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Interrelationship of Forms: Research into the Juxtaposition of Material, Color, and Texture

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Interrelationship of Forms:
**Research into the Juxtaposition
of Material, Color and Texture**



Honors Thesis

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Department: Art and Design

Advisor: Jeffrey C. Jones, M.A.

April 2019

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Abstract

I have completed a body of artistic work composed of a series of paintings with the intent of exploring my use of material, color and texture. I am interested in using these tools to complete paintings which feel equally balanced and surprising, with subtleties that materialize through time spent with each piece. This exploration will continue past my thesis project, as the intention behind this project was to obtain a firmer grasp on myself as an artist along with the body of work I wish to pursue in the coming years.



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Thesis Paper

My senior thesis project is based around the idea of exploration—exploration of materials, texture, color, and techniques, based in the desire to obtain a better grasp on not only myself as an artist, but the body of work I wish to pursue in the future. With the help of other artists both contemporary and historical, time spent working in the studio, and a constant mindset of trial and error, I have found my work as an artist to be in the realm of non-representational paintings with a focus on the relationships between the different formalist components that make up each individual piece. I have grown to focus on the materiality of the objects that are filling my paintings, from the texture of paint to the way my various choices of paper absorb color differently. In this paper I will be discussing why I am choosing to paint the way I am, the course my paintings have gone through mainly in the past year, my influences as an artist, and some explanation of my decision making process that occurs while working.

Through my senior thesis I was intending to obtain a better understanding of the answer to a question I get asked all the time: why abstraction? Specifically, why non-representational painting? Several answers come to mind after months spent in the studio. First, painting this way lets me focus on the more formalist elements that comprise a painting—shape, line, color, texture—in turn, allowing me to stray away from a direct narrative element in my work. Artists who work with a similar mindset label their work in categories such as minimalism, non-representational, and non-objective. One example of this would be James McNeill Whistler. Whistler began to diverge from the category of representational art by eventually focusing on the qualities of paint and what it can do on its own, even abstracting the titles of his paintings to get his viewers to disassociate his work from a specific subject matter. He would utilize words in titles that have musical connotations like “nocturne” in *Nocturne in Black and Gold* and “symphony” *Symphony in White, No. 1: The White Girl*. This was done with the intention of influencing his viewers to notice a relationship between music and color, shifting their focus to the process of painting instead of the subject matter

at hand The Art Story Contributors and McCain). Similarly, Clary Stolte has made the following statement about her paintings: “My work can be best described as ‘object research painting projects’, which means a precise research of material properties and behaviour” (Six Questions). Clary here is stating that she is making paintings to obtain a deeper understanding of the materials she chooses to use such as yarn, tape, gum, paper, and many other things in her practice. This was a new concept for me at the time as I had not yet found any artists who were making art in this way. You can see an example of this below in the image of her work titled Plastic Volume Surface #3, this one specifically made with tape (See Figure 1). Finding artists such as the ones above have helped me find the words to describe the desire to not paint things, but to explore relationships, learn through the process, research the qualities of materials, and disassociate myself with the idea of any narrative not centered around process alone.

The second answer to this question I have found is the fact that painting in a non-representational manner challenges me. In my artist statement I say, “I am a problem-creator, and therefore solver, at heart and aim to find the elements of a painting that work perfectly together, no matter how incompatible they may initially seem.” Here I am discussing the fact that I have always been interested in solving problems, one of the reasons I loved math and puzzles growing up. Sitting down, putting a task like this in front of me, and working through it to completion was part of the fun for me, and I feel the same way about painting. Each time I begin a new painting, I am creating a problem to solve. When I put down my first mark, flat of color, or texture I immediately think, “what comes next?” The puzzle stops when the answer to that question is, “nothing”, the painting does not need a “next” because it can finally stand on its own as a finished piece. Like math or puzzles, I am to solve this problem with the fundamental, original element of the medium I am working in: numbers, puzzle pieces, color, composition, texture, materials, and so on. Starting these challenges everyday, not only keeps me engaged, and excited about working, but keeps me pushing to find new problems to create everyday with different solutions to eventually solve them.

The progression my work has gone through in the past several years is vital to understand the work I am currently creating. Two years ago, through largely looking at the work of Helen Frankenthaler and Barnett Newman, both artists based in Abstract Expressionism, I began creating large color-field paintings that included pouring watery paint across a canvas, allowing it to soak in at its own will. My intention here was to explore the impact paintings as seemingly simple as flats of color can have on the audience's emotions, very much related to the artists I was referencing at the time. For example, Barnett Newman was creating paintings with large zips of color, as he called them, streaking through the center of his canvases to spark life and emotion within his viewers (Gershman). Shifts in my thought process began to emerge upon further exploration of the category of painting labeled, "Abstraction". Research into the work of Mark Rothko got my mind thinking of the idea of paintings composed of sections of color, and how those sections worked with, against, hid behind, pushed forward from, and engaged with their surroundings. Early into 2018 is when I was introduced to the name Clary Stolte, an artist who uses non conventional materials to explore the notion of space and process. One painting of hers in particular, a seemingly simple painting constructed from a folded piece of white paper, was what it took to get me thinking about materials in a much more critical way. While this piece may seem like just a piece of paper to the untrained eye, I believe anyone can notice the complexities of it with more time spent looking at the piece. For example, in the one piece of paper alone, once it becomes folded, you have a variance of tones created from multiple shadows cascading across the piece, this combined with the subtleties in the tone across the sheet of paper gives the number of versions of white on this one single piece of paper an infinite number. Considering this, my work shifted to pieces created entirely out of paper and fabric, yet still categorized as paintings because of the thought process behind them. While these pieces did not have much actual paint on them, they were still being constructed in the same way I had always made paintings, by consideration of composition, color, texture, and scale, therefore they were paintings.

Moving to the present, my work is still focused on components surrounding the quality of painting itself. Currently, I am exploring the natural paradoxes that come up through

the process of making, the things that contrast each other but still work together. I have been exploiting this idea in my paintings through the juxtaposition of material, color, texture, and technique to yield an end result which feels equally balanced and surprising, with subtleties unfolding through time that often seem to create the largest impact in the final works. A large influence of mine throughout this past semester has been the paintings of Richard Diebenkorn, specifically his Ocean Park series (See Figure 2). Diebenkorn places a focus on activating his canvases from edge to edge with a fixation on spatial relationships through indiscernible forms (Diebenkorn, et al. 31). What excites me about these paintings is the way that Diebenkorn handles materials, pushing paint across a surface, only masking, not eliminating the layers below with a focus on geometric forms and line. You can see this influence push through in the division of space through color, shape, and line, along with the layering of forms.

In all of my recent works on paper, a grid featuring an almost square was first drawn out in pencil as you can see in the piece below titled *Different From Scale* (See Figure 3). This was originally set in place to give me a starting point and a clear area to work inside of on a new material I was working with, Yupo. Yupo is a synthetic, waterproof, extremely smooth paper made from polypropylene pellets that creates a very nice surface for paint to sit on top of and not soak in to. While working on cradled wooden panels, the edges of my workspace were very much obvious by the one and a half inch drop between the front of my piece and the wall implemented by the sides of the cradle. On a sheet of Yupo that edge is not as clear. I found the grid I would create, always only close to an inch away from being a perfect square, to set up my page with a strong composition, focus point, and frame to create a new painting. Through continued work with this grid, I have noticed that it initially sets me up with one specific guideline—paint inside the square—therefore giving me actually more room to experiment with the single sheet of paper. What happens when the paint no longer acts the way I want it to and drifts outside of its set residence? What happens when the paint covered fingerprints begin to build up in the bounds of the painting, creating a recurring means of tracking my movement throughout working on the piece? When paint splashes from one painting to the next and finds a home in this outer edge? The square box gives

me a stronger opportunity to work with the element of chance, increasing my level of experimentation and range of results. Matt Connors, an American experimental abstract painter, works in a fashion with a similar mindset emphasizing it in the way he displays his paintings. “By literally removing works from the walls and placing them on the same level as the viewer, as well as by celebrating his “mistakes” and revealing his process, Connors violates the aura of high seriousness that surrounds the tradition of geometric abstraction. What was once the revered language of the avant-garde is spiritedly repurposed in these works and transformed into objects that express the artist’s perception of the everyday in the here and now” (Hoptman 83). What I enjoy about this statement is the fact that Connors is thinking of these works as perceptions of his everyday life, putting back onto the canvas what he has taken in throughout the day as a means of record making. The grid in my work also gives me a space for collection of records. Referencing the piece *Different From Scale*, the “blank” area around the main composition of the piece is full of fingerprints, smudges, and stray lines, all a collection of what happened during the process of creation; mistakes worked into the final outcome.

Touching on my works being very process based, and I have found that to be an important component to my practice throughout the recent months. First, it keeps my mindset very experimental. Working through my paintings as I am constructing them allows me not to get too wrapped up in what I am doing, it keeps me from thinking too much which would make my paintings seem less playful and more forced. Second, working process-based means I often have many paintings in progress in my studio at any given time. This working method not only keeps my mind engaged, as everywhere I look there is something new to work on and add to, but it allows my work to interact with each other in a way I don’t think would be possible had I been working on one piece at a time. I can bridge my ideas between paintings this way by transferring shapes from pressing two paintings together, adding the color I’m using for one painting onto the one next to it, or even hanging them in a way so that their compositions compliment each other. This gives my work an element of cohesivity while still allowing me not to get too wrapped up in one idea.

Research into artists other than myself has been a large component of this thesis projects, specifically by finding artists who work with the same mindset as me. It has been hard to articulate why I am making paintings, or what I am making paintings about, so finding real life examples of what I am trying to do helps me to better understand my work. Take Richard Serra for an example, a minimalist sculptor, video artist, painter, and drawer. I recently read this explanation of what interests him in his work in a book of his stating, “His “obsession with space, weight, balance, size, scale, placement, and density.” Like rhythm and harmony, these properties generate a metaphoric vocabulary to describe and analyze articulated surfaces, but they belong more intimately to material objects and substances” (Serra 32). Here Serra is saying not only is he interested in the more formal qualities of painting, he is obsessed with them. He even creates the paintings in a way that they surround themselves with a particular vocabulary that lends itself to material qualities. Hearing a successful artist talk about their art in a way similar to the way I have been working has not only made me a lot more sensitive to the work I am doing and the materials I am using, but has given me a better vocabulary to talk about my work.

Along with the means of research listed prior, I also have been seeking more inspiration on Instagram. Instagram is such a powerful tool for artists because of the massive level of availability it puts in the palm of your hand. The number of accounts I could draw inspiration from are endless, and I have tried to use that to my advantage. By curating my Instagram feed to provide me with a constant stream of new artists and their ideas, related to mine or not, it has kept me competitive, pushing my ideas to be at or above the level of artists’ work I am seeing online, and in a constant stream of thought about different ways to solve my paintings. I can see how artists similar to myself are solving a lot of the same problems as I, such as how to marry two colors on a canvas or perfectly balance a composition. Saving these images and referencing them when I need a new push not only connects me to the larger contemporary art world by making my presence known on social media, but keeps me inspired and trying new solutions in my own work.

Through this project, I have been able to obtain a greater understanding of my work and what it means to me. Non-objective painting is the path I plan to pursue in the future with continued experimentation and research because of the way it allows me to focus on the formalist elements of painting and because of the way it always challenges me. I plan to keep emphasizing the process based nature of my art by highlighting my mistakes and never getting too caught up in the end result. I hope to continue to find artists that inspire me at the level the Clary Stolte and Richard Diebenkorn do, hopefully through more research and exploration through books and Instagram.

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- Richard Diebenkorn, *Ocean Park #79*, 1975; Oil on canvas; Philadelphia Museum of Art, Purchased with a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts and with funds contributed by private donors, 1977. ©The Estate of Richard Diebenkorn
- Clary Stolte, *Plastic Volume Surface #3*, 2018, Plastic Tape, 24x24cm



Figure 1. Clary Stolte, *Plastic Volume Surface #3*, 2018, Plastic Tape, 24x24cm



Figure 2. Richard Diebenkorn, *Ocean Park #79*, 1975, Oil on Canvas



Figure 3. Emily Bartolone, *Different From Scale*, 2018, Oil Paint and Paper on Yupo