

Blank Expression

an exploration of
transitory values
in painting

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an exegesis submitted to AUT University in partial
fulfilment of requirements for the degree of Master of
Art & Design.

ATTESTATION OF AUTHORSHIP

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person, nor material which to a substantial extension has been accepted for the qualification of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning, except where due acknowledgement is made in the acknowledgements, or where I have previously written it myself under these same conditions.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, consisting of a stylized 'R' followed by a horizontal line and a small flourish.

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Preface

The following document is intended to be accompanied by a future exhibition in November 2012. Images from this exhibition will be included in this document after the exhibition has taken place. As a partial requirement of the Master's of Art and Design programme, this document will be largely in part image based.

Blank Expression : an exploration of transitory values in painting.

This visual arts research project explores colour and composition as both the mediums and the subjects of painting. In particular it explores possibilities for colour to deictically question its own values, and for composition to ask questions of the rhetoric as they arise from the shifting relations of paint and support, and in interaction with historically established perspectives on colour value (aesthetic conventions) and of composition as a means of recidivism.

The approach taken is to mediate between the playful and the formal, an approach that aims to avoid simply proposing either an anti-aesthetic, or another hieratic system of colour usage and/or structural values. Instead the project aims to celebrate and extend an experience of colour and composition. The project remains open to multiple modes/codes of painting, including the figurative and the abstract, the systematic and the improvised.

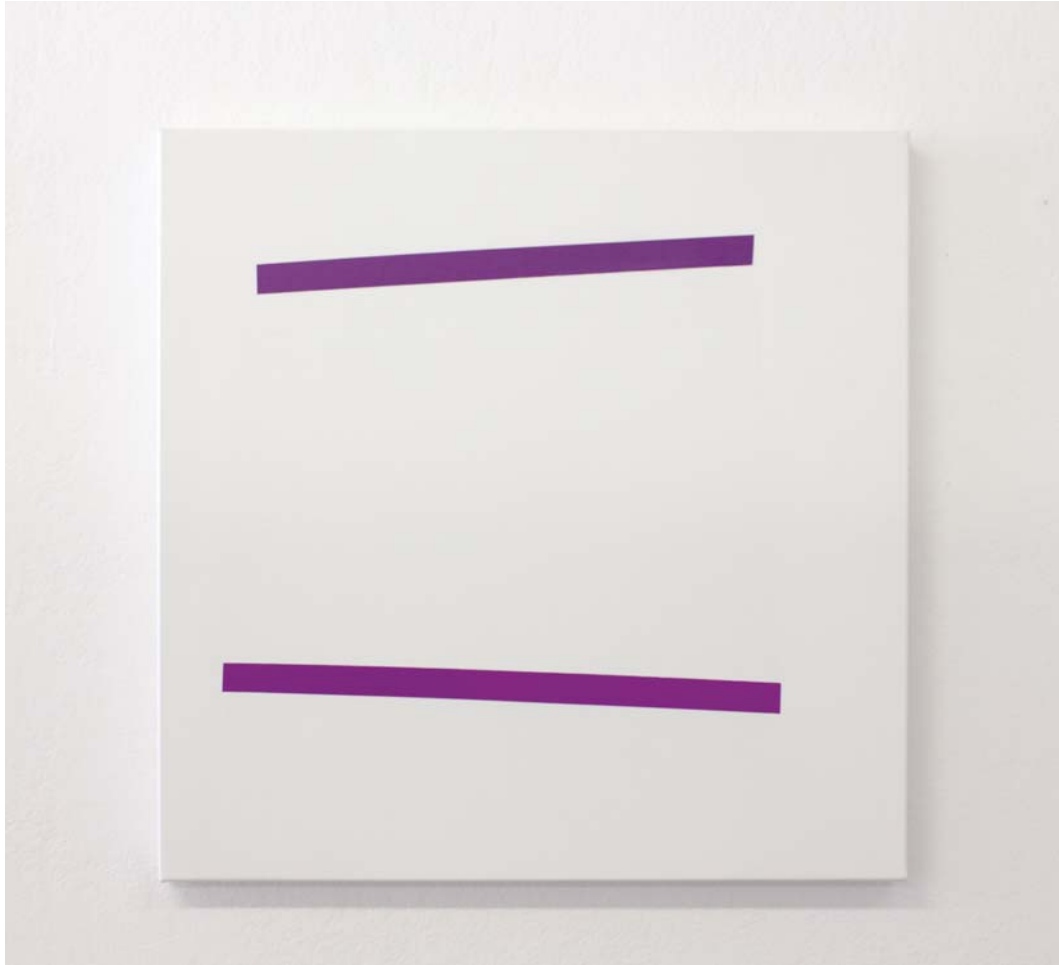


Image: Space Face
24" x 24"
Oil on Canvas
2012

Two purple slabs of colour dominate the field of white, a false illusory space is created between the lines, an area masked off between the right, left, top and bottom edges is painted white and left to dry. The space outside the delineated area is also painted white.

The Irony in Being Earnest

It could be argued that modern art is generally ironic, because until recently it has utilised various methods to create distance between art and its audience as a device in the context of the multiple truths of post-structuralist thinking. The capitalist influences of the art market through dealer galleries, “art celebrities”, and the apparent aggressive intellectualising driven by another market, the universities. All of these factors could be said to be referenced in my paintings due to the following attributes:

- a) painting itself as model with emphasis on material values in its production.
- b) my work’s visual similarity to previous modes of abstract art.
- c) that the project references a basic neurological principle that things look, sound and feel like other things.

A particular green could evoke the sensation of citric acid on the tongue, or a red could invoke a feeling of anger or even a memory of a particular dress in a closet. A particular shape could be related to a real estate agents business card, a mountain or a housing complex. A compositional element such as a simple line in a painting could relate to the architecture of the space that the painting inhabits, thereby making that painting specific to the site of its making and display.

My visual conversation in the production of my paintings and the conversations that arise (in showing or perusal after viewing) between the audience and the painted object do not seek to open up questions of historical or theatrical irony. However irony can be perceived in the humour or wit of the paintings, in the use of titles as a device to throw the audience off the scent, and in the sharpness of line coupled with the “bendiness” of form presents to the viewer the dual roles of exactitude and rectitude implicit in production.

There is an added, implied irony in the use of colours/paint that are heavily saturated on application, but the use of, at other times of these same heavily saturated colours in muted modes. These can have the effect of not sitting specifically or easily in the original and clearly defined chromatic range. Furthermore for me, the author of these paintings, there is also the question of the audience: perhaps an informed viewer may easily know that these paintings can be linked to minimalist variations of contemporary art, but can s/he recover from the signs/marks/fields that these works are not part of a revisionist project where I seek to position myself in a pantheon of painters? This I feel is an important part of the conversation. Do they get the impression that I’m not looking back with any particular focus, to try and reclaim something which is apparently lost in art history or even trying to resurrect old strategies of making and thinking about painting?

Dualities and ambiguities are present and presented in the work. There is plenty of room for a viewer therefore to suppose/perceive polar opposites of intention in my painting. The audience is presented with choices, but those choices are not of particular paths of thinking or approach, but a range of choices both made and avoided by myself. Questions of choice will always arise in the viewers mind, but the objective is that will not be able to make a definitive judgement of my intentions.



Image: Internationally International
22"x24"
Oil on Linen
2012

A mistake kept: too much solvent mixed with the neutral burnt umber, burning it again after the pigment (umber earth) has already been subjected to flame. a bluish white is the background colour, seemingly brighter than the wall behind it. Top most and bottom most stripes are wonky; a tap of the hat to all wonky painters.

The main point of contention I hope they will find is a separation of style, both denoting conceptual and contextual paradigms of Representational Painting (representations of nature), Abstract Painting (metaphorical representations of nature) and Non-objective Painting (images of mental concepts). The irony apparent here to me is that all these terms could be attached to any painting, in fact any piece of art, in history.

The viewer shouldn't be able to determine my exact intentions I hope. But I can, like most artists I have a set of apriori rules around the making of my work it would perhaps help to further understand the conceptual basis and contexts for my practice if I discuss them here.

RULE 1: No Representational Painting, No Abstract Painting, No Non Objective Painting.

An internal discussion that I have when painting is how to travel between the three points of stylistic and operational modes: Representational Painting, Abstract Painting and Non Objective Painting, without arriving too closely to any of them conceptually or settling stylistically in any of them for too long. Whilst trying to find a 'middle ground' (which could be perceived as a posturing of personal positioning) or a place of reconciliation (righting a wrong, acting as a marriage counselor), which is, in effect, a conversation that I have no interest in continuing. So the process of maintaining the drift is the paramount point of this rule. To go between, around, and/or through the destination. But then there is always a time when these principles conflate upon each other, and this is also worthy of discussion. With reference to Lyotard, to me a relevant advocate of postmodern theory, (Lyotard, 1984) there is a supposition that the most interesting things happen when dualities which are based on the same ideal collide with each other, i.e. capitalism and socialism, (both being intrinsically aligned with monetary value systems) or even aesthetics and anti aesthetics (both concerned with the value of beauty and taste). In this collision, after the initial aggressive contact, schisms are discovered, and it is here where Lyotard delineates a parallel space to that which my Rule 1 occupies.

Much has been written and studied in the spectra of colour, from it's chromatic values in scientific fields to the more whimsical effects that it has on us as humanity and also in a societal sense. From Caesar's purple, sourced from rotting shellfish that only the emperor was allowed to wear on punishment of death, to the present everyday use of Red to denote a warning or that harm awaits. But as colour is situated in an infinite spectrum, much like scale, how can it ever be located? When the word 'Colour' is thought of internally, what colour springs to mind?



Image: 2.5D
18" x 20"
Oil on Linen
2011



Image: 2.25L
18" x 20"
Oil on Linen
2011

A diptych made to ridicule itself: 2.5D is in reference to the idea of painting not occupying an object-hood; flatness not equating to thickness, as everything in the universe is made of matter, this statement is incorrect. 2.25L punishes 2.5D for being so literal, the orange referencing the popular drink Fanta, a personal preference is to let the beverage go flat, as to be easily consumed.



Image: Brick Squad
24" x 24"
Oil on Canvas
2012

Despite it's initially obvious brickish qualities, this painting could be the inside of a floating room as well. An idea around and through the practice of isometric drawing, a perspective device locked to the ideal of a 35° angle, with the edges of the field subverted, no parallels. It's colour combination could be linked to poisonous amazonian tree frogs and in the same breath as a logo for an agricultural vehicle manufacturer, possibly the same kind out to destroy said rainforests.

RULE 2: No Fixed Colour Palette – all colours are equal, black and white to be considered as colours rather than tones as is oft used in colour theory to simplify the complexities of colour.

Suggested Guidelines

1. Cultural or societal attachments to colour are not to be considered in production of the paintings.
2. Discordant or harmonic colours are not to be thought of as either complementary or polar opposites, but as separate entities co-dependant on each other's existence.

By reducing the use of highly contrasted tonal values in my practice, I seek to establish a more rigorous understanding of chromatic value, one where each colour is indeed its own, rather than a colour being subdued or deepened by white or black. In terms of what I understand of primary colours, the denoting terms of “warm” and “cool” are an added concept of chroma, in everyday language about colour it is revealed that we know about this. As an example we could take a description of a colour, call it ‘greenish blue’, or ‘reddish yellow’. By combining pigments, we have already altered the basic composition of colour itself, so to describe something in terms of tonal value alone “light green” for example, is not that an accurate description when there is always more than one pigment at play. But then there is also the fact that some of these colours are not mixed pigments at all, but mono pigments, and still fit into a description of “greenish blue”, or “red-dish yellow”. A particular pigment I have been working with this year is an incredibly bright orange, but when Titanium White is added it turns into a lurid pink. So what are we to make of these aberrations? What can be said of colours that do not do what they are told?

As a means of speculation, I tend to think of what a spectator might consider as an unnatural colour, meaning a colour that does not readily make itself available in nature. By this I do not seek to find rare colours, or to create a parlour trick, but to highlight the tendency that colour has to not be pinned down. But seeing as colour is a product of lighting conditions, surface reflectance, our eye's colour cones and the brain's ability to process this information, is there really any colour that can be considered unnatural? For example, fluorescent colours are a relatively new development in paint manufacture, one that is readily considered as a manmade product. A recent tactic that I've started to employ is that of the dulling down of fluorescent colour, to impart limits on its vividness to see how this affects the spectator. The idea of using the unnatural colour acts as a distancing aspect to the spectator as well, a kind of weak force field that anchors the viewer in the position that the paintings are there to be experienced in an abstract fashion, rather than being representative of anything readily available in nature.

In *Philosophy of the Flesh* (Lakoff, 1999) he states “We see colours as inherent in things. Blue is in the sky, green in the grass, red in the blood, yellow in the sun. We see colour, and yet it is an artificial construct of our brains and perception, just as illusory as any other thing we see as real, the moving sun rising past the edge of the stationary earth for example. Just as astronomy tells us that the earth moves around the sun, not the sun around the earth, so cognitive science tells us that colours do not exist in the external world. Given the world, our bodies and brains have evolved to create colour.” That colour is in itself not about any cultural paradigm, that we attach these values onto it, It could be taken as a truth that colour plays an important part in cultures. and by what we choose to prescribe various hues, and could be taken as interactional, but the interaction is all us, because colour, as we experience it, does not occupy a physical part in the world.

Our experience of colour is created by a combination of four factors:

1. Wavelengths of reflected light.
2. Lighting conditions.
3. The three kinds of colour cones in our retinas, which absorb light of long, medium and short wavelengths.
4. The neural circuitry connected to these cones.

I think it would be important to add a fifth factor to Lakoff’s combination, that of:

5. Cultural and Aesthetic Values

Lakoff states “Colours are not objective; there is in the grass or the sky no greenness or blueness independent of retinas, colour cones, neural circuitry and brains. Nor are colours purely subjective; they are neither a figment of our imaginations nor spontaneous connections to our brains.”

“The philosophical consequences are immediate. Since colours are not things or substances in the world, metaphysical realism fails. The meaning of the word red cannot be just the relation between the word and something in the world (say, a collection of wavelengths of light or a surface reflectance). An adequate theory of the conceptual structure of red, including an account of why it has the structure it has (with focal red, purplish red, orangish red, and so on) cannot be constructed solely from the spectral properties of surfaces. It must make reference to colour cones and neural circuitry. Since the cones and neural circuitry are embodied, the internal conceptual properties of red are correspondingly embodied.”

“Subjectivism in its various forms – radical relativism and social constructionism – also fails to explain colour, since colour is created jointly by our biology and the world, not just by our culture. This is not to say that colour does not differ in its significance from culture to culture. It clearly does. Rather, colour is a function of the world and our biology interacting.”



Image: Black Smithers
20" x 40"
Oil on Plywood
2011

Initially started as an experiment with different surfaces to paint on, this painting had its positives and negatives. As a substrate the ply wood produced an easy, gliding surface but its recesses at the edge of the surface were too harsh. The initial ideas of objecthood were too pronounced. The colour combination of matt, absorbant white and a purple that was so dark so that it seemed black were the highlights. a question was asked of this painting; are we so used to an idea of monochromatic paintings that we judged the purple to be black?



Image: Parallelysis
30" x 30"
Oil on Canvas
2012

Started as a title begging for an image, the conjoining of parallel (extending in the same direction and never converging) and paralysis (loss or impairment of physical movement). An idea springs to mind of being locked in between two ideals, floating in stasis, or even being thrown in directions without any means of physical direction.

In *The Differend* (Lyotard, 1988), he proposes in the Preface “As distinguished from a litigation, a differend would be a case of conflict, between (at least) two parties, that cannot be equitably resolved for lack of a rule of judgment applicable to both arguments. One side’s legitimacy does not imply the other’s lack of legitimacy. However, applying a single rule of judgment in order to settle their differend as though it were merely a contest made legitimate by law would be inappropriate to (at least) one of them (and/or both of them if neither side admits this rule).” In an article on iep.utm.edu, Ashley Woodward states “A victim, for Lyotard, is not just someone who has been wronged, but someone who has lost the power to present this wrong. This can happen in many ways, through a silencing of the victim, or that wrong done to the victim cannot be translated into its terms; the wrong may not be presentable as a wrong” (Woodward, 2005). As an exercise in terms of my practice, you could think of the parties as (1) the viewer and the image and more importantly (2) colour and what cultural and aesthetic values we impart on it.

As the viewer, how are we to confront or propose a resolution to an image that cannot answer back through speech, or through an apparent lack of aids to the viewer through visual language. Can an image present itself in a way that it is not misunderstood? In terms of my practice, I reference the visual structure of Abstract Geometry, but I’m not necessarily concerned with ideals of Minimalism or thoughts on Modernity. That of visual language in the context of a history of painting could provide some answers, but the image itself has no say in where it is located in history, only the viewer and (of probable more importance) the maker can locate it.

In relation to colour, the argument follows. Colour and humanity have no shared language of their own. Colour does not see humanity, so the fact that we can see it makes it the victim. Colour is blind in this way. Colour is also deaf to our pleas of conformity. So how does one argue on the side of colour when it is mute, deaf and blind? If it has an argument against the rules we impart on it, it becomes untranslatable, having no voice of its own and no way of presenting its case. So in this case you could call colour the victim, or the wronged.



Image: Intentionally Intentional
24" x 24"
Oil on Canvas
2012

An image reminiscent of desk planners, the reverse of painting stretchers, an octagonal road sign, a geometrical slide. The orange has been subtly manipulated in the four separate instances of it's application, darker proceeding to lighter. the cream inner field could be likened to cake filling, offering the savoury to the citric.

RULE 3 : No Set objectives on Compositional elements – A plan of composition may be set at the start of a painting but may and will change as time goes on, depending on how ‘finished’ the painting is.

Suggested Guidelines

1. Scale Limitations – no painting shall be smaller than 16 x 16 inches or greater than 40 x 40 inches. Too small and the statement is not carried, too large and the statement becomes lost.

Breaking the Rule – Scale to be treated as spectra

As colour should be treated as spectra, then the possibility for scale should do so. As humans we have a limited sense of scale due to perception and our embodied minds, and the possibility in breaking the rule here is that no scale format for the production of painting should be dismissed.

2. No ruled lines – measurements may be taken to establish points but there will be no line between them. Masking tape may be used but no straight edge may be implemented in execution.

3. Square / Off Square format to be utilised at all times.

How does the square format function in painting? It seems probable that the square was used by early abstract artist's to break away from the traditional format of portrait and landscape, perhaps Malevich, the initiator of abstraction in the west, himself used it as such, it seems logical that this in part informs his original use of the square. Malevich for the first time showed his black square(now at the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow) at the last Futurist Exhibition 0,10 in 1915. The square itself needs discussion. Geometry suggests stability to us, a concrete idea that cannot be subverted. Angles and lines keep in each other in check, the symmetry of a square or an equilateral triangle form the basis of this assumption. The triangle is a very pure and simple geometric structure, but because of its triple aspect it appears as not so stable as the eye moves around its salient points but a square by contrast has gravity and a gravitas of stability that is insistent upon us, that it is not to be taken lightly.

In my earlier practice I attempted to disrupt this use of perspective or an idea of ideal geometry. I have used a 'true' square canvas e.g. 1000 x 1000mm to set up a paradigm that conformed to the ideas above but then I have also used canvases that are slightly longer on one edge so they sit in what I like to term 'un-square' e.g. 1000 x 1010mm. What this creates in the viewer is subliminal disruption of their expectations which set up an unspoken question about truth or veracity in painting. Which truth value do we follow? Are we able to be deceived as to the truth or is the truth a variable thing? Where does truth lie in the viewer in painting? Is the truth a learned thing or does it lie in the educated subconscious we call intuition? Can both areas be accessed? In my work I like to challenge people's perception of the truth by presenting truths and fictions with or next to each other, knowing that on some subtle level I will unsettle that person's presumptions about the truth inherent in a painting, and even my intentions for that painting's impact on them. The first basis for the rule of scale in earlier aspects of process allowed for a comfortable focus for the viewer. The thinking was that if the image presented was too large then eye would have to roam around the image, making it monumental by implication. Secondly it had the practical function for me the artist to not unconsciously fill up the painting with too much visual information. If the painting is too small then the viewer feels compelled to get close to the image, either physically or mentally, contorting himself/herself into an uncomfortable perusal. In terms of breaking this rule, whereby deflating the area used, or expanding it to a monumental state could open up new avenues of exploration. If the same amount of information is given on any canvas, will the scale even matter?

The masked line vs. the straight line is used as a consistent untruth in this practice. The crispness of edge is used to placate the geometric forms used, to make them real in the viewer's mind's, but our eyes can see that something's amiss. So the connection between our vision and the process of the mind develops a glitch and usually the first instinct is to blame the eye, for who hasn't heard the term that our eyes are fooling us? It can be a lot for the viewer that it is in fact our minds that are playing the trick here.



Image: “ — ”
15” x 16”
Oil on Canvas
2010

An example of an earlier series, where the parallelogram held dominance. The repetitive nature of title and composition coupled with the differing scales of work and colour choices in the series helped to establish the current mode of thinking and producing. The singular title for the works in the series was inspired by the use of “Untitled” as a common place mode of titling artworks. By replacing it with a symbol used commonly to denote where a space should be, a duality is presented. The empty space is occupied by its own signifier.



Image: The Lozenge
40" x 40"
Oil on Canvas
2011

A composition that grew from it's central focus of two squarish forms, the lines coming from these forms hint at depth or shadows or both. By being lighter than the central motif, the initial response is to think of the darker areas as being a void or a sink of light.

RULE 4 : Craft Values to be held at high regard – no painting on sub standard materials or pre-used surfaces.

A decision to use oil paint is also a deliberation worth examining. Oil paint doesn't dry quickly, so you have more time to work with it. It's considered as a traditional medium as well, originally created as a way of lending more life to fresco paintings, as well as being a more stable medium as opposed to egg tempura, which had a tendency to go off and discolour before modern chemicals were added. Oil paint is the most impractical material to use for what I'm intending. An acrylic based would on the face of it seem much more practical it dries quite matte, is easy to use once the proportions of medium are right, and when used against masking tape it dries so quickly that the edge is to all intents and purposes, perfect. A vector-based practice (CAD, Adobe Illustrator) involving typical design programs could speed the process up, providing a linear approach where each decision can be saved, re-used, and reinterpreted. I could also use enamel spray paint as a practical alternative medium. But the innate difficulties of traditional oil paint bring into play the artist's hand, the 'heroic' struggle with the medium and its ultimate conquest. Oil paint is seen as a true painter's medium, hard to master, bad for the health, and impractical to use because of the supposed difficulty in application and its tendency to become muddled through impatience or lack of thoroughness in practice and application of the medium. This is what lends oil paint its lofty status. It's difficulty lies in the mastering of one's own patience, to realise that an image's formation is not as "instantaneous" as an image seen. Working through these issues of self and object and mastering the medium, however reveals endless subtle plastic nuances just not attainable in any other material/medium. Another bonus of oil paint itself, is the property of the pigment's suspension in oil, gives it an integral luminosity and its colours are historically proven to be, when applied properly to the correct substrate, very stable. The craftsman/craftsmanship relationship is both celebrated and thrown into doubt by a subtle subterfuge and undermining of nuanced clues as developed by the history and lineage of the masters, from Jan van Eyck, Piet Mondrian and Gerhard Richter to the present. But in here lies a problem as well. For this type of painting, as stated before, oil paint is probably one of the worst things to use. The crispness of line will be subverted at times by the medium of oil, leaking and making its way under the tape due to capillary action, to create blurs and smears. By deploying the weight of history and the authority of oil paint a paradoxical question develops.

And in this question of deliberation versus chance brings us to the next rule.

RULE 5 : Exactitude and Rectitude – What needs to be done correctly, what needs to be corrected and what can be left alone.

Decisions need to be made here. What can be presented as it occurs? Does the surface need to be completely flat? Will another layer of paint rectify the problem? Knowing when to stop so everything is rectified enough so that the painting does

not become anaesthetised and lifeless, where perfection is not the ideal. A basic tenet in the physical nature of the universe is that nothing is perfect otherwise life would not exist. Matter and gravity would conspire with each other to be completely balanced, a static void, where there would be no chance of life, as we know it. As a matter of discourse we could think of our own artistic endeavours as a journey towards an ideal, the perfect painting for our practice, the installation that hits all the triggers in our audience, regardless of who/what/where their identity lies.

If we take a view of our own lives through this way of practice, we can see patterns and repetitive actions taking place. We search for things of interest, aesthetically and literally. But what happens when nothing seems to pique our interest? Is there a time when we are engaged in a constant seesawing between an ideal beauty and a chaotic dissonance? A utopia sounds interesting but the reality of it could be awful. In a place of a constant moving positioning, where ideals are marched towards but shunned at the last moment is a crux of my practice. A place where there is a shying away of exactitude, where the corners don't quite meet up. Geometry suggests precision to us and further suggests itself to be the very abode of exactitude, but what if it doesn't? To conclude, a final rule seems apt.



Image: Shaitan
26" x 26"
Oil on Canvas
2012

The dark line dominates the painting. It either propels the blue or the blue is being vacuumed into it's space. Does it matter that the line is dark green rather than the black it is imagined to be? It probably doesn't.

RULE 6: All Rules are to be considered equal, and in this equality may be broken or intentionally subverted at whim.

“In other words, every structural or “synchronic” phenomenon has a history, and the structure cannot be understood without understanding its genesis. At the same time, in order that there be movement, or potential, the origin cannot be some pure unity or simplicity, but must already be articulated—complex—such that from it a diachronic process can emerge. This originary complexity must not be understood as an original positing, but more like a default of origin, which Derrida refers to as iterability, inscription, or textuality.” (Derrida on Deconstruction, sourced from Wikipedia)

What is the point of a subversive practice with all these rules? There is a point when you have to question why to even bother to set up guidelines for yourself at all when it could be a lot more interesting and possibly a lot more contemporary to just put the brakes on one or two and see what happens. A possible argument is that when rules are broken they do not do justice to the practice, but is there justice here? Has a wrong been righted? By putting myself in a position of points and guidelines have I not locked myself down, thereby negating the position of non-position? The drift will be stopped, and I could easily find myself sitting on the fence. Chance, choice and control play major parts in the project, the chance that the whole painting will go pear shaped (or worse, be too “clean”) can be solved by either not getting it wrong in the first place or never showing it publically and letting it quietly die in the corner. By choosing a process that involves processes that are inherently prone to failure, it can hardly ever reach the “perfect” aesthetic it appears to want to be.



Image: Flagrant
22" x 24"
Oil on Canvas
2012

To be described.

Final Exhibition







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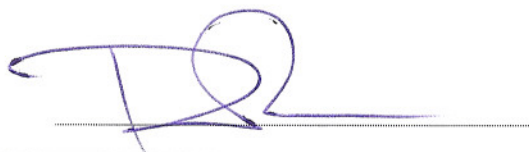
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