

Virtual Loops:  
Deconstructing Painting to Explore the Aesthetics of Mediation

By:

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## **Abstract**

This thesis document outlines the key concepts and research practices I undertook to explore the aesthetics of mediating digital and analog logics through materiality and painterly abstraction. It culminated in a body of work of 8 paintings and a final thesis exhibition from March 22 to April 1 at Emily Carr University of Art and Design. This work builds on my practice as an abstract painter to deconstruct painting and use a site responsive installation method to explore the optical dimensions of borders, boundaries, and surfaces to negotiate between digital and analog logics. This interest in a medial condition coupled with the impact of Covid 19 focused my observational and material research to center around the site and idea of LCD and plasma screens of personal computing devices. The screen mediates between two categories of digital and analog, and in an attempt to study communication loops between these two categories I use digital processes of laser cutters, 3D scanners, and 3D printers as well as analog processes of silicone casting and paint drying to explore different variations of transmutation. The materials I choose are based on visual effect and the relationship with transparency/translucency and opacity/obscuring. Through fusing an expanded painting practice (using flat, painterly elements) with the spatial and sculptural (using the actuality and volume of sculpture) I want to consider the digital as a state of abstraction that is constantly mediated between the analog forms of real. This research draws on the theories of the media archaeology of colour by Carolyn L Kane for my selection of colours and surfaces, Alexander Galloway's conception of the digital as an epistemological category that exists outside of personal computing devices, and Bernhard Siegert's notion of cultural techniques to frame the screen as a material technic that reinforces ideas and divisions of digital and analog, while these categories and ways of thinking have long historical precedents.



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## **Acknowledgement**

This thesis project, in its thinking and making, its materials and processes, all occurred on the traditional territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh Úxwumixw (Squamish) and səl̓ ilwətaʔ (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations.

I respect and acknowledge that I am an uninvited guest on this land.

## **Dedication**

I would like to thank my supervisor, Amber Frid-Jimenez for everything over the past two years. I'd like to thank Elizabeth McIntosh as my internal examiner and professor for the sharp critiques coupled with an openness for exploration. Thank you to Raymond Boisjoly as my external examiner, and early professor, for the deeply insightful lectures, observations and questions. Ben Reeves, my teaching mentor, for all our talks about matte, gloss, abstraction and figuration - Thank you. Thank you, so much, to Landon McKenzie and the tree fort crew! To my cohort - it's been pretty wild and weird. Our work inevitably is in conversation with each other and I'm grateful for that.

This thesis is dedicated to my family, Hugh, Eva, Christopher, and Thomas (and the East Coast cohort!).

This work is in memory and honour of Barbara McClatchie-Andrews.

## **1.0 Introduction**

In this document I will outline the material decisions and conceptual framework behind my thesis project that resulted in several bodies of experimental work, and culminated in an exhibition titled *Suture*. The work presented in this paper responds to the following research questions: If digital culture is so pervasive, why are analog and digital considered distinct categories? If digitality is now a mode of being, of socializing, the field of politics, why am I repeatedly faced with the assumption that it is somehow “less real” than analog forms? As someone who thinks through materials, how can I create work that speaks to the condition of co existing with digital and analog ways of being? How can I paint digitality? I will begin with an overview by introducing the nature of my research, my positionality in the *Background and Context* section. I will then define my key terms of the screen, loops, and mediation. After introducing these concepts I will situate my exploration through two materially distinct pieces developed over the past year. Afterwards I will introduce the concept of cultural techniques. I will introduce the four interfaces of mediation between analog and digital, and introduce the concept of digitality in opposition to analog through Alexander Galloway’s definition. I will contextualize each process of translation through a detailed description of my painting entitled *04* that explores these processes. I will then introduce the material experiments and choices that led to a form of painting that works within installations to explore the aesthetics of mediation through the possibilities and limits of vision. I will expand on why and how I focus on a range of materials that are transparent to opaque and in between, and the process of exposing or embedding as an extension of this. I will discuss my work in relation to work of other artists, such as Sarah Sze, Kerstin Brascht, Florian Meisenberg, and Ken Okiishi as a way to position myself in contemporary discourse of the interrogation of digital mediation, information flow, and fragmented dispersal in a post medium condition.

## **2.0 Background and Context**

I approach my study of mediation through a material based research project that builds off of an abstract painting practice. Most of the material inquiries and experimentation I undertook comes from an interest in deconstructing painting and using it to describe the conditions of mediation through visual and haptic qualities. In this sense a large portion of my material inquiry is based in observation and material sketches or experiments as a way to think about and study my subject of the screen (particularly LCD and plasma screens of phones and computers). My perspective comes from my identity as a white woman of first generation settler ancestry. I am able bodied and heterosexual, and know that these positions come with immense privilege. The work I discuss and present in this paper are experimental in nature and demonstrate my introduction to discourse surrounding media theory and computation while remaining positioned within a lineage of painting through my dependence on colour, composition, abstraction, and the painted mark. This project is in dialogue with a number of artists, but I have specified works by Kerstin Brätsch and Sarah Sze as expressing key properties that link to my research. As demonstrated by the summer 2020 show “.Paint” at MCA Chicago<sup>1</sup>, and the exhibition and publication of “Painting 2.0: Expression in the information Age”<sup>2</sup> published in 2015, painting’s status as a discursive arena, as a “network”, renders it ever present and hardly archaic or “dead” as claimed.<sup>3</sup> However, I do not wish to focus singularly on painting or make a claim about painting. In this case it is a tool and methodology that relies on perception and phenomenal knowledge. I do not want to speak to any form of modernist medium specificity, but place my work in Rosalind Krauss’ post medium condition, where I use practices of painting, sculpture, and installation to pose ques-

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<sup>1</sup> The exhibition can be found here: <https://mcachicago.org/Exhibitions/2020/Dot-Paint> . It features paintings by Petra Cortright, Wade Guyton, Joshua Nathanson, R.H. Quaytman, Sarah Sze, and Michael Williams.

<sup>2</sup> The anthology is here: <https://brooklynrail.org/2016/02/artseen/painting-20-expression-in-the-information-age>

<sup>3</sup> I am referring to David Joselit’s essay “Painting beside Itself” as well as Achim Hochdorfer’s essay “How the World Came in” where he names painting as a discursive arena.

tions about digital mediation. This shift from painting on canvas into an expanded field echos Sarah Sze's shift from painting into sculpture in order to better address her questions. The title of this thesis, *Virtual Loops* is a reference to my area of study, as well as a description of the work I have produced. The work I make is a virtual loop of material transformations in that it is almost a fully circular process of translation, but not quite. It is also a reference to the predominant use of the term virtual to describe digital spaces online.<sup>4</sup> The experimentation I undertake operates in this space of nearly arriving at a totality, but remaining in a propositional space, a virtual framework. In being virtual, it is also medial. My intention with this paper is to provide the context and support for the artwork I have made, and I invite the reader to think through these questions with me.

### **3.0 Key Terms**

In the following three sections I will define and outline my key terms and areas of study. I will begin with the screen, then loops (cybernetic feedback loops), and digital as a way to ground my subject of study.

#### **3.1 Screen**

In this section I will outline how I define the screen and the relationship I make between the frame of the screen and that of the canvas/image space. My research considers the site of the screen as a liminal space and discursive function. What this

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<sup>4</sup> Anne Friedberg's book *The Virtual Window* explores the etymology of the term virtuality as it related to the development of optical devices. To use the term virtual was (and is still) used to refer to a category of difference. For example, a microscopic or prismatic image were virtual in the way they translated a form from one thing into another version of itself. They had a parallel meaning. She claims that to operate virtually, where meaning is transformed into another form, is also to operate metaphorically. N. Katherine Hayles has described virtuality in her book *How we Became Post Human* as "the cultural perception that material objects are interpenetrated by information patterns" (13). Media Theorist Giuliana Bruno asks the question, in addressing her idea of virtuality, "In the age of virtuality, with its rapidly changing materials and media, what role can materiality have? Can we refashion a new form of materiality in our new age?". Artist Cecile B. Evans addresses the misuse of the term virtuality as it is applied to anything happening in an internet-like space. I have researched and thought about virtuality, and I think that most art operates in a virtual space, one that is a suspended, metaphoric moment.

means is that the screen is the merging place of simulation and actual, a site that is both and neither simultaneously. It is not simply an aesthetic object nor is it a neutral tool. It is an interface, a series of actions and processes in digital simulation, while also operating as a reflective flat surface.<sup>5</sup> I define the screen as the square or rectangular surface that emits light and is controlled by the user via hands, face, thumbs, or other bodily appendages - digits. I intentionally create this definition of the screen as quite open. The canvas onto which a painter creates a painting is also a form of screen, as is a large movie screen, a television screen, or a window screen.<sup>6</sup> In her book *The Virtual Window* Anne Friedberg charts a history of renaissance painting (Leon Baptista Alberti's conception of the painting as a window) through the development of projection and cinema, into the current paradigm of the computer screen. She links the historical site of the canvas to the computer screen to address how the virtual spaces of images are defined as such through the device of framing. Friedberg claims the frame is used to defined categories of ontology, and delineates between actual and virtual. This is distinct from my approach to the screen as the boundary between digital and analog sequences. For the purposes of my research I am not concerned with virtuality, but digitality. What is outside the screen, and what is inside the screen, are separated through ontologies of digital and analog. By ontology I mean a term to describe qualities ascribed to a certain domain of knowledge. I am interested in the circular loop of communication between analog and digital and the impacts and possibilities of translations occurring here. The screen, in summary, is itself a medial space that is the meeting place of both analog and digital, and I will expand further on this in the later section on cultural techniques.

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<sup>5</sup> "Actions and processes in digital simulation" is the definition of screen interface from Alexander Galloway's book *The Interface Effect*.

<sup>6</sup> The comparison to the surface of painting acting like a screen, or window, is a very old discussion. I started thinking about the painting surface this way after Jaqueline Humphries spoke of her work this way. She says, in introducing her work to an audience at Aspen art museum, "I'm less interested in harnessing technology as a means to make painting, or changing painting through technology... but in how technology has changed me. How computers have changed bodies. And so by reimagining painting as a technological interface I can think of painting as a screen upon which anything can be projected".



### 3.2 Loop

The concept and motif of the loop is a recurrent theme in my body of graduate work. This loop I am describing is the cybernetic feedback loop between person and device, a closed circuit of information that circles from the screen, into the viewer, and back. To put it very briefly, cybernetics is a theoretical turn from 1948 that restructured systems through the lens of information flow and order. Cybernetic systems depend upon feedback loops to continually adjust to achieve a state of order, and importantly it equates living organisms with machines all under the guise of information. Cybernetics is now referred to as control or systems theory. Carolyn L. Kane, in her book on the media archaeology of colour called *Chromatic Algorithms: Synthetic Color, Computer Art, and Aesthetics after Code*, notes that “feedback loops between culture and computation create a co-evolutionary dynamic in which computational media and humans mutually modify, influence, and help to constitute one another.” This can become a troubling dynamic when things like employment and radicalization are involved and impacted through this loop. Online hate speech begins in a simulated space and subsequently emerges into the non simulated space of the analog. Kane goes on to say in a separate chapter, “tele-vision is a cybernetic system; instantiated through human-machine feedback loops that fuse particular kinds of signal processing with subjective perception”. In other words, cybernetic systems combine human and machine processes. Ana Tiexiera Pinto is critical of cybernetic systems and the loop of information. She says, “Although feedback and dialectics represent motion in similar ways, cybernetics is an integrated model, while dialectical materialism is an antagonistic one: dialectics implies a fundamental tension, and an unresolved antagonism; while feed-back knows no outside or contradiction, only perpetual iteration.” This looping, recursive effect only offers perpetual iteration rather than a possibility of resistance outside of itself.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> She specifically says the possibility of a communist resistance given its dialectical structure.

While the screen operates as a threshold that separates categories of digital and analog it is also an opening that allows these two systems to be intricately connected in a continuous loop, one influencing the other as co emergent categories and each perpetually influencing the other. Through working with processes that cycle from handmade, into image, into a laser engraving back into image, I explore the transmutations of materiality as a way to reflect on this looping condition. I will further elaborate on processes of translation in the section on the four interfaces and in relation to a work that explores these processes as they relate to physicality and movement.

### 3.3 Digital

While the digital is typically associated with computers and based on Boolean logic and binary code, it is also a philosophical position and a mode of describing forms of mediation. Most importantly, digital is characterized as an immaterial other that is weightless, illusive, and an ulterior version of reality. One of the claims I am putting forth in my thesis project is that digital is a very material condition that manifests psychically and socially, and is built upon resource extraction and labour.<sup>8</sup> It influences physicality as well as economic, social, environmental, and political. Alexander Galloway explores digitality in a manner that considers it outside of computational devices and this characterization of immateriality. Galloway discusses the social and political aspects of digital systems through analogies of precomputational forms of information systems that rely on discrete units like alphabets and mosaics. For physicists, the natural world is ordered in a digital structure of calculable and organized units. What is important about digitality is 1) the quality of being abstract and 2) the homogenization of abstracted units. Analog forms, in contrast, are defined through heterogeneity.

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<sup>8</sup> Evan Calder Williams points out in his book *Shard Cinema*, Hollywood blockbusters recreate the myth between analog nostalgia and the immaterial technologies that will accelerate and change the material conditions towards a better global world. He is very critical of this, pointing out that these technologies are built by brutal labour.

To put it simply, digital modes of mediation depend on sameness, and analog modes of mediation depend on difference, but always remaining in the real. Alexander Galloway says the following to this point,

*(...) the digital is the site of contemporary power. The digital is where capital exploits labour. The digital organizes technologies, bodies, and societies. But, the digital means something else too. The digital is the mechanism of negation, or the confrontation of the two, of breaking with the present state of affairs. Indeed, the digital is the site of the event, and thus of a political confrontation more generally. So, digital is both a term to describe the contemporary infrastructure of power, but also a term of art meaning “cut” or distinction. In this way, the digital is both the site, and the stake, in any contemporary struggle, as Stuart Hall once said about popular culture. It is time to turn our attention back to the digital, not at the expense of real analogicity, but as a co-equal branch. And here we may investigate what Kathrine Mckittrick and Alexander G. Weheliye have called “the heavy waves and vibrations”, but also the wicked mathematics of contemporary life, in both body and mind.*

The digital is a complex system of processes, but also the infrastructure of the internet and therefore of socialization, connection, employment, and politics. As someone who grew up with the growth of digital personal computing technologies, I am sensitive to the ways in which my own relationships have altered because of these conditions, and the extent to which screens are actors in choreographing movement based around these digital systems.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Another text of Galloway that informs my thinking here is *The Exploit*, written with Eugene Thacker.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, the 2020 performance “Google Maps Hack” by artist Simon Weckert here: <http://www.simonweckert.com/googlemapshacks.html>. By carrying a wagon full of cellphones, he disrupts and changes traffic flows. Another instance of this during the pandemic, is the placement of phones in trees so that amazon drivers could beat competition with a faster connection. By placing the phone in trees, it is closer to the dispatch center and receives the signal faster than others. See here: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-09-01/amazon-drivers-arehanging-smartphones-in-trees-to-get-more-work>.



Fig.1 *Sequence*, synthetic polymer paint, gesso on canvas. 2020. 52 x 74 ".





Fig.2 01. acrylic, synthetic polymer paint, silicone, organza, bolts, nuts, light, shadows. 2020. 11 x 6".





Fig.3, detail 01. acrylic, synthetic polymer paint, silicone, organza, bolts, nuts, light, shadows. 2020.



Fig.4 *Sequence*, Installation view. 2020.

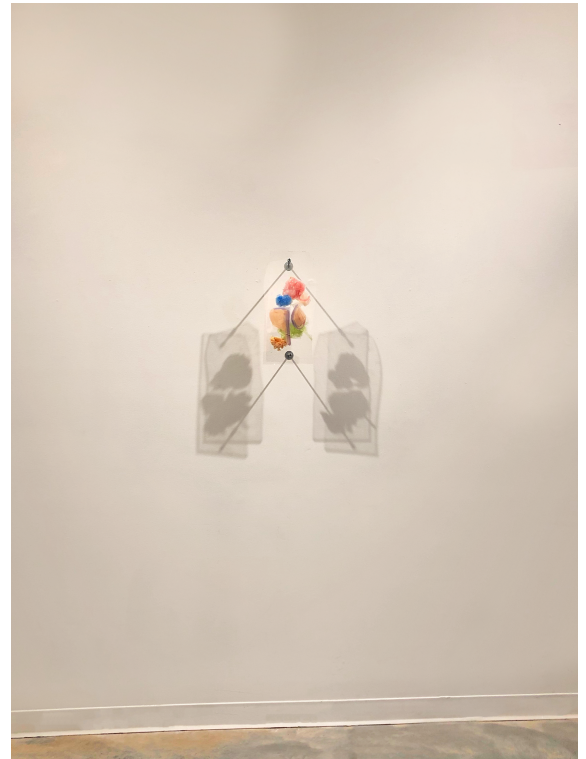


Fig.5 *01*, Installation view. 2020.

#### **4. Surface as Screen**

To now bring the concepts of loops, digital, and screen, into context with my material practice, I will outline the progression of working on canvas into an expanded field through discussing two works. I will demonstrate how I conceive of the canvas surface as one that explores fragmentation, transparency, layering, and display techniques that use the painted surface as a form of screen. The first work on canvas titled “Sequence” (Fig. 1) shows exposed raw canvas, a red stained rectangular form with rounded edges in the centre, clear acrylic medium mixed with light blue in some areas, with large shards of gesso applied on top. The order of applying the paint reverses the typical layering process that a painting undergoes (first is gesso, then thin layers, and lastly the thickest). This work explores the porous quality of the

canvas in relation to the smooth painted surface, while depicting a minimal and abstracted scene of flattened space and distorted forms. It is in conversation with the history of abstraction in painting, but it arises out of an interest in depicting my own condition of abstraction within digital systems as one of continuous fragmentation.<sup>11</sup> The second piece title “01” (fig. 2) from November 2020 consists of two pieces of broken plexi that are mounted to the wall and held together with bolts and nuts. In between them are thin sheets of crumpled, coloured silicone. The forward (frontal) piece of plexi is painted on the front and back of the piece with matte paint. This work plays with a process of layering much like the painting on canvas, however it does so in space with constituent elements. It is a deconstruction that suspends itself with discreet parts that make up the whole. The screen of the painting is no longer a flat projected space; it has become a voluminous mass, a threshold to pass through. The balls of silicone are like paint: they are sandwiched between transparent plexi and so appear to defy the laws of gravity. It also alludes to image compression, and the compression of space more broadly. This kind of gravitational suspension is like the diagetic spaces in paintings that disobey the physical laws of the rooms that their viewers inhabit. The coloured masses themselves still react to pressure, and the light cast on them creates multiple shadows and shine. This is exemplified as the lighting travels through the painting, and the shadows on the wall indicate and highlight this other side. The shadows are like echoes and reflections. This piece unfolds the operations of seeing in screens; passing through layers at the speed of light, rendered into small shards and pieces in transparent trails of data and debris.

## **5. Cultural Techniques**

Bernhard Siegert's book *Cultural Techniques: Grids, Filters, Doors, and Other Articulations of the Real* is a series of essays that position Siegert's approach to media theory and technology generally.

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<sup>11</sup> The artist Tomashi Jackson has informed my thinking around the ability for abstraction to express new ways of communicating urgent and complex ideas. She deliberately co-prioritizes form and content.



The final chapter of the book on doors has been particularly influential for his discussion on doors, openings, closings, and cybernetic systems. He says,

Doors and door sills are not only formal attributes of Western architecture, they are also architectural media that function as cultural techniques because they operate the primordial difference of architecture—that between inside and outside. At the same time they reflect this difference and thereby establish a system comprised of opening and closing operations. In contrast to the “mute” closedness of the nonarticulated wall, Georg Simmel wrote, the closed door is both closed and the sign of this closedness. The door emphasizes the unity of the difference between inside and outside, since “it shapes the possibility of closure against the backdrop of the possibility of opening and keeps virtually present both possibilities.”

This is essentially a claim that the material conditions of culture create the ideological basis of categories and divisions. Conditions of being, or ontologies, are not relegated to philosophical idealism but are manifested and created through the cultural technics that create them. The screen is a cultural technique of mediation, a threshold of encounter that necessarily separates and divides.

The work and writing of artist Raymond Boisjoly has informed my approach to thinking about about screens and mediation more generally. Boisjoly’s practice utilizes scanners, screens, photocopiers along with language to think about cultural propriety and general aspects of mediation. Boisjoly curated an exhibition at the Polygon Gallery in North Vancouver with artists Scott Benesiinaabandan, Tricia Livingston, Mike Macdonald, Karthik Pandian, Postcommodity, and Krista Belle Stewart. The artists in the exhibition identify as indigenous and all consider the impact of mediation on the understanding of history and experience. Boisjoly says of screens in the exhibition catalogue,

Screens carry information from one place to another and function as an interface gesturing to a now knowable and somewhat contained entity. Our knowledge of the world is transformed by our sensory apparatus. To pass through this apparatus—in our encounter with a world that exceeds it—articulates the mutable threshold of experience. Art is a way to exercise and renew our capacity to reflexively experience phenomena that have become

habitual or that seem to function transparently. To knowingly mediate is to deliberately consider the ways knowledge or understanding may be produced, accessed or communicated. The challenge is in foregrounding these processes so as to understand them as a general condition of knowledge. Differing mediations bring differing encounters with what may be known. In all of these works, an encounter, with very real stakes, is staged.

The artists in the exhibition consider the multiples ways in which various knowledges are produced through mediation; the medial becomes a condition not simply through the screen but a method of thinking through encounter. The exhibition thought specifically through encounter, mediation, and difference as an experience of indigeneity in Canada, the United States, and globally. Mediation is not limited to the screen, in fact it is simply acknowledging the constant negotiations of such encounters. As Boisjoly mentions, our knowledge of the world is transformed through our sensory apparatus. What I mean by mediation is similar to what Boisjoly describes, as passing through an apparatus. Screens of phones and computers are a form of mediated encounter that presents the world in a digital form, flattened by the glass surface of the monitor and plasma screens. It is but one condition of mediation amongst many, a subset within this general condition of knowledge.

## 6.0 The Four Interfaces

I will now define digital and analog through their relationships to one another and how they translate between each other. I will then contextualize these processes in my work through discussing the painting *04*. The relationships between analog and digital categories can be defined through the four interactions below.



### **The Four Interfaces**

**D → D    Transcoding**

**A → A    Transduction**

**A → D    Sampling**

**D → A    Interpolation**

The forms of material research I have undertaken explore all of these interfaces, but I am interested specifically in sampling (an analog into a digital process) and interpolation (digital into analog) as a way to think through the loop I mentioned in the introduction. The works I produce are like screens, palimpsests that record these translated processes. The definition of Interpolation by Miriam Webster's dictionary is "to alter or corrupt, using new or foreign matter; to insert between other things or parts". In mathematics it involves estimating unknown values between known values. This then implies that digitality is an interruption or insertion into the analog. The definition of sampling is "a portion, a part, a fraction, of a whole group". One piece that introduces all four of these modes of translation is the piece titled *04*, both in the processes I used to create the piece and the final aesthetics of the work. I used processes of silicone pouring and casting, image manipulation, painting, and laser cutting as forms that experiment with the circulation of media through these distinct interfaces, all of which particularly centred around capturing or recording motion and movement. The painting is made up of 4 pieces that were created independently and then assembled together. I will first describe the piece as a whole, and then each unit independently. The sections are separated based on the optical qualities of the media I have selected and the conceptual importance of their surface quality. More generally I have not wanted to use images or representative strategies, but choose to work with optics, effects, surfaces, and appearances. This is in part informed by the work at the Studio for Extensive Aesthetics. My graduate supervisor and director of the SEA Amber Frid-Jimenez works with artificial neural networks to critique the algorithmic structure and the dataset on which the ANN was trained.<sup>12</sup> The projects are realized in material forms that necessarily think through the translation processes from the digital into analog modes. By participating in the creation of datasets and witnessing the output of the neural network, it is clear that artificial in-

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<sup>12</sup> See, for example, the piece "Madame Bovary" at <https://amberfj.com/projects/a-dream-and-a-drive/>. Gustave Flaubert's book is a classical piece of feminist literature. The book was trained with Google's language model, and the results were Madame Bovary turning into a drug addict, having sex and dying multiple times. It is clear from the results how the datasets around women are reinscribed into google models to

telligence imitates. It creates a surface to look like the image or language it has been given, producing the effect of similarity.

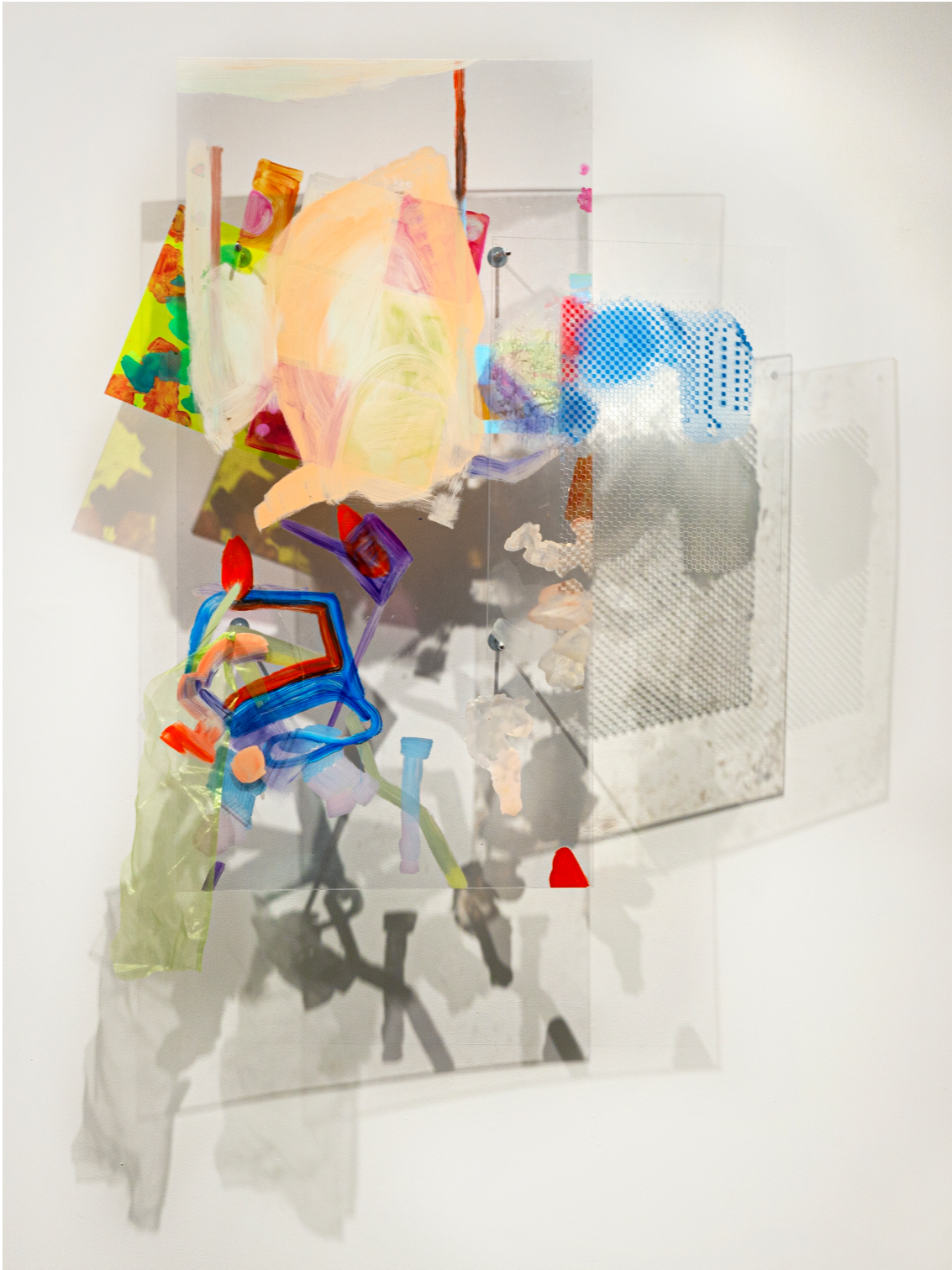


Fig. 6, 04, front view. organza, bolt, coloured shadow, synthetic poly-mer, shadows. 2020. 42 x 38".

## **7.0 Description of Work**

My methodology combines a material practice with an interest in systems of knowledge. I am interested in structures that characterize differing knowledge systems, and attempt to complicate them using materials. This is ultimately to reveal the perceptual qualities and capabilities of power in these systems. The piece titled *04* (fig. 6) explores material viscosity, shadow, layering and reflectivity as elements to explore the material translations of analog and digital systems. The layering and optical strategies explore the multiple registers in which screens define modes of visibility. The piece is made of transparent and coloured plexiglass, paint, silicone, fabric, and illuminated with two spotlights.<sup>13</sup> It is mounted to a white wall with threaded steel rods and secured with small steel bolts. Each sheet of acrylic is painted on the front and back. The brush marks on the front are very matte and absorb the light, while the strokes on the back are flattened as they are seen through the shiny acrylic surface. The marks are sparse and convey movement rather than a mimetic representation. Blob-like pieces of silicone are inserted between each sheet of acrylic. The fabric is also inserted between two sheets, but pushes out through the hole from which the steel rod is emerging. It is both flattened in the plexi and activated in space. The lighting casts two shadows on the white wall. The shadows are from the positive paint marks and silicone objects (the negative space is the transparent surface). The shadows are not only from the lack of light passing through the object, but are also coloured light from the yellow acrylic and some of the paint marks. In this way there are two kinds of shadows; a lack of light and a filtering of light. On the right, one sheet of acrylic has been cut into, forming a grid-like pattern of holes. The holes have blue and red silicone pushed through them. Each sheet is parallel to the wall, except for the one with holes in it. This piece is skewed in relation to the wall. The plexi orientation influences the shape of the shadows, so in the case of the skewed piece the shadow image is distorted. Some of the rectangular shapes were oriented to be parallel with the floor, while others were hung as orthogonal to the floor.

<sup>13</sup> Other painters who have used transparent acrylic as their substrate include the large abstractions of Nina Roos, the Mylar paintings of Kerstin Brätsch, the moulded sculptural pieces of Rachel Rossin.



The rectangular shape of these pieces allude to the space of images, moving and still, through the omnipresence of the shape of the frame (a rectangle). This piece was first made in separate parts, and then assembled using the already painted plexi to form an image. Each sheet of acrylic was painted in a circular way. This means that instead of painting on a canvas, where I step in to paint, and step back to look, I painted in a circle, responding to my own gesture and colour from each side, as a way to work within the loops (which I discussed in section 3.2). The brushwork was applied via immediate gestures, that were fast and direct. I layered the acrylic sheets, keeping distance and space between them. This work, as are all the works in this series, are very physical in that they require the movement of the viewer/participant, and also chart my own physicality in making and interacting with the materials. The gestures in the pieces convey many motions, and it charts and demonstrates my movement through and with the materials. This piece is part of a series of works with acrylic titled “1 + 2”.



Fig. 7, 1 + 2, Installation view. 2020.

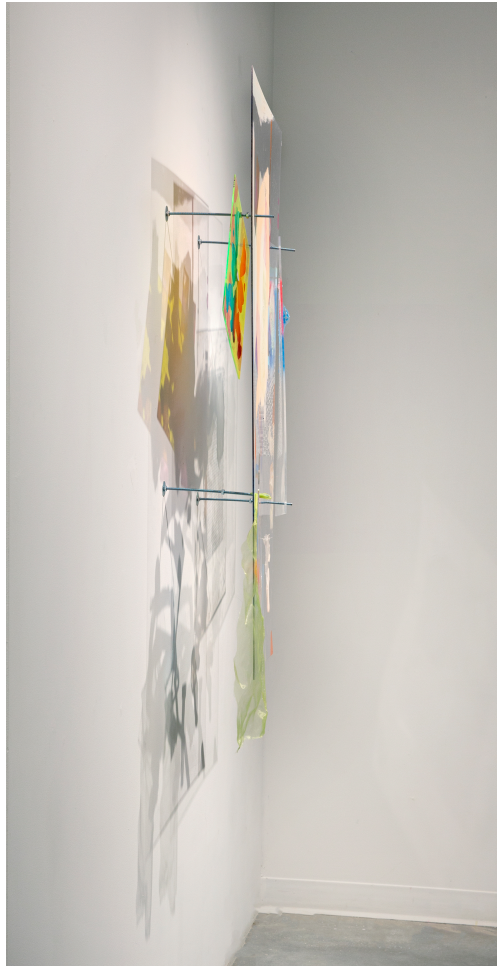


Fig.8, 04, side. acrylic, synthetic polymer paint, silicone, organza, bolts, nuts, light, shadows.



Fig. 9, 1 + 2, Installation view. From left to right: 02, Processing, 04. 2020.



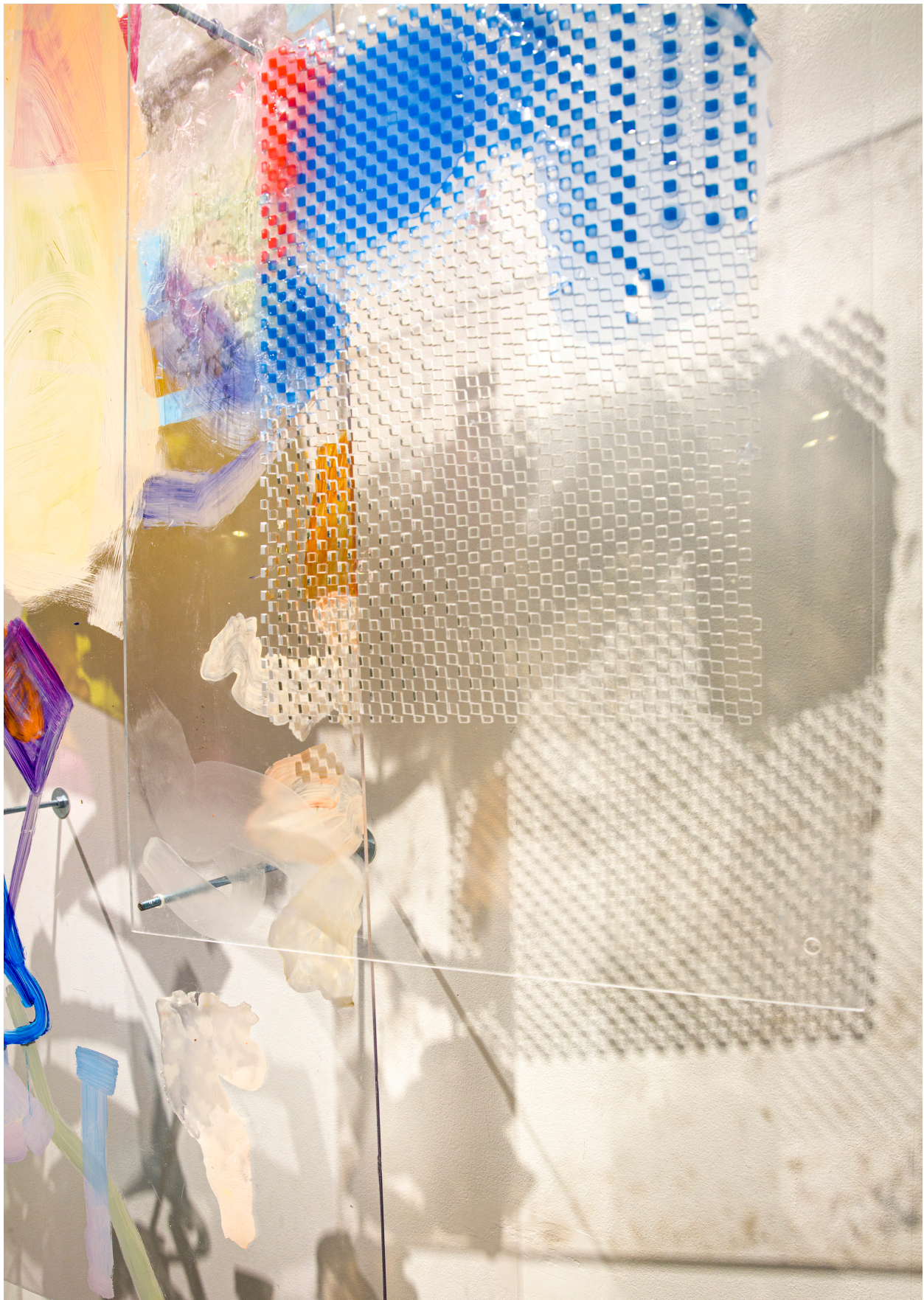


Fig.10, **04**, detail. Laser cut acrylic, silicone, synthetic polymer, shadows. 2020.



## 7.1 Iridescence

The first component of *04* I will discuss is a piece of clear acrylic that I laser cut and then pushed silicone through the engraved openings. I selected a stock colour in photoshop called “Iridescence 04”. Iridescence is a surface quality that changes based on the position of looking, and is a feature of camouflage in animals, plants, and minerals. It is a reflective surface that obscures the depth, volume, and boundary of itself. The quality of multiplicity of colour cannot be isolated or captured on camera. The figure to ground relationship is obscured, and the surface indicates a flattening despite the actual volume of depth. An iridescent surface implies movement as a necessary condition for its activation, while also acting as a surface that questions the abilities of vision as the primary perceptual sense of acquiring knowledge. Artist and philosopher Tavi Meraud contends of iridescence as a surface that emphasizes the multiplicity of reality. In their piece “Iridescence and intimacies”, they outline the philosophical histories that led to this study of surface (among them are those of Martin Heidegger and Immanuel Kant), and the way in which iridescence is a mode that is not a boundary, but a site of “intractable multiplicities”<sup>14</sup>. For Meraud, the surface quality is the suspension of the appearance and reality distinction. They write, “My work eschews anchoring itself to a specific ideology, but rather is itself an inquiry into the conditions of the possibility of even recognizing one; of the threshold between appearance and reality.”<sup>15</sup> Because of its particular surface quality, iridescence became a stand in for movement. It also acts as an opening, an area that expresses this intractable multiplicity, a kind of technique to describe and explain screens not as boundaries but openings; passageways. Iridescence became a motif and quality that recurs in my silicone casting and painting. In photoshop, the stock images of iridescence are created with pastel tones, and none of them, once converted into black and white, had a differing value range. After translating all of them into black and white, they

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<sup>14</sup> See e-flux article here: <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/61/60995/iridescence-intimacies/>

<sup>15</sup> See their website: <https://tavimeraud.com/about>

became grey monochromes. Indeed, without algorithmic colour, they became formless. After changing the image into black and white, I converted it into a pixelated pattern that rendered the pixels/holes just large enough to be lasercut into a piece of 1/4 inch thick clear acrylic. This process did not work directly with code but still operated as digital translation. I then made the rasterized image into a vector file and used the laser cutter to engrave the holes I had made to push silicone through them. The industrial application of the silicone is used for prosthetic limbs and sex toys, as it's an uncanny replica of flesh. In this sense I saw a relation to digital discretization of units as it is used to create parts of a body, small elements taken out of a whole. It's used in other household items like shampoo, shaving cream, and contact lenses, and so it's proximity to the body through mass production also speaks to the dependence on membranes and surface as a porous boundary. Additionally, this material is conceptually relevant to personal computing screens and devices because of its relationship to silicon, a metal that is used for computer chips. I mixed colours for the silicone into a red and blue (I will elaborate on colour choices later in the document), then poured it and pushed the acrylic into the viscous puddle of silicone. The voluminous material formed itself through the holes. The piece as a unit is an inquiry into voluminous matter that is moulded and shaped by the mechanic thresholds, and thresholds themselves as containers. This motion of pushing a substance through a mechanized and patterned substrate was a recurring strategy to create units of dried paint and silicone objects that questioned the quality of indirect gestures. The pushing of wet media creates a gesture of pressure that records motion while simultaneously erasing any sense of immediate mark. The imprint that remained was simply a formation of pattern through forceful movement; the motion of compression.



Fig. 11, **04**, detail: organza, bolt, coloured shadow, synthetic polymer.

## 7.2 Opacity and Transparency

Opacity and transparency are terms to describe optics of materials, but they are equally applied to conditions of political visibility. In this section I will discuss my approach to these concepts through material and conceptual means. The main unit of 04 is a sheet of transparent acrylic onto which I painted gestural, abstracted forms on the front and back. The transparent boundary mediates the immediacy of the marks; the frontal brush marks were direct, while on the back they were flattened. The acrylic was a way to explore this dynamic of mediated space, but it was also an inquiry into optics. Transparency in physics is the quality of light passing through a solid object or mass, and is typically liquid. Glass is a liquid even when it is perceived as solid. It is also, philosophically speaking, the ethical idea that to be transparent is to reveal everything and hold no secrets. To be transparent, however, still requires mediation. There is never a free exchange of information and flow, but it is always staged through an encounter that allows it to be so. The use of shadows emphasize the voluminous quality of the transparent substrate and highlights that it is a method of representation.<sup>16</sup> In a short book/manifesto entitled *The Transparency Society*, Byung Chul Han considers the promise of transparency as a myth, one that essentially allows a society of control. While I do not agree with Han's claim that opacity is required to form trusting relationships (total openness, to Han, actually signals a lack of trust), as I believe transparency in organizations and institutions are absolutely necessary, I do think that it is important to complicate and consider what is meant by transparency today with so much of contemporary life conducted in digitality, through screens. I agree with the mandate of the copyleft to share and disseminate information, and I think that this ability and idea points to the quality of digital media as being transparent, or having the ability to be so. For this reason the theme of capturing, recording, and identifying transparency comes up repeatedly in the forms of substrates that I select and work with as ways of thinking about modes of communication in digital infrastructures.

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<sup>16</sup> The use of shadows and projections in arts and culture has a long history. The magic lantern, light projection in cinema, and then the distinctly long and ominous shadows of the Surrealists. Lazlo Moholy Nagy's light projections onto his kinetic sculptures. Other more contemporary artists who have worked with the shadows are the white paintings by Robert Rauschenberg, Albert Oehlen, Rachel Rossin, David Bachelor.

This is an area of study that I will continue past this graduate project, as I have found it to be rich and too large a scope for this graduate project. Because I am working in the discipline of painting and optics for this body of research, I used qualities of transparency, translucency, opacity, and obscuring as modes to think through visual mediation as it relates to screens and additive vs subtractive colour systems. The transparency of the acrylic created the feeling of floating and weightless fragments of paint, occupying space in a suspended moment.<sup>17</sup> The painting becomes a moment in space rather than a singular constructed image. Carolyn L Kane elaborates on how opacity and transparency pertain to different categories of colour mixing. She says,

Opacity and transparency then concern two modes of mediation that, in their modern form, appear as “additive” and “subtractive” color systems. Additive color systems, such as television sets, rainbows, neon signs, and computer displays, generate and emit light. The primary colors of an additive system are red, green, and blue. When these primaries are combined, they produce transparent white light. In contrast, subtractive color systems like paintings, books, apples, and cars, are chemically based color systems that reflect color from a material substrate.<sup>18</sup>

By using transparent sheets with light and shadow I am also referencing imaging processes of x-ray and infrared imaging. With using colour and lighting I am attempting to describe conditions of seeing that technological imaging devices define. On this point, Kane postulates two different modes of perception: the optical and the algorithmic. She says,

The former is rooted in the hegemony of the eye and the logos of vision, while the latter derives from post–World War II research in digital computing, cybernetics, and automated military weapons. As models, the optic and the

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<sup>17</sup> This is also a reference to Duchamp’s *The Large Glass*, otherwise called *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors Even*.

<sup>18</sup> Kane discusses the qualities of opacity and transparency beginning from the aristotelian and platonic conceptions of colour, and more generally to the division between subjective and objective colour systems.



algorithmic are metaphors, which means they are not hard-and-fast ways of dividing the world, but rather interpretive matrixes used to make sense of it, and in particular, of the emerging relationships between culture and information technology.” She goes on to say, “whether optical or algorithmic, color is not exclusively about vision. Rather, it is a system of control used to manage and discipline perception and thus reality. And perception, as I note in the introduction, necessarily involves a field of forces and strategies—power and knowledge relations—that extend beyond any single viewer, physical technology, or image-artifact. Colour is part visible and part invisible and in order to see how we see, we must consider how these boundaries have shifted in recent decades and the ways in which these changes pose a threat to, and yet also serve as an extension of, models of vision that have been central to Western power, culture, and ideology for hundreds of years.

Kane’s identification of colour as a range between two systems that represent strategies of visualization (optical and subtractive - algorithmic and additive) become visual stand ins for negotiating between digital and analog logics in the work I have produced. Even further to this, these paintings think about depth, space, light, colour and material as a way to think about vision through techniques of mediation.

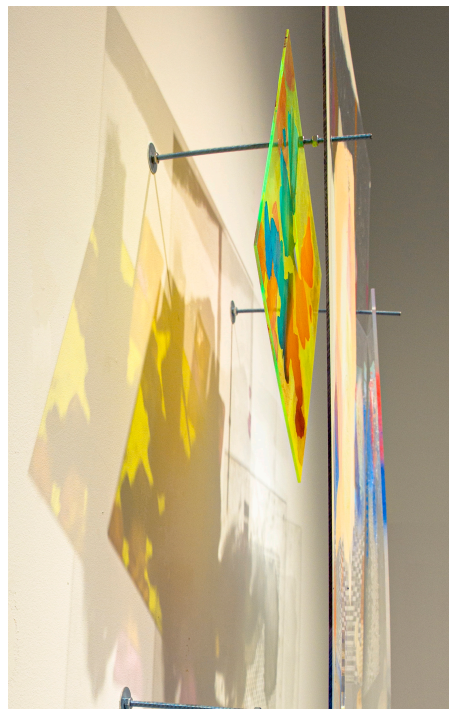


Fig.12 04, side. acrylic, synthetic polymer paint, silicone, organza, bolts, nuts, light, shadows.

### 7.3 Colour

Colour is a system of knowledge that is relational and subjective. The history and development of synthetic and organic colours are linked to technological advancements that altered perceptual capabilities of seeing and visualizing. My thesis work makes reference to these histories as a way to access colour as a system of understanding. I used clear acrylic to make the piece 04, but an additional feature of acrylic is the production of neon tinted sheets of acrylic. In these piece my colour palette combine qualities of light and luminescence, along with painted colour that shifts and changes with lighting conditions. As a way to reference synthetic colours I use acrylic filters of neon and reference the subtractive RGB colour based model. I use Smalt hue as a pigment that comes from the smelting of glass and a way to reference the Dutch Republic's blue painted ceramic. I studied this period of art history and was interested in how the visual culture (a term by Svetlana Alpers) shifted due to new optical instruments of telescopes and microscopes. To return to Raymond Boisjoly's quotation, the

apparatus' of optics shifted the conditions of knowledge. To put it another way, The devices used to visualize the microscopic and the telescopic transported forms of seeing and understanding within that cultural logic. It was also around this time, with the use of optical devices, that the term "virtual" emerged.<sup>19</sup> The other blue I use is Prussian blue hue, as the blue that was first used for x rays, and one of the first blues to be synthetically produced. Pyrrole Red is a bright tone that complements the blue, but it is also a reference to the production of automotive colours and mass production of colours. The Flashe paint is finished matte, and is a very pale and subdued counterpoint to the neon colours that emit light. The flashe absorbs light, and this palette I derived from the inside of a mouth. All of the colours I used almost directly from the tube as a way to speak to synthetically produced colours that are fully chromatic and bright. The colours have historical references but they also react together as a compositional element of abstract painting, where each mark and colour carves out its own space and frequency.

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<sup>19</sup> This Etymology is taken from Anne Friedberg.

## **8.0 Surface as Boundary**

I use transparent acrylic, fabric, and dried paint as a way to work around and through a form of boundary or border. This is also informed by the changes brought about from reducing the spread of Covid-19. The work I have made over the program inevitably responds to these conditions. With the onset of Covid-19, the awareness of surfaces became an acute concern, as they were dangerous in their capacity to contain traces of viral forms. This attentiveness to surface was a very important shift in the work I was making as I had already been focusing on qualities of iridescence and transparency (techniques of obscuring or translucency, allowing and disallowing vision to pass through), viscosity and virtuality (analog and digital, the latter manifesting through shadows and reflections, the former through paint and painted objects), and enclosure vs permeability (how closed or open the works were in relation to the spaces of exhibition) as a way to think about analog and digital distinctions. I was working with clear acrylic paint and translucent fabric at the time when transparent acrylic sheets were erected in areas of social encounter. The quality of both seeing through and being reflected back is a paradoxical feature of the material that attracted me to it. In addition, its function as a boundary and a reminder of the new biopolitical control structures were reminiscent of what I had been thinking through in relation to the screen; the computer and phone screen as devices that govern cognitive processes, behaviour, and movement. I began using transparent acrylic for its new status as a boundary, as well as its quality of transparency as I have discussed. It attempts to be invisible and allows a person to see through it, much like the introduction of glass into architecture, but yet further separates people into small units. It is a digital object, a cultural technique that introduces the safe/not safe self and other. My use of fabric is similar to my using plexiglass in the quality of the material as a mediating entity. The green organza fabric in *04* is very sheer, and it sparkles in the light. It is a fabric that not only connotes a sense of performativity, and proximity to and confusion of a border, but is itself a form of screen, a form of exposing or obscuring the body. The fabric is a screen a place of division and it also simultaneously recalls the fabric of canvas for painting



and the manufacturing of digitality. It acts like a layer of camouflage that dazzles and confuses a sense of exteriority. As a mass produced fabric it references the weaving and historical process of algorithms from the loom.<sup>20</sup>

## **9.0 Abstraction**

In *04*, and in all the painting on acrylic I have produced, the constellation of painted marks I make are extremely minimal, and they depend on fast gestural strokes. I thought about the brushwork as a single element that creates a painting, as fractured events that neither belong to the wholeness of the painting nor is a sample from another image. It is an isolated moment that captures a motion and yet fails to produce any cohesive whole, but is rather a dispersal of movement. After each motion I move to the back of the acrylic and react to the move I just made, and effectively painting in a loop and creating a composition through the act of looping. The artist Kerstin Brätsch also focuses on the brushstroke as a unit, but she thinks of it more specifically as a sample, that is both a motif and an abstraction. In a short clip audio clip from the Museum of Modern Art (New York), Brätsch discusses her use of the brushstroke, its relationship to abstraction, sign, and digitality. She says of her series *9 blocked radiant paintings*,

I work in series to create a delay, or to drag something formally into the future like creating an afterimage, or almost like recycling. This might be thought of as an analog sequencing using digitality as a way of perceiving my existence in the world. For example, I use the brushstroke as an abstract sample. The simplest element in the construction of a painterly unit. So in large, as an autonomous motif the brushstroke becomes an image of itself. Close up the motif into diluted again, into physical messy abstraction, revealing smudges or inner fingerprints and paint drips. So it turns into abstract entity towards almost a figurative motif and back again. What I was interested in was on the one hand there's this constitution of the brushstroke itself and on the other hand it implies already the potential of the transformative element into different interpretations, and the brushstroke becomes a

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<sup>20</sup> See Sadie Plant's book *0s and 1s: Digital Women and the New Technoculture*.

stand in for its physical process. if you go further you could say its basically a question of painting or authorship or investigation of the digital as an image machine or the digital as a condition of abstraction.

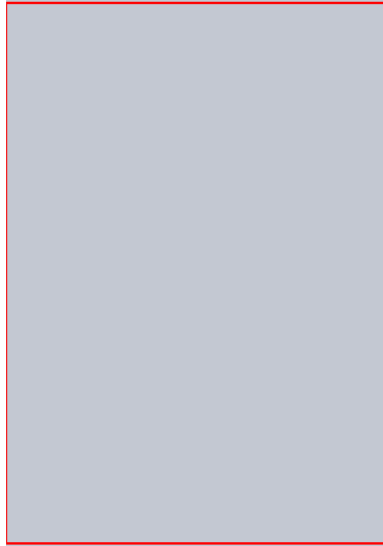


Fig. 13, Kerstin Brätsch, Blocked Radiant D (for Ioana). Oil on Paper. 2012. Image removed due to copyright restriction.

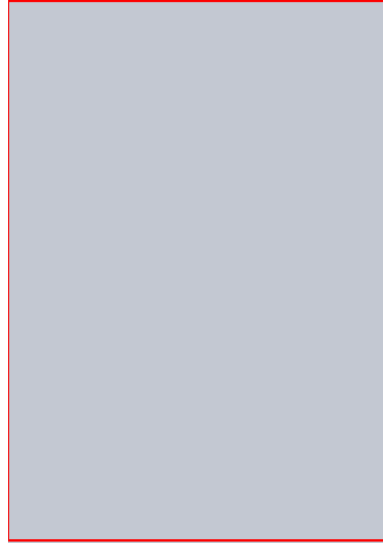


Fig. 14 Kerstin Brätsch, Blocked Radiant (For Ioana). Oil on Paper. Image removed due to copyright restriction.



Fig. 15, Kerstin Brätsch, Installation View of Radiant Paintings, Museum of Modern Art, New York. Dec 4, 2014 - April 5 2015. Image removed due to copyright restriction.

Brätsch and I both think about this “condition of abstraction” specific to digitality. In her 9 bloc radiant paintings she paints with large, continuous strands of undulating wave-like brushstrokes onto paper. The category and definition of abstraction are broad and contested, my definition of abstraction is similar to digital in that to abstract is to subtract. It is to reduce into a more essentialized pattern, and focus on a single, repeatable element.<sup>21</sup> This discussion, however, is broad and changes in meaning across disciplines. I am focused on abstraction as a formal element in visual arts that, while formal, also responds to the concrete conditions of becoming reduced to units of information in digital spaces.

## **10.0 Assemblage**

My deconstruction of painting and working in an expanded field necessarily creates assembled and collaged forms that engage with this history from Dada until now. The artist Sarah Sze creates sculptural assemblages that transverse architectural interiors and exteriors a way to address the subsumption of individual materials into a greater wholeness of movement and dispersal. Her pieces chart pathways and flows of information throughout gallery spaces in unorthodox ways, such as her piece *Seamless* from 1999. In this work Sze takes scraps/fragments of wood, ripped pieces of paper, photographs, string, lights, ladder to build an intricate and expansive network that is a self sustaining work. The piece even cuts holes in the gallery walls to directly engage with the site and the architecture. The small bits of sculptural elements are bound together as it weaves up the wall, through the doorway, and into the skylight, drawing a path that is seemingly completely arbitrary in relation to the space. While recognizable elements such as plants and water bottles stand out

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<sup>21</sup> I am referring to Sven Lutticken’s piece “Living with Abstraction” from 2008.

as objects, their functional status dissipates as they become as component of a larger whole in the sculpture. They become aesthetics objects, a part of this larger structure. This tension between an individual unit, and it's contribution and relationship to a whole is something Sze thinks through in her work. As she says in a 2017 interview, "I am very interested in the idea of smaller units that add up to a whole."<sup>22</sup> I also create smaller parts and elements that I then assemble into a whole. Small pieces of silicone, the singular brushmark, and the sheets of acrylic as units of painting, all use this strategy to question boundaries through alluding to screens and treating the materials as medial, as screens themselves. I agree with Sze's point when she says, "In the age of the image, a painting is a sculpture."<sup>23</sup>

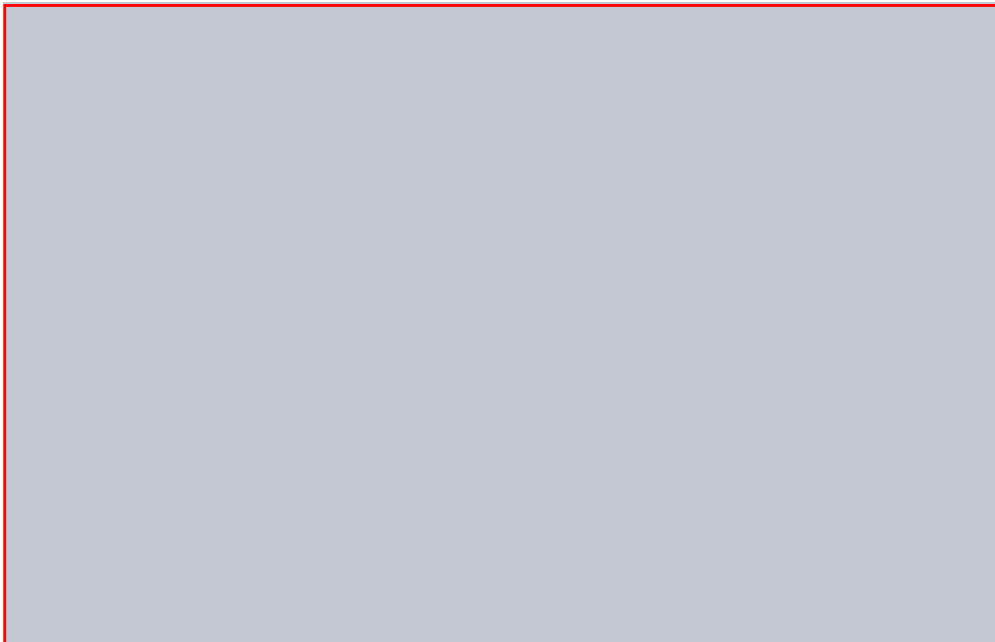


Fig. 16 Sarah Sze. *Seamless*. Tate Modern, 1999. Image removed due to copyright restriction.

<sup>22</sup> See full interview here: <https://www.phaidon.com/agenda/art/articles/2015/february/02/sarah-sze-on-how-to-make-sense-of-your-life/>

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.tanyabonakdargallery.com/exhibitions/17-sarah-sze-tanya-bonakdar-gallery-new-york/>

## **11.0 Suture**

The thesis exhibition is a site responsive work that alludes to the cultural techniques of screens by using materiality, light and space to think about painting in an expanded field. By using paint, fabric, string, light, and wall paint, silicone, glass, and acrylic I explore and complicate the relationship between painting and sculpture, and in doing so create multiple spaces and moments that consider boundaries and borders in thinking about mediation as it relates to screens. The space is divided by a wall that is painted with digital green paint, used to create green screens. The paint almost glows as it emits light outward. There is a piece mounted to the wall, a cyanotype on canvas that I inserted between two panes of glass. The glass reflects the green, and from certain position the image is lost. The cyanotype work is called *A transparent Imprint* and comes from a body of cyanotypes I made over the summer of Covid 19. I had become interested in transparency and began trying to record transparent objects through sunlight, and thinking about shadows as a way to verify volume, weight, and presence in a physical world. On the floor in this space is an assemblage titled *An assemblage of non orientable objects*. Three half inch sheets of clear acrylic are stacked together, with grey organza fabric compressed in between them. There are two iPhones that have been cast in silicone and embedded with fabrics and surfaces. One of the iPhones has an iridescent film inside, the other has a screen printed piece of organza with an image from a session in virtual reality I had. One silicone piece is on top, the other is sandwiched between the acrylic, hanging partially, pathetically outwards. This stacking reference a scanner bed, a stacked and flattened space. On top of the acrylic is a glass mobius strip. This small sculpture was made from a process where I created a sculpture with clay, 3D scanned it, 3D printed the clay mould, and fired the mould in glass. It is an object that is describing its conditions of being made; the continuous loop from analog, into digital, back to analog, and now back into digital as an image. I chose glass because of its relationship to screens and touching screens, as well as it's quality of always being a liquid, even in a solidified state. The two rooms are connected through a series of hanging grey organza fabric that produce large moray effects.

They are literally screens, and screens that divide a space and change patterns of moving through the space. From the outside, the screens offer multiply forms of mediated viewing into the space, from the doubled moray fabric, to the single sheet, to the gaps between them. They are tied together with painted fabric, as a loop and connection of two disparate parts together. In the next room, a small enclosed space, are two paintings that expand on what I have dis-cussed in this paper. They are fragmented pieces of coloured acrylic that are as-sembled together. I use dried acrylic paint, painted marks, silicone, silicone cast from phone cases, embedded dried paint and fabric in silicone to create these ab-stractions that question digital immateriality and dispersal of information. These works all question screens as cultural techniques and methods of mediation.



Fig.17, *Suture*. Installation View. 2021





Fig.18, *Suture*. Installation View. 2021.

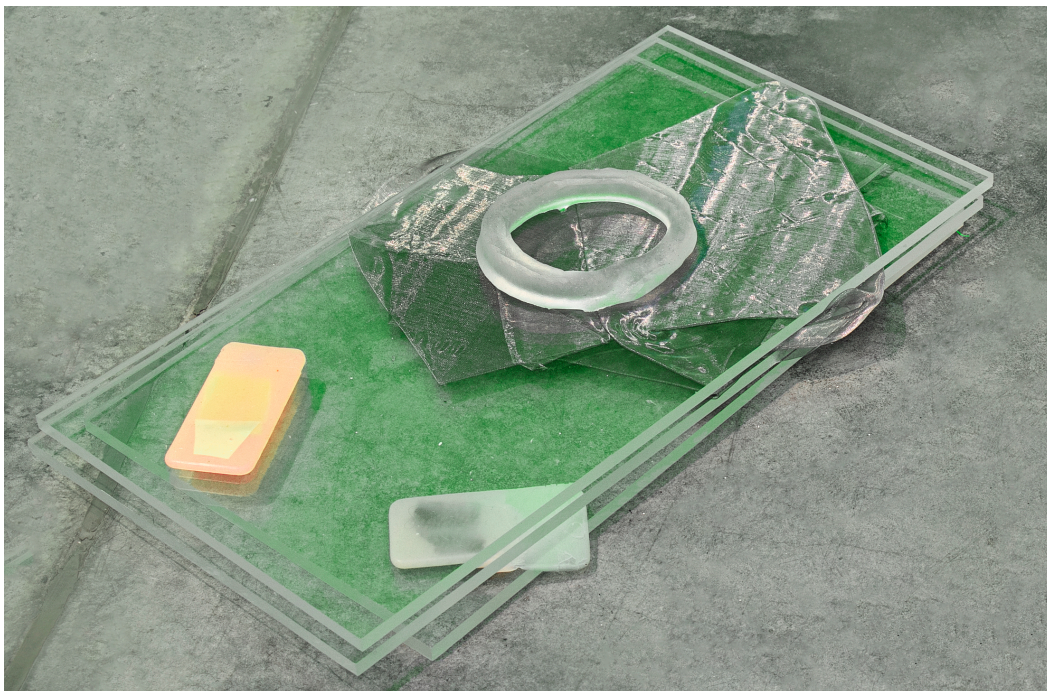


Fig. 19 *An assemblage of non orientable objects*. silicone, organza fabric, glass, acrylic. 2021.



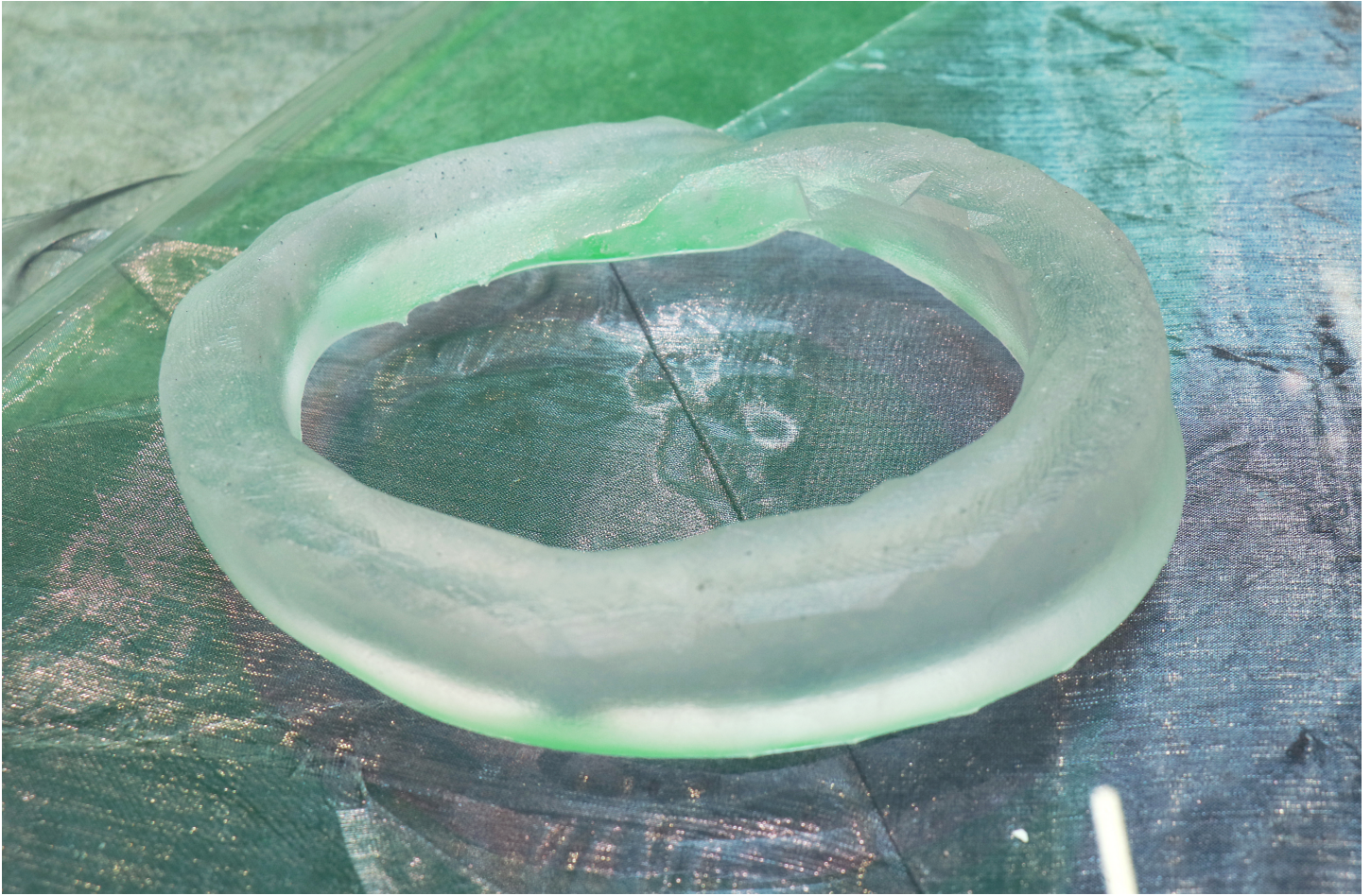


Fig. 20, *An Assemblage of Non Orientable Objects*, Detail: Moebius Strip. 2021. Glass. 6".

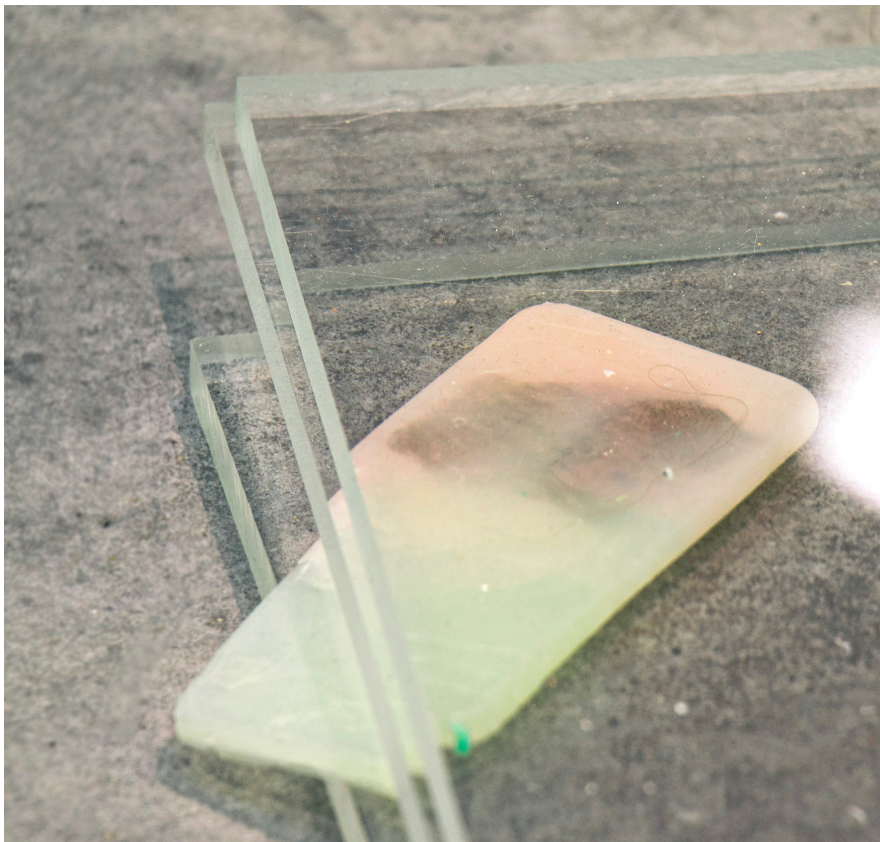


Fig. 21 *An Assemblage of Non Orientable Objects*, Detail. 2021. Silicone embedded with silkscreened organza.





Fig. 22. Transparent, 2021. Cyanotype on canvas, mounted on glass. 15 x 17".



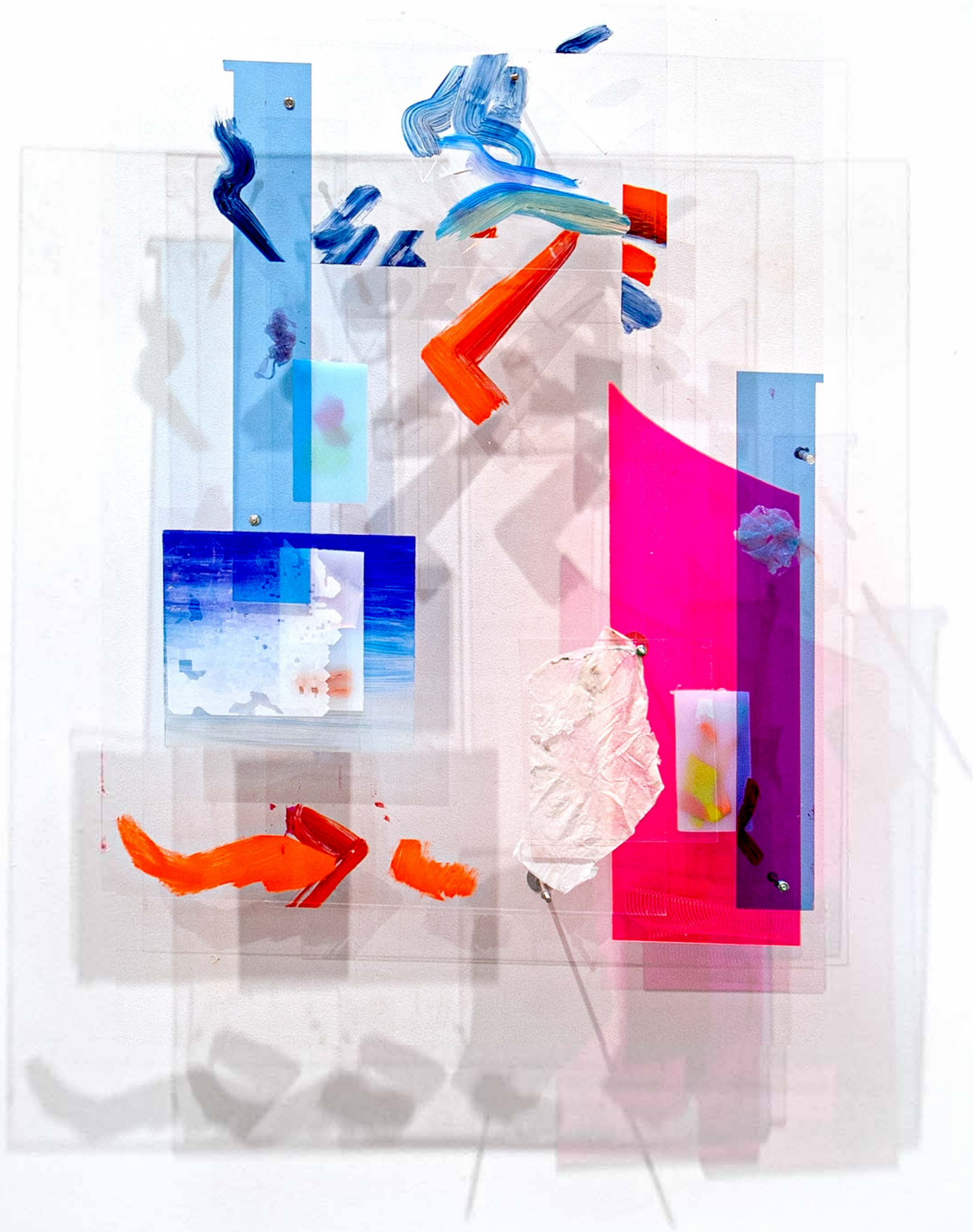


Fig. 23. 002b9e, Plexiglass, synthetic polymer, silicone, bolts, nuts, light. 2021. 48 x 37"



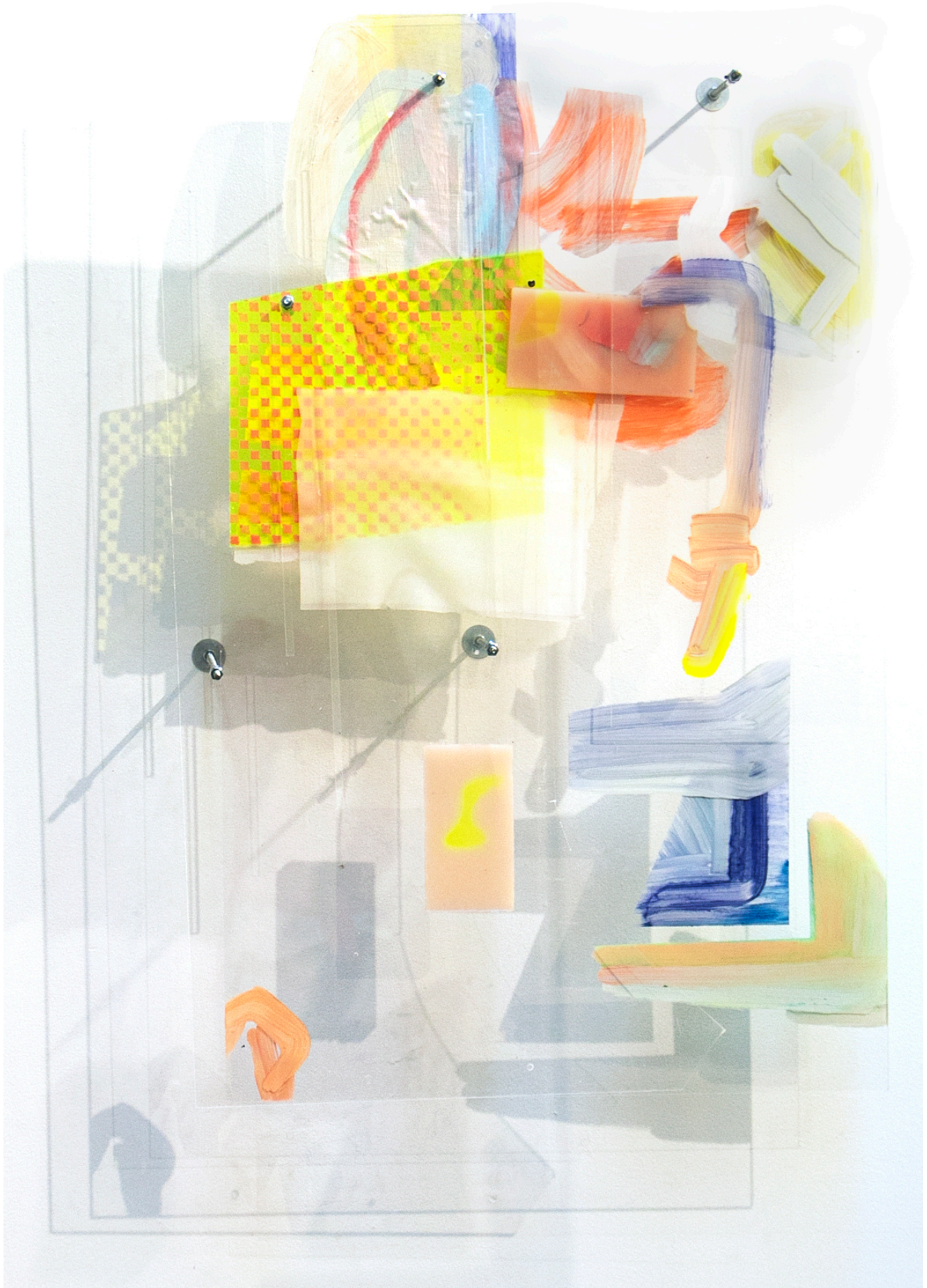


Fig. 24. *e8ed8f*, Plexiglass, synthetic polymer, silicone, bolts, nuts, light. 2021. 45 x 34"

One of the serendipitous moments of my research was the discovery of a panel talk hosted by Alexander Galloway with abstract painters who considered digitality. The talk was hosted by the New Museum in conjunction with Albert Oehlen's exhibition *Home and Garden*. The artists Ken Okiishi, Florian Meisenberg, and Kerstin Brätsch each gave artist presentations to think about their approach to digitalism from a painting perspective. While I had known all of their practises beforehand, the discussion between the four of them was particularly generative for my thesis. Okiishi paints on the screens themselves, gestural and colourful marks that sometimes sit on top of video, and sometimes on black monitor. He thinks about his work as a translation and uses the actual screen as his substrate. Meisenberg paints on raw canvases that portray grids, skewed openings and closings as evident nods to the cultural techniques of computation; windows, openings, closings. He also uses coding and technologies of video games in installations alongside his paintings. Brätsch's work, as I have already discussed, thinks about painting and its relationship to authorship and self in the digital age<sup>24</sup>. Each approach of the subjective (Brätsch), sculptural (Okiishi), and algorithmic (Meisenberg) enters into this conversation through thinking about different aspects of the apparatus; the psychic, the mechanical, and the social. My thesis project thinks through optical strategies that use techniques of assemblage to question modes of seeing and visualizing working out of a methodology of painting.

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<sup>24</sup> Brätsch's practice emphasizes collaboration, not only with her partner and friend in Das Institut, but also in processes of craft such as marbling and stained glass.

## **12.0 Conclusion**

The two years of graduate research and work were also times of immense change given the impact of Covid-19. This work responds to an interest in algorithmic infrastructure through a material inquiry that was no doubt furthered through the prevalence of screens in my daily life. The concepts introduced in this document were not just items of research but a reality I was living in that was distinct from the year previous. My practice of deconstructing painting to explore the aesthetics of mediation in both wall and installation works depend upon a moving spectator/participant, and yet are fated to exist predominantly as an image. I have shown the importance of loops, screens, and digitally to both my critique and method of painting. The distinctions of additive and subtractive colour systems as representing modes of mediation between two categories have been integral to how I create my colour palette and choosing the material of plexiglass as a way to recognize and interrogate forms of visualizing within screens. Using painting as an assemblage I think about fracturing the image space, operating outside of a frame as a form of spill or dispersal; an opening of the loop. The collision of painting and media theory result in the disfigurement of painting; layers of spaces unfold moments of tension, compression, and collapse. They are barely held together through bolts, nuts, and plastic. Perhaps embedded within this deconstructed and dissolving materiality of paint is the equal potential to expose and rearrange it's infrastructure. My work over the course of the graduate program is merely the beginning of a longer project of inquiry and experimentation.

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