*Painting the View From My Doorstep*

Maggee Day

# Painting the View From My Doorstep

By

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ABSTRACT

This essay follows the journey of my process driven investigation surrounding nuances between seeing, perceiving, and representing the view from my doorstep through paint. The work I created and is discussed in this thesis is in chronological order and follows the progression of my studio exploration, as well as questioning past and current painting tools and techniques. I want to address the following questions: 1) What can painting do now that it could not before and how can contemporary painting practices challenge our notions of what a landscape can be? 2) Can I create a painting from my doorstep that steps outside of my own learned perception? This exploration has allowed me to learn more about the relationship between abstraction and representation, as well as the material potential of paint.

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## INTRODUCTION

I am interested in the fact that there are many different ways of seeing, and therefore many different ways of representing a subject. Through my experimental process, I am exploring the various ways I can see the space in front of my apartment building, and therefore— the various ways this space can be represented through paint. The doorstep is the location where my exploration starts; it is a catalyst to my more central subject which is the space of perception. I chose this environment because it is something I can have daily interactions with, as well as the fact that it is constantly changing; this subject is out of my control and constantly developing. This location allows me to see the magic in the ordinary and momentary, while reevaluating how I perceive/construct a representational painting.

## LANDSCAPE

At the beginning of my investigation into my thesis, I was interested in the particular processes that landscape encourages such as: plein air painting and a language of techniques that represent three-dimensional space within a two-dimensional surface. Techniques such as atmospheric perspective and horizon lines ground the viewer and create an illusion of space that the viewer can enter. Although my interest in landscape stemmed from the technical side of painting, I can not paint the view from my doorstep and ignore the fact that my subject is politically charged and painting this subject brings up complicated issues of land representation throughout Western history.

Landscape painting is historically connected to power, it was used to represent the wealth of land that a patron owned. Within the past few decades the problems within the western history of the genre and even our beloved “national” Group of Seven have been highlighted by historians, critics, and curators. All contemporary Canadian landscape artists need to discuss these current conversations and rethink connections between landscape and Canadian identity. John O’Brian and Peter White’s book *Beyond Wilderness* (2007) has informed a lot of my thoughts about the problematic aspects of landscape and more specifically the Group of Seven:

Within the first half of the twentieth century a group of men (who were settlers, or descendants of settlers) called themselves the Group of Seven and focused on wilderness painting as a movement[1]. They were eventually supported by the National Gallery of Canada and set about remaking conventions of landscape painting in order to create “National” art. For them “Canadianness” was defined as northern and wild. They painted the land as rugged, empty, and uninhabitable, which in turn— created a propaganda that Canada was empty before its colonization (3). O’Brian states:

> “In all these postcolonial countries, landscape has functioned as a powerful political unifier. It has helped to consolidate the drive toward national sovereignty, as well as to contain prior aboriginal claims to the land. Through the fiction of wilderness [..] ‘empty’ land was declared to be there for the taking — and then it was mythologized.” (4)

The impact of these paintings as an icon of Canada has attempted to rewrite history and diminish the fact that settlers stole this land from the Indigenous nations that were living here thousands of years before us.

In addition to painting’s history, the subject of my work is also political. My subject— the visuals of the space that is outside of my East Vancouver apartment building has a history that is much older than what I have been taught in school. It is stolen land that belongs to the Coast Salish Nations of Musqueam, Tsleil-Waututh and Squamish. I locate myself on this unceded land as an uninvited guest; I am the descendant of European settlers from Ireland, Germany, and Scotland, I was born and raised in London, Ontario— the traditional territory of the Anishinaabek, Haudenosaunee, Huron-Wendt, Attawandaron and Lenape Indigenous peoples. I moved to Vancouver two years ago to attend this Masters program. This acknowledgement is a starting step for me to become more aware of my connection to this land and my own privileges as a white settler.

In my practice, I am investigating how my artistic choices can be respectful to the land around me and move away from historical notions of power and control. I want to distance

[1] The group was in response to a Scandinavian art movement surrounding northern identity. “The Scandinavian art exhibition seen at Buffalo in January 1913 gave Harris and MacDonald an idea for the possibilities available in the northern theme, and encouraged them to go beyond a literal comprehension and towards a symbolic treatment of the order and grandeur of the north.” ( Reid 106)

myself from themes of wilderness and traditional methods of landscape painting, and instead, use the everyday as a prolonged study of space that allows me to rethink how I build a painting. I am learning that there are many different ways space is represented and a painting can move beyond Westen modes of representation.

SERIES

My work is instigated by landscape but becomes something else. Within my work I am making many paintings from one location and this isolation allows me to investigate different ways of seeing and representing one subject in paint. I am interested in how a series can express uncertainty by not navigating a definitive moment. This uncertainty can be useful for challenging my own notions of representational painting. Also, there is a power in working out a subject through a series; in each painting you learn more information which then informs the next. The act of painting one subject multiple times has been taken up by many artists from Monet's lily-pads, Giorgio Morandi's bottles, and Agnes Martin's grids.

In Henry F. Skerritt's exhibition essay "Marking the Infinite"— an exhibition that showcases the work of nine Aboriginal contemporary women artists— he writes about Napangati and Pwerle's process of repetition and seriality to bring attention to the limitless aspects of representation and the infinity of the world:

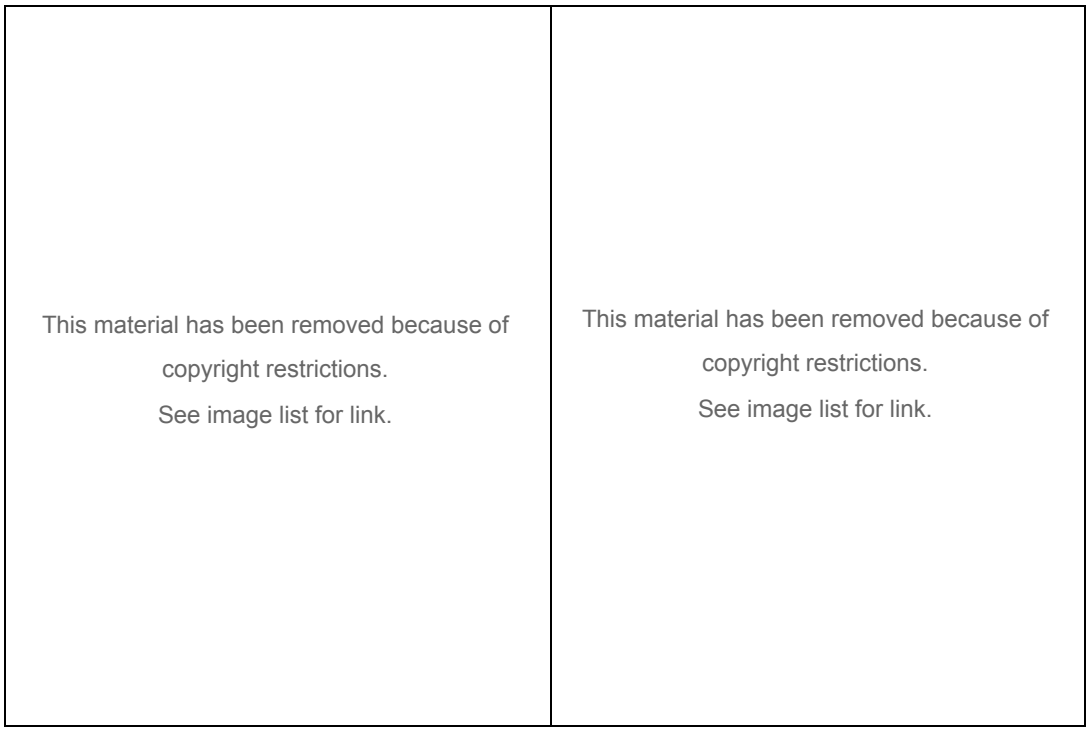


Figure 1 & 2. Yukultji Napangati, *Untitled* & *Untitled,* 2018, Acrylic on Linen 35”x 59” & 96”x 72”

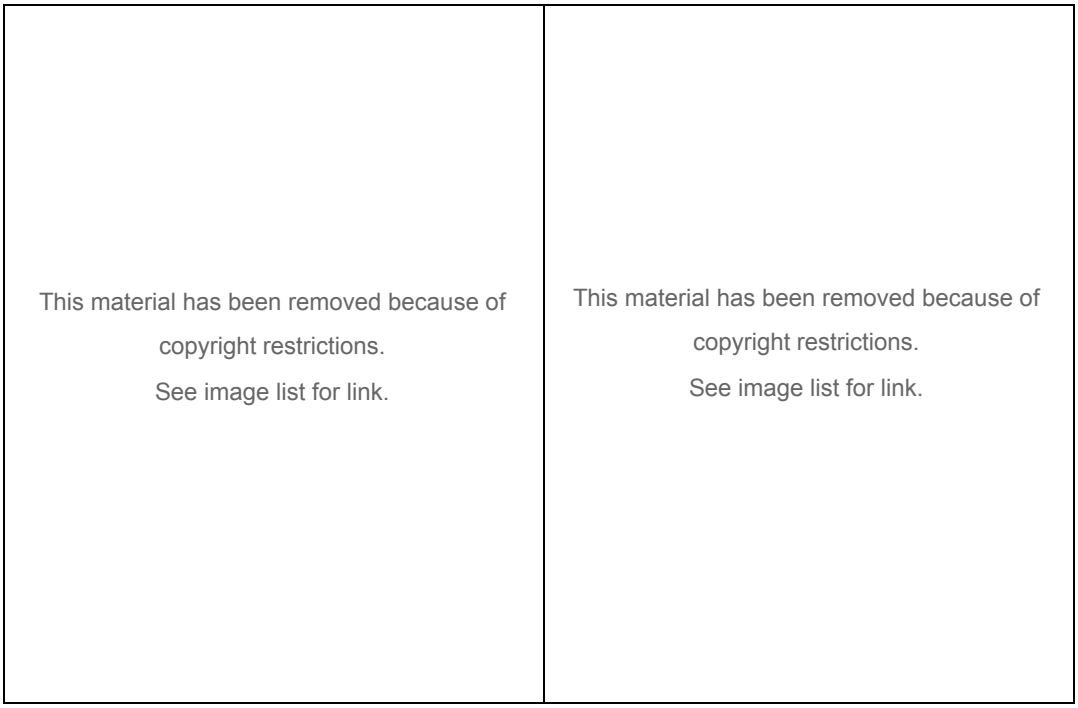


Figure 3 & 4. Angelina Pwerle, *Bush Plum & Bush Plum,* 2005, Synthetic Polymer Paint on Canvas 48”x 70” & 35.8” x 23.6”

> Both Yikultji and Pwerle, extrapolate the universal through multiplicity— “They stray away from a static and absolute definition of the universal towards an active process of universalization. This is not an attempt to move into multicultural relativism, but rather a process of critique that brings to bear local and specific knowledge in order to correct change, and transform our vision of the universal. In these artworks, cyclical, ceremonial, and localized actions form the basis of a world-picture defined by its multiplicity. [..] In a broad sense, they ask us to acknowledge different ways of seeing and valuing the same planet.” (10)

For Yikultji and Pwerle, the world calls forth many possibilities for the painter and one painting can not encompass their perception of it. Their “seriality encourages sensitivity to the minutiae of difference. While their use of repetition creates internal systems within which the viewer is drawn to identify variations, a constant tension is maintained between these individual parts and the whole.” (12). Not only can their use of repetition within one canvas create tension between the individual parts and the whole, but the repetition of each painting within the series allows the viewer to reconsider their subject. Multiplicity is a way to rethink past knowledge and allow the viewer to reevaluate the relationship between “reality and representation, between images and the world we inhabit” (12). I find my work strongly related to their use of seriality— the multiplicity of my subject encourages nuances between seeing and representing. One painting suggests an end; an answer of representation, while a group of paintings suggest that there are infinite ways of seeing, perceiving, and representing one subject in paint.

In addition, both Yikultji and Pwerle are examples of landscape painters that reject Westen modes of representation. They draw from their experience of the land to display a more universal representation of the world we inhabit. Napagati paintings can be thought of as a map that depicts her embodied experience of where she lives, where she travels, and sacred land. Where Pwerle’s work showcases interconnectivity between ourselves, the land, and the universe; the universe can be seen through a sugar plum bush (10). Both these artists ask us to acknowledge different ways of seeing and understanding the land, as well as rejecting Western modes of representation that depict the world around an observer. “From the Renaissance onwards, the position of the ‘I’ is central to perspective, and is privileged above all others. The

world then becomes a picture or object to be viewed from a single angle. Thus, perspective suggests that the world circulates around the eye of the observer." (Oxley 167). Throughout my practice, I want to challenge my notions of what a representational painting can be. I will experiment with different processes and tools in order to let in other forms of knowledge and move away from traditional Western methods of landscape painting that reference a limited understanding of space.

## OBSERVATION

*It's a gloomy overcast day. I am sitting on the steps outside of my apartment building. The lack of sunlight and dampness is making the cement a dark greeny-brown-gray. The soil for the flower beds beside me is a dark brown-purple. The plants seem alive and thriving even though it is December, except for the hydrangeas that once were a vibrant blue, but now the whole plant is an orangy-brown and the leaves are barely hanging on to their stems. On the walkway there is always garbage, today there is a wet napkin and a cigarette butt, in the flower bed there is a degrading cigarette box which stands out with its contrast of bright red and yellow. The plants closest to me are not moving, but some of them seem like they have been windswept as they lean into other plants. Some of the plants further away like the palm tree are dwindling in the wind.*

*The purple-brown wood chips in the garden lay overtop the almost black soil. There is a collection of different leaves sitting on top of the dirt. They all range from orange yellow, to brown orange, to a purple brown. There is an array of plants that average different greens, from a light mint blue-green, lime green-yellow, dark green, and even more muted red-greens, or dark blue-greens. Within each plant is a variety of warm and cool tones of that colour, pale blue reflections of light and/or yellow-brown areas where leaves are dying. Through the garden I can see a sidewalk, cars parked on the road, small modern houses, 3 story apartment buildings, and in the distance I see other apartment buildings, and lights. Everything seems gray, less detailed, and dull the further I look.*

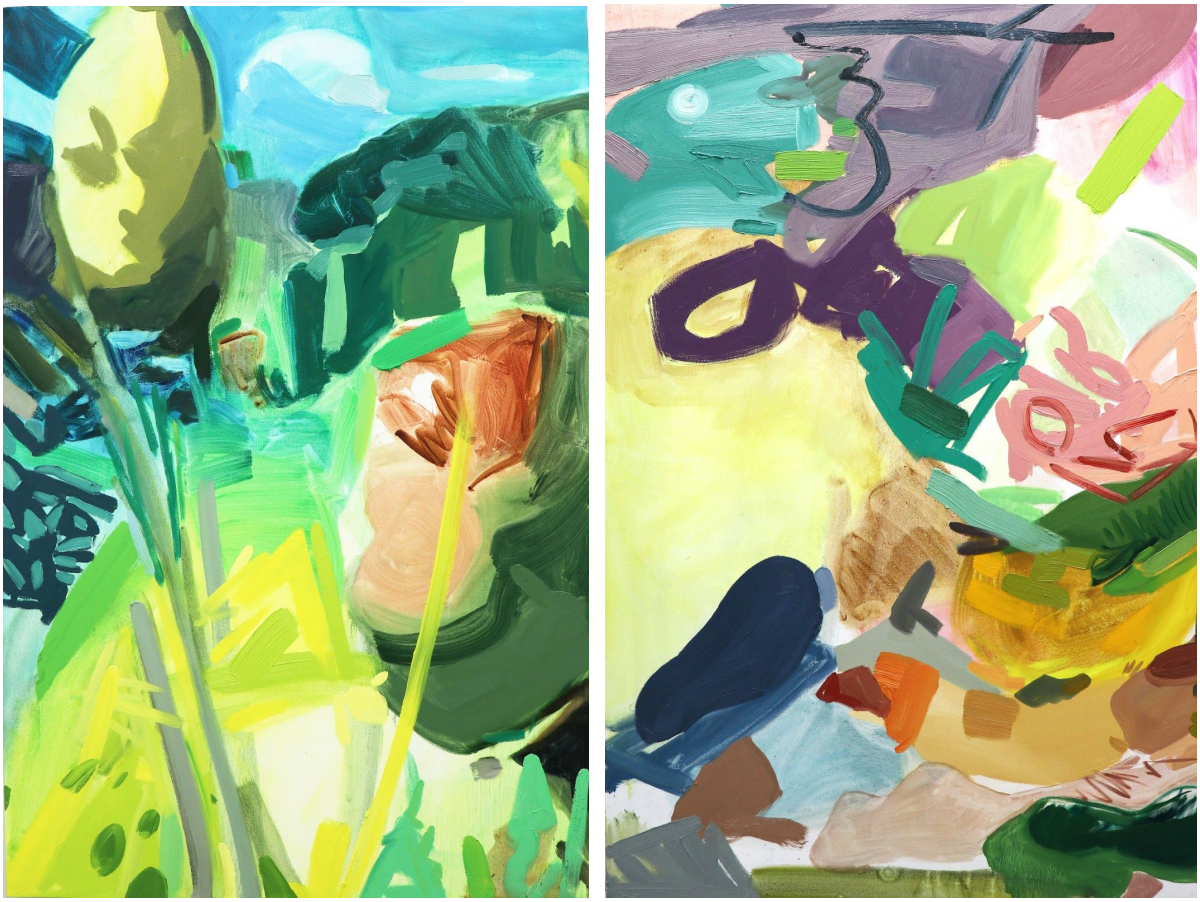

Figure 5 & 6. Maggee Day, *Doorstep View 1* & *Doorstep View 2, 2019,* Oil paint on Canvas 72”x 48”

This description is a glimpse into my thought process as I sit on the steps and create plein-air paintings. I am interested in how I can portray the complex information (of colour, shape, and perception) that my eyes receive while viewing my subject. Through my investigation I have learned that seeing is both social and neurological; a painting is both mediated through historical tools of perspective and the artist’s subjective perception.

Perspective:

Webster’s Dictionary defines perspective as “The appearance to the eye of objects in respect to their relative distance and positions”; perspective refers to an external objective point of view. Tools of perspective can be seen throughout painting’s history. In this section I will go over the evolution of seeing tools and their subsequent flaws. I will argue that each tool presents

a different way of seeing the world and one is not better than another like time suggests. This historical disruption of tools allows me to rethink how painters use tools of perspective today.

Orientation and the modern concept of time and space all started with the horizon line. The horizon line was an important element in navigation and was used to figure out one's own location in relation to surroundings[2]. This grounding/stabilizing horizon line leads to the construction of optical paradigms such as linear perspective. As early as the eleventh century, paintings were composed of linear parallels to the horizon line or desired vantage points; thus 1, 2, and 3 point perspective tools were born and commonly used in early European painting practices (early Renaissance period) (Steyerl 3).

This method was commonly used in painting practices until the realization of camera obscura and its function to painters who traced the projection onto a two dimensional surface. In the book *Secret Knowledge* artist David Hockney argues that as early as the fifteenth century European artists were commonly using camera obscura technology (such as mirrors and lenses, or a combination of the two) in order to create projections that they could trace. Fast forward to the early 19th century— camera obscura was exchanged for the photographic image (Hockney 12).

As seen throughout painting's history, perspectival tools replaced one another. This replacement suggests that we advanced from linear perspective to camera obscura, then from camera obscura to the photographic image. Anne Frieberg in her book *The Virtual Window* suggests otherwise— Frieberg argues that each seeing tool is not better than another but presents a different way of seeing. Furthermore, no tool can accurately represent what our eyes see (60-61). Both Hito Steyerl and Jerry Saltz point out the flaws within linear and photographic perspective in relation to the external world and the anatomy of the human eye:

> "Linear perspective is based on several decisive negations. First, the curvature of the earth is typically disregarded. The horizon is conceived as an abstract flat line upon which the points on any horizon plane converge. Additionally, Edward Panofsky

[2] I was unaware of the fact that my investigation into seeing, relates to colonial methods of travelling. Steyerl states that "The use of horizon to calculate position gave seafarers a sense of orientation, thus also enabling colonialism and the spread of a capitalist global market."(Steyerl 3). This quote reinstates that methods of perspective are rooted in the western lens, and was used to enable western dominance.

> argued the construction of linear perspective declares the view of a one-eyed and immobile spectator as a norm."(Steyerl 4)

> "Artists who rely on 'lensular' space ignore the fact that we see the world one way and the camera sees it in another very different, very particular way: with a single eye (usually a 55-millimeter one). Our eye's lens is variable (to focus near and far) and is approximately 80 mm. The perception of space varies from person to person and depends on experience, and on emotional refractive state. [..] Regardless, the eye is round; the film plane is flat. Camera lenses correct for chromatic and spherical abnormalities; we don't. Eyes scan; cameras crop." (Saltz 185)

These discrepancies confirm that perspective tools are not advancing and allow me to reevaluate tools that are common in painting practices today like digital photographs and projectors. In "The Richter Resolution" Saltz states that the problem with tools we depend on today is that we are using them in unoriginal and non purposeful ways. Contemporary painting should not be dependent on copying a photo, we need to give the "alchemy of painting"[3] a chance and not rely on these tools to simplify the painting process (Saltz 183).

An example of an artist who is questioning current tools of perception and using photographs in innovative ways is Hockney. I am inspired by his experiments with contemporary technology and his attempt to challenge both the perspective and perception of a painting. My work is similar to his series he called *Woldgate*, which is the name of a road he would commonly use to get to his mother's house. He made many works at this one location: collaged video work, collaged photographs, plein air painting, and works from memory. The various materials would capture different perspectives and create a diverse sense of space throughout the images. (Martin 229)

[3] The Alchemy of paint refers to the magic of painting. "Alchemy and studio art exist, you might say, on the same level: they depend on intuition and naiveté, and they are ruined by secure knowledge." (Elkin 44)

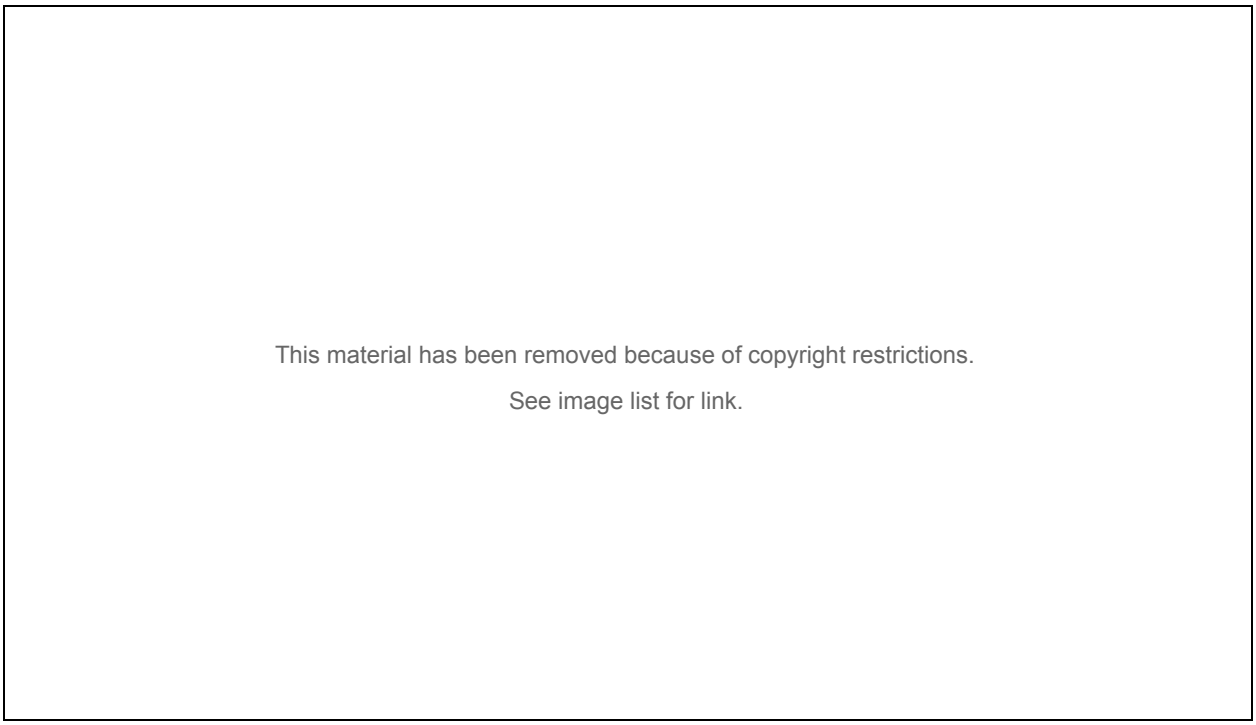


Figure 7. David Hockney, *Summer: The Four Seasons -Woldgate Wood*, 2011, Video Still

Fig 7.*Summer Woldgate Wood*[4] Is a video work Hockney made using nine separate cameras to "overcome quite a few differences between how the human eye sees and how a camera sees"(Martin 229). All nine cameras are set at different exposures which allow the videos to let in different levels of light. This gives the viewer access to a space that adjusts to light similarly to how our eye would when we look at the bright sky— then the depth of the dark bush. Hockney is challenging the definition of what a realistic image is and experimenting with the space between photography and the human eye (Martin 31). This spatial interrogation is something that I strive to do in my own work by creating multifaceted paintings that combine plein air painting and photographic images.

Not only have perspectival tools altered how we see the world, but advancements in technology like Google Maps also alter our spatial orientation (Steyerl 1). We commonly see the world from a birds eye view which changes our sense of space. I am interested in this state of flux we are currently experiencing in terms of seeing and understanding space. Additionally, Johnathan Crary in his book *Techniques of the Observer* (1990) argues that each person, and

[4]Video of Figure 2: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1HJivzm7aII

furthermore, each eye sees the world differently. Crary's argument that each individual sees the world differently means that all our perspective tools are unreliable since they account for an objective viewer; they account for everyone seeing the world the same (19). How can I create a realistic image when everything that I thought I knew about seeing is in flux[5]?

Perception:

Webster's Dictionary defines Perception as "physical sensation interpreted in the light of experience". Perception is a subjective interpretation that a person comes up with based on their life experiences. In this section I will discuss the subjective view, as well as— how my own work is in conversation with the phenomenon of perception.

In my practice I want to focus on the fact that everyone will see the same space differently; my perception mediates how I see the world and therefore how I paint. I want to acknowledge that there is a difference between seeing and perceiving: seeing as an optical or physiological process of sight, and perceiving as a resolution into an understandable image or concept. Perception is culturally and ideologically informed, it is what we take forward as an understanding of the world. Is it possible to create a painting that steps outside of my own learned perception? Can you see without perceiving?

The British neurologist Oliver Sacks addresses this question in his book *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat.* Sacks focuses on the daily lives of people with right hemisphere disorders which are impossible to imagine and can only be understood through narrative. The right side of the brain holds primal instincts like perception, while the left is more unique to humans and holds logic (left hemisphere problems are easier to identify, and imagine). The man who mistook his wife for a hat; Doctor P, has a neurological disorder that separates seeing from perceiving.

[5] 'Seeing in flux' also references Hito Stereyl in her essay *Free Falling*, where she describes the disorientation the contemporary viewer feels— that is due to the dismantling of perspective tools and advancements in technology. (Steyerl 1)

Doctor P was a musician and teacher at the time he met Oliver Sacks. He was unaware he had visual agnosia[6], he initially thought there was a problem with his eyesight because he would regularly mistake his students and would occasionally think that inanimate objects were people. He could no longer perceive, or have an emotional relationship with what he sees, everything was reduced to abstract shapes and colours. He would go about his day categorizing shapes and symbols, but when he was presented with the details of faces (and furthermore expressions) he failed to recognize them. He approached seeing as if it was abstract puzzles or tests, he functioned as if he was a computer looking for key features or patterns. His eyes were fine, but his perception was lost; he would break the world down into abstract visuals that he did not have any emotional relationship to. (8-17)

My paintings—in part— could be understood to operate in that space of Doctor P; the space of seeing without perceiving and without being resolved into a readable landscape. All of the sensory data and information is there but it has not yet been resolved into an image; perception has not taken hold of it and defined it. Arguably this is an impossible space, but an interesting concept to attempt. I want my paintings to offer the possibility or the idea of this space as their subject.[7]

[6] Webster's Dictionary defines Visual Agnosia as a form of agnosia characterized by inability to recognize familiar objects observed by the sense of sight.

[7] I want to note that this can be a problematic space— to step outside of my own lived and cultural perception. I also want to note that I do not want to romanticise or exploit this neurological disorder but reference it as an example that proves perception and seeing are seperate.

Figure 8. Maggee Day, *Doorstep View 3,* 2019, Oil on Canvas 60”x 72”

I am trained to see the world similarly to how I am trained to paint representationally. This fracturing of the world, and treating everything one sees with the same intensity is essentially the action of representational painting. Fig. 8 *Doorstep View 3* breaks down the view from my doorstep into coloured shapes and brushstrokes that hover in between the perceived space of the landscape and abstraction (the space before perception defines the world). This juxtaposition allows me and hopefully the viewer to rethink how we interpret the world around us.

MATERIALS

“The history of art, is also the history of technology” (Bales 17). I believe this is still true today, each technological development in artistic tools imparts their own characteristics of form, colour, and gesture. Within my process I use many different materials such as: photographs, digital paint, watercolours, and oil paint. These Materials become extensions of my body. The more tools I use the more information I can place on a canvas; certain tools make certain results possible. But, tools do more than shape the appearance, they also set limits on the artwork. In this section I will discuss the benefits and limitations of both plein air painting and painting from a photograph— as well as, characteristics of watercolour and digital paint applications.

> “When new tools appear, new artistic possibilities arise— a scene painted from life reveals a world much different from the one painted by memory. This was evident in the 1870’s when manufacturers found a way to seal colours in collapsible metal tubes, and for the first time artists working in that medium had an option to leave the studio and work with oils directly in the field. [..] Those who did are known as the impressionists.” (Bayles 18)

This quote proves that painting outside was not possible before the invention of paint tubes in the 1870’s—the same time that photographs were becoming widespread. Plein air painting was a way to push back against the photograph that threatened to make painting obsolete. The Impressionists were attracted to plein air painting because it offered a different possibility of painting landscape; it no longer had to be limited to a studio window, created by imagination, or distorted by a photograph. This development created paintings that focused on light, “Other elements that define plein air paintings are an interest in light and the evanescence of light, colors set next to one another and not mixed to show changes in light, and built up areas of impasto” (Grant 8).

In my experience, Plein air painting is very different from painting from a photograph because it allows the movement of time to be captured within the painting; like Saltz stated before “Eyes scan, camera’s don’t”. I am interested in the changes of depth, perspective, and colour that my eyes can perceive while looking at this one location. This action forces paniters to work fast, which in turn creates unexpected results within the canvas. Impressionists like Paul

Cezanne were drawn to this technique because they felt like it was more alive and more truthful than working from a photo or imagination.

> "On the moral side is the belief that plein air painting embodies a certain truth, reflecting the immediacy of the moment when the artist is at work, needing to make compositional and color-value decisions quickly before the clouds roll in or the wind kicks up. Often, the artwork looks rougher and less finished than pieces executed fully or partly in a studio." (Grant 14)

I believe that this action of sitting on my doorstep everyday allows me to train my perception to notice small nuances in colour and form. These nuances are something that a camera often filters out. Camera's do not absorb as much detail as the human eye, but they do add other benefits to the painting process. Photographs have the ability to capture the world and flatten it. This flattening simplifies the painting process since the painter no longer has to figure out how to transfer a three dimensional object into two dimensions. Photographs also allow one moment in time to be frozen— which in turn, allows the viewer to notice unexpected occurrences within the frame.

This space between the human eye and lens lead me to further explore how contemporary tools can shape oil painting. Digital paint is a newer technology, I am very excited to explore this medium and think about what it can add to the painting conversation. With my tablet I am able to create paintings anywhere and have access to an unlimited colour palette and brush styles. This convenience allows me to create plein air paintings faster than using any other painting medium, therefore I can attempt to capture the exact colour and light of a moment before it changes. Digital paint is a valuable tool for my process and reworking the image with oil paint adds a material quality.

Another material I have been experimenting with is watercolours. This material has many opposing characteristics from oil paint, therefore I have been interested in translating one material into the other in my process. Watercolour is another immediate medium and tool that I use for drawing. With watercolour you work from light to dark and everything is transparent— with oil you can layer overtop and cover over areas entirely. Watercolour can create a simple

airy feeling since you cannot accumulate paint— the more you work with it the less successful it becomes; it requires a light touch.

The material of my final work is always oil paint on canvas, it is my passion and my primary tool. I am interested in this duality of oil paint: It is responsive and lays where I put it, but it is also unpredictable and often takes a life of its own animating the object or scene I try to represent— this juxtaposition keeps me engaged.

> "Making a painting is so hard it makes you crazy. You have to negotiate surface, tone, silhouette, line, space, zone, layer, scale, speed, and mass, while interacting with a meta-surface of meaning, text, sign, language, intention, concept, and history. You have to simultaneously diagnose the present, predict the future, and ignore the past- to both remember and forget. You have to love and hate your objects and subjects, to believe every shred of romantic and passionate mythos about painting, and at the same time cast your gimlet eye on it." (Sillman 110)

Painter Amy Sillman illustrates the complex challenges of painting, while also describing her relationship and passion for the medium. Painting is incredibly hard, and that is why I am attracted to it— because I am forever learning. Oil painting also has the richest history in comparison to any other artistic medium. Therefore, when we create a painting today we are automatically referencing past art movements, tools, and processes. This embodied recycling is conceptually interesting for dismantling past notions of landscape or abstract painting.

## TRANSLATION

My process drives my work, as I attempt to discover different possibilities in oil painting and rethink methods that are deeply enriched in representational painting. A rule I created in my process is that every painting must change its order of procedures and materials. I want to highlight all the different choices that a painter can make when they approach a subject, and furthermore find connections and divisions between processes in art history and contemporary painting. When I approach my subject I have a choice to capture the visual information in a photograph, or I can attempt to capture the information through plein air painting/sketching.

Afterwards I have a plethora of different possibilities: I can translate that information into another material, collage different materials together, or layer different images on top of one another.

I am interested in disrupting the illusion of painting, by throwing wrenches into my process. These wrenches include translating paintings from one medium to another for example: watercolours which contain translucent paint and pools of colour which are impossible to recreate in oil paint. Another example of a wrench would be challenging the physicality of oil paint by layering two images on top of eachother wet on wet, or spilling paint. These disruptions challenge the skills I have developed of how to perceive things and how to build up illusions in paint effectively. I am not always aware of the ways in which I am trained to see or construct, but in order to interrogate my own learned perception— I have to disrupt those skills; which in turn will give me unexpected results. An unexpected troubling is helpful for learning how to paint and for pulling apart my notions of what a landscape painting should look like.

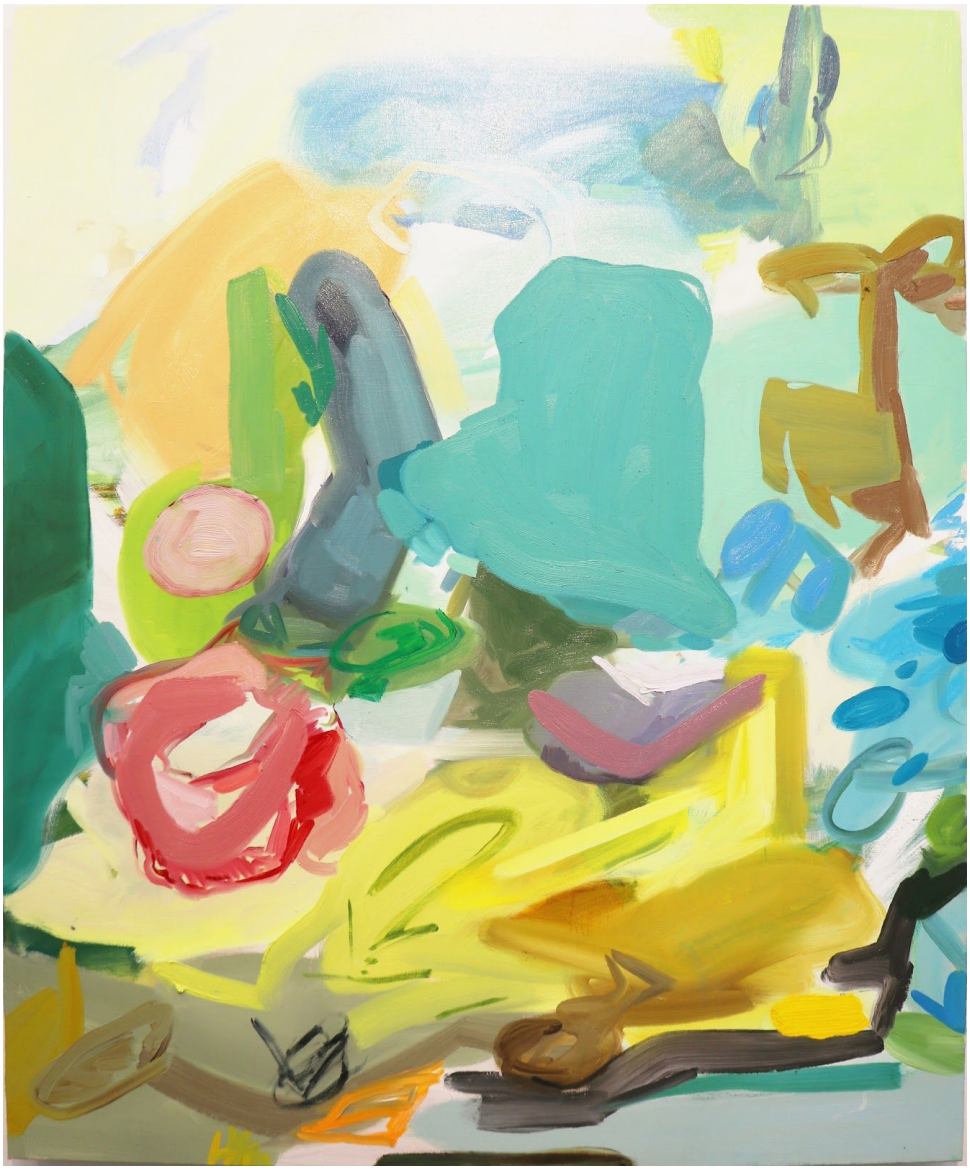

Figure 9. Maggee Day *Doorstep View 4, 2019,* Oil on Canvas *60"x 72"*

Fig 9. *Doorstep View 4* Started with two digital[8] plein air paintings I made of the same subject at slightly different angles. With this experiment, I was interested in the nuances that can happen when a subject is painted twice and the different colours, shapes, and perspective that are realized in the second rendering. Also the second time I paint this subject I should be more aware of the figures and paint faster, but this complex outdoor scene of the garden, sidewalk, and other apartments allow me to slow down and notice different colours and objects.

[8] By 'digital' I mean creating an image with a digital painting app on my tablet with a pen.

I then took these two digital paintings and translated them into two watercolour images. Translation from one material to another is a common theme in my practice. Through translation I attempt to bring qualities from one medium into another. I am also attracted to my own ability/inability to transfer visual information into paint, and the slippage, abstraction, and/or simplification that occurs between each step. Here, the watercolours brought a fresh airiness to the digital paintings and transformed the digital brush stroked into watery pools of colour. This simplification allows me to improvise my own brush strokes when I create the large oil painting, which in turn keeps the brush marks fast and fresh

Next, I took the first watercolour and used it as a reference for my base painting on a large 6'x5' canvas[9]. After I had done that, I flipped the canvas and took the second watercolour and painted it on top of the first image using an alla prima technique. When I painted the second image on the first image I was thinking of the final painting as a whole, which parts are strong and need to stay, and which parts need to be further integrated within the second image. But since I am combining two paintings wet on wet, I do not have complete control over the outcome and surprising shapes and colours emerge. This unpredictability keeps me excited about painting— the paint is not laying where I put it or staying the colour that I mixed on the palette, instead it is gaining autonomy. Through this process I lose control of the image. This space of not knowing[10] allows me to reflect on my own understanding of pictorial space and the alchemy of paint.

Charline Von Heyl is an artist that I look at in terms of disrupting the process of painting in order to create a new and surprising image.

> "It was both construction and destruction. [..] Gestural expression for me is putting a shape into a canvas, but ultimately it's not interesting because it is just a mirror

[9] I paint large because I want to place the viewer inside the environment, it also relates to the history of landscape painting and Abstract Expressionism. " I paint large because I want to be very intimate and human. To paint a small picture is to place yourself outside your experience, to look upon an experience as a stereopticon view or with reducing glass. However, you paint large pictures, you are in it. It isn't something you command." —Mark Rothko (Quoted in *Action Painting.* [Berger 24] )

[10] In Rachel Jones Essay "On the Value of Not Knowing", Jones writes about the process of making the strange familiar: "Learning to see strange makes us un-at-home in the everyday, and thereby restores it a potential place of marvel, where we might become other than what or who we are." (16). I am interested in how my actions of disruption can lead to new forms of learning.

of a movement and energy. I can use that only for a moment, as a start, in the painting. I build up shapes by destroying it and by laying another shape over it. By building a painting in overlapping layers I would get shapes that I could never have invented. That's what I wanted." (Von Heyl 40)

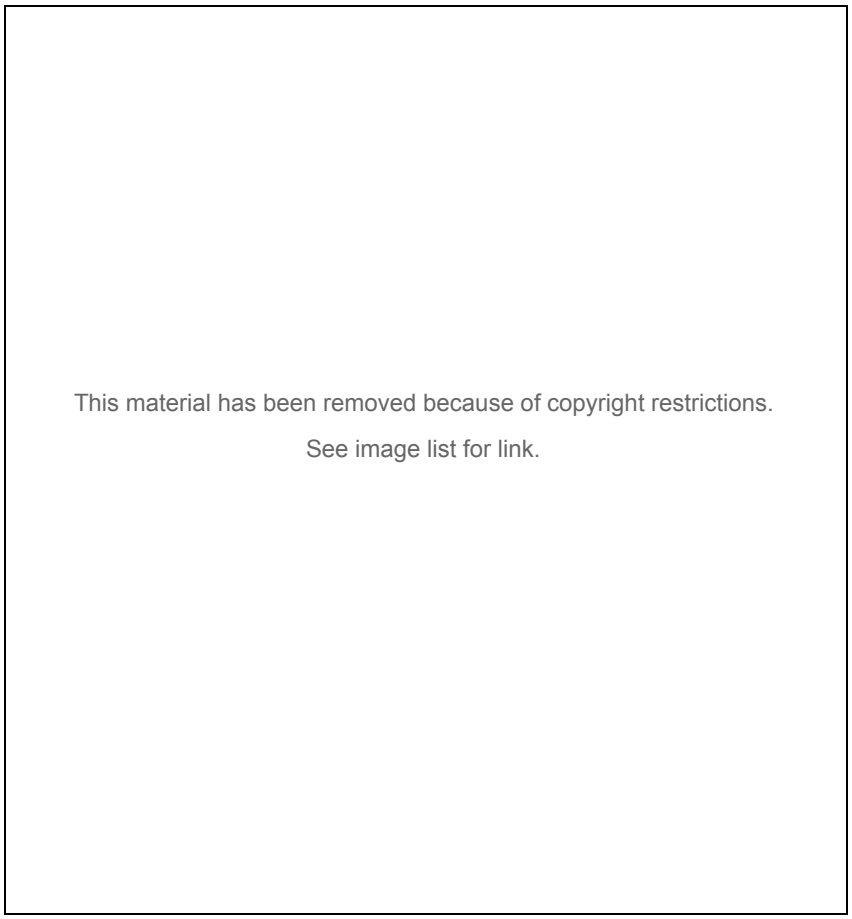


Figure 10. Charline Von Heyl *Night Doctor*, 2013, Oil and Acrylic on Canvas 82.5"x 68"

Von Heyl process creates a similar collaboration between artist and oil paint; between construction and destruction. James Elkin in his book *What Is Painting* discusses this feeling that something as dead as paint can feel alive and full of thought. "Paint is like a finely tuned antenna, reacting to the faintest unnoticed movement of the painter's hand, fixing the faintest shadow of thought in colour and texture."(188). Paint follows the artist's body and emotions, but the artist also follows the paint.

ABSTRACTION

I find it difficult to define abstraction and representation. My brushstrokes become shapes and colours that hold information and suggest a logic to three dimensional space and objects within it. Fig. 9 *Doorstep View 4* is a painting with many different elements, colours, shapes, and mark making. I no longer easily see my doorstep environment— I have pulled the landscape apart. Although many of the initial doorstep elements are there, they are now open to be rethought and renegotiated because they have not been resolved as what we traditionally look for as being landscape. I will restrain myself from further describing the painting because the point is for the viewer to have their own perceptual encounter with this layered, mediated landscape.

My paintings oscillate between abstraction and representation. I wouldn't fully consider them to be abstract because they start from observations or photographs that I then break down throughout the process of translation. Within my process I am not necessarily taking away information— sometimes I am adding more information than what we would normally receive from looking at a photograph. Where is the line between abstraction and representation; is it a sliding scale that every painting sits on? Can a process based painting practice be representational?

Art historian Alfread Barr describes abstraction as an "impulse away from nature" (28). Abstraction is referred to as an art movement, a noun, and a verb. " The verb abstract means to draw out of or away from. But the noun abstraction is something already drawn away from [..] it may have no apparent relation to concrete reality." (Barr 28). For me, abstraction and representation are one in the same. After the advent of abstract expressionism, we see paintings as both material and illusionary. Berry Schwabsky in his book *Landscape Painting Now* discusses how landscape will never be the same after modernism:

> "Not all modernist painting was abstract, not by a long shot- but the entire field of painting was reconfigured by the arrival of abstraction. The old genres never went away, but their significance changed— became, in fact, more abstract, more generalized. I like to put it this way: *still life* became *object, figure* became *presence,* and *landscape* became *space."* (Schwabsky 265)

After abstract expressionism we can no longer see paintings as windows, we are now confronted by the materiality of paint. All representational paintings become more generalized and open, free to experiment with process and the materiality of paint. I find my paintings in relation to near abstraction movements like cubism[11] , and also action painting[12] — where the process is the driving force, and the painting reflects these actions.

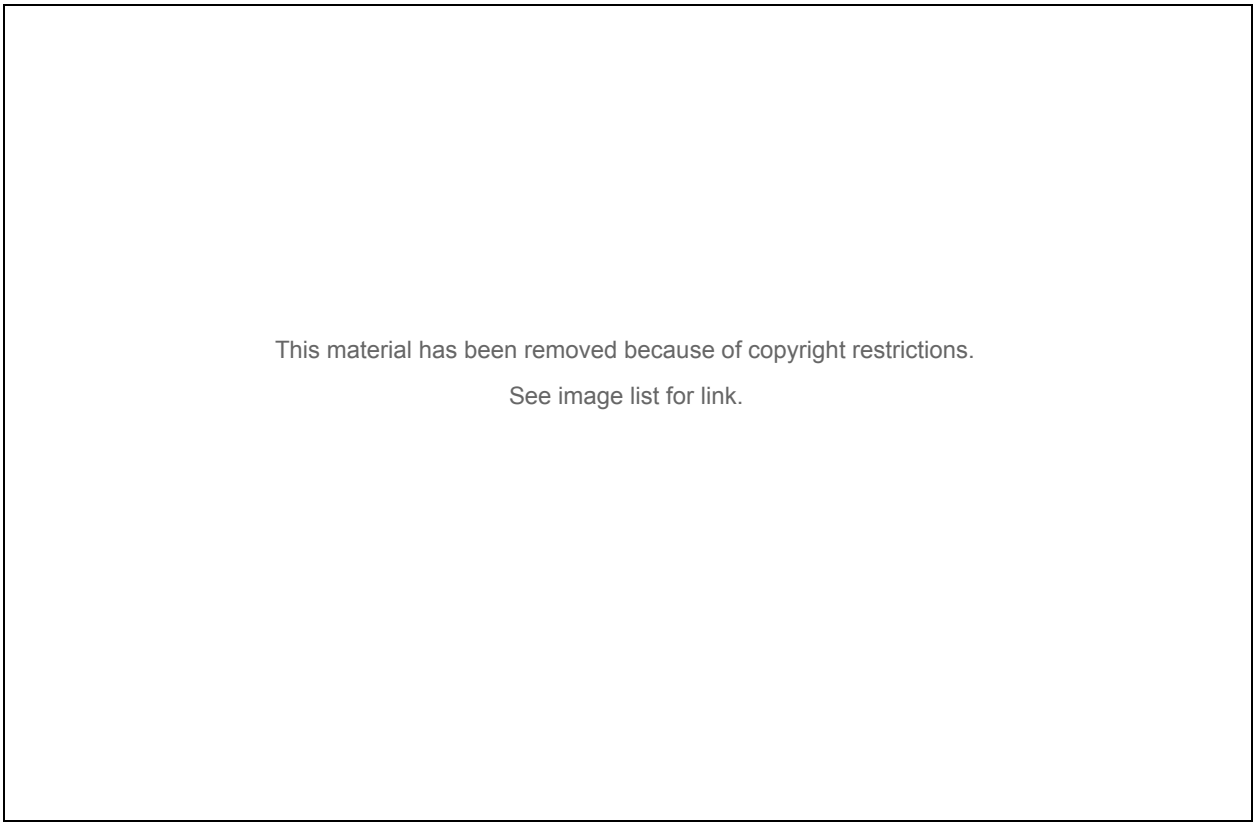


Figure 11. Cecily Brown, *Figures in a Landscape 1,* 2001, Oil on Linen, 90”x 100”

[11] Analytic cubism attempted to display multiple perspectives of an object within one canvas, this was an early attempt to rethink the process of representing an object and was the gateway to abstraction.
[12] Action Painting: a term coined by Harold Rosenberg in his 1952 essay “The American Action Painters” used to describe process based artists (Willem De Kooning) within Abstract Expressionism. “Roseberg saw artists’ individual expression-their gestures and processes-as a radical shift, a break with the history of art. According to him the painters in the United States now saw the canvas ‘as an arena in which to act’-rather than means of representation. ‘What was to go on the canvas was not a picture, but an event’.”(Kleeblatt 7)

Cecily Brown is an artist who sits in a similar space between abstraction and representation. Her paintings seem like something, but I do not have the words to describe it. In an interview with Jasper Sharp[13], Brown talks about how she breaks down the figurative elements in her paintings. She wants her paintings to "reveal themselves slowly and continuously" in order to keep the viewer engaged. I similarly break down images from the observable world, but I do it by translation from one medium into another. Brown renders photographs of people, pornography, and images of historical paintings (such as Rubens) on top of one another until there is an information overload on the canvas and the image crumbles.

Artist and writer Jan Ryden sums up the magic of painting and how paintings can flicker between referencing the world and material objects:

> "I believe paintings get a lot of their magic from the fact that we go back and forth between seeing them as images, windows into another world, and as objects and surfaces with a bodily fleshy presence in the room. [..] We flicker between the different aspects not only of the image, but also between the painting or as body or as pure content. The reason that this attracts us might be that painting is closely related to how we think: in metaphors and images that arise from our bodily experiences." (Ryden 46)

Ryden discusses the human act of painting; its ability to create an external representation of an internal one. This suggests that both painting and perception is a bodily experience. Paint becomes an abstract language of the artist's mind, which attracts viewers by displaying an expression that is beyond words or even conscious thought.

[13]Interview: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zuiaXaJ0TLI

REFLECTION

My work has changed a lot in the last couple months— from a focus on landscape and perspective to an exploration of process and abstraction. I am relying less on the reference and moving further away from any recognizable imagery.

My interests in abstraction and the material potential of paint have been grounded in contemporary abstract painters like Sillman. Sillman is also a process based artist— the construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction create meaning in her paintings. Through the act of laying colour and shape on the surface, images emerge and dissolve into abstraction. In her book *The ALL-OVER,* Sillman writes about abstract painting today and how it offers a space to discuss something not fully understood:

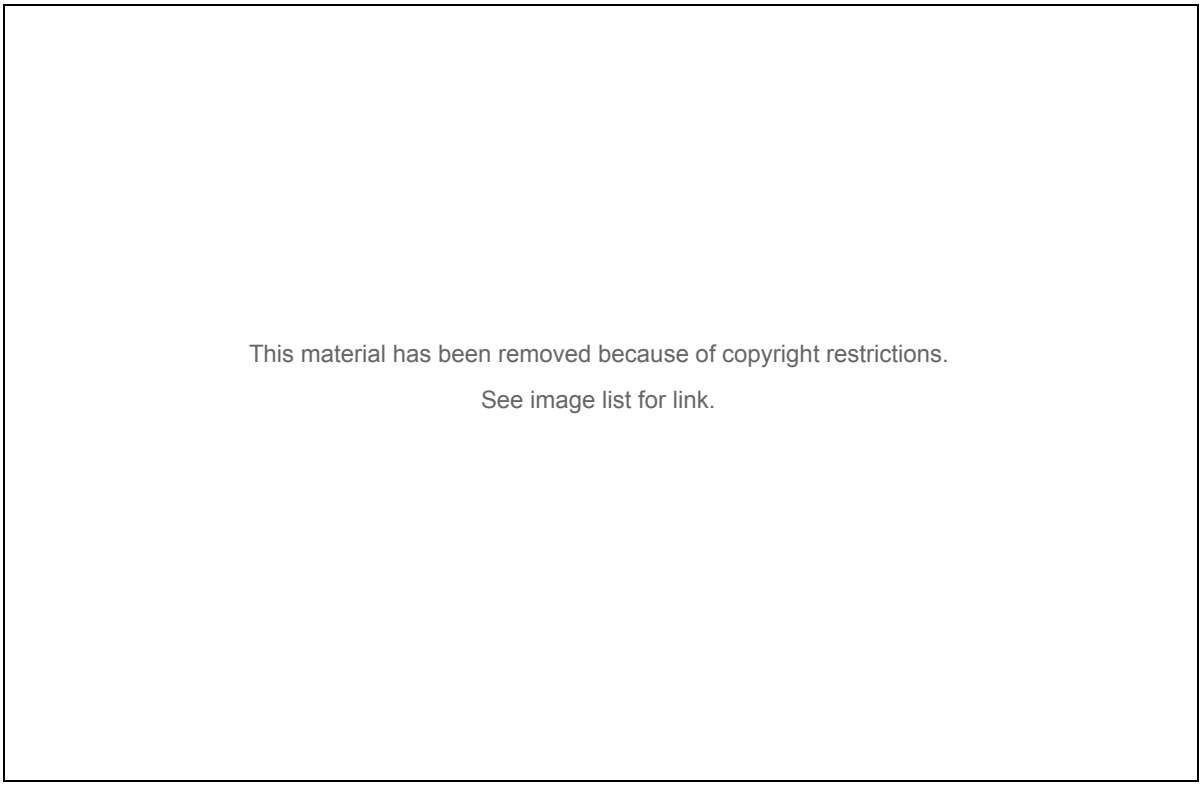


Figure 12: Amy Sillman, *The New Land,* 2005, Oil on Canvas, 77”x 66”

> “I think abstraction is very much like humour in a way, because it’s a form that resists or refuses. it refuses the preconceived, it's a kind of negation but it's also a generous condition. ‘not this, maybe that, or maybe somewhere in between’, a way to compress what is there with what is remembered, or to admit what is wrong, or confusing, or just coming into being, or not there yet, or emotional, or imaginary-- in other words, everything that is *other*. And that is where formal language of colour, shape, line, layer, scale, size is used and respected in its own terms, not as illustration.” (51)

I believe abstract painting opens up a space for uncertainty and new discoveries. When I am painting I don’t have a plan, I am not sure what will happen next and what the final outcome will look like. This process allows me to figure something out while doing it; it allows me to move out of my comfort zone and grow as a painter.

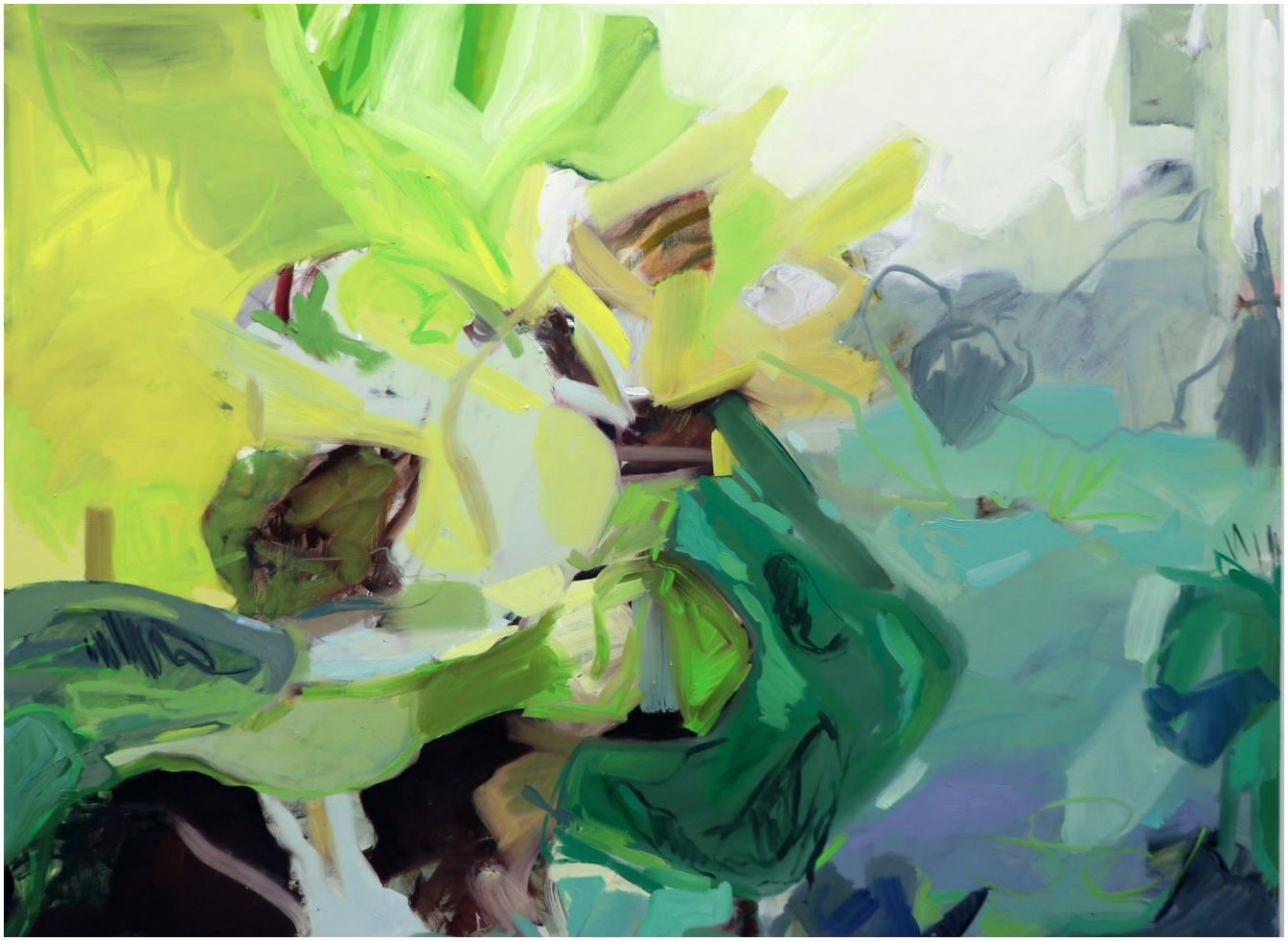

Figure 13. Maggee Day, *Doorstep View 5*, 2020, Oil on Canvas, 96”x 72”

Fig. 13 *Doorstep View 5* is an example of letting go of the references and allowing the painting to obtain its own agency. A certain brushstroke, shape, or colour, will call for a different colour, shape, or composition. The whole painting gets pushed around in this process of creating, reflecting and reacting. Sillman writes about how decisions and accidents can open up "this crazy slippage between what we do and think" which suggests that the act of painting is both physical and mental (47). Paint is both a reflection of the artist's mind, and a material that holds a degree of consciousness.

In comparison to my earlier paintings my brush-marks no longer look contrived or like it is an imitation of a previous mark. Instead, they are organic and react to the painting in the moment. These new found gestures allow the image to sit in this interesting space between abstraction and representation. Arguably the picture is more abstract because I am letting go of the reference, but the unusual brushstrokes and shapes feel more descriptive; like it is an illusion of something, but I do not have the words to describe it. Through this process of being more reactive to the painting, it is becoming more open and can be interpreted as something other than my doorstep.

On reflection, this paper showcases my journey of painting. Themes of landscape, perspective, and perception started my inquiry into process and abstraction. I would no longer consider my work in relation to landscape, but themes of perception, as well as how we see and understand space reappear in the context of abstraction. Similar to doctor P who breaks down the world into detached colours and shapes, the viewer attempts to make sense of the space and forms in my paintings. Colours and shapes push forward or move back into the picture frame, illusions of objects emerge then dissolve— the painting becomes open to interpretation, while also being respected by its own terms. I understand that my new paintings are at risk of being vague and not lining up with original questions I set out for myself, but perhaps, the nature of abstraction is to be open and "refuse the preconceived" (51). Moving forward, I plan to further my exploration on contemporary abstraction, take risks, and become more receptive to my paintings.

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