

"What would YOU do if your mother asked YOU?"



Russna Kaur Somal

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By

Russna Kaur Somal

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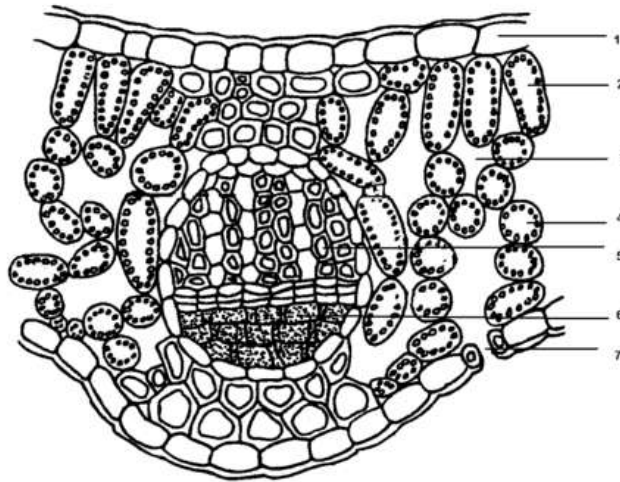
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My heritage is glued to colour palette, which is layered underneath historical and contemporary painting influences. In an attempt to answer these questions, I begin to peel back layers of personal history and the physical layers of each painting, discovering aspects of my identity that fuel my desire to participate and contribute to painting today.

"You have to go your own way, to cut away from your heroes and influences and still be utterly conscious and literate about the discourse. You have to simultaneously predict, diagnose and ignore past, present and future all at once. You have to remember and to forget at once."

Amy Sillman.

I rushed down the path to the old, brick Biology 1 building with my white lab coat stuffed in my bag along with my manual, textbook and gridded notebook. Hours went by in the classroom as we meticulously drew veins of bright green leaves, following the exact instructions listed in our Plant Biology lab manuals. Use a pencil, no shading, start your drawing three squares down from the top of the page and three squares in from the edges, label the parts of the plant to the right of the diagram, use a ruler to draw your lines, no arrowheads, etc.



Parts of a plant, diagram.

There was a detailed example of what our drawings should look like on the forest green chalkboard. Our TA drew it in case anyone was still confused. Sitting on my stool, I became so captivated by subtle shifts in green within the same, tiny leaf. Looking around at the other 20 students hunched over their benches, like robots at a production line, I wondered if anyone else even noticed.

To enhance the clarity of certain parts of the leaf, we carefully added a drop of water to its surface, covered it with an extremely thin, square piece of glass and examined under a microscope. Squinting one eye shut and the other open looking and through the eyepiece lens... even more green, deep green, yellow-green, emerald green.

A whole new way of observing opened up before me. The closer and longer I looked, the more I discovered.

My parents were born in Punjab, India. My mom was three years old when her family moved to Toronto. My dad moved on his own, moving in with his new family after marrying my mom. Their marriage was arranged and they were young, my mom 19 and my dad 21 years old. My mom and my massis¹, one older and two younger, grew up in a very strict household. Amongst many other things, they were not allowed to talk to boys, cut their hair, cross a boundary line in their neighborhood (determined by my grandfather) or encouraged to pursue an education. My nanaji² was quick to put an end to my mom and massi's aspirations, tearing down pictures of airplanes and cars that covered their bedroom walls. They were never allowed to find themselves, to figure out what they wanted from life. In her book, "Feminist Theory: from margin to center," American author, professor, feminist and social activist, bell hooks writes about forms of oppression. She states, "most people witness and/or experience the practice of sexist domination in family settings" (hooks, 36). My naniji³, mom and massis obeyed the rules laid out for them, without questioning, out of fear. In

¹ Mother's sister

² Grandfather

³ Grandmother

⁴ Mother's uncle

⁵ A lehenga is a two-piece outfit that include a long, floor length skirt, short blouse and

addition to my nanaji, my mom and massis were under the watchful eye of my chachajis⁴ ensured that they never stepped out of line. It was as if their each and every move was controlled and accounted for. hooks continues, “family exists as a space wherein we are socialized from birth to accept and support forms of oppression.” (36). The women in my family never challenged anything and didn’t dare argue, it was unheard of for a woman in my family to voice her opinion. It’s as if speaking up for yourself was something to be ashamed of. My naniji, my mom and my massis were stripped of their voice and were raised to listen. This caused them to repress emotions, which turned into resentment, depression and regret. hooks stresses that “brutal assertion of domination shapes family life so that it is often the setting of intense suffering and pain.” (37). Due to the experiences that many women, including the women in my family, go through, oppression can turn into anger, pain and bitterness that get passed down to future generations, and the cycle continues. *How can this cycle be broken?*

For me, painting is how I break the cycle. Painting gives me the voice I never had. It gives me a platform to say what I want and how I want. It allows me to use my voice – as if every colour is a word I never spoke, every gesture a question mark, every mark is a period, textures become exclamation marks and shapes become commas constructing sentences I never said and my surfaces come together like conversations I never had. In an interview with Border Crossings magazine Canadian painter, Beth Letain whose vibrant canvases speak loudly, expresses her ideas on painting, “I think of painting as a conversation where you’re saying something to the people who came before you and you’re trying to contribute something to the people who will come after.”

⁴ Mother’s uncle

(Borderviews, "Paintings That Go on Somewhere Else"). This quote resonates with me in two ways:

(1) Art historically, I see my practice in conversation with the abstract expressionist movement in terms of emphasis placed on the gesture, materiality of paint, colour and scale. Further, I see my work in line with the postmodernist movement of deskilling and construction or destruction of an idea, materials and surfaces. As I progressed through the MFA program, I realized that my work is not autonomous from my identity, experiences or life. It does not exist as a free-floating, separate object. Painting becomes an extension of myself and this is embedded in the colors, materials and surfaces I use. With this philosophy, my paintings are not static, fixed or permanent objects. Much like myself, the surfaces I paint on can shift and change. They are responsive, dynamic, alive and unfixed. They take comfort in discomfort. In addition, my paintings are in conversation with contemporary Punjabi painters as we are members of the same community. My work is a reaction or response to all of these influences. I aim to offer a different perspective that will inspire other artists from my community to consider alternative ways of communicating their story through painting, and not feel as though there is only one way to share it. I bring to painting today this voice that is currently not being heard and working in a way that is not being seen from an artist with my background.

(2) Personally, I consider this quote in terms of my community, specifically women in my family. My practice is in conversation with them as well. My work is not only empowering for me, but also for them. The act of painting

is how I take a stance. Through painting I am able to communicate with generations of painters and generations of family.

Thinking and making occur in non-linear ways within my practice. This support paper has been written, as I would approach painting a painting, in distinct sections yet allowing ideas to flow freely. Drawing from a variety of sources, I often jump from a thought I had to a conversation shared, an article I read and a colour I've seen. By discussing and dissecting a painting created in the Fall 2018 semester, "A piece of pie (an aerial view)", I uncover the methodology for my entire body of work created in the duration of the graduate program.

Through my auto-ethnographic approach to writing this paper I question: is the freedom experienced through painting limited by aspects of my identity that are out of my control? How can I use abstraction to break the mold of what is expected of my work, given my identity as a Canadian woman with Punjabi heritage? Abstraction is not untethered from culture or history, so how can I use it to share my story without my identity sitting on the surface of my paintings? As I become tangled in multiple threads of thought, I find myself slowly unknitting them, looking for the needle that will stitch all of the ideas together. This paper is written in a way that represents how I've organized information in my mind.



Installation, A piece of pie (an aerial view), (center right), 2018.

My full name is Russna Kaur Somal, which very clearly indicates my identity and because of this, I feel as though there are certain expectations of what my work should look like. In Sikhism, all males share the same middle name, Singh, and all females share the middle name, Kaur. As a Canadian woman with a Punjabi-Sikh heritage, it is important for me that my identity does not sit on the surface of my paintings, as it is already clear in the name I use as an artist, Russna Kaur. In conducting research for this paper, I tried to find examples of other female painters with a Punjabi background that are currently painting or have painted. Finding few results of historical and contemporary painters, I realized that none of the artists

worked with 'abstraction'. American art historian and the first director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, Alfred H. Barr defined 'abstract' in two ways: as a noun and as a verb. He explains:

The verb *to abstract* means *to draw out of or away from*. But the noun abstraction is something already drawn out of or away from – so much that, like a geometrical figure or an amorphous silhouette, it may have no apparent relation to concrete reality. (Barr Jr., 11-19).

I believe my paintings are abstract as a noun, as they make no reference to imagery, figures or landscapes. Barr refers to Malevich's red and black square, Mondrian's *Composition* and Kandinsky's use of non-geometrical as well as geometrical forms, stating that the paintings have "absolutely no dependence upon natural forms" and are "purely abstract in genesis as well as in its final form." He continues to expand on this idea of pure-abstraction and clarifies, "pure-abstractions are those in which the artist makes a composition of abstract elements such as geometrical or amorphous shapes." (11-19). Again, the paintings are abstract (noun). On the contrary, Mondrian's 'plus and minus' painting is not pure-abstraction as it is based upon a seascape and has been "abstracted (note the verb)" from nature therefore becomes a 'near-abstraction'. Barr defines this as "compositions in which the artist, starting with natural forms, transforms them into abstract or nearly abstract forms." (11-19). More recently, when discussing the origins of abstract expressionism, American art historian Kirk Varnedoe states that artists such as Jackson Pollock,

Barnett Newman, Willem de Kooning and Mark Rothko emerged from the context of surrealism, with an emphasis on “visual free association.” He continues:

Abstract expressionist painting had its roots in the unconscious mind. It was, to paraphrase one of these artists, made ‘out of ourselves’, without any accompanying insistence on the former metaphysical or social agendas of abstraction (Varnedoe, 20-45).

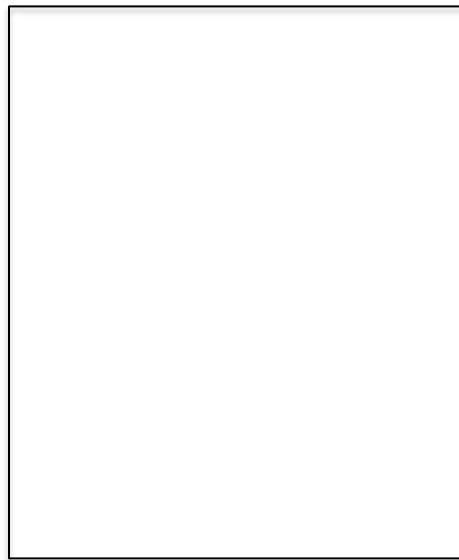
As a result, the process of actually making the art becomes the content through which the work gains meaning. No two artists will make the same mark. The physicality of applying paint, exposes the materiality of the medium, the gesture, while the overwhelming scale draws attention to the relationship between pictorial space and the body. In the postmodern movement, this continues to develop, as abstract art becomes less about this construction of an image and more about the destruction of an image.

The women a part of the ab-ex movement - Elaine de Kooning, Mary Abbott, Perle Fine, Lee Krasner, Joan Mitchell and Helen Frankenthaler – often get left out but are crucial figures. In a September 2018 interview with VICE, author Mary Gabriel talks about her book “Ninth Street Women”, named after the New York gallery that first showed the works of some of these female artists. These women were overshadowed by their male counterparts; their work was undervalued in comparison and turned down by galleries. Motivated to pave their own path, these

artists “didn’t take kindly to the limitations put upon them” and were determined to break the mold of what was expected of them as women (“Three Cheers”, Jacolbe).

With this history in mind, I looked closely at the work of some of the painters I came across in my research, eager to find an artist who shares my heritage and that my work is in dialogue with.

- In the 1930’s, painter Amrita Sher-Gil was considered to be “a pioneer of modern Indian art” as she depicted the daily lives of Indian women “often revealing a sense of their loneliness and even hopelessness.” (“Overlooked No More”, Mzezewa). Dealing with figures, Sher-Gil’s paintings often made clear references to her own Hungarian-Indian identity.



Three Girls, 1935. Amrita Sher-Gil.

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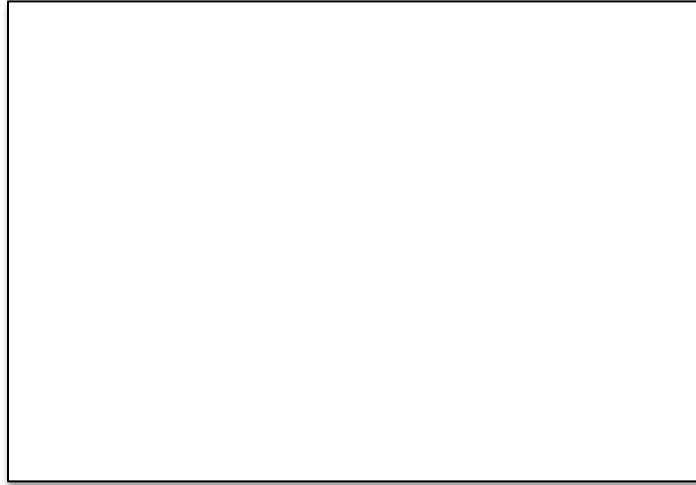
- More recently sisters, Amrit and Rabindra Singh, known as the Singh Twins are a painting duo based in the UK, “their highly decorative, narrative and symbolic work, has been recognized as pioneering a modern revival of Indian miniature painting within contemporary art practice.” (“Brief Profile”, The Singh Twins). In addition to references of Indian miniature painting, evident in their work is the contrast between east/west and old/new.



Daddy Sitting in the Sitting Room III, The Singh Twins.

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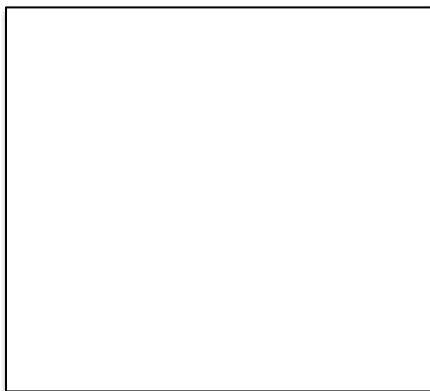
- Another UK based multi-media artist, Sarinder Dhaliwal’s work is often influenced by her changing surroundings. Born in India and raised in Southall, London she has painted large-scale watercolour works based on photographs she took on a trip to India. (“Sarinder Dhaliwal”, LalitKalaAkademi Chandigarh). The paintings depict several billboards of imagery found in India and written in the various languages spoken in the country.



Painting by artist Sarinder Dhaliwal.

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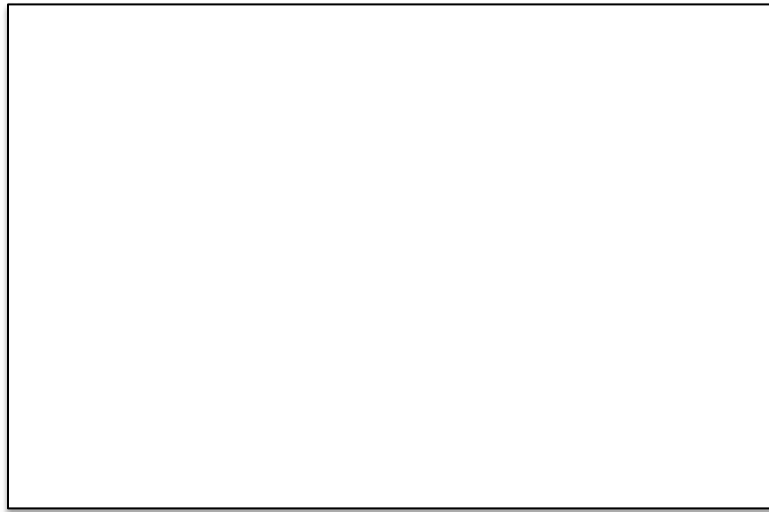
- Local Vancouver artist, Sandeep Johal is a Canadian painter “whose colourful geometric forms and intricate black and white line work is aesthetically and conceptually inspired by her South Asian heritage” (Johal, 2017). Johal is best known for her bold public murals and her *rest in power* series in which “she dedicated a body of work to twelve women from various cultural backgrounds whose murders have impacted her deeply.” (Johal).



Marina Menegazzo + Maria Jose Coni/Rest in Power V, Sandeep Johal.

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- Toronto based multi-media artist Nep Sidhu whose solo show, *Medicine for a Nightmare (they called, we responded)* recently opened at Mercer Union, “intends to explore material as a carrier and communicator of knowledge.” (“Nep Sidhu”, Hampton). For the show, he worked with metal to create amulets, medallions, and other adornments, engraved with Punjabi script that makes reference to Sikh holy text and the 1984 Sikh Massacre. Included in the show is a large scale, painted tapestry, which displays “a medley of handsome carpets, rich-looking textiles and blades of all shapes ‘dancing.’”



Medicine for a Nightmare (they called, we responded), Nep Sidhu.

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Although these artists are abstracting images, their identities as artists of Punjabi/Indian heritage are quickly read on the surface of their work. Moving away from pure-abstraction, they incorporate Indian motifs, tropes, imagery and symbols.

I can appreciate the importance of having such art in galleries, museums and institutions; this is not a criticism of their work. However, it does raise the question, why is this often the way Punjabi artists are represented? Many artists deal with conflictions around the representation of identity. Pakistani-American visual artist, Shahzia Sikander expresses her opinion:

[...] this whole issue on identity always became an important thing. But along came simplistic readings. Oh, “Muslim woman”, “Pakistani artist”, deals with maybe “liberation” ... “oppression of women”. So simplistic readings like that...I feel that they are the most detrimental thing (“Shahzia Sikander”, MoMa).

Abstraction, for me, was a way to avoid this simple, quick reading of my work. By using Indian imagery or motifs, I think the work is at risk of being easily dismissed and categorized under a specific group. I feel as though I can’t escape this expectation to fit within a specific mold. In my family, I was expected to study science, pursue medical school and become a doctor. By deciding to study art and paint, I broke out of this mold. When it comes to painting, again I feel like because of my heritage, I am expected to paint certain imagery addressing my identity in a very clear way because that is the way it has been done. American contemporary artist, Mary Heilmann expresses her ideas surrounding viewing images:

Each of my paintings can be seen as an autobiographical marker, a cue, by which I evoke a moment from my past, or my projected future, each a charm to conjure mental reality and to give it physical form (Heilmann, 7).

Heilmann's paintings use colour, shape and space, which are "imbued with recollections, stories spun from her imagination, and references to music, aesthetic influences, and dreams - her paintings are like meditations or icons." ("Mary Heilmann", 303 Gallery). Heilmann's work still addresses her identity, however it is not sitting on the surface of her canvas but instead is embedded in the layers of her paint. This is how I would like my work to be read. Through abstract painting I can complicate the reading of who I am as a person/artist because my identity is more complex than using direct imagery, motifs, symbols and tropes.

Reflecting upon my thesis defense, I consider an important question that was asked during the discussion: can a painting truly be abstract? What is the role of representational imagery in the work? This is not a concept that I had thought about in such a way before. My understanding of representational imagery was limited. I defined it as something that could be recognized, something that is seen in everyday life, experienced in one way and depicted in a painting. However, representational imagery is not so objective, it's reading varies depending on one's own subjectivity. American art critic, Thomas McEvilley, writes:

We tend to feel that representation works by a recognizable element of objective resemblance, yet it seems more accurate to say that what we experience as representation is, like aesthetic taste, a culturally conditioned

habit response not involving objective resemblance (McEvilley, “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird”).

Let’s take, for example, a painted landscape – the imagery used within the painting will resonate with me, based upon my culture, upbringing and experiences, differently than someone from another part of the world. Further, representation is not restricted to nature, portraiture or objects. Decisions surrounding colour palette are representational, the colors I use in my work represent something – my experiences, my culture, and my preferences. Paint application and decisions surrounding materials and surfaces are representational, the variety of ways in which I make a mark with paint carry emotion, my gestures are loaded. Colour is not simply pigment and the treatments of my surfaces are not solely formal decisions, it all represents something – contrary to my earlier thoughts, my paintings are not “pure abstractions”. They are an extension of myself - a representation of my experiences.

Pattern has been a big part of my life. My mom started selling Indian bridal lehengas⁵, suits and saris fifteen years ago. This has impacted how I combine colour, textures and shapes in my practice. From a young age I helped my mom to fold beautifully embroidered, vibrantly coloured. The colour pink is my mom’s favorite colour; the hue was prominently represented in every shade possible within the piles of fabric: blush pink, dusty rose, fuchsia, bright pink, fluorescent pink and amaranth. It was amazing how so many colours were combined on a single piece of fabric. Each colour demanded attention, yet there was an effortless elegance. The lehengas were made of several different fabrics that overlapped each other. For example, a bright pink, raw silk skirt would have a net fabric stitched over top of it. The silk held a rich stiffness and a subtle, tight weave and the net was almost transparent, but became darker where the skirt

⁵ A lehenga is a two-piece outfit that include a long, floor length skirt, short blouse and dupatta (shawl-like scarf).

was pleated, tinting the colour of the silk underneath. The gold threadwork and gemstones on the wide border of the skirt weighed down the net. The georgette dupatta¹ would drape elegantly off the shoulders of my mom's clients, like a waterfall of delicate fabric cascading to the floor.



Brocade silk fabric.

Each fabric draped and pleated so differently; thick velvet would create large, luscious, dramatic pleats and achieve a depth of colour only revealed as the light touched it, while the satin silk had a luminous sheen and subtle gathering but accumulated static as it moved. Being surrounded by patterns, yards of fabrics in every colour, texture, weights and cutting and combining fabrics to create movement deeply inspired my development as an artist.

My interest in pattern and colour led me to the work of Brazilian artist Beatriz Milhazes, who creates colourful abstract paintings, prints, collages and tapestries. Her work is influenced by nature, rhythm, music, Brazilian folk art, colour and Modernist abstraction, all of which contribute to the creation of the motifs she uses in her paintings. Milhazes' paintings come together in distinct sections and her unique paint application process is integral to her practice. In her process, she works with the idea of collage: cutting paper, fabrics and canvas and applying them to her canvas. In an in-studio interview, Milhazes expresses her thoughts on colour: "I am interested in conflict, and the moment you add one more colour you start the conflict - which is endless. So it's constant movement to your eyes, to yourself and to your body." (Pérez Art Museum Miami, "Beatriz Milhazes"). Her method of creating movement through colour is similar to how I think about the power colour has and its potential impacts. With simple shapes such as circles, squares, swirls, outlines and floral forms, Milhazes use of striking, flat colours and bold patterns to create paintings that have explosive energy.



Bibi, Beatriz Milhazes.

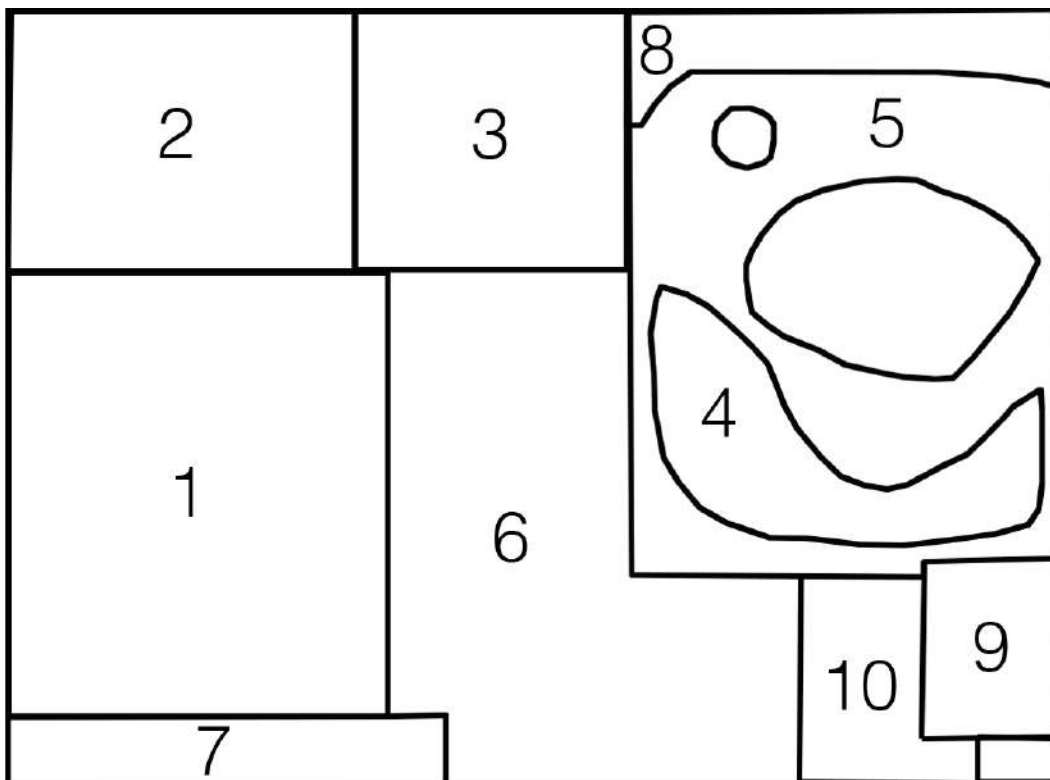
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I stare at blank surfaces not knowing where to begin. In a daze, I become distracted as certain colors, textures and marks trigger long held memories, fascinations and new curiosities. Painting and writing encourage reflection in different ways – during the process of making a painting, I think about how each mark made on the surface affects the composition as a whole. Once a painting is complete, I analyze how each element functions within the composition, whether it is the saturation of a colour, direction of a line, or the speed of a mark. Processing this information, I decide how to move forward into the next painting. Similarly, when writing about the work, I consider such questions: why is the act of painting so important to me? Why do I use bold colours with such ease? What role does scale play in my practice? What makes me think in terms of collage?

My heritage is glued to colour palette, which is layered underneath historical and contemporary painting influences. In an attempt to answer these questions, I begin to peel back layers of personal history and the physical layers of each painting, discovering aspects of my identity that fuel my desire to participate and contribute to painting today.



A piece of pie (an aerial view), 120 x 90 in., mixed media, 2018.



A piece of pie (an aerial view), outline.

Like a sudden outburst of emotion, a painting I created on a single wood panel, *A piece of pie (an aerial view)*, exploded onto multiple surfaces of varying sizes and depths. Playing with the materiality of paint, I mixed it to a velvety consistency and poured it from jars, sprayed it from cans and spread it like butter with my fingers. Paper was layered in segments like a stitched quilt, textured with childlike scribbles in crayon and swiftly cut into with a blade. The transition from one surface to another flows fluidly at times while other shifts are cut off abruptly. Some lines and shapes are trapped in an endless loop of movement within the frame of the composition while others escape, trailing off the edge of the surface searching for a new life.

This painting combines everything I am excited by or curious about such as bold colour, large scale, collage, experimenting with the proximity between multiple surfaces and how that affects the reading of the work. It opened up a new way of making, one that allows me to pull from a wide range of sources and play with the application of elements. This includes the various ways I apply paint to the surface, adhere paper or cut canvas and use different tools to make a mark. Whether it be a specific mark to balance the composition or throw off the balance, bringing together colour palettes or breaking them apart, building up areas of texture or flattening the surface, the sources I pull from assist in creating my visual language, which accumulates over time. This language is developed as I gain a deeper understanding of the materials I am using and the marks they can produce. In the studio, I learn about these marks and when to use them as each one contains a different energy. In an interview with BOMB Magazine, artist Julie Mehretu describes her relationship with mark making, “[...] drawn marks behave as characters, individuals. The characters keep

evolving and changing through the painting.” (Chua, “Julie Mehretu”). Similarly, in my work every gesture has a role to play and, as I get to know it better, I push to develop it further. This could take the form of increasing or decreasing the scale of a mark, repeating the mark, outlining it or filling it in. My interest in mark making is informed by my previous experiences in Biology labs drawing detailed diagrams as well as watching my mom design bridal lehengas that combined brightly dyed fabrics of various textures and patterns.

I am intrigued in amusement parks where I am overtaken by the spectacle of what is offered in the space: twisting roller-coasters, oversized costumed characters, building facades meant to look like they are from another era, sharp neon lights, puffs of cotton candy and fireworks. These spaces may be anxiety inducing to most, but for me, it is amongst this chaos I am most at ease. In these spaces I blend into the crowd, have fun and feel liberated from ordinary expectations and responsibilities in daily life. Consumed by the elements that make up the space, it is difficult to know if what I’m feeling is real or a result of the overwhelming nature of the space. It is difficult to attempt to understand these spaces at once; one needs to break the experience into digestible parts to grasp how I am affected. The experience of being in an amusement park inspires me to make something bigger than myself, to deflect attention onto something else, even if temporary. This desire to deflect is connected to being the eldest (and only) daughter in my family, where I am constantly in the spotlight. Creating paintings became an outlet for me, a form of non-verbal expression that allowed me to feel the way I felt in these spaces: completely free while being totally present.

I have isolated each component of the painting in *Fig. 3*, numbering the surfaces from 1-10, the order in which they were painted. Describing the construction of this looming, large-scale painting – that allowed for more experimentation than what could occur on a single surface – gives me an opportunity to think through how I approach making.



1. This panel (48 x 53 in.) transformed several times before becoming a part of this painting. I started working on this painting in my first year of graduate studies and in its early stages it displayed many of the same ideas that ultimately came together in, *A piece of pie* (an aerial view). After a few sketches (both hand drawn and digital), the “finished” piece included sculptural elements that protruded out from the wood panel surface, in addition to

the use of multiple overlapping surfaces. The color palette was simple - too simple, not complicated enough - paint was applied conservatively. Stepping back from the work, I realized that paint was not being used in a stimulating way. I applied it too thinly, with little texture, and several elements in the work were of a similar scale.

In the second iteration and without a sketch, I painted over the entire surface using white gesso, allowing some parts of the previous painting to show through as the layers built up. Peeking out from beneath, the under painting was used as a starting point and dictated the next mark. Allowing a painting to be a guide, Mehretu explains the importance of learning from what is on the surface:

The most interesting things that can happen in painting are not what you can plan in advance but what happens when you're making them. It breaks down all the preconceptions of what you think you have (Chua).

In order to give the painting this kind of agency requires confidence in what I am doing. One of the exercises that help build this confidence is creating textured paper, or small-scale collages using various tools in the studio such as markers, crayons, paint, and oil pastel. This is a way to loosen up how I make marks on a surface. In this way, I

am not concerned with making mistakes, which may open up to new ways of mark making that may not happen on a larger surface. Pulling sheets from this stack, I tore, cut and folded the pieces and applied them to the panel, blocking out areas of colour and assembling the composition. Using a food processor, I blended together objects collected from the Richmond Night Market such as stuffed animals, Hello Kitty notebooks, hair extensions, nail polish, blue glitter and key chains. With this pulp, I made paper that was then collaged into the painting.



I drew the outlines of shapes found in photographs taken in and around Landsdowne Mall in Richmond, BC. Through this

process, I discovered shapes, which I increased in scale and painted onto the surface of the panel. This method of generating shapes came from a public art project I was commissioned to make for the City of Richmond. Participating artists were encouraged to look at their surroundings for inspiration. By documenting various areas of the city I was able to extract shapes from areas of shadow, negative spaces or other peculiarities that often go overlooked in daily life. A pink deflated balloon can be found in the painting, which was cut open and filled with the stuffing found inside stuffed animals.

Red is the color of the light that signals a stop. It is the last color I remember seeing on December 24, 2013 at 2:20pm as my car refused to stop and I found myself in the middle of a busy intersection. It is the color that I saw as I closed my eyes, bracing myself from the impact of a car hitting my driver's side door at full speed. It is the color that was dripping from my forehead when the airbags didn't deploy and my car came to a halt as it crashed into a pole.

It is the color of fire trucks and E M E R G E N C Y. Red is the colour of panic, depression, failure, anxiety, wondering how I was still alive and why I was given a second chance.

Panel 1: Process

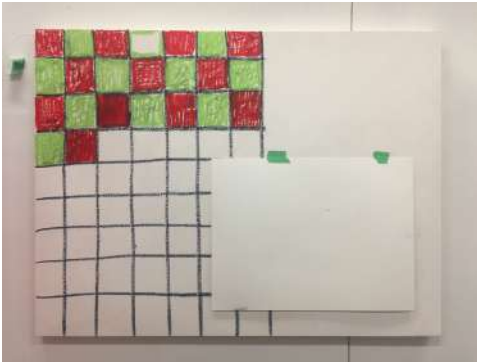




2. This panel (30 x 24 in.) was planned carefully using Photoshop to sketch how it was to connect with panel #1. To begin, a grid-like pattern was made on paper using crayons to draw free, childlike lines that intersected with one another. I built up the texture on the panel by using cold wax medium. I mixed pigments by folding the colour in using a palette knife like a baker mixing sweet, sugary frosting. Laying the panel flat on the ground, I put on a latex glove and scooped up a handful of paint. Crouched down on the floor next to the panel, I squeezed my hand, letting the paint drop to the top of the panel. Quickly wiping my hand on the edge of the panel, with the waxy, stiff paint, I was able to create peaks of colour that stuck out from the surface. Once this dried overnight, the surface was lifted off the ground and hung on the wall where I created much slower marks using three colours: red oxide, yellow ochre and burnt sienna. I added these warmer tones to contrast

the cool, artificial neon yellow, pink and electric blue. After mixing sawdust into the paint (for quicker drying time and additional texture) I applied it to the surface with a small palette knife, making tiny, repetitive gestures the size of my fingernail. Finally, I mixed a bright pink colour by combining neon acrylic paint and crimson red oil combining them into cold wax medium. Then using my finger, which allows more control and reduces the distance between my surface and myself, I applied the paint using a fast, zigzag motion.

Panel 2: Process





3. Referring to my Photoshop sketch, I started by mixing yellow ochre and brown tones from the edge of panel #2, which would connect seamlessly to this panel (30 x 30 in.). Looking for ways to complicate the surface of the paintings, I attempt to invite my viewer to look at the work for a longer period of time so as to discover more about my process as the layers unfold before them. In this panel, once the paint was mixed, I used a tiny palette knife to apply the medium on the panel. With just a bit of paint on the tip of knife, in one slight motion I pushed down on the surface and lifted up, creating miniature peaks. The collection of these small, repeated gestures produced a larger gesture that covered half of the panel. While the paint was wet I took a piece of oil pastel and,

from the top of the panel to the middle I drew a line to break up the surface and texture. This allowed the first layers of the painting to come through, creating a river of blue paint that flowed into the center of the composition. Mixing a pastel pink hue with molding paste, the sticky, melted marshmallow like substance was loaded onto a brush and applied to the middle of the surface. In order to avoid the center of the composition becoming the focus of attention, the pastel pink bowl shape was echoed towards the top of the composition.

I've spent my entire life in and out of swimming pools, from being a Starfish to completing level 12, to swimming competitively and becoming a certified lifeguard. The smell of chlorine, the Cerulean blue hue the water takes on and the feeling of diving to the bottom of the pool. Disappearing into silence brings an instant serenity. Sound seems to echo through these spaces introducing a chaos that bubbles into stillness at the bottom of the cobalt blue pool.

Panel 3: Process





4. This collaged painting on paper (54 x 73 in.) began by making various marks on small pieces of watercolour paper (4 x 5 in.). Using many different mediums such as oil stick, watercolour, acrylic, coloured pencil and marker, I made marks varying from quick scribbles and dashes to long, slow thick lines as well as overall washes of colour.

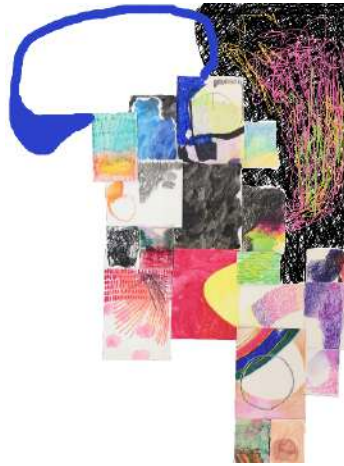
I use colour as a starting point for much of my work, it helps me organize my thoughts as each colour provides varying degrees of visual weight. For example, colours like red or black can be, visually, very heavy – so instead of blocking out areas of the painting in these tones, they become outlines. American painter, Amy Sillman's surfaces instate her intense explorations of colour. In a lecture given at the Whitney Museum of American Art Sillman says:

Colour is a primary tool for negation in my work – colors that block each other out or contradict each other, and are mixed in an archeological-dialectic of continual destruction and reconstruction. My palette begins with everything I look at in the world: paintings, iPhone apps, cartoons, magazines, flowers, fashion, buildings, landscapes, books, and movies (Whitney Museum of American Art, "Seminars with Artists").

My surfaces are constantly in flux; being cut into, layered on top of, torn apart or hung side by side destruction and reconstruction is a part of my process. Often colour and paint are treated the same way; painting over work that was once considered complete with fresh colours, overlapping colour and cancelling out one colour with another. Colour becomes buried in the layers of my paintings and, at times, I dig them back out to reveal my process. In the above quote, Sillman expresses that "colour is a primary tool for negation" in her work, however the role colour plays in my work is the opposite. I use vivid colours in my work as a tool to assert myself in a space, to declare my presence. Colour is used to make a statement.

As the "sketches" accumulated and grew or decreased in size, pinning the pieces of paper up on the studio wall side-by-side I noticed similarities between them. Looking for areas where it seemed like one mark ended on a piece and began or transformed on another, I taped the pieces together and watched my composition grow.

Panel 4: Process



Sterile, new, empty, and blank. Throughout my undergraduate studies at The University of Waterloo, I volunteered at various hospitals in Ontario and India to build my resume for medical school applications. Within these spaces everything was white, or slightly off-white: the floors, the ceiling, the walls, the building itself. Standing in the Medical ICU at Fortis Hospital in Mohali, I can remember the lingering fragrance of fresh, white bed sheets that had just been changed. A nurse accidentally removed a tube from a patient causing blood to gush out at an alarming rate, staining the sheets a deep color red.

Under bright white lights, everyone's skin look pale and grey. I would observe patients for hours, sick, dying or recovering, making detailed notes amongst the routine chaos of the unit. I remained fixated on the patient – eyes closed, weak heartbeat, shallow breaths, and expressionless face. My mind began to wander as I stared at my notes, rereading them, erasing and rewriting the same words...bored. The colour white drained the life out of everyone I encountered.

I shifted my attention to the heart monitor, hypnotized by the pulse of bright zigzags lines on the faint, gridded screen. I flipped through various pieces of paper, all filled with overwhelming amounts of information: transparent x-rays, blood reports, doctors comments. I tried to make sense of it all.



5. The sense of iteration is key to my process as thinking through a painting (during the act of painting) or thinking about a painting (after the act of painting) may lead to the development of several new ideas for future works. This inspiration can come from the way a mark is made or a colour is used. It may also come from the direction a line is drawn: ending suddenly at the edge of a surface but implying that it can continue (like the yellow line in this piece). LA-based artist, Laura Owens, whose abstract paintings combine handmade, silkscreened and digital mark making, expands on this idea:

What's interesting about the making of the painting is that every step along the way, you're recalibrating

the choices you've just made. It's an activity in which you're watching yourself; you're doing a close reading of, and response to, your own decisions (Enright, "Painting in an Expanded Field").

Painting is a space for reflection. Sifting through my own visual archive, I examine choices made in previous works and respond to them in new works. The transformation from flat, graphic, small Photoshop sketch to large and textured painting presents challenges, as paint behaves in ways that isn't pre-planned, but it is exciting. As each colour is added or a gesture is made, the affect on the surface must be considered, which may force a recalibration of how the material is being used or what I am expecting of the outcome. Through this reflection, aspects of the composition that perhaps went unnoticed seem to reveal a whole new set of possibilities. Owens continues, "It's as if you've just opened a door to a series of new rooms that you didn't know existed in your house. What had seemed to be a small closet, something that I've passed by, turns out to be a serious addition." (Enright). This awareness or observational method is how *A piece of pie (an aerial view)* came together. Each element of the painting is placed on the surface as a response to an initial action, which is how the composition builds. When a painting is complete, the next piece becomes a reaction to the action that was

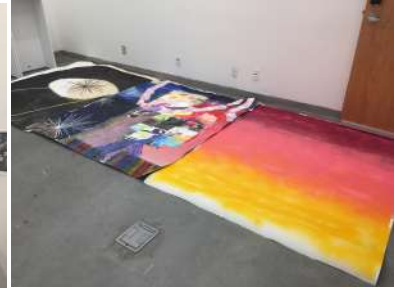
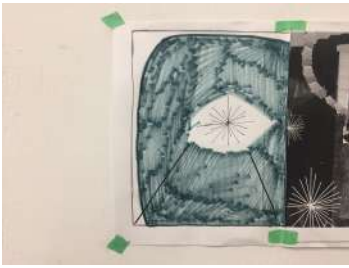
done in the first painting. I pull elements that are working well in one piece and consider how I can develop them further, turning the process into an exploration of paint and materials.

Since my dad moved to Canada he has been purchasing lottery tickets – everyday. Most days, he would go multiple times and purchase from multiple locations across the Greater Toronto Area. Sometimes he would take road trips and travel to various parts of Ontario or even across the border, specifically to purchase these light yellow lottery tickets. Dad has never thrown a ticket out; he has suitcases bursting at the seams filled with each and every ticket he has bought over the years, the first one dating back to 1988. I know this because two summers ago, my dad wanted to apply to break the Guinness World Record for most lottery tickets bought and collected. My brothers, our friends and I would sit in our living room, with thousands of yellow tickets spread across our floor, and organize the lottery tickets by year. I couldn't believe how well the colour aged with just the slightest shift in hue between the initial tickets purchased and the most recent ones. My dad never ended up applying, but he has an extremely well organized collection of yellow lottery tickets.

I am extremely comfortable jumping into uncertainty and approaching painting in fragments. This treatment of materials and surfaces gives the sense that the composition can continue to grow or be rearranged at any given time. Working with multiple surfaces means panels can be replaced or turned upside-down; the possibilities are endless as the work comes together like a puzzle; unfixed. This work on

paper was an important step in the process because I realized certain parts of the painting were not working well so using a blade, in one swift movement, I cut out the areas I was unsatisfied with. American filmmaker and painter, David Lynch expresses his thoughts on the process of action and reaction, "this is the thing you hope to keep alive. And there's got to be a freedom to say, that didn't work, it's got to go. Then in the process of destruction, a beautiful new thing can emerge [...]" (Enright, "Dark Enlightenment"). The action of cutting into my paper opened up the whole painting. I began to question, what else could be combined to create the composition and in what other ways could it grow? This is when I started combining surfaces.

Panel 5: Process





6. The gradient background for this paper piece (53 x 72 in.) was created using golden yellow, bright orange and pink spray paint. Combining two shades of blue with some pumice medium for texture, I painted a funnel shape. Before the paint dried, using a white oil stick I sketched lines loosely, breaking up the blue surface and mimicking other lines within the larger composition of the painting. I experimented with mixing white oil and acrylic paint into cold wax medium, which caused some bits of acrylic paint to congeal. Because of this, when I applied it to the surface of the paper, a new texture within the medium was created. Stepping back from the surface, the blue funnel shape was, visually, too loud so I incorporated an organic white form

to quiet the blue and tie the composition together. Aware the white shape could become too dominant; I 'cut into' the shape and placed the cut out to the right of the composition.

Panel 6: Process



7. (7, 8 & 10) These plywood surfaces served to complete the edges of the painting; to fill in gaps and provide a frame. At this stage I explored everything I was interested in with the painting and was no longer stimulated to push further. Taking the knowledge I gained from the process I was ready to find a new way to apply it. Artist Shahzia Sikander expresses her thoughts on image making in an interview, she says:

I like the idea of exhausting an image. And to generate as many combinations as I can through the usage of limited vocabulary...And not necessarily just repeating them in the same way, but through repetition create different formations ("Shahzia Sikander", MoMa).

This idea of exhausting an image, pushing a composition, a line or a shape as far as possible is what motivates me to continue painting. At times, the task at hand seems intimidating - the chaos of mark-making, the layers and colours that need to be peeled back amongst the destruction and reconstruction of the surface until the core of the piece is discovered. Through these iterations I figure out what truly fascinated me from the start, whether it's a line, shape, texture or colour.



9. I experimented with paint pouring techniques for this wood panel, by mixing three different colours in separate jars. In order to manipulate how the colours interact with each other, I mixed water into one, soil into another and matte medium into the last, which altered the speed of paint flow. Placing the surface on the floor, I poured the paint and lifted the surface, tilting the panel on an angle. Once the paint started to drip off the edge, I laid it flat to stop the paint flow. Not knowing what I wanted to use this panel for, I set it aside for several weeks before considering it for *A piece of pie (an aerial view)*.

I didn't get my first job until I was 23 years old. I wasn't allowed at an earlier age; my parents told me to focus on school and only school. One focus. As a teenager, I was eager to start working when I turned 16. I craved independence and wanted to do something for myself; to have some control over my life. So, in my third year of undergrad I started my very first job working at Party City for the Halloween season. We were given these obnoxiously bright orange t-shirts to wear during our shifts, but I didn't care. Excited for every shift, I wore the t-shirt with pride knowing how long I'd wanted to feel this freedom. I *needed* to fulfill my burning desire to make something of my own.

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