



Neotropical Migration

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by

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

MASTER OF FINE ARTS
in
VISUAL ARTS

EMILY CARR UNIVERSITY OF ART + DESIGN
2019

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To Camilla and Lux for helping me go through this process with their support, critical thinking and unconditional love. If it weren't for you two this experience wouldn't be so full of magic and constant transformation.
Thank you!

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Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge that this thesis has been written on the unceded ancestral territories of the Coast Salish peoples, including the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tseil Waututh. For me is a great honour to live, share and learn in this territory which I feel as fundamental for my formation as an adult and artist. I have a long relationship with the land known today as Vancouver. I came here ten years ago for the first time to do my undergraduate program at Emily Carr University (at that time Institute), during that period I discovered my personal identity as an adult, the displacement felt allowed me to recognize myself as a Latin American body and artist. After 6 years of living in Ecuador developing my artistic career I came back to do the Master's in Fine arts program at Emily Carr University. When I decided to come back I wasn't sure why, today I know I had to return. Coming from the post-colonial territories of the land anciently known as the Kingdom of Quito known today as the Republic of Ecuador has been incredibly important to witness the desire of a process of reconciliation, which Canada is going through. The problematic of land representation and cultural appropriation led me to deep questioning of my own identity and the space in which I can participate as an artist that comes from a "post-colonial" country. This questioning has taken me to explore historic research about my country and its social process that have as an outcome the Mestizo identity that I navigate.

Abstract

Neotropical migration is a project where material and conceptual research is focused on visual and intellectual strategies of receptivity in the viewer towards humans and interspecies relations. Working with painting and collage, I am also invested in human dialogue with the natural world from an Ecuadorian mestizo perspective. Analyzing the natural phenomenon of bird migrations has allowed me to visualize my ideas about my personal migration in the form of paintings and collages. While in painting I weave together narratives from different periods from western painting history; the collage work explores an interdisciplinary dialogue of aesthetic transformations, where I aim to generate elastic and hybrid narratives that lend themselves for fluid ways of sharing knowledge. Through my material practice, I weave and juxtapose diverse visual universes together so that they might emerge as new ecosystems expanding beyond their established meanings whether in biology, astronomy, anthropology, etc. My aim is to open a dialogue with histories of representation like painting history and natural history, to challenge their aesthetic structures and re-imagine them in a contemporary art context.

Introduction

Neotropical Migration is the name given to the animal migrations that take place in the American continent (South, Central and North) during seasonal change. Every year in spring around a billion species of birds migrate from Central and South America to North America. They come from various regions to different locations in the U.S.A and Canada to take advantage of the longer days during summer to feed and mate in the northern forests. My personal experience of migrating from Ecuador to Canada has informed an analysis of this natural phenomenon. I contrast the way these birds occupy territory with no restrictions of political borders by questioning how humans navigate the legality of migratory regulations such as the requirements of visas, etc. To further understand and observe the similarities and differences between the human and the natural world I have developed conceptual and material research that comes together in my latest body of work composed of paintings and collages.

I explore ideas about my identity by making conceptual speculations and material experiments that allow me to visualise a complex conversation. For the unfolding of my ideas I raise two questions:

- 1) Can painting and collage function as a space of interaction between the divergent visual imaginaries of Ecuador & the west?
- 2) How does the experience of the perpendicular sunlight on Quito affects my relation to color and the way I explore it in my practice?

This thesis document serves as a dissection of my creative process and a visualization of the transformative trajectory that the material and conceptual practice has gone through in this Neotropical Migration.

Methodology

I have conducted my research with a focus in Ecuadorian history in relation to art and science, historical and contemporary painting discourses, and strategies such as putting Latin American theories at the center of my thinking. In this way my methodology is hybrid, taking up diverse knowledge practices. I have invested in drawing from contemporary cultural theory that informs my academic understanding of subjects such as landscape painting, geographic specificity in my relationship with color, the fluid nature of paint as a layer of meaning in my material practice and the use of the figure in my compositions. The research has been accompanied by recognising other contemporary artists working with similar lines of thought with which I feel my practice is in dialogue in conceptual and material aspects.

I would like to start with a brief history of Ecuador in relation to science and art and how this impacts the ontology of the present¹ in Ecuadorian imaginaries of identity and my subjectivity. Situating myself in a geographic specificity allows me to understand where I am coming from and the visual cultures that shape my vision of the world.

¹ I was first introduced to the idea of ontology of the present by doing research on the Colombian author Santiago Castro-Gómez who is well-known for his studies in the genealogy of the colonial heritages in Colombia.

I. A brief history of Ecuador in relation to art and science

One of my strategies for developing this project has been to study a book² by Ecuadorian contemporary art historian Alexandra Kennedy with a focus on the eighteen and nineteen centuries in relation to art and science as fields of cultural production. These were centuries of transitions and scientific discoveries, a moment of synthesis when a new Ecuadorian identity saw its foundation after the independence from the Spanish Crown. It is important to understand these cultural genealogies to be aware of the foundational structures that have repercussions in the social, political and cultural structures of today.

Ecuador is a small country located in South America in between Colombia and Perú, and crossed by the equatorial line. The equator is an imaginary line on the surface of the planet, equidistant from the North and South Poles, dividing the Earth into Northern and Southern Hemispheres.

In Ecuador it is common to hear, that if the equator is an imaginary line Ecuadorians are imaginary beings. This phrase contextualises the constant dance between the rational and irrational mind that dominates the imaginaries of contemporary Ecuadorians and my approach to art. The colonial history of the territory resulted in a hybrid racial group known as Mestizos. Mestizo is the son or daughter of a mixed couple conformed by an Indigenous parent and a white Spanish parent, contemporary Latin America is formed by generations of different mixtures that come from Spanish colonizers and the different Nationalities of the groups they conquered on a continental scale. I have further explored notions of a contemporary mestizo from the perspectives of authors like Gloria Anzaldua and Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui. I am an Ecuadorian mestizo son of a dual nationality couple (Ecuador-Colombia) and unpacking these histories through my art practice is a way to further understand my subject position and find a voice that I own, a place from which I can speak.

Elites y la nación en obras, visualidades y arquitectura del Ecuador 1840-1839

²The Cultural Imaginary is a theory derived from different concepts in Latin American and Latina/o Cultural Studies. In order to understand what the imagined is, two concepts are put together to form a community's cultural imaginary, the definition of culture by Stuart Hall and Benedict Anderson's idea of the "imaginary". (Hall)

Gloria Anzaldua was Chicana writer and activist, author of the book *Borderlands La Frontera the new Mestiza*. The engagement with her story has been of great influence in my understanding of the diversity of mestizo identities in the American continent. In *Borderlands/La Frontera* Anzaldua's essays and poems challenge our understandings about identity. "Remaps our understanding of what a "border" is, presenting it not as simple divide between here and there, us and them, but as a psychic, social, and cultural terrain that we inhabit and that inhabits all of us." (Cantu)

Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui is a Bolivian scholar who is one of the pioneers in de-colonial thinking in south America and sees de-colonization as something that should be taken in to action and beyond a rhetoric discourse. Cusicanqui has been influential to situate myself as a contemporary Mestizo.



Neotropical Migration, 8x11 in, 2018

II. French geodesic expedition

I would like to go back to the eighteenth century when the equatorial line was re-traced by a group of French explorers⁶ in a historic event known as the French geodesic expedition. This period is important for my project because is the first time that Ecuador is introduced to western history. Both as a territory and as an important geographic location that divides the world in two. The expedition was carried out for the purpose of measuring the roundness of the Earth and measuring the length of a degree of latitude at the equator. The project was one of the first geodesic missions carried out under modern scientific principles, and the first major international scientific expedition.

This significant event has haunted my imagination not only for its importance in Ecuadorian history but the ways in which scientific curiosity mingle with mythmaking. A series of collages that borrows visual sources from this period (not specifically from the FGE) have emerged in my studio. Making these collages has helped me to visualize ideas about my migratory experience.

The first collage called Neotropical Migration is composed of a simple gesture. I glued a hand painted Rufous Humming Bird (a migratory neotropical bird) on top of the Ophiuchus Constellation from the Uranometria atlas⁷(1603). Ophiucus is a large constellation on the celestial equator. By juxtaposing these two images I created new associations that allow me to think through my ideas. Interlacing research and imagination "The hybridization of metaphor"(Anzaldua) comes to be thereby staging a bridge for divergent disciplines to cross paths.

⁶The men who led the expedition were French astronomers Charles Marie de La Condamine, Pierre Bouguer, Louis Godin and Spanish geographers Jorge Juan and Antonio de Ulloa. They were accompanied by several assistants, including the naturalist Joseph de Jussieu and Louis's cousin Jean Godin. La Condamine was joined in his journey down the Amazon by Ecuadoran geographer and topographer Pedro Maldonado.

⁷"Uranometria (measuring the sky) was produced by lawyer and amateur astronomer Johannes Bayer, this state-of -the-arts atlas(rather than a catalog which didn't illustrate stars' locations) was the first to cover the entire sky , contained 1,200 stars, and became the standard for all later atlases of the heavens." (Michael Shara

The expedition was an ambitious project that changed the world with its discoveries. Some of the most relevant include the discovery of rubber; the identification of the Chinchona tree that produces the active form of Quinine (anti malaria agent) and the development of the decimal metric system, all studies conducted by La Condamine . Perhaps most important for my research is how this project became fundamental to the identity of Ecuador as the middle of the world. As a result, in this thesis I focus on the tracing of the equator and the geographical specificity that informs my subjectivity and how it affects my relationship with color and image making.

The tracing of the equator has two versions; first we have the location established by the French Geodesic Expedition, considered the official version because it was traced by the dominant imperial project from Europe. The other measurement had been established by the original culture of the area known as the Quitus Cara centuries before. This dialogue between native and colonial perspectives is how Ecuadorian narratives are constructed, a history entangled between the official colonial history and syncretic story telling. Sometimes these ways of knowing and being co-exist as a hybrid and sometimes as a juxtaposition, that is the nature of a mestizo or what Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui the de-colonial Bolivian theorist calls the Ch'ixi' Identity.

I navigate an Ecuadorian identity that after 500 years of colonial structures is becoming aware of it and trying to make sense of my nature through critical thinking and cultural production. The relevance of this imaginary line is crucial for my material and conceptual explorations and the understanding of it was fundamental for the development of my project.

I am invested in this geographic specificity because of light. Light is the facilitator for our conscious experience of life and reality, because of the light emitted by the sun (and now by electrical means) we are able to experience color reflected by the objects that construct our world. In his book *Colour*, David Batchelor shares this passage from Jimmie Duran Statement on color, 2007 which I find useful to illustrate this concepts:

"We perceive colour when light strikes an object and is partially refracted. The band, or colour, that we perceive is that which is reflected from the object while the rest of the light is absorbed. Thus, a leaf appears to be green because the green part of the spectrum is reflected. We might therefore more correctly say that a leaf is anti-green.

There are two kinds of black. The first, more normal kind absorbs all of the light and therefore contains the entire colour spectrum. The second kind of black, often called 'blanc' (or 'blanco' in Spanish) is entirely reflective. In this instance the colour spectrum is neither absorbed nor reflected, but simply rejected." Jimmie Duran, Statement for *Colour*, 2007

⁸ T "Charles Marie de La Condamine (28 January 1701 – 4 February 1774) was a French explorer, geographer, and mathematician. He spent ten years in present-day Ecuador measuring the length of a degree latitude at the equator and preparing the first map of the Amazon region based on astronomical observations. Furthermore he was a contributor to the *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers* "(Safier)

⁹ The Quitus Cara was the aboriginal culture that inhabited the Territories of present day Ecuador before the Inca invasion and the Spanish conquest. They were recognized for their astronomical understanding, artistic craftsmanship and social organization entire sky , contained 1,200 stars, and became the standard for all later atlases of the heavens." (Michael Shara 9)



Wawa, acrylic and oil on canvas, 48x45in, 2018

Sunlight is the energetic force that makes life possible. How we experience light is how we experience life. For this reason stating that I come from Quito-Ecuador (the middle of the world) is fundamental to understanding that my painting comes from another light.

For example, Wawa (kid in Quichua¹¹) from September 2018 is a painting where we can see a child in a natural environment; the background and the foreground are in a constant push and pull interaction. The botanical motifs vary in weight, some are almost imperceptible and others pop-up because of the contrast of their color. In Wawa we can see how the light affects the image. The objects in the painting that have a thicker body are the ones that have more interaction with light, they are more present and the ones that are in the dark are thin and, in some cases, almost absent.

Light also reminds me of the neotropical birds. When the earth is changing position during seasonal change birds receive less light and their instinct manifests in their migration to the north of the continent. I relate to the birds in this need to come to the north in order to survive. Coming to Canada a first world country to receive an MFA (academic qualification that you can't obtain in Ecuador) is a strategy to have a better opportunity to survive as an artist today. The analysis of the bird migrations allow me to observe through a critical lens my own migratory condition and the politics involved in it.

III. Alexander von Humboldt and his legacy

In 1802 German Polymath Alexander Von Humboldt arrived in Ecuador after visiting the Spanish priest Jose Celestino Mutis¹² in Bogota, Colombia. Mutis was developing an ambitious project of cataloguing the flora of the region supported by the Spanish crown. Humboldt had been traveling around Latin America in a self-funded expedition where he was trying to discover, understand and categorize the natural world of the Americas with a focus on the volcanoes of the Andes. This taxonomic compulsion is foundational for how we see the world today. My ideas around these topics have been clarified by studying the work of contemporary Ecuadorian artist Tomas Ochoa. In his mixmedia series Flores de Seniza Ochoa describes: "The colonality of the being refers to the modes of colonial representation, and to the manner in which this imaginary persist in own self representation.... Since the eighteen-century in America science was inseparable from the political and economical interests, said practices constituted fundamental ways of control and domination, of human beings as well as of nature". (Ochoa) Even though there is apparent neutrality behind the scientific discoveries there is always a hidden act of dominance and appropriation. Whoever recognized for the first time a place, a plant, a medicine, proclaimed the right of possession. Europeans had the false idea that they were the first ones that were discovering plants that had been used in ancestral medicines for millennia in these territories.

¹¹ Quichua is the native language from the former Kingdom of Quito before and during the Inca occupation, in present Ecuadorian Spanish we use many different words from Quichua, this inclusion of the language is formally known as "quichuismos", the word Wawa is the most common word to refer to a kid in contemporary Ecuador.



Integumentary Portrait, 8x 11 in ,2018

Reflecting on this historical dynamic I came to Ingumentary portrait which is a collage developed on top of a plate from the History of the Indian tribes of North America, with biographical sketches and anecdotes of the principal chiefs; embellished with one hundred and twenty portraits from the Indian Gallery in the Department of War at Washington. The original plate was a portrait of Monchosia or White Plume a Kansas Chief by Thomas L.McKenney. Ingumentary Portrait presents a hybrid character (bird-man), the character looks as if the human is wearing a mask of a bird and perhaps morphing and becoming the bird. The actual bird transmuted in this collage is formed by a plate that depicts a male Ruff (*Philomachus pugnax*) painted by Sarah Stone in 1788. The result is a haunting image that evokes fear and respect; here a kinship between man and bird is embodied, the integumentary systems of both beings are interconnected opening up a conversation about skin, identity and ecology through interspecies relations.

Artist Tomas Ochoa writes: "The European idea of racial superiority with respect to those conquered was fundamental to the establishment both of the intersubjective relations as well as to classify the world and nature. Thereby, the colonial view remains in the savage and primitive body as if it was a Botanical species, either are part of nature, the scenery, and are to be dominated and exploited to serve the imperial expansion project." (Ochoa) By liberating the subject from a taxonomic gaze and introducing them into a realm of radical imagination I propose a new visual reading. I treat the images with a great deal of respect. The intention is to take them away from the place of specimens for study and instead I try to relate to them on a personal level. Ingumentary portrait is also the beginning of a series of collages that challenge the idea that everything presented to us in museums and places of cultural production are facts and not a fictionalized version of the dominant culture.

12 Jose Celestino Mutis was a Spanish priest, botanist and mathematician. Mutis developed one of the most important projects from the Spanish American Enlightenment called La Flora de Bogota which aimed to catalogue all the species of plants from the regions of contemporary Colombia and parts of Ecuador. In this project Mutis worked with many artists that came from Quito including native and creole artists. (Kennedy)

Recapitulating, Humboldt's visit is a milestone in the development of Ecuadorian art and scientific history. Humboldt left a lasting influence on the local guides who accompanied him in his expeditions, he taught them how to make outdoor studies of their motifs from observation, which had an impact on the later development of landscape painting in Ecuador. Humboldt's discoveries came together in a series of publications called *Cosmos* where he explained in depth the natural world as an interconnected network and wrote chronicles of the people from the region from a western imperial perspective of dominance. These publications perpetuated stereotypes of the exotic, otherness and uncivilized without being able to see the value in other ways of knowing. I was formally introduced to Humboldt through the project: *Archivo Alexander von Humboldt* by the Ecuadorian artist Fabiano Kueva.¹³ In this project Kueva traces Humboldt's steps in a gesture of performativity to visualize the imperial gaze and its influence in perpetuating stereotypes of the primitive and the exotic to the first nations of America. Kueva's work has been influential in how to navigate de-colonial discourses through an artistic practice, the use of poetics and self-referential dialogues to engage in critical research and to question the 'imperial gaze'.

My intention in exposing these histories is to visualize how art and scientific practices have served as political instruments that shape the perception of the world of its participants. Through this process I navigate an art practice as a space for an intercultural dialogue. The transient nature of my imagery and hybrid understanding of the world is an intrinsic part of my practice that has its origins in the visual culture that I was brought up with. The intercultural flow of my work is framed by this plurality of knowledge that occupies the visual compositions in painting or collage

IV. A reflection in geographic specificity

One of the phenomenological experiences that characterize Ecuador, especially Quito, is the direction in which the sun hits the land. In the spring solstice (March 21 at 12:20 pm) the sun is positioned at an angle that for a few minutes casts no shadow. This situated geographic experience of light has an impact on my relationship to color and how I use it in my practice. The saturation of the palette and the method of application of paint are examples of how these strategies take form. The embodied knowledge of this photonic experience determinates my experience of the world.

¹³ Fabiano Kueva (1972): His strategies of work have to do with the collective, with the plural dialogue, fluid genders, the unlearning and de-skilling, fictional narratives and the rein vindication of failure. His projects orbit around ideas of geopolitics of knowledge, the critique of official discourses, research of archives and social activation through technology.



Religar, acrylic and oil on canvas, 72x60 in, 2018

In “Religar”, two girls are braiding each other’s hair. The scene staged in the painting is an image of empathy and care employed as a strategy to foment inter-personal experiences as a mode of resistance to an apathetic global culture. The girls in the painting are apparently floating, fused on the canvas in an unconventional space where dimensions intersect. The way the material has been applied in different sections of the painting allow for an agency from the paint, by thinning it down to a liquid state the paint follows gravity by moving the canvas in different directions and embodying the fluidity in which the material runs on the surface. In this unpredictability I remove my hand from the making and allow the pigment to sit on the ground and act as another presence in the composition. I see this painting as a symbolic reference to Quito during the spring solstice, a moment of reconnection to nature after winter, an action of care and love while casting no shadow.

As a painter I know I am part of a discourse that uses color as celebration of identity. While doing my research I encountered the work of Kenyan artist Michael Armitage. My work is engaged in a dialogue with Michael Armitage’s painting in more than one respect. Regarding the use of color our mutual affection and engagement with color comes through. I also find a connection in how we weave together different narratives. One that is personal and bodily unconscious¹⁴ The other one is in dialogue with western art history to visualize different motifs that have been under-considered or erased.



Michael Armitage, Kariakor, oil on lubago bark cloth 66x 69 in ,2015,Photo (c) White Cube (George Darrel)

V. Color=Calor

I have further understood this affection for color after reading texts that illuminated my understanding of color in a historical, political and subjective way. The main sources where I ground my ideas are Michael Taussig's *What Color is the Sacred?* and David Batchelor's *Chromophobia*.

In *What Color is the Sacred*, Taussig explores ideas about color in regards to history, politics, literature, art and most important for my sensibility, magical thinking. In his book Taussig explores the nature of color as a "Polymorphous substance. It affects all the senses not just sight. It moves. It has depth and motion just as a stream has depth and motion, and it connects such that it changes whatever it comes in contact with." (Taussig 40) Taussig makes ingenious connections between disciplines, ideas, thinkers and things. I find a connection in this intercultural thinking which inform my own artistic methodologies. He uses writing as a space for a diverse dialogue, almost as a collage

My ideas about diversity and a polyphonic approach to research and studio practice were further explored from a contemporary art perspective with *Chromophobia*. The emphasis in the book is trying to understand the relationship of western art history to color. By mapping out an interdisciplinary narrative Batchelor creates a detailed journey where he demonstrates through devastating quotes (like his concept of chromophobia explained later in the text) the conscious rejection of color in western art. Both sources are important voices in the formation of my personal narrative and discourse for my art practice.

Taussig's text is important to my geographic specificity. In his text Taussig refers to Isidore of Seville: "Isidore of Seville, the savant, said in the seventh century AD that color and heat were the same since colors came from fire or the sunlight and because the words for them were fundamentally the same: calor and color." (Taussig 5)

Based on the etymological similarity and in Newtonian Optics¹⁵ the geographical location of Ecuador has a particularity in regards to the experience of light and color. My painting comes from a different light and the saturation of my pallet is not just drawn on personal sensibility but is also a conceptual statement that functions as a layer of meaning in regards to my identity. Light has fascinated painters since its beginnings¹⁶. By engaging with the tradition of western painting I open my practice to a dialogue with contemporary painting discourse and approach the medium in a subjective manner.

14 Bodily unconscious is a term used by Michael Taussig to describe embodied knowledge.

15 Opticks: or, A Treatise of the Reflexions, Refractions, Inflexions and Colours of Light is a book by English natural philosopher Isaac Newton that was published in English in 1704. The book analyzes the fundamental nature of light by means of the refraction of light with prisms and lenses, the diffraction of light by closely spaced sheets of glass, and the behaviour of color mixtures with spectral lights or pigment powders. It is considered one of the great works of science in history.

16 The concept of 'Painting History' is based on the description given by Isabelle Graw in her book *The Love of painting, the genealogy of a success medium* where she writes "I will locate the genesis of the painted panel in early modern Western Europe between the fifteenth and eighteen centuries. Around this time, painting freed itself from its existing context (e.g., frescos, altar pieces, book illustrations) to emerge stronger still in the form of painted canvas that was moveable."

VI. Color as a layer of meaning

I use the exotic or otherness as a tool of empowerment, flipping the colonial gaze of undermining the exotic as something less sophisticated and instead celebrating it. The chromatic saturation is used as a strategy of visualization of my voice in the contemporary art context, a “chromophiliac”¹⁷ approach, using the color in flamboyant ways, challenging the expectations of good taste. To explain I refer to Batchelor and his concept of Chromophobia.

“ It is, I believe, no exaggeration to say that, in the west, since Antiquity, colour has been systematically marginalized, reviled, diminished and degraded. Generations of philosophers, artists, art historians of one stripe or another have kept this prejudice alive, warm, fed and groomed. As with all prejudices, it manifests form, it’s loathing, masks a fear: a fear of contamination and corruption by something that is unknown or appears unknowable. This loathing of colour, this fear of corruption through colour, needs a name: chromophobia.”(Batchelor 22)

Color in my practice is an articulation of pride and a tool for seducing the viewer. I use it as a formal and conceptual strategy to open the conversation, a conversation that opens up painting from the western tradition and the canvas starts to function as a space for dialogue, a utopic place of horizontal exchange of aesthetical values that does not negate the dominant tradition but rather explores a plurality of knowledge circulation for a diverse audience.



¹⁷ Chromophiliac is a term I have encountered in both *What color is the sacred?* and *Chromophobia*. In both cases it refers to a fascination for color and fearless use of it.



Encuentro en el sol, acrylic and oil on canvas 72x96 in, 2018

VII. Gesture (mark-making and performativity)

I understand the surface of the canvas as an active record of an action, in this way the pictorial experience is built upon performativity: this allows me to understand the painted ground as a tool for thinking, for digesting what happens socially, politically and ecologically in the territory in which I navigate. In "Encuentro en el sol (encounter in the sun)" I apply paint with a method that is guided by an energetic performance that tries to convey a feeling of life. The motives and subjects that populate my composition conjure themselves in this meeting of influences and chromatic interactions, where the botanical motifs become visible generating a web on the painted surface. The figures are incorporated and staged in a space of fusion commanded by the phenomenology of the image. In this painting the figures are in the landscape but at the same time they are the landscape, the use of scale and the space that they occupy on the image generates an effect that distorts the position of the viewer for reading the space. The representation dissolves in to material passages of liquid flows of paint. In this instability conventions of depicting spaces are challenged by the refusal of an illusionistic strategy and by doing so I am stating that we are looking at paint applied on canvas. The scene speculates about an alternate space, it's a landscape where the laws of gravity dissolve to generate new relationships in between bodies and forms in the pictorial plane.

VIII. Imperfections and failure

I am generating images that couldn't be achieved with the mechanical reproduction of a camera or other technological device, rather they are records of an activity with a lot of imperfections and failure. When I am in the studio the action takes place in a form of performance that entangles a basic technical structure with improvisation. The method is based in a defined color pallet always with the possibility for expansion and a clear idea of what I want to paint. When I am in the painting process I am in a constant puzzle, trying to find solutions for material problems that are popping up with every mark I lay on the canvas. The performance becomes a process of making decisions, finding balance in between freedom of mark making and control of the brushwork. It is a constant negotiation in between letting it be and overworking the canvas. All this focus in the material experience that I am having is accompanied by other conversations in my head, conversations around what I am painting and the ideas behind the image. In this way I understand painting as a tool for thinking, thinking in the action and thinking in the ideas.

My intent is to open conversations that have recurred over the genealogy of the medium. Painting has been killed and resurrected many times and this metamorphic nature of the medium is what fascinates me. In his essay that accompanied the exhibition *The Undiscovered Country* at the Hammer Museum curator Russel Ferguson describes:

"Ambitious painters recognized early on that photography had irrevocably changed the terms of their art. One of the driving forces behind Impressionism was the need to respond to photography's claim of authority in representation. Impressionism sought out effects beyond the search of photography. Color was paramount. A loose painterliness replaced the earlier emphasis on correct drawing, and ephemeral atmospheric effects eclipsed elaborately worked-out compositions. An "impression" would suffice. The retreat from representational authority had begun, as had the search for an alternative site of authority and autonomy."(Ferguson)

This need to express something that goes beyond a mechanical reproduction of an image is a trigger to my fascination with color, its polymorphous nature. Painting is an open field for imagination and speculation, it is a space that can act as a visual reference to propose alternate realities, to imagine different possible worlds and to generate new associations through color and form.

¹⁸ In *The love of painting* Isabelle Graw talks about the Italian humanist Alberti she quotes: "painting's task was to (let) the absent be present and to show the dead to the living. Accordingly, a painting, acting as divine power, had to ensure that the figures it represented appeared as alive as possible. Color was constantly declared to be the most important vehicle of this aesthetic, which is to say it contained artificial aliveness and was credited with the capacity to bring dead matter to life."



Electromagnetic navigational tool,
acrylic, oil and copperware on canvas,
72x48in, 2018

This need to express something that goes beyond a mechanical reproduction of an image is a trigger to my fascination with color, its polymorphous nature. Painting is an open field for imagination and speculation, it is a space that can act as a visual reference to propose alternate realities, to imagine different possible worlds and to generate new associations through color and form.

In the painting "Electromagnetic navigational tool" I explore different avenues through the use of color and collage. The idea of introducing collaged elements to the paintings opens up dialogues with contemporary painters such as Chris Ofili and Ellen Gallagher. Both artists are reference for how to inject meaning on to a canvas by bringing external elements in to the work. "Electromagnetic navigational tool" acts as an activated color field through mark making. The repetition of the brushwork was achieved in a quasi-ritualistic activity of banging the canvas like a drum. This performance activates divergent color patterns layered one over the other marking their journey through the canvas, the directional uniformity of the marks is reminiscent of a shoal of fish or a flock of birds. In addition to the pictorial activity is a vertical copper wire crossing the field that acts as figure or a trail. This painting opens conversations with the natural world and my interest in bird migration. It is a material attempt to engage in a speculative interspecies conversation with birds about our migratory experiences.

IX. Layers in Painting

" Numerous overlays of paint, rough surfaces, smooth surfaces, make me realize I am preoccupied with texture as well. Too, I see the barely contained color threatening to spill over the boundaries of the object it represents, and in other objects and over the borders of the frame. I see a hybridization of metaphor, different species of ideas popping up here, popping up there, full of variations and seeming contradictions, though I believe in an ordered, structured universe where all phenomena are interrelated and imbued with spirit."(Anzaldua 88)

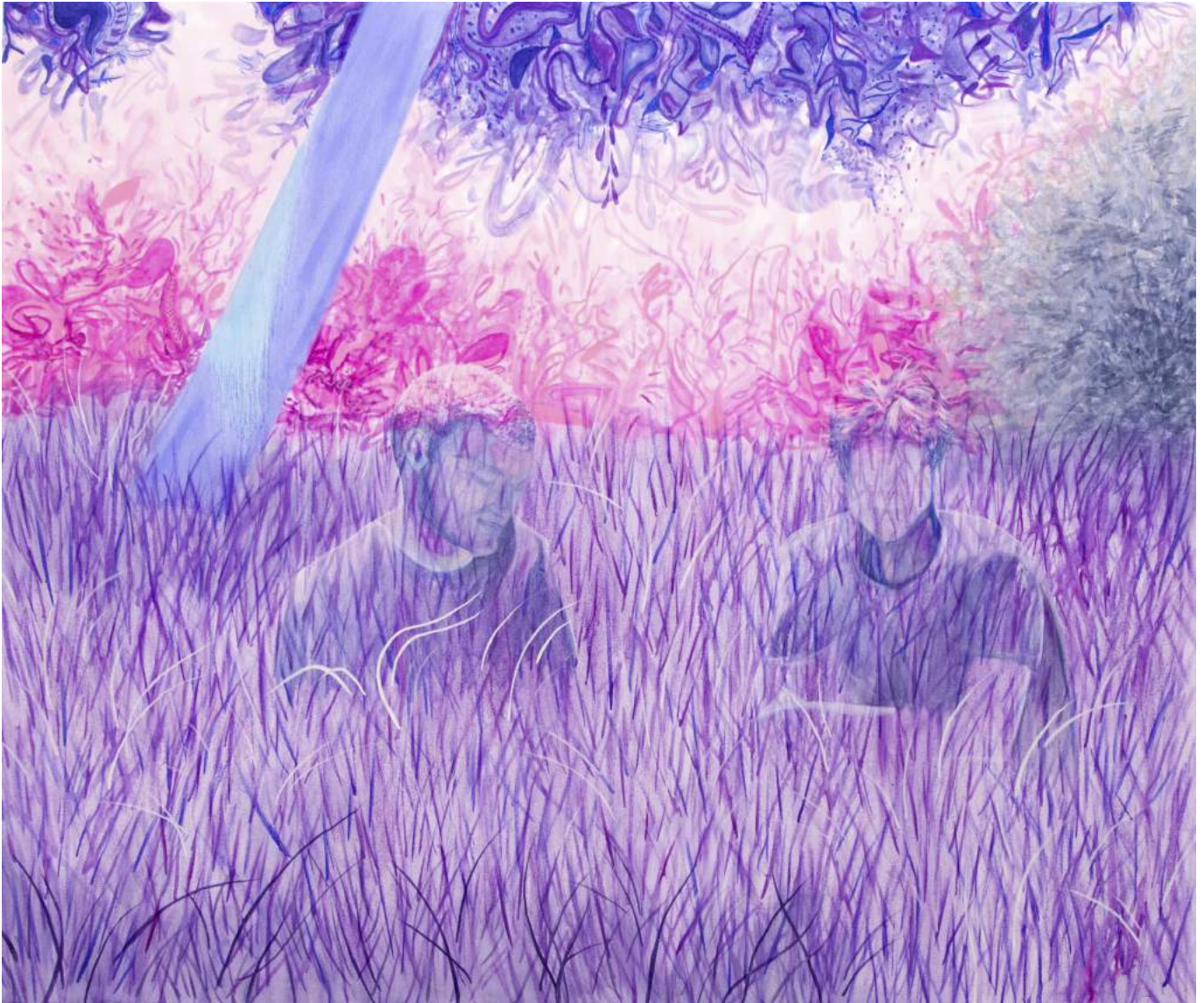
The object is the whole canvas; I like making my own stretchers. It's the under layer process that gives me space to think of the painting that will inhabit this object. I like the transformation that happens by cutting the wood and assembling it back together, it's the first layer of labor of the process, the ground where the story will emerge.

I create compositions that are layered through thin washes that allow the viewer to visualize the process of painting. In a way I open up the history of the object itself, exposing the archeology of the canvas, visualizing the stratification of painted surfaces acting as one and recognizing its history.

The application of paint in my work is characterized by its fluidity. I thin down the viscosity of the paint to apply it in thin glazes. This superposition of pigment functions as layers of meaning. I find the technical specificity of painting as a generative way of activating conceptual rationalizations. By using them as metaphors, for example the material layers of the painting acting as the layers of influences that inform my identity. It's a way of creating meaning by giving agency to the material through its physical faculties.

By thinking about my subjectivity through the application of paint I am able to separate the imagery and the method. It's a strategy to open the possible readings of the work for a multiplicity of audiences that might have different entry points. By making the paint liquid and thinning up its viscosity I am treating the paint as my own body, my own identity that is fluid and uncontained, in constant flux and in a constant interaction with the ground on which it sits. I make this comparison with the body because if a color is able to reflect light means it has a physical faculty of reflection like a body, in that way I see color as a symbol of pride of Latino identity. Michael Tausig writes about Anita Albus and how she describes color as bodies: "Albus puts it, color is the interplay between body and tone (meaning hue) each pigment a painter used had a different body, she writes, "which refracts, reflects, and absorb light in a different way"(Tausig 42), I relate this to my own body and my experience. In my paintings for Neotropical Migration the background is always affecting the figures, they are transparent, all their bodies are interacting with the ground and being transformed by it.

In paintings like, Religar, Tarde en los Andes and Wawa the figuration is dominant as a tool for generating empathy. The images I have been producing are images of empathy, care for each other and care for the natural world, a visual narrative to express the potential of spiritual growth through interspecies relations and mindfulness experiencing nature.



Tarde en los Andes, oil on canvas, 60x72in, 2018

Tarde en los Andes is a scene that depicts two young men sitting in a grass field. I have obscured their identities by erasing the face in one of them and closing the eyes in the other one. The intention in doing this is to generate a feeling of interconnectivity in between the viewer and the characters. The open face is a doorway into the painting.

X. Layers in Collage

The research into disciplines such as natural history informs the collage work I have been developing. The process for producing the collages in *Neotropical Migration* started when I found some used books on natural history that came with ready to frame plates from the American Museum of Natural History Library. Natural history plates have always fascinated me and this fascination is what triggers my interest in the periods of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when these representations became the dominant structures to rationalize nature. The visual exercise that these artists developed is really fascinating. The accuracy demanded by the scientific purpose of the task combined with the sensibilities of the individuals who created them have as an outcome a visual universe with a profoundly beautiful aesthetic that I value as a visual inspiration.

Researching scientific facts generates ideas that I try to convey visually about my personal experience of migration. In my collage *Neotropical Migration* that I discussed earlier some of these interests are present. For example scientists believe that for their migration birds have different strategies to guide their journeys, "migratory birds use their visual system to navigate using the magnetic field (of the earth)(Roach)." It's also believed that birds use stars as reference points in their migratory routes. By juxtaposing the constellation map and a hand drawn bird I draw parallels between the natural world and the human world. Challenging the established dichotomies through visual speculation the image addresses geographic specificity, migration and interspecies relations with navigational tools related to celestial observation.

Neotropical Migration was the beginning of an ongoing series of collages made on the constellations from *Uronometria*. This process has been extremely generative and liberating. It is a space for exploration on many levels including composition, material interactions, physical layering and mix-media approaches.

My collage practice is influenced and in dialogue with some voices in contemporary art, one of the most influential is the Kenyan artist Wangechi Mutu. Mutu creates fantastic worlds through her collage works characterized by their empowering transformations. "For Mutu these imaginative kingdoms are also critical arenas to profound cultural, psychological, and socio-political exploration." (Schoonmaker 21) The combination of magical thinking and figurative exploration are formal avenues that I admire in Mutu's work, she orchestrates different narratives that converse through the material exploration which is something I develop in my own practice.



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XI. Synthesis

"Synthesis is the mixing of things that do not belong together into something new. It's creation. Synthesis is the essence of love" (Parfume)

Neotropical Migration has been an adventure. An expedition into my unconscious, my history and modes of making art. I have encountered past interests that have flourished in new ways and also I have found obstacles that have challenged my material practice and ideas. Developing new methodologies in research has changed my relationship with subject matter.

I have decided to call this final chapter of my thesis Synthesis because I feel Neotropical Migration is a project where things came together and something is emerging from this experience. The last experiments that I have been conducting in my studio are combinations of painting and collage. I have introduced a new material on to my canvases, a new layer, a collaged element that brings my subjectivity in to the work in new material and conceptual ways. The material is hand made paper I have been producing with my father in Quito for many years. The paper is made out of a natural fiber that comes from a very popular plant in the Andes, the Andean Agave or Cabuyo Azul popularly known as Penco. This plant was fundamental to the first cultures that inhabited the territory known today as Ecuador. The Quitus Cara used to call it the plant of a thousand wonders because it provided them with wood for construction and musical instruments, the flowers are edible, the heart of the plant contains a sweet liquid, called Chawar Mishke, that you can drink directly from the plant or ferment and make an alcoholic beverage. The fiber known as Cabuya was used for clothing and a variety of textiles as well as adopted in construction of bridges. For these reasons the material holds an important symbolic value, I grew up surrounded by this plant.



During the winter solstice break 2018 I went back to Ecuador and worked on the creation of this paper with a marbling process that I had learnt years ago. I find the creation of this paper fascinating. First the plant has to grow for at least eighteen to nineteen years before it's fibers can be used. This means that the plant has grown with the same equatorial light as me, we both have the photonic experience in our "bodily unconscious". The plant has been transformed and now forms a new body that in a way feels more like skin; in that sense I feel a connection to the plant because I feel I mutate depending in how my skin is perceived.

To have the color that now the paper embodies it had to be submerged in a contradiction. The technique works because of the physical rejection of water and oil, when it is immersed in both materials it goes under another process of transformation. I too have been immersed in different traditions and narratives that both inform who I am even though sometimes they are contradictory. And finally, the paper migrated with me from Ecuador, navigating the legalities of border control. The material embodies the connections of my material practice with my ideas.

Neotropical migration has been a project that has allowed me to see a new relationship with art. I have experienced interconnectivity in between my concerns about the world and the intellectual fascinations that trigger my creativity in the material exploration. I make sense of the world through the making and rearrangement of images. This migratory journey has helped to create a speculative kinship with birds and materials that informs my position in the world. Through this experience I have been able to see that art can be a field for an intercultural dialogue, that painting can tell stories that come from another light.





Penco/Acrylic, oil, pastel,hand made cabuya paper and canvas on canvas/72x60 in / 2019

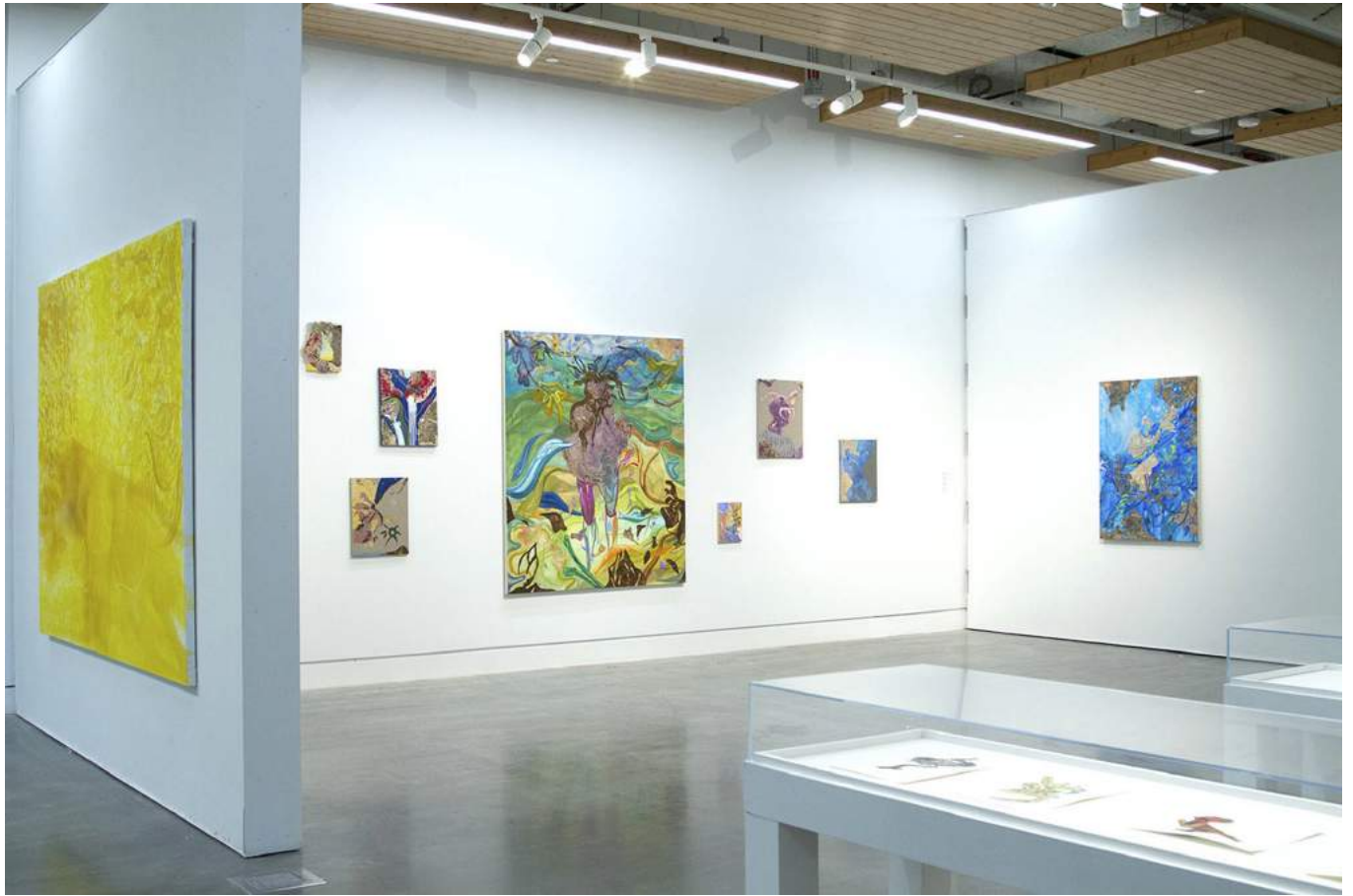
Reflection

After finalizing this intensive process I have some final reflections in relation to the Thesis exhibition and defense. I will address the exhibition first. Introspection, was the name of the show for the Master of Fine Arts Thesis Exhibition 2019 on the Michael O'Brien Exhibition Commons on the 2nd floor at Emily Carr University of Art + Design. Anyone who knows the ECUAD campus knows that the Exhibition Commons has its particularities as an exhibition space, due to the fact that is the "main floor" of the school it has a great flow of people around it. I had the privilege of showing my work in proximity to the main entrance what gave me project a great exposure for what I am deeply grateful. This allowed me to see the interactions of undergrad students, professors and the general public engage with the project, this was the greatest reward for me.

For the installation of the work, I had something really planned out in a digital maquette that I thought it would work perfectly. As soon as I got my work down with the help of my supervisor Ben Reeves I realized that my digital vision had failed and I decided to move the whole installation. My original idea was to leave the paintings on an open wall and the collage work on the front of it. What happened is that when we got the paintings inside the area formed by two facing walls a large wall the color and the feel of the paintings created an environment that was working. In collaboration with Ben, we decided that I was better to show the paintings in the closed space and the collage work in front of it. The collage installation had two vitrines that occupied a physical space in the gallery hallway that in a sense it felt they were acting as a limit between the installation and the Loaf cafeteria which is the next space after my showing area. This was an effective strategy that made the whole installation felt like a different space in that territory. Overall, I was very satisfied with how things worked out.

The defense was a surprise for me. I was very nervous about it for weeks. Although the night before it I when I was going over everything for the million times I came to the realization that I actually enjoy sharing the ideas behind my work and the research that I put into it. It's something that fascinates me and that moves my entire life, so I said to myself, Teo, you like doing this just go ahead and enjoy it. Everything became even more clear when I was talking with my girlfriend Camilla and I told her this realization and playing around she told me: "Yes you love talking about your work, and now you have an audience that will actually care about it". That made me laugh really hard and helped me to relax and go to the defense with a positive attitude. The stress was still there I really wanted to represent well all my work.

The conversation with my external examiner Rene Van Helm, my internal examiner Mark Igloliorte, my supervisor Ben Reeves and the Chair Trish Kelly was in my memory of it fantastic. We talked about the work, my ideas behind it, the research and the material. I had the privilege to talk about my practice with these incredibly intelligent and prepared professionals that gave me a real engagement with the ideas and the work in general for which I am profoundly grateful. I received feedback that pointed to the proximity of collage approaches in the installation of the work. This proximity allowed the viewer to have associations and connections of the work that was tying them up maybe too much. I personally agree with this comment and is something I will most definitely take under consideration for my next installations and to think further what and how to show my work.



Installation Shot, Thesis exhibition. ECUAD 2019

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