm of a human hand. This prompted me to complete the work as a set of individually coloured morsels that can be rearranged according to the whim of a participant.

In keeping with my recent thinking about deriving palettes from specific colour sources, I began to look for a way to amplify the connection I had intuited between these blocks and ideas about pleasure and desire. Ultimately, my personal collection of commercial paint samples provided the link I was looking for, and I began to sort through the swatches in my possession to find the ones named after food items. I then proceeded to mix these colours in acrylic paint and apply them to the handmade blocks.

Fig. 16: *Tasty Colours (peach sorbet, raspberry, new lime, crushed berries, rhubarb, fresh lime, grape juice, chestnut, blueberry, chili pepper, pumpkin pie, lemon, mystic grape, sharp cheddar, orange juice, cranberry, basil leaf, citron, hot spice, curry flurry, summer plum),* 2015.
Acrylic on ¾ inch fibreboard, dimensions variable.

Fig. 17: Arrangement of *Tasty Colours,* 2015.

Fig. 18: Arrangement of *Tasty Colours,* 2015.

Now that *Tasty Colours* is complete, I can see a resonance between this project and a work from 1989 by the Canadian artist Gary Neill Kennedy that I have seen exhibited at the National Gallery in Ottawa. Kennedy's piece, entitled *An American History Painting (The Complete List of Pittsburgh Paints Historic Colour Series)*, involves the vertical arrangement of a sequence of commercial colour swatches with their corresponding names painted directly on the gallery wall.[29] Aside from the amusing word play of a title that conflates domestic décor with the History Painting of the French academy, I think this piece carries more serious layers of social and political commentary, as it invites us to think about connections between the history of the United States and the culture of consumerism that has blossomed there. More significant to my own investigations, however, is the way Kennedy's project has fused a concern with colour with a conceptual procedure.

I am very interested in continuing to explore the potential of conceptual systems to drive at least some of the decisions in my work,[30] although as I reflect upon the projects of my MAA thesis, I suspect that I will never choose to adhere to a completely pre-determined set of rules. It feels more compelling to me at the moment to look for ways to blend systems-based approaches to artistic production with elements of arbitrary and subjective choice in order to assimilate an asynchronous[31] range of art historical cues into my own contemporary work.

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[29] For more about this work and others by Kennedy in the National Gallery permanent collection, see the website page at http://www.gallery.ca/en/see/collections/artist.php?iartistid=2877

[30] In 1966, the British-born art historian Lawrence Alloway published a catalogue essay to accompany the "Systemic Painting" exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum in New York. In this text, Alloway argues that a shift in painting sensibility occurred in the early 1960s as many young artists had begun to work with rule-based rather than spontaneous or expressive procedures to make their paintings (15). Although this essay has only recently come to my attention, I look forward to following several of its threads in my future art historical research, as well as in my practice-based investigations of systemic procedure. See Works Consulted.

[31] In his essay "This Funeral is for the Wrong Corpse," the American art critic and historian Hal Foster has suggested that some contemporary artists have taken up the strategy of blending asynchronous art references in order to grapple with the condition of "coming after" the innovations of the 20th century. See Works Consulted.

Conclusions and Reflections

As I look back upon the works that have been described and analyzed in this paper, I see a sequence of studio-based experiments and critical reflections that have enabled me to gain clarity about the most important impulses behind my work. Moreover, I see that these projects have stimulated artistic growth by opening up new avenues for theoretical investigation and material production. As I have outlined, the *Stripe Set* project began as an extended colour experiment; however, it evolved into an exploration of the perceptual implications of seriality and modular form. Similarly, the *Polychrome Lozenges,* which began as an investigation of repetitive process, matured as a playful critique of the serious attitudes traditionally associated with geometric abstraction. The third body of work that I have included in this paper also underwent a transformation while it was being produced, for while I initiated the *Intermedial Experiments* to reconsider the metaphysical aims of Modernist painting, I soon found myself investigating the potential for conceptual procedures to inflect colour-based works with additional layers of context.

As I come to the conclusion of the MAA program, I find myself identifying quite strongly with the concept that a studio practice can be understood as a form of research in its own right, for as I have moved through the material processes of making work, I have made discoveries about my artistic impulses and the contexts that inform them that I could not have anticipated at the beginning of this period of graduate study. As I currently understand it, I can now describe my methodology as a tapestry of interwoven threads that include the reanimation of Modernist tropes, the mobilization of colour and pattern to create instances of perceptual surprise, the development of strategies to link the everyday perceptual event with the staged situation of a gallery work, and the employment of material techniques to *craft* events that carry coded signals about the touch, time and attention that have gone into their production. Furthermore, it has also emerged that I am involved in a process of blending rules-based procedures with elements of arbitrary or spontaneous choice, as my program of artistic research has progressed through a sequence of closed experimental procedures and open-ended discoveries

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