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What I Made

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What I Made

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Visual Art

by

Richard Corral

June 2018

Thesis Committee:  
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2018

The Thesis of Richard Corral is approved:

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# **A Description of Themes and Recurring Ideas and Techniques**

I am going to discuss the work I have made in my time in the program and how my thoughts and influences have changed and developed.

I have been consistent with making paintings and being interested in paintings history and how it can meld with and/or be pushed forward with technology. It seems easier to take apart a picture than to put one together, so that is what I have been doing, taking them apart in my own way.

## **List of Painting Elements and Potential Meaning**

**Paint globs/chips** = basic unformed representational stuff or broken forms

**CMYK Colors** = fundamental building blocks of light and color as it exists in material form

**CG Space** = can be history of painting or digitally represented world

**Gestural marks** = trace of human interfacing with digitally represented world

**Left brain thinking** = careful initial planning

**Right brain thinking** = finishing paint smears

I wanted to start with this list. Mainly because I think all writing is just lists of things, and I think this list sums up everything very succinctly. Let me first explain how I have arrived at this list. Early on in the process I will ask myself lots of questions. I do not necessarily answer these questions very well but they are motivational starting points. A question that keeps returning for me is: is a picture of an abstraction a representation? I am not the first to ask this question. Lichtenstein and Richter have asked it before and devised remarkable paintings trying to answer this riddle. Other questions I keep asking are: is Abstraction less complex or more complex? Is it possible to make an abstraction the other way around? Meaning don't take things apart, but take a representation and push the representation further forward to a point so fine grained and factual that the image leaves naturalism behind. Other questions are: What is the space of a painting? Can a painting invent a space so existent it can contain anything?

The work that has been resulting has been exciting for me to play with. I keep describing them to myself as "fake abstract paintings". I call them this because the work still uses all the tricks of representation but the work does not resolve itself into a tidy representational image or space. The spatial complexity is increasing; I deem this a good thing. I feel most comfortable when the work snowballs in complexity and I am somewhat at a loss as to what it is. But I will try my best to dissect it more and give some insight into the thought process and what has influenced the work.

Even though I ask big questions I have to devise practical means while working in the studio. I will go into Photoshop or Autodesk Maya and create forms and gestural marks; but these programs were designed for very practical and predictable final productions. Maya follows the rules of established representation. The program is not designed to do something that is illogical or abstract (I don't mean to equate these two things). The program will force whatever I do into its set parameters of a 3D space. This sets up the perfect situation to mash up contradictory things. I can take a clunky abstract painting I made in Photoshop and import it into Maya and have it exist in a simulated 3D space. The mash up combinations are endless when you also consider all the additional manipulations you can do within Maya. There is an eeriness that gets created in the work. This eeriness has been mentioned to me more than once. It is not an eeriness that is intended or one that is a stylistic choice on my part. I have been wondering about the potential connotations of this eeriness, and I will return to this topic later.

My interest lies in the entirety of the illusionary core of painting, which has been constructed and maintained throughout art history. It has pervaded the pores and spaces of artistic practice and, of not just of our perception of art, but of the world in general. This Illusory core has evolved into our technology that tries to give us a sense of a real life fidelity. Today there is a proliferation of computer generated spectacles that creates fake worlds for us to view and

inhabit. We seem to want to be dazzled by these fake realities, and I believe I am quoting these spectacles. In a way they are our new sublime, and the sublime is familiar territory for painting.

Abstraction has been entering into the work almost as a quotation. My interest in abstraction comes from both painting's history and also being confronted with the abstraction of the digitally represented worlds. This raises questions about the historical terms of abstraction and our expectations of how representation and the relationship of 3D reality such as movement in real time and the body in space are constructed in the real world today.

I keep calling the paintings I have been making "Fake Abstract" paintings. It might be because I see them as representational paintings that represent the world from such an odd angle that the realism comes apart at the seams; this can give the work echoes of Cubism at times. Photo representation has retreated into vignettes of Photo-realism. It is good to keep in mind that Photo-Realism is not as simple as a return to Renaissance depiction, but depicts the flat object that is the photograph. The vignettes of photographs are of everyday snapshots, giving the work an ambient quality, like a TV set in a waiting room playing for no one. They also create different and disjointed fragments of time.

## Influences

### Frank Stella

There is a blindness to pictorial space or maybe it is a type of illiteracy when it comes to trying to read pictorial space. Something early on I had to read as an undergrad was Donald Judd's *Specific Objects*, this was my first warning not to dabble with painting. Donald Judd states, "The main thing wrong with painting is that it is a rectangular plane placed flat against the wall. A rectangle is a shape itself; it is obviously the whole shape; it determines and limits the arrangement of whatever is on or inside of it. In work before 1946 the edges of the rectangle are a boundary, the end of the picture." I have always felt this is a strange statement because Judd seems to act as if he is blind to the most important aspect of painting: the pictorial space. The rectangle is the "whole shape" if one ignores its pictorial shapes. Judd wants us to move into real space. Real space being more profound for him, pictorial space is something to abandon. Yet pictorial space is not real space it's a virtual space, this is a negative not a plus for Judd. But I think it is unfair to criticize painting with the standards of sculpture. Judd glosses over paintings advantages, some of which are it activates the imagination and is not bound to the limitations of real space. I have always found Judd's thoughts outright comical, because one has to pretend to be blind to the pictorial space that painting tries to activate. It is very strange and literal minded to resist reading the virtual space inside these rectangles and I

have always wondered if Judd also dislikes books too because they are nothing but rectangles with black words on white pages, and what is inside is limited by its rectangular book shape. Judd has been something I have actively pushed against. There is something too defeatist about his painting argument.

For me a good antidote to Judd is Frank Stella's book *Working Spaces*, which has been a big influence on me for the past 3 years. Stella is capable of unraveling the complexities of pictorial space so he has no need to pretend to be blind to it. Stella accepts painting's history and understands the complexities of painting grappling with pictorial space. Stella looks at the entire history of painting and sees the crisis of representational art in the sixteenth-century Italy and compares it with the crisis of our time to help illuminate a way to resolve painting's problems. Like Judd Stella does see problems with painting, but instead of seeing nothing but dead ends, Stella asks how do we solve the problems and not simply abandon them. This following quote, in particular, has given me insight and something to use.

The success of Picasso's painting from 1920 on comes from the unabashed rendering of volume, and this is what has proved to be the most difficult thing for abstraction to deal with. What Picasso left behind – Cubism, the fragmented structure of solid figure – has been duck soup for



abstraction. It appears that it is easier to take things apart than it is to keep them together. The real problem is that abstraction cannot have rendering; it must be literal. For example, the employment of the simple device of shading a surface to give the illusion of roundness or depth seems to be anathema to the modern visual sensibility. It just never looks right. Yet this experience has become no more than a powerless contradiction in the face of an obvious imperative – that abstraction must have a viable sense and expression of volume, because without them the space available to abstraction is simply too closed, too dull, too unimaginative. The irony here is that the last really vibrant and exciting pictorial space was the Cubist space that Picasso had left behind by 1920. What abstract painting has to do is to take what Picasso left behind – Cubism and develop it to include what Picasso went on with – a dynamic rendition of volume. That is, abstraction must go on with what painting has always had – line, plane, and volume, the basic ingredients. (Stella, 23)

Throughout the book you get the sense that Stella, instead of declaring that painting is dead, he is declaring that painting is broken, and in a rut and needs to be fixed. In a lot of ways, though Stella is speculative on paintings history, this seems to come from his dissatisfaction of his early work. Where does one go after creating the perfect restrained abstraction? Though Stella does move into real space with his own work he does it not from a place of seeing painting as being defeated but from a place of wanted to expand his practice.

### **Sloterdijk**

The way reality is explored in and seen in our culture not just in art is of importance to me. In Peter Sloterdijk's book *in the World Interior of Capital*, he gives us a metaphor for understanding the invisible world interior we are surrounded by. Sloterdijk discusses how after Dostoevsky was released from a Siberian prison camp he went to London and saw the International Exhibition and the original Crystal Palace and also the newer version. The giant glass hothouse disturbed him and he saw them as a metaphor for western civilization. He saw it as an immune system that could bring together diverse flora, fauna, and industrial products under the same roof. It was a protective sheath that made the outside world with its unpredictable weather, diseases, genocide, slavery, dwindle away. Sloterdijk urges us to understand Dostoevsky metaphor. "He

recognized the monstrous edifice as a man-eating structure, a culture container in which humans pay homage to the demons of the west: the power of money and pure movement." (Sloterdijk,107)

Sloterdijk sees these Crystal Palaces everywhere today metaphorically speaking. The new crystal palaces now contain us the winners of globalization. The crystal palaces wanted to close distances by bringing together diversity in its protective covering. The internet takes it further by dematerializing the crystal palace and fully realizes this dream of removing distances. Today with our smart phone, we can jack ourselves into this new World Interior from wherever on the planet we happened to be. No need to go anywhere to be included in the World Interior. In this new World Interior time is modular and made of series of present moments and not connected to the past or future. He sees man as disconnected from the past with nothing to achieve; no great political movements to be a part of. With nothing to achieve except our own valueless instant gratification we are stuck without any vision. We each have our own semiotic sign systems that are incompatible with everyone else's. The internet makes each individual a world unto himself. Hyper individuality and hyper freedom, can breed all sorts of paranoia and isolation. Instead of there being any more politically motivated extremist who are united under a single cause, we now have spree killers. Instead of trusted explanations of events we have conspiracy theories, and news

that is nothing more than ideologically slanted entertainment (on both sides of the political spectrum).

This is the stuff of a Philip K. Dick world, another big influence on my thinking. Dick saw this world coming that Sloterdijk articulates. He formulates in his pulp sci-fi theme of seeing our daily world as inauthentic and not to be trusted. He constantly turned to dreams, drugs, religion, and death, all things that promised to lift the veil of everyday reality. In a speech he states his interest in fake realities concisely.

But I consider that the matter of defining what is real — that is a serious topic, even a vital topic. And in there somewhere is the other topic, the definition of the authentic human. Because the bombardment of pseudo-realities begins to produce inauthentic humans very quickly, spurious humans — as fake as the data pressing at them from all sides. My two topics are really one topic; they unite at this point. Fake realities will create fake humans. Or, fake humans will generate fake realities and then sell them to other humans, turning them, eventually, into forgeries of themselves. So we wind up with fake humans inventing fake realities and then peddling them to other fake humans. It is just a very large version of Disneyland. You can have the Pirate Ride or the Lincoln

Simulacrum or Mr. Toad's Wild Ride — you can have *all* of them,  
but none is true. (Dick, 10)

It is quintessentially an American trait to want to create and then get lost in our fake realities. It is as if we think we have the right to believe in whatever we want. Remember that originally the concept of the “new world” with all its new possibilities was originally an advertising campaign concocted by the English. The first batch of newcomers to America were the first suckers or maybe the first enthusiastic believers in the concept that anything is possible.

## **The Computer, CG Models and My Process**

While working on the computer I have noticed there is an output problem. The computer as a tool has given us new means of re-envisioning the material world in infinite new ways. With algorithms it can create countless sets of new objects, spaces and events. But in the end you are left with fairly lame options for output. You have the option of using a printer, or a 3d printer, you can project with an lcd screens or to just use the monitor itself. I find all these options unsatisfying and I am surprised so many of us accept these options as a default. At times I feel I am getting around this output problem by relying of my painting facility to jump over this hurdle. At times it works. Having real paint on the surface that is manipulated by hand, exactly as I want it, does gets me past the output problem. For now, anyway.

I can create dozens of compositions and models on the computer before I even start using physical paint. In these two processes there can be moments where there are strange corresponding equivalent processes and effects. And at other times everything appears to be in contradiction, everything is separate. For example, there are ways of creating algorithmic chaos in the computer. I was obsessed for a while exploding things with CG models to find random compositions. There are parallels with physical paint to this random chaos, dealing with the fluid dynamic aspects of poured or scraped paint is unruly. These two processes might have nothing to do with one another. One is virtual randomness and the other is a physical randomness of dealing with real materials. Are they the same thing? Can you simulate real chaos? Which is better the real or simulated version? I am not sure these are good or even the right questions to be asking.

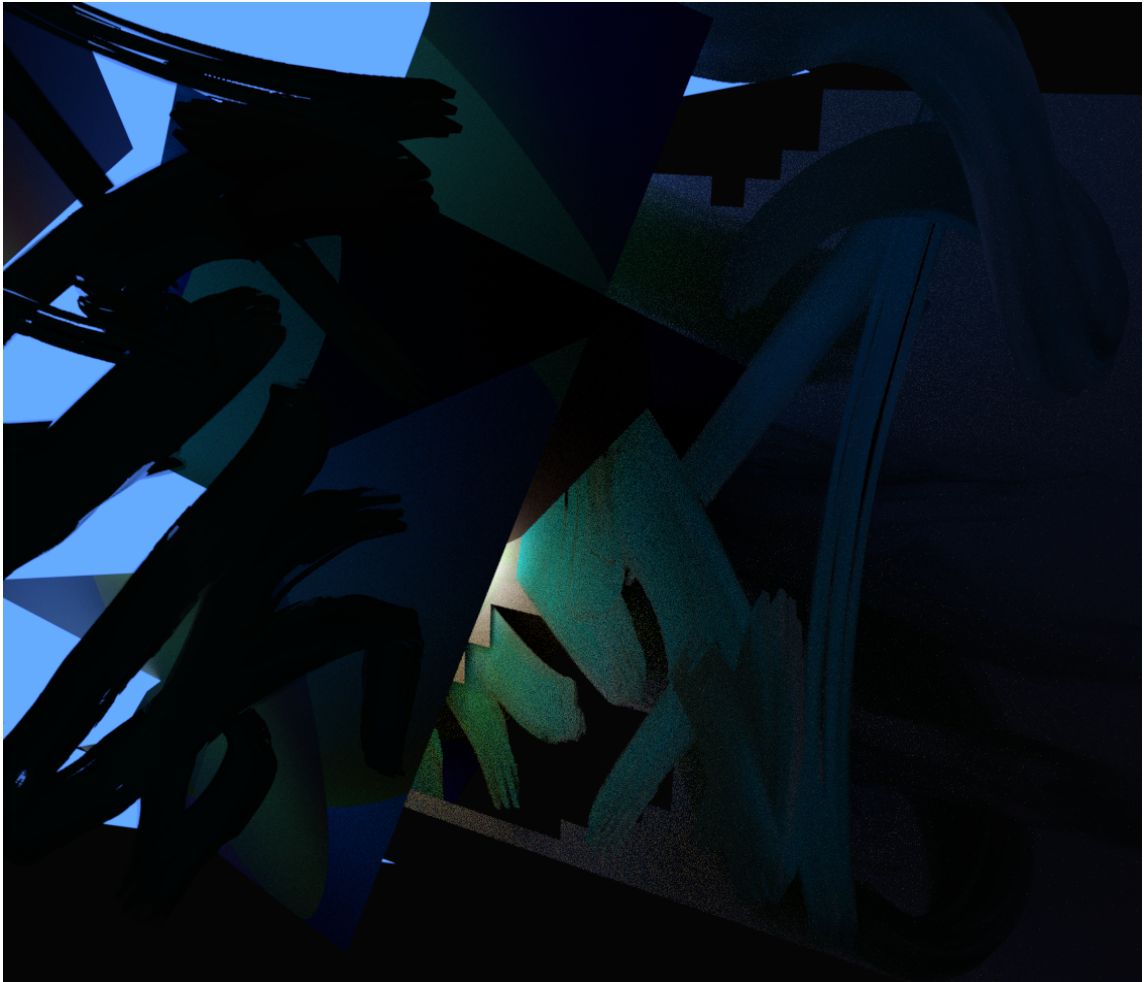
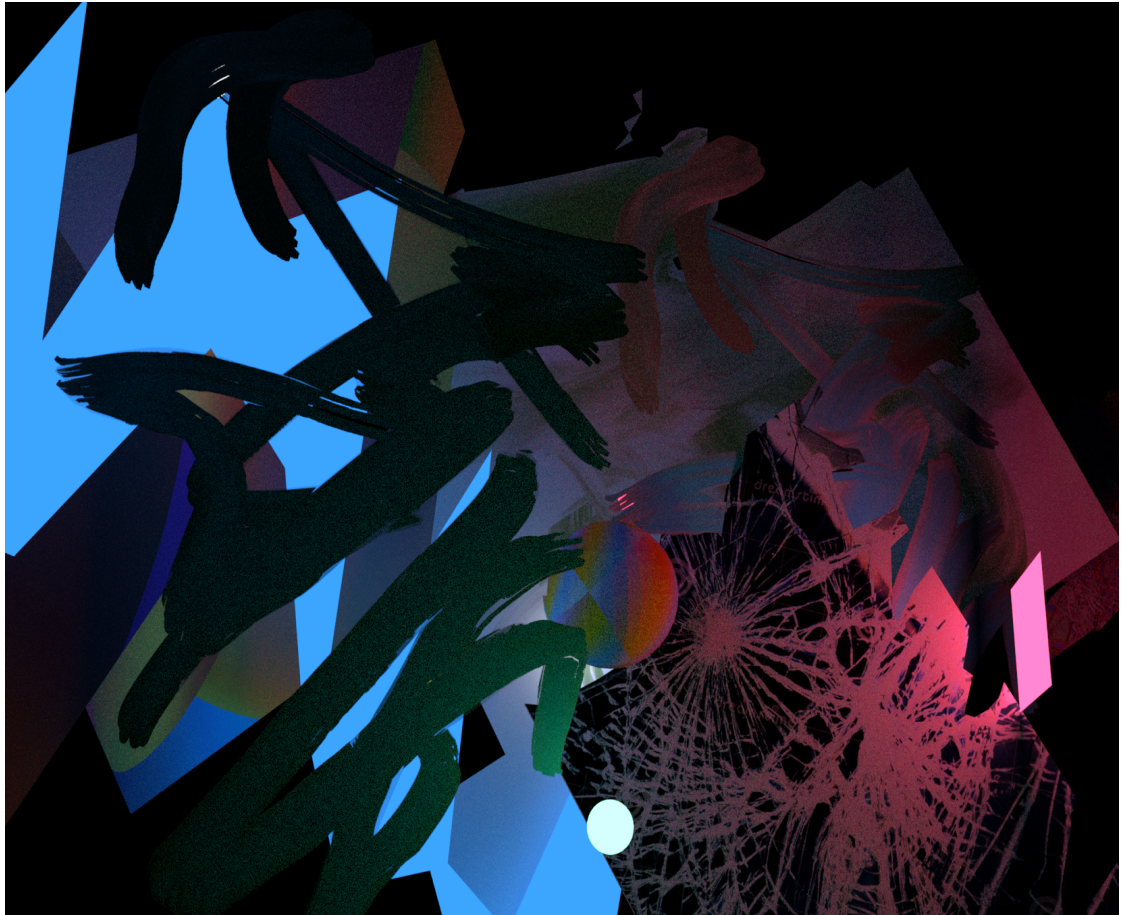


Figure 1: *Untitled*, One of may Computer generated models I made and never printed out, 2017



**Figure 2: *Untitled, Unprinted* CG rendering 2017**

Everything gets leveled out. Even though it is spatial, everything exists with same emphasis of importance no matter if it's a photo or cut out shape or a 3d object. There is also a shallowness to this software that I use; meaning it is all surface. In Autodesk Maya everything is made up of polygons and not atoms; the program does not simulate particles that then build up to make objects like they do in reality. I am not the first to wonder about the empirical questions that arise with virtual fakes. These empirical questions arise in the sciences in



regards to simulations. In Eric Winsberg's book, *Science in the Age of Computer Simulation*, he asks, "Simulations seem to have the character of both experimentation and theorizing – two activities that are traditionally taken to occupy rather different spheres of scientific activity. Where, then "on the methodological map," do techniques of computer simulation lie?" (Winsberg, 29). He lays out the views of how simulation can fit into scientific empirical questions. Can simulations, even ones that are theoretically motivated simulations be part of the proper empirical content of theories? I am an artist working in the studio and not a scientist working in the lab, so I ask these deeper epistemological questions with a lot less seriousness. And I have no end I am working towards other than trying to not bore myself in the studio. I might be more concerned with the affect these digital techniques give us.

The use of CGI is extensive in movies and video games. All popular media uses it where spectacle and plausible realism is preferred. We as a culture find it pleasing and desirable, regardless of how many criticisms you may hear that CG images appear fake or unsatisfying, regardless of these common criticisms there is a trust in, and desire to see the almost God like ability of the computer to create and to "get it right". Maybe simply for the reason we know the computer can think faster than us, we trust it like we trust our calculators and smart phones.

The way 3D programs try to visualize space is completely in line with the Renaissance perspective. Autodesk Maya's generated space is the fully realized space of Renaissance linear perspective. In the studio I have been moving back and forth from the easel and the computer finding ways these two processes line up or diverge. Painting is inherently extremely tactile, and the computer tries to be tactile with all of the interface tools to obtain a tactile sense with its touch screens, mouse, tablets, etc. and yet the computer is inherently other in its logic. Much of the early research and development of the the original GUI (graphic user interface) was based on how children learn, so it focused on basic hand eye coordination rather than command languages.

Early on I did a painting that incorporated a hand touching water. I was collecting them using Google Images with no real reason. I believe I was unconsciously drawn to these images and I inserted one of these images into a painting (painted in not glued on). The image is of a liquid surface and the human hand subtly breaking or interacting with that surface. In a lot of ways this image of a hand touching water sums up all that I do: I paint and engage with a surface that is smeared with viscous fluid. And I work on the computer which is a screen surface with multiple user interfaces as substitutes for the hand. These user interfaces are more removed than direct hand manipulation. Though I do have a desire to get my hand into the computer more, the surface of the screen and the surface of the canvas are not equal counterpart. The screen may want to

be as malleable and viscous as the surface of a painting, but can not be.  
Everything there is virtual.



**Figure 3: Found image, 2016**

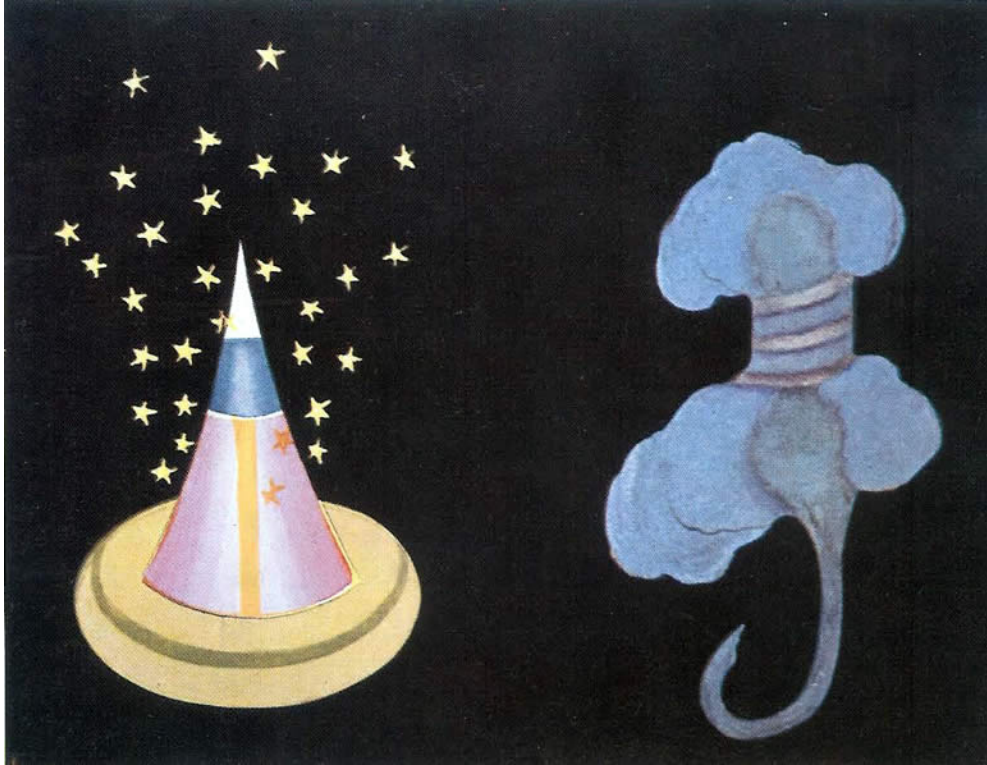
How does the digital information that surrounds us materialize itself? I do wonder about this in the wider cultural context. I like everyone else am dazzled by the extravagant excessive use of CGI as it is used in movie special effects. In a lot of ways, the use of computer generated images is seen as the current tool to imagine the limits of what we can be imagine, or to create a sense of other worldliness. Whenever the impossible needs to be visualized such as an apocalyptic scene, an alien, a monsters, natural disaster, there is CGI to fill in the gap of what can be envisaged. I do not believe this is the only way to visually fill

in the gap. I am only stating a cliché that I see. We have been imagining amazing things, and solving visual problems centuries before the computer ever entered the scene. However, the way computer envisions culturally is always there in my mind simply because it's the tool I am constantly using. There is a blind faith in what computer power can do. We believe that there is no limit to it. I am using them to solve the problems of painting that Stella articulates in *Working Space*. Maybe I am too under their spell that they can solve all problems, even painting's problems. But in the end I am left with no actual otherworldliness or any real painting problems solved, I am left with an eerie space that is not referencing this world but a simulated one.

The ubiquity of digital technology and the desperate faith in technological redemption de-center the human as the locus of experience in history, and this thought is difficult to grasp. When faced with the possible existence of a ghost, a malfunction in ordered normality, we retreat in abject fear. We live in the manufactured illusion that we are still separate from our media extensions when in fact we are interlopers stumbling through a spectral world not for us. (Tanner,17)

## Visualizing

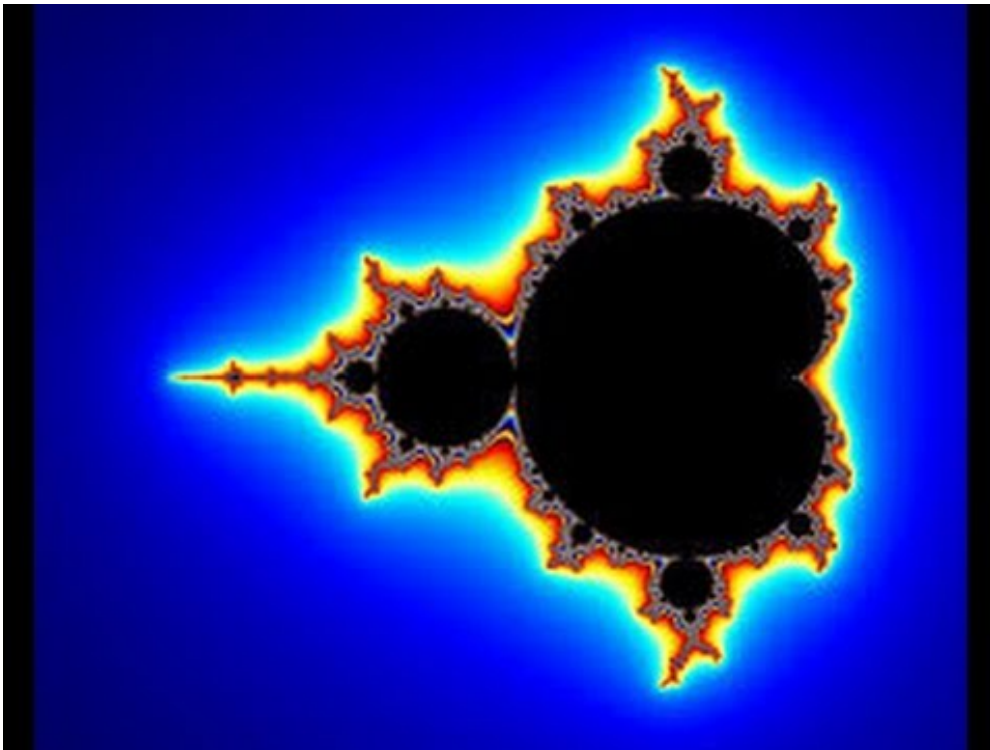
Computer images and abstraction has entered into the work and I have been drawing parallels between their two distinct ways of visualization they employ. The history of abstraction is not as narrow as my knowledge and interest of it are. I have a tendency to start with a very reductionist way of thinking as a starting point before I let it snowball into more complex ideas. Kandinsky struggles with his early abstractions has been a major influence on me. His basic question of when you leave behind depiction of the natural world, what is to replace the object? This is a thoughtful question, especially in relationship to painting's long history of inquiry and struggle with depiction. I was compelled by his long struggles and research as he delved "more in these measureless depths,". He did eventually arrive at forms. They "ripened" within him finally. "Such inner ripening's do not lend themselves to observation: they are mysterious and depend on hidden causes." There is an occult quality to Kandinsky's Inner visions. An early influence for him was the book *Thought-Forms*. The book speaks of a different type of perception, "Thoughts and emotions create distinctive patterns of color and form in the human aura, which are visible to persons with a sufficient degree of clairvoyance" (Besant, 64).



**Figure 4: *At the Funeral*, from the book *Thought-Forms*, 1901**

The occult and technology have always been intertwined. When the invention of the telegraph emerged there was also a flourishing in the popularity of Spiritualism. The new technology of the telegraph spurred the imagination. If we could now communicate through long distances almost by magic why not also communicate with the dead or with aliens. New technology always appears to have the quality of being able to open new doors or to peel back the curtain on reality. What gets depicted with the computer like wise can not be visualized by

conventional means. The Mandelbrot set could not be visualized without the aid of the computer. In our popular culture with movies there is a tendency to use CGI where the limits of visualization hit the wall and where normal means of depiction can not be used.



**Figure 5: Fractal from Google Image search**

Of course there is a difference between Kandinsky's abstract painting trying to depict non objective forms and a computer doing extra human number crunching or CGI depicting hyper real images. I see more parallels and similarities than one might first assume. Both are leaving the conventional ways of visualizing and depiction behind, both use unconventional means of

interpretation to attempt to see a fundamental or different reality that is more complex than the everyday one, and both make an appeal to some kind a superior reality. I am purposely and consciously playing with these notions of visualization and the unknown. Just like Science fiction covers with their ridiculous attempts to depict the impossible and give superfluous information in one single cover image, I too am wanting to depict the impossible. It is as if a type of complex unknown flurry of information has simplified itself into a recognizable image. Similar to how Kant saw the sublime as pushing us beyond our limits, as if the sublime is doing violence to our imagination. Below is small painting I made. Done with heavy Photoshop manipulation creating its own unintended spectral qualities.

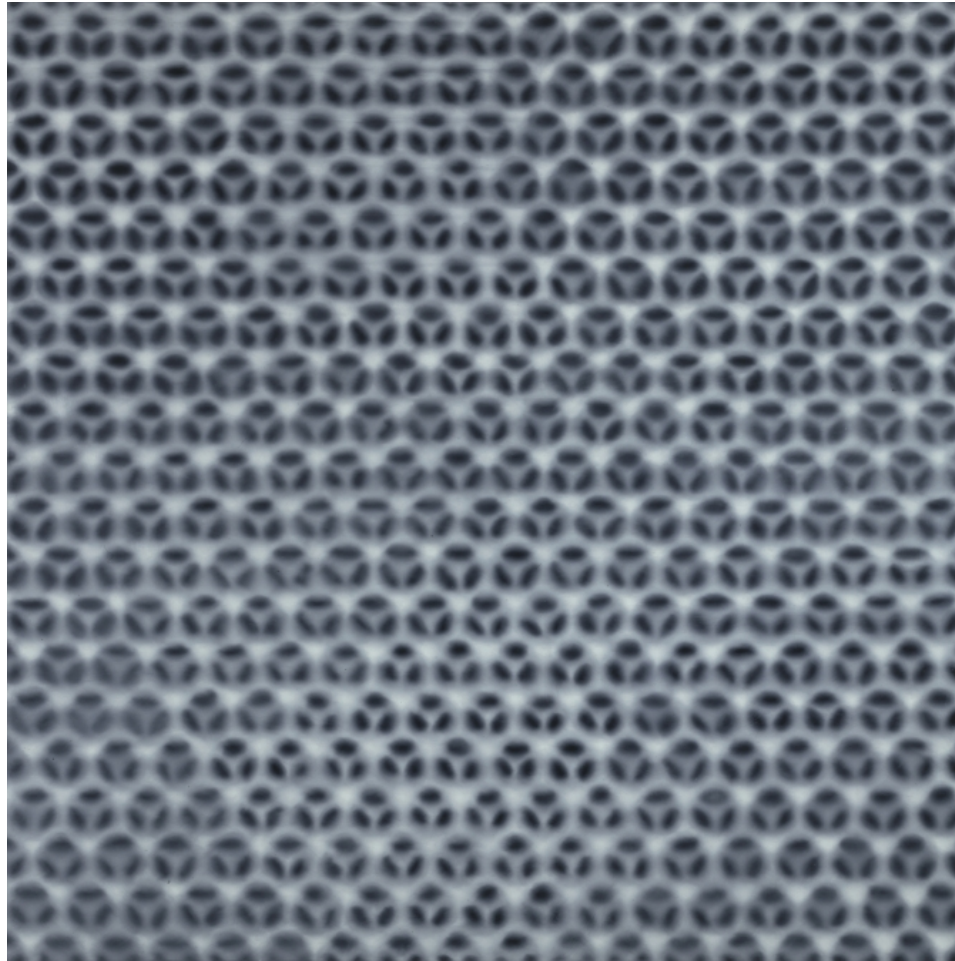




Figure 6: *Untitled Landscape*, 2016

## Light

Most of painting's history is a history of attempts at simulating light. The undulations of values and hues on the canvas are a simulacra of the undulations of values and hues out there in the real world. I want to start with this painting by Gerhard Richter titled *Silikat* from 2003. In a strange way this work sums up the contradictory nature of painting grappling with its own antiquated nature of being pigment on surface.



**Figure 7: Gerhard Richter, *Silikat*, oil on canvas, 2003**

Richter copied it from a small fuzzy photo he clipped from a newspaper. It is a model based off the microscopic structure of butterfly wings. Japanese researchers studied the butterfly *Morpho Sulkowski* and discovered its intense blue wings did not come from blue light reflecting off of colored pigment but from white light scattered from the microscopic cavities in the scaled surface.

The painting in a sense is an absurd gesture. Richter is using black and white paint to copy a photo of a model of a complex structure that refracts light in a complex way. There is an increasing use of light based media today by artists. In the past painters had to contend with photography but now they have to respond to immaterial light based images. Early on in his career Richter responded to photography, and now he is responding to this newer shifting trend in art. He both highlights paintings antiquated physical chunkiness and its persistence to not go away.

“artists of the digital era have been able to respond to the rampant proliferation of light-based images in a novel way. Instead of stressing the distinctiveness and irreplaceability of paint in the face of new forms of light-based image production, as prior generations of modernists were wont to do in response to the rise of photography, recent artist such as Luc Tuymans, Alber Oehlen, Fabian Marcaccio, Chrisotopher Wool, and Wade Guyton have instead affirmed the virtues of pigment more broadly. This shift in emphasis reveals that the once-burning conflict between painting and various forms of photomechanical image production has lately been eclipsed by a new and more pressing antagonism, between the materiality and tactility of pigment on one hand, and the immateriality and intangibility of light on the other.” (Smythe, 106)

In my studio visit with Edgar Arceneaux he pointed out my tendency to analyze basic materials I was using. He pointed out the metaphysical aspect of wanting to start with CMYK, to analyze the basic nature of objects and their properties, and the relationship between the two. With light the basic elements are light waves that refract. Physical light is adding together RGB, and CMYK is a subtractive model. Paint is physical pigment you add together though it is using the subtractive model of CMYK. The television or computer monitor with its glowing RGB can at times highlight the inadequacies of the subtractive models. Physical paint can be obsolete in its constituent elements grounded in a physical component to produce color, the work I've been making is underlining this aspect.

Gradients are also a recurring theme in my work. Gradients are the perfect summary of light in space. As light falls off it falls off in a gradual transition from one color and/or value into another. As light filters through atmosphere it appears as a gradient. Early on when I painted photo representationally I learned that the key to making things appear naturalistic was getting the gradients correct. If the values shift too abruptly it doesn't appear naturalistic. Gradients create a volumetric sense of space. And yet at the same time gradients are intangible spaces. They are incredible subtle and sly. They are also very banal because of their overuse in popular culture. A graphic design article I read recently was titled "Are Gradients Making a Comeback?". Graphic

designers are working them into all manner of logos, product packaging and more. They are a type of banal place holder and I am using them as light and space.



Figure 8: Yellow to blue gradient from Google Images, 2017

## **BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF SPECIFIC WORKS**

I wanted to conclude with a brief generalized description of some of the work. The work has been evolving through repeating iteration and quotations. Quotations that refer to previous paintings. I consider the group of work as a

finished completed series that I will be moving on from. I have been starting out very planned and ordered and finishing the work off with these intuitive paint smears that are the finishing touch that end the paintings. I think of them as unworried, napkin like smears. This is done on top of the more carefully planed and painted underpainting. The finishing touches do not cancel out what is painted underneath. It is done in response to the bottom layers but it some how has to be done with some indifference to the bottom layers. This first one is one of the earliest works. I used it to make the larger version. There is no real smearing top layer. Only the glazing to act as light and fragment light colored shapes that are carefully painted at this point.



**Figure 9: *SkyDome*, 14" x 15" Oil and Acrylic on Canvas, 2017**





**Figure 10: *SkyDome*, 8' x 6', Oil and Acrylic on Canvas, 2017**

This larger version expanded on the spatial aspects that the smaller version implied. I expanded on it to have the sky dome in the back to create a vertigo sense of space. I was enjoying using fragment paint chips to insert on top that functioned as fragmented object like space fillers. The different paint was poured and dried at different times, this made me think of the paint chips as fractured time. The paint chips are physical yet nonfigurative but when placed on the painting it has to appear as existing in space; different times existing in a single view of single space.





Figure 11: Scanned acrylic paint chips, 2018



**Figure 12: *Untitled*, 5' x 4', Oil and Acrylic on Canvas, 2018**

I made repetitions on these themes of space and compressed time. The photo-realist images seemed to add a different sense of time and space. I wasn't sure if the photo realist parts would look like their own space or flatten out into a sticker-like add-on. The idea of photorealism returning as a painting of a flat photo-object. Or is it merely creating a different time interval? I do not know. The unclarity of space and form seems to me to create a kind of noise where nothing is centered. The tension of the surface was intriguing me here. The tension of

illusion and surfaces was referring back to the Google Images of hands touching water. Perhaps because I wanted the work to exist as flat surface and also as trompe l'oeil space. I was starting to think of other flat surfaces from my daily life such as dirty screens, my dirty car window. After all the car itself is a kind of picture making device.



Figure 13: *Untitled*, 3' x 2', Oil and Acrylic on Canvas, 2018





Figure 14: *Untitled*, 17" x 14", Acrylic on Canvas, 2018

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