

Taming Mess: Remembering Gesture Through Painting

Arwen Flowers

2024

Exegesis in support of practice-based Thesis

Master of Visual Arts

Auckland University of Technology.



Abstract

Key Words

Body Memory / Housework / Affective relations / Domestic Surfaces / Painting / Gesture

This practice-led project in painting examines embodied memory acquired through repetitive housework practices and affective relations with domestic surfaces. Theories situated in the humanities suggest that learning through our body is formed by trusting body sensations and haptic perception. This project, positioned within a contemporary visual art framework, proposes that embodied memory of repeated actions gained through doing domestic housework can contribute to methods of painting. Also, during the painting process, traces of subconscious body-held and body-felt knowledge are made visible as unique coherent gestures. In this project, cleaning methods are used to tame painterly messiness with a focus on affective relations during close touch-making, encounters with surfaces, borrowed colour and abjection. This exploration will generate outcomes through interactions between the body, art materials, substrates and environments to reveal and value the body's gestures as a visible language that transforms perceptions of agency within domestic housekeeping and painting practice.

Table of Contents

Abstract	2
Attestation of Authorship	4
Acknowledgement	5
Introduction	6
Chapter 1: Surface, Margin and Space	9
Thin-skinned expanse	9
Mapping margins	12
Navigating space	16
Borrowed and abject	18
Chapter 2: Messy Gestures	24
Making a Mess	24
Taming a Mess	28
Close Touch	29
Visible Language	31
Visual Documentation	34
Conclusion	44
Image List	46
Bibliography	48

Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge, it contains no material previously written or published by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been accepted for the award of another degree or diploma or a university or institution of higher learning.

Signed: Arwen Flowers

24th April 2024

Acknowledgements

I want to thank Dr Ingrid Boberg and Dr Lucy Meyle for their support throughout this project. I could not have done this without your encouragement and expertise. You are both immensely knowledgeable, perceptive and generous of heart and time. The Visual Arts technicians were wonderful, patiently helping me attempt new skills, and I am grateful for that. I also acknowledge my family and friends for their unfailing encouragement and support.

Introduction



Figure 1. My dining room table.

“Welcome! Come in!” I say cheerily.

As you follow me inside, I quickly scan the dining table, checking it’s still tidy, though I’ve just removed the cork breakfast mats, wiped them, and put them away. We make our way to the kitchen, and you sit on a bench stool, watching me as I switch on the kettle by the sink.

“Would you like a coffee or tea?” I ask, catching your eye over my shoulder. At the same time, I’m reaching for the green rectangular sponge next to the water tap. I have just spied a few small toast crumbs dusting the countertop in front of you, and I feel remiss that I hadn’t seen them earlier. The wiping gesture is quick and deft, and I hardly notice how I do it.

This painting project proposes that repetitious housework practices produce ingrained physical responses as a form of intuitive body-movement wisdom. The body contains knowledge gained through sensory experience, touch, temperature and movement, contributing to its innate ability to navigate the world.¹ My body has internalised learned responses gained through the repeated processual acts of housework via encounters with surface messiness.²

Adhering to a level of cleanliness in my rental home and expectations around mothering are governing forces that can feel restrictive when compared to the enjoyable freedom of my painting practice. Although this research sets out to explore my body’s tacit knowledge, a secondary concern is to reconcile my antipathy towards domestic maintenance within the intuitive, smooth space of my painting practice.

My painting is an instinctive and intuitive embodied act that moves beyond representational aspirations, although I think of the resulting gestures as representations of my body in motion. By drawing on housework methods, I repurpose them into a methodology of exploring subconscious body memory and awareness of agency. My body draws from its learned behaviours, and there are moments of transition where memories of learned actions and the held attitudes motivate them to move from invisible to tangible. I aim to notice when they occur, to reside within those events of change if possible, and to record traces of their coming and going.

¹Mimi Sodhi, “Embodied Knowing: An Experiential, Contextual, and Reflective Process,” *Adult Education Research Conference*, October 23, 2008: <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2008/papers/59>.

²The environmental parameters of this investigation are related to unwanted dirt and debris that mar domestic household surfaces, also known as messes. “Definition of MESS,” March 14, 2024: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/mess>.

I seek to find agency within the transitory states, so, through methods of addition and subtraction, I uncover, corral, upend, intervene or cover over; I allow or negate the materiality of paint. These activities reflect my desire to gain control over the chaotic nature of life or disrupt the mundanity of my routine. My methodology and methods have been woven throughout the exegesis because of how they emerged to inform and occur within my practice.

My methodological thinking is not governed by the conventions of abstract expressionism but rather is driven by my response to a body-felt memory of bodily movement while cleaning domestic surfaces. As I enable my body to express its learned actions, body-made gestures that are usually invisible in the home, become visible in the context of painting. So, rather than inhabiting a consciousness of becoming an abstract painter, I'm focused on drawing upon affect relations and felt movement from my embodied memory of repetitive and ritualised habits of care.

Working within the contemporary visual art field, I aim to make visible the repetitive actions of my physical body by utilising these actions as methods for mark-making. The resulting marks in my paintings transcend being a diaristic record. They move beyond my ongoing ethical struggle with caring for my domestic environment through attempts to keep it clean and tidy, becoming artworks that carry encoded meaning associated with life as a middle-aged woman living in a rental house with my two children.

I have spent decades cleaning up residual material and unwanted spillage from kitchen benches, walls, tables and floors. Messiness in my home occurs in a temporal cycle of interrelated encounters between people, materials and spaces that converge as rhythmic patterns of accidental events, and cleaning methods control their degenerative influence on the internal geography of my home.³ As I move around its territory I carefully tame⁴ messes created at various times by myself and my family and friends, to maintain and preserve the type of environment I prefer.

The processual and repetitive housekeeping routines spill into my painting practice. Cleaning actions are designed to protect and preserve, to keep surfaces in optimal condition—however in my paintings, I meddle with the skin of my substrate by applying paint that records my cleaning-based methods. The territory of my garage studio is where and when messes become wanted and acceptable, accidental and purposeful painting methods in the context of my painting practice. During each studio session, I draw from many years of body-based learning from first-hand experience of domestic-based sensorial actions, like wiping and scrubbing with sponges, cloths and scrubbing tools, to understand how my body conveys its tacit knowledge of doing housework. I add and subtract materials to and from durable surfaces with both disregard (making a mess) and care (removing a mess). During these events, the materials converge, separate, thicken, and dissolve while traces of my gestures remain. Throughout this procedure, I observe how my body responds intuitively to the substrate, materials, and location within the workspace.

³ Brian Massumi, *Politics of Affect* (Newark, UNITED KINGDOM: Polity Press, 2015): <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/aut/detail.action?docID=4029964>.

⁴ Using the word 'tame' in relation to mess infers an ability to control it.

Philosophers Deleuze and Guattari discuss the concept of smooth space and striated space orientations.⁵ I am conscious of being affected by these orientations in both their discreet and mixed manner. As I move between the structured areas of my home, I am subject to expectations associated with the rules and requirements for housework and parenting and these govern my daily routines. In contrast, the open-plan area of my garage studio encourages free movement, intuitive anticipation, spontaneous action and unplanned moments. Within this smooth-space environment, I transform domestic-learned body knowledge into an exploration of 'affect relations' between me and the painting. Cleaning methods based on housework become methods for making, but the resulting artwork is purely about sensation derived through the encounter of making. Rising emotions and thoughts link it back to domestic housework for me, but the resulting images can communicate with authority beyond those origins.

This exegesis presents two chapters that consider the impact of my home's environment on my mind and body, and an exploration of my body's responses. Chapter One will examine surfaces and care through the influences of my home's architecture and topography. It will discuss affect theory and the dynamics of smooth and striated spaces within my painting practice, process and paintings. I will discuss how taming the material nature of messiness influences my methods, how borrowed colour transfers its affective qualities, and the influence of abjection.

Chapter Two will focus on encounters with surfaces as physical and affective moments through making and taming messiness. I will discuss how I utilise paints and liquid mediums to reflect some of the behaviour and appearance of cleansers, dirt, and unwanted spillage and how cleaning tools enable me to manoeuvre painting materials with confidence and dexterity. I will discuss the relevance of close touch and the significance of gestural markings as visible language.

⁵ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus : Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Continuum, 2004).

Chapter 1: Surface, Margin and Space



It had been a peaceful morning, and our conversation flowed smoothly. When I collected the tea mugs, I noticed you hadn't entirely emptied yours. As I rinsed the remaining tea, a full blast of water pressure ejects the last of it, splashing brown drops up the dull, cream-painted plasterboard. I felt instantly annoyed and immediately retrieved the sponge to dry the wall and faux-granite laminate bench. Lastly, I wipe the crease between both surfaces to erase the liquid smoothly; gaps in the silicone punctuate the movement.

Figure 2. Wiping my kitchen.

The interior of my home contains a mixture of aged but reasonably durable, functional surfaces that begin and end in approximation to one another. These fabricated expanses continually collect unwanted messes such as thick smears, liquid spills, and powdery residue left by my family's day-to-day living. Walls, benchtops, cupboards and appliances come in a modest selection of colours and textures. I find them unappealing, but I have no choice over the colours, tones, and finishes as the house is a rental. However, for sanitary reasons (and so I can get my bond back), I care for them as best I can.

To explore my affective bodily response to the characteristics of domestic surfaces and their margins, I document found messes, examine material and ethical care, confront gravity and reconfigure paintings. I also use borrowed colours, shades sampled from my domestic interior, questioning their affective qualities in my painting process and paintings and the notion of ownership and control.

Thin-skinned Expanse

Surfaces cover and protect, are comprised of material textures, and their continuity can be penetrated by holes and tears. In my home, they divide interior from exterior, above from below, and space from space. In my studio, I perceive the topography of substrate surfaces as expanses that participate in affective encounters through visual and dermal haptic sensations.⁶

My home's terrain consists of textural membranes that partition spaces, creating inner and outer zones. Most of the coverings are painted MDF panels and engineered veneers, so I use MDF

⁶Giuliana Bruno, *Surface: Matters of Aesthetics, Materiality, and Media* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014): <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/aut/detail.action?docID=3038578>

boards for my painting because their flat, thin, and durable qualities reflect materials used for suburban house interiors.

To clean my home's vertical and horizontal regions, I adjust my body movements and choice of tools and mediums to accommodate the effects of gravity on cleaning solutions and water. While painting, I'm not constrained by fixed-position substrates, and I can shift my body position and the substrate's orientations. I have some governance over the gravitational effects of media and will decide if I want them to run down the substrate or lay flat in a pool. Being able to unsettle gravity's effects in my painting affords me a feeling of agency that I don't experience while wiping walls or cabinets.

Surfaces can be allocated anthropomorphic qualities. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari compare the surface of the human face to a landscape furnished with holes, crevices and undulating planes; they proposed that we can flip that idea in painting so that landscape takes on aspects of the face.⁷ The notion that a surface can be skin-like infers that it is connected to a body and is functional, permeable, and durable but fragile. Both skin and domestic surfaces require careful handling and a deft touch to maintain effectiveness.

Typically, unprimed MDF requires sealing (a skin) to protect its composition from warping or expanding. Unpainted, MDF is a porous surface, easily affected by atmospheric and liquid moisture. Purposefully wetting it is a destructive act that contradicts the appropriate manufacturing care,⁸ and in my home, I would make all efforts to look after the surface of this product correctly. However, when painting, I deliberately chose to apply mediums to the unsealed board to challenge my own perceptions of care.

When I poured liquid paint onto unprimed MDF boards placed on the floor (see figure 3), the paint immediately stained the wood, so returning it to its original condition was impossible. I found it challenging to deal with the large unsealed MDF from a preservation perspective, but I experienced freedom in permitting myself to expose it to such ravages. An attitude of carelessness felt invigorating in the context of exploratory painting.

⁷ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 191.

⁸ MDF is used for construction and is designed to remain dry. Storage should always be in areas not subject to: 1. High humidity 2. Water infiltration 3. Abnormal temperature variation 4. Direct sunlight 5. Spillage of liquids such as coffee or tea. "Nelson Pine Industries Ltd," accessed March 21, 2024, <https://www.nelsonpine.co.nz/>.



Figure 3. Arwen Flowers, *Untitled* (2023). Poured paint on unprimed MDF board, 2400 mm x 1220 mm.

Gestural colourfield artist Helen Frankenthaler was initially unconcerned about the preservation of her large, unstretched, unprimed canvases in the 1960s. Her soak-stain technique (see figure 4), used turpentine-thinned paints poured onto the fabric's bare weave, leaving a halo effect on the canvas as the absorbed paint and turpentine mix sunk in. Kandinsky and Pollock had used the technique, but she was the first to use it for entire paintings.⁹ Eventually, she altered her paints to water-based acrylics partly for archival reasons, as the turps caused damage, eroding the canvas fibres.¹⁰ By initially ignoring best-practice care for the MDF panels, I gave myself the licence to not worry about rules related to archival quality or painting process conventions, which enabled me to be more explorative. As a result, I noticed affective material effects that were useful in the context of my painting practice.



Figure 4. Helen Frankenthaler pouring paint. Photographer Ernst Hass. Image © Getty Images.

⁹ Morgan Ridler, "Landscaping Helen Frankenthaler," January 1, 2006: https://www.academia.edu/29719867/Landscaping_Helen_Frankenthaler.

¹⁰ "The Abstract Soak-Stain Painting Technique of Helen Frankenthaler," *ThoughtCo*, accessed April 17, 2024, <https://www.thoughtco.com/painting-technique-of-helen-frankenthaler-4118620>.

Mapping Margins

I perceive the architecture of my home as a structured environment. The planes of surfaces meet in places of transition as junctions, gaps, and edges between cabinetry, walls, and floors. To investigate how my body might navigate these margins in painting, I took photographs of my home, focusing on where surfaces intersect and observing directional light from windows to form compositions (see figure 5).



Figure 5. Flattening surfaces and space with photography.

The surfaces of my home are flat planes orientated in three-dimensional space, but through close-up framing and blurring, the photos helped me to collapse the zones and edges into flattened composites from which to base the compositional planes that formed the back-grounding layer of my earlier works. *Wall Scrawl* was painted on three flat panels, which were later installed with moveable junctions. This process animated my gestural scrawl, giving it dimensional life as it moved across, around, up or down the space (see figures 6 and 7).

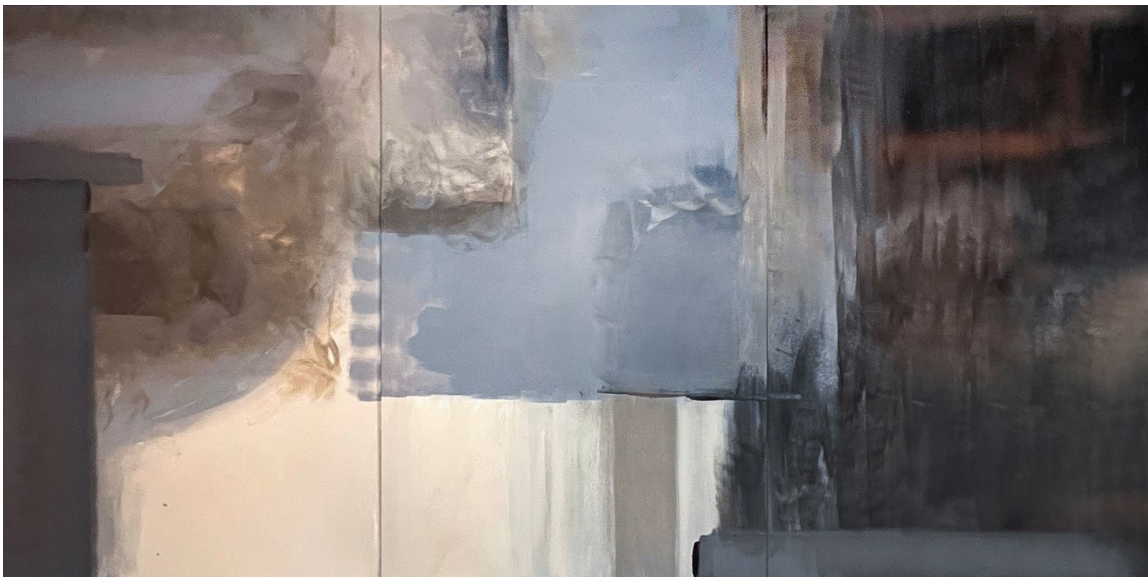


Figure 6. Arwen Flowers, *Wall Scrawl* (2023). Painted background on boards, work in progress.



Figure 7. Arwen Flowers, *Wall Scrawl* (2023). Different configurations during three studio installations.

To understand how I approach the edges of an expanse at 1:1 scale, I used an interior door as my substrate for my painting *Threshold* (see figure 8). I instinctively started at the top as I navigated the expanse of its terrain. Although the paint is contained within the edges, the gestural marks reflect an awareness of the substrate's size and shape in relation to my own physical stature.



Figure 8. Arwen Flowers, *Threshold* (2024). Paint and mediums on door panel, 1980 mm x 760 mm x 35 mm.



Figure 9. Janine Antoni, *Loving Care*, 1992. Performance with Loving Care hair dye, Natural Black. Dimensions variable. Photographed by Prudence Cuming Associates at Anthony d'Offay Gallery, London, 1993. © Janine Antoni; Courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York.

In her artwork *Loving Care*, Janine Antoni maps a territory by mopping the floor with her hair. She works right to the room's edges, spreading loving care hair dye in a gesture that references painting. As she moves across the floor, she eventually pushes the spectators out of the space (see figure 9).¹¹ After I painted *Threshold*, I questioned if I'd claimed "door space" from the landlord by metaphorically marking the entry/exit of my home as personal territory. Perhaps by mapping my path across the panel's surface, I was exercising my right to secure space—the space of my home and the space of my body.



Figure 10 Arwen Flowers, *Here, not there* (2024). Paint and mediums on board, 900 mm x 1220 mm

¹¹Jennifer Fisher and Jim Drobnick, "Janine Antoni: Performance and Its Objects," n.d., 5.

Unlike *Threshold*, I paint beyond the boundary in my painting *Here, not there*, allowing my body to ignore any restrictive feelings (see figure 10). The resulting paintwork slips over itself and over the edge of the board, escaping into unseen and open territory where my body feels free to move around the painting in my studio. Judy Millar also maps surfaces with comprehensive body-actioned marks that crisscross the whole plane of the painting (see figure 11). I imagine she allows her gestures to escape the edges to suggest a larger world. Allowing my gestures to slip free of the margins, uncontained, *Here, not there*, becomes a window to the time and place that contained my body while I painted.



Figure 11. Judy Millar, *Learning to Eat Fire* (2022). Acrylic and oil on canvas, 1800 mm x 1250 mm. Photographer, Samuel Hartnett. Image courtesy of Michael Lett Gallery.



Figure 12. Mirdidingkingathi Juwarnda Sally Gabori, *Dibirdibi Country* (2012). Synthetic polymer paint on canvas. Image from *Present: First Peoples Art of Australia Exhibition*, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki. Photographer Arwen Flowers. © Sally Gabori/Copyright Agency, 2024.

I saw First Nations artist Mirdidingkingathi Juwarnda Sally Gabori's painting *Dibirdibi Country*¹² at Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki during this research (see figure 12). The painting is an interpretation of Dingkari, Queensland, a shallow reef surrounded by deep water, which makes a good hunting ground for dugongs and turtles. I considered the painting not only a map but instructions for a successful hunting journey; however, the coloured locations potentially represented areas involved in political battles for Kaiadilt land rights to be recognised.¹³ *Dibirdibi Country* maps the important boundaries of social events and justice issues while also expressing the artist's bodily connection to them, and the painting.

After viewing *Dibirdibi Country*, I decided I could focus less on domestic-based locations as backgrounds and instead focus on the junctions, margins and edges of my body's expressive gestural markings that might also represent meeting places, fringes and boundaries of ideas, feelings, affects, people and events.

Navigating Space

Deleuze and Guattari suggest that although fundamentally different, the conceptual pairing of smooth space and striated space exists in a mixture. In simple form, they explain them as nomadic (roaming) or machine-like (institutionalised), fluid or orderly.¹⁴ I am continuously affected by smooth space and striated space orientations as I move between my open-plan garage-cum-studio and the structured and demarcated areas of my home (see figure 13).

I dwell in the striated space of domestic architecture. The walls, floors, and benches constrain me to orderly paths around my home. The rooms are segmented for specific activities, and each décor element is chosen to suit a purpose. Within the walls of my home, I am subject to expectations about parenting choices, housework necessities, and food preferences. These rules and requirements govern what I do every day. I stick to routines, schedule activities, and make lists.

However, my sense of routine and predictable structure changes when it's time to go out to my studio. I pick up the garage remote door key placed on a shelf by the front door and click the top button; it's a sensory staccato moment, but it heralds the blurred whirring sound of the garage door opening. Although I am still inside, the distant noise of the door rolling upwards heralds I am about to transition into a smooth space orientation and affective experience.

¹² Acknowledgment of Country:

I pay respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders past and present and, in the spirit of reconciliation, acknowledge the immense creative contribution First Australians make to the art and culture of Australia.

¹³ "Mirdidingkingathi Juwarnda Sally Gabori," Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain, December 5, 2023: <https://www.fondationcartier.com/en/exhibitions/mirdidingkingathi-juwarnda-sally-gabori>.

¹⁴ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*.

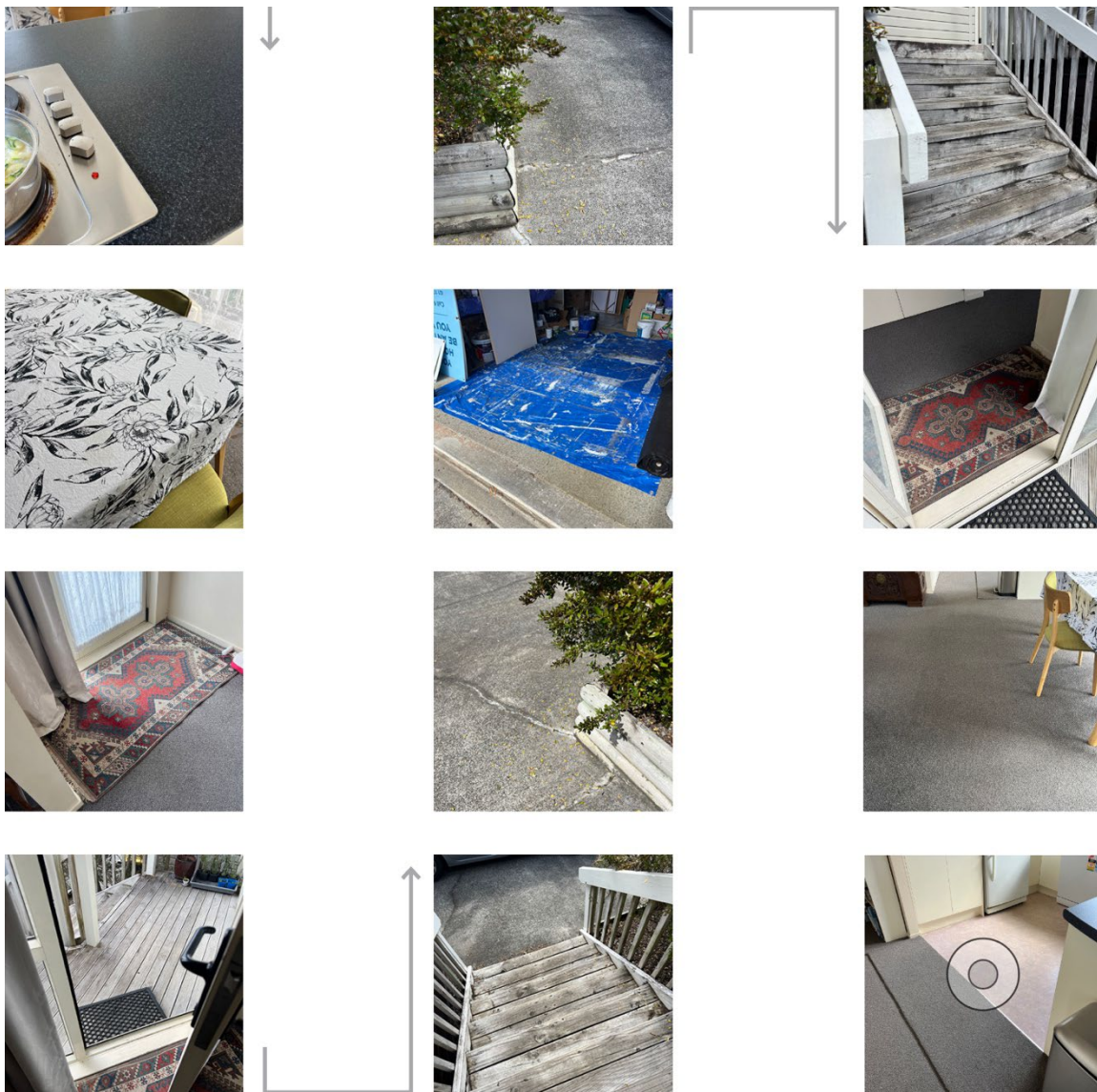


Figure 13. The journey from my kitchen to my garage studio and back again.

After exiting the house I get my first taste of freedom from the confines of expectations and imperatives that it contains. The window of open sky and the influx of fresh air are an encounter signalling to my body that I have entered a predominantly smooth space environment. I feel invigorated and peaceful; domestic life drops away as I turn to enter the garage.

While I am painting I don't feel hemmed in or confined to set movement paths. I lay out several substrates in a row on the floor, an orderly moment where striated space sensibility creeps in. This disappears as another smooth space moment takes over when I approach the flat, blank surface of each painting-to-be as if entering a desert or an arctic expanse.¹⁵ I could wait there if I wanted to, but then there would be no painting and my body's core is barely holding on to the anticipatory feeling of its arrival.

¹⁵ Deleuze and Guattari, 420.

I apply paint and remain lost in the expanses before me. Being up close feels like a smooth space zone with no horizon, just my hands and the paint. Periodically, I step away to gain an overview of the work, a change of aspect that pulls me back to consider the compositional effects of my just-laid-down paint rather than purely feeling it.

Moving between and through smooth space and striated space orientations, I explore the paint's effects as it converges, separates, materialises, and dissolves on the substrate. I revel in smooth space feelings and painterly events during the painting process. But inevitably, my painting session will end, and I must return to domestic life within the house again.

Deleuze and Guattari state that "...smooth spaces are not in themselves liberatory. But the struggle is changed or displaced in them, and life reconstitutes its stakes, confronts new obstacles, invents new paces, and switches adversaries."¹⁶ During each painting experience, routines and thoughts about domestic roles and activities are temporarily shifted or displaced within the smooth space orientation and felt qualities of the processual acts of painting. However, I cannot exist within its influence continuously.

Borrowed and Abject

Colours are found everywhere, influencing mood and loaded with meaning, and daily I make choices over those I can control, like clothing and cushions. Someone else chose the colours of my rental home's fixed décor; unfortunately, I don't like them. Although the rental colour scheme cannot be changed, I can use similar shades and tones within my paintings to explore how the affective nature of colour influences the feelings retained by my body. The colours are borrowed, not taken, because they still exist on the walls and curtains—nor do I own or expect to return them. However, I do have the power to choose specific wall or floor shades found inside my home to use in painting projects. As a method, borrowed colour allows me to examine the psychological and physical effects of living daily with various shades during the painting process and question their affective impact through the resulting artwork. My initial dislike shifts as colours are transformed once they are situated in my paintings. I enjoy their ability to behave as vehicles for meaning and the visual tension they create alongside each other when used in awkward combinations. By deliberately borrowing the landlord's colour scheme for painting, I explore the power of ownership and control—I have a say over what colours to employ in my artwork even if I don't have that same privilege in the home.

¹⁶Deleuze and Guattari, 551.



Figure 14 (left). Arwen Flowers, *Rental walls are never perfect* (2023). Paint and mediums on loose canvas.
Figure 15 (right). Rental colour scheme.

My painting, *Rental walls are never perfect* (see figure 14), was a pivotal development in employing borrowed colour in this manner. Its inception was a spontaneous moment where I quickly laid the canvas on the kitchen bench top to make a painting and chose the first colours I noticed around me: the cream walls and grey furnishings (see figure 15).

I physically reacted to the painting process by sponging on yellow and then haphazardly tipping grey paint straight from a tin, vigorously and automatically wiping the colours around with a sponge. I wasn't trying to match the exact colours of cream and grey. However, their approximation was enough to trigger instinctive body responses related to a year spent caring for uninspiring surfaces. I suspect long-term exposure to a dislike of the cream shade had worked into my subconscious, provoking an intensified memory response.

To better understand my discomfort through painting with borrowed colours, I closely examined the colour palette of furnishings in my home by taking photographs and digitally sampling four areas in each image. Then I made swatches that accurately depicted ranges of colours and tones (see figures 16 and 17).



Figure 16. Photographic images of décor colours in my home.



Figure 17. Coloured swatches made from the photos taken around my home.

To make paintings I have been using mis-tinted house paint, usually colours mixed incorrectly by paint distributors. For me, they represent unwanted, discarded décor colours of unusual shades not widely used, or various popular cream and grey tones that have been badly made. By using these shades, I transform someone's colour-mixing mess-up into a useful situation where I can borrow a colour palette as a form of control and ownership of the physical material for use in my painting.

Colour is loaded with meaning through its ability to reference locations, events, people, animals, brands or emotions. I coloured the background of my painting *Accrue* by borrowing the shades of my tabletop (see figures 18 and 19).



Figure 18. Colour swatches used to choose a colour from mis-tint paint for my painting *Accrue*.

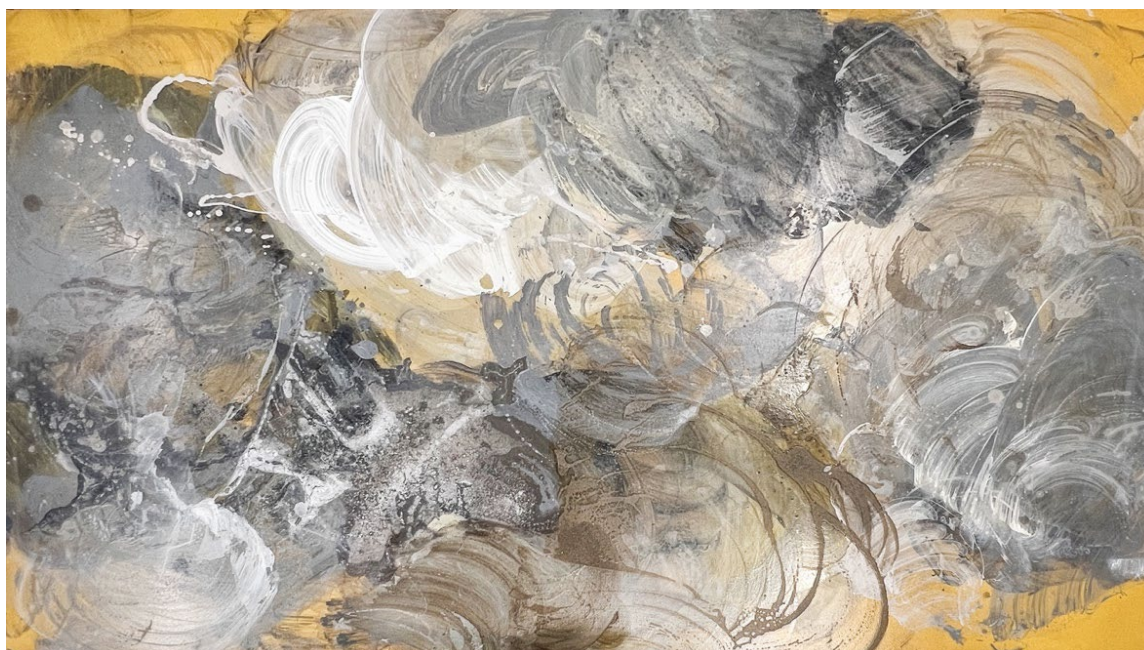


Figure 19. Arwen Flowers, *Accrue* (2024). Paint and mediums on board, 1500 mm x 900 mm.

The gold-toned mustard in *Accrue* came to represent (to me) gathering wealth, materiality, and prestige. The process of borrowing colour created an opportunity to infer meaning; the painting is not just an exercise in how I gently clean a table but also opens a conversation about prosperity.

I might not be wealthy enough to own the home I live in, but I do own the table, and I can borrow mustard as a colour and paint with it if I want to.

In the exhibition *Underfoot*, John Spiteri's paintings had an anthropological feel. He used greys, dark reds, and ochres that reminded me of colours found in ancient pottery or cave paintings (see figure 20). These colour choices, along with finger marks and dry surface texture evoke primordial life and human evolution.¹⁷ Through the affective power of borrowing colour, Spiteri influences readings of his work based on the weight of meaning gathered from widely experienced previous uses for the colours.



Figure 20. John Spiteri, *Small Amusements* (2017). Oil on canvas, 168 cm x 122 cm. Sarah Cottier Gallery, accessed April 5, 2024, <https://sarahcottiergallery.com/artist/john-spiteri/>. Image courtesy of Sarah Cottier Gallery and John Spiteri.

During a studio presentation on colour given by artist Evan Woodruffe, he noted that single-pigmented colours are “clean” and as more pigments are added, they become “dirty”. Muddied colours also have limited transparency; for these reasons, they are not as highly valued as pure clean and transparent pigmented paints. Most mis-tinted house paint colours I have been working with are multi-pigmented and become even dirtier in tone when I add more pigments. These impure dull colours, when combined with material textures that resemble food smears, tea stains, or dirt, inspire an abject response in me (see figure 21).

¹⁷ “Te Uru Waitākere Contemporary Gallery | Underfoot,” accessed April 22, 2024, <https://www.teuru.org.nz/whats-on/calendar/underfoot/>.

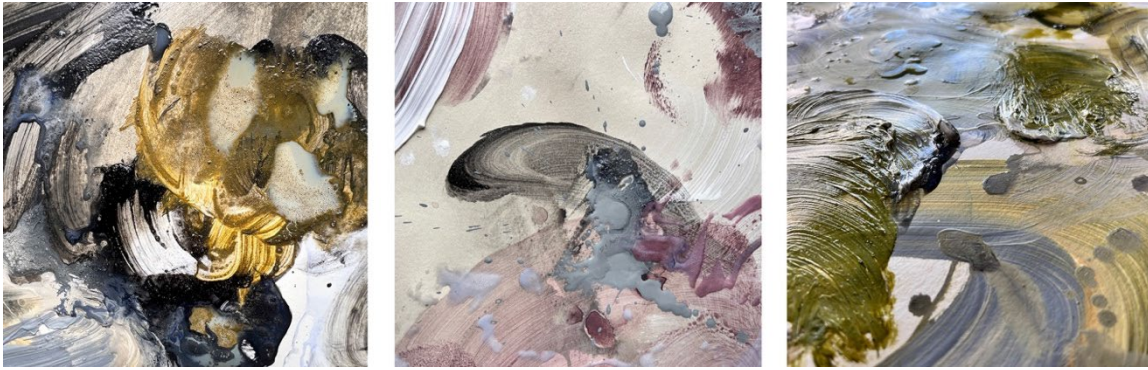


Figure 21. Abject colours and textures in painting.

French feminist philosopher Julia Kristeva used the term abjection to indicate the visceral fright humans experience when faced with their own body's materiality. The abject is the experience of fear or hatred of material impurity;¹⁸ encountering abjection through frightful, unclean or dirty colour is an affective event experienced by the body.

My home has a lot of dirty grey or cream tones. Living with grey affects my sense of well-being through its lifelessness. To me, grey is an abject colour of decay that I am forced to confront daily. I often feel I can never get the place clean, fresh or bright enough. By borrowing grey (see figure 22, *left*), a colour the landlord chose for its functional, practical characteristics, any bright or pastel paint colours are moderated by its relative neutrality. Some colours are intensely active and almost aggressive, but grey can tone them down or magnify their vibrance.

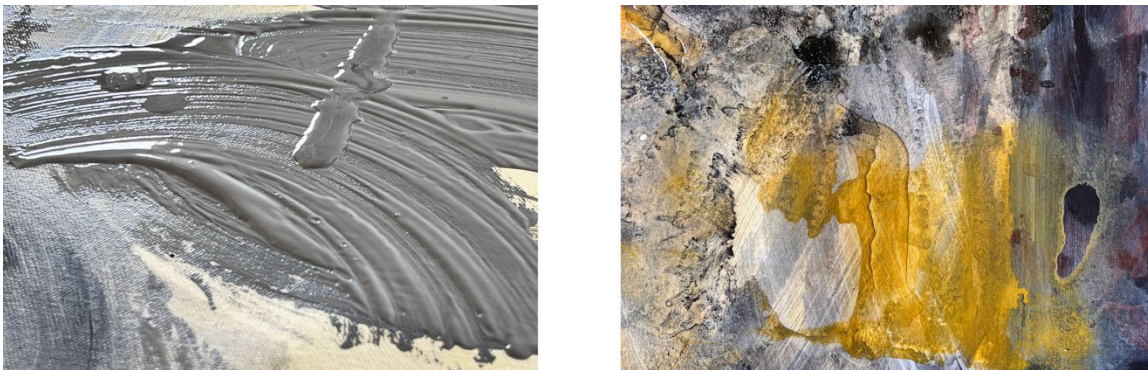


Figure 22. Grey paint colour and texture (*left*). Abject yellow ochre paint colour (*right*).

Writer Kristen Yoonsoo Kim highlights the way author Charlotte Perkins Gilman describes a home's papered walls in her feminist story *The Yellow Wallpaper*. Gilman says they are "repellent", "unclean", and "a sickly sulphur tint", which Kim believes evokes anxiety and suffocation and the fear of captivity within a woman's domestic life.¹⁹ Borrowing my rental's dark

¹⁸ Julia Kristeva first used the term Abjection in her 1980 book *The Powers of Horror*. "Credo Reference - Abject," accessed March 24, 2024, <https://search.credoreference.com/articles/Qm9va0FydGlibGU6MjM5MTQ0NQ==>.

¹⁹ Charlotte Perkins Gilman as quoted in this article by Kristen Yoonsoo Kim. Yoonsoo Kim, Kristen. Ssense. Color Story: Worry Yellow, October 17, 2019: <https://www.ssense.com/en-us/editorial/culture/color-story-worry-yellow>.

creams, acid-bright yellow, muddied grey-ish or blackened ochres (see figure 22, *right*), infuses my painting experience with personal memories of cigarette smoke residue, old coffee stains, and anxious feelings.

These sensations affect how I use my tools and paint. My painting actions can be inflected with frustration, disgust and discontent. The citric burn of orange is aesthetically brutal on my bathroom's dado rails and my hands don't like spreading it as paint. I find myself sporadically using that colour and wishing to cover it or remove it again. Browns and blacks feel gritty or blurry; I smudge them on and off but I'm never sure if I prefer more or less. Often, I respond with white or grey to lighten (clean?) the mood. Colours can cause me to push into the surface or wipe quickly and softly.

Chapter 2: Messy Gestures



A few days later, you call me, and the conversation becomes long and involved. As you speak of tough times, I wander the house and end up sitting on my bed. I tried to console you with gentle words while rubbing my finger in the dust of the bedside drawers. The finger-drawn circles became spirals that look like the supportive solution I am trying to suggest. You agree, and I wipe the dust from my finger onto my black pants, creating a grey streak infused with feelings of resolve.

Figure 23. My bedside drawers.

This chapter will focus on why and how I make and tame messiness in my paintings and how paints and mediums can reflect the qualities of cleaning products, residual materials and unwanted spills. I will also note how I apply painting materials with confidence and dexterity using familiar-to-hold cleaning tools through close-touch application methods and discuss how and why the remnants of my gestural markings appear as visible language.

Making a Mess

To me, making a mess conjures associations with food scraps left in unacceptable places, accidental spills of liquid, untouchable jumbles of dirty or untidy things, or confusing, problematic situations. I was raised to believe the saying “Cleanliness is next to Godliness”²⁰ and that maintaining hygienic practice is a moral way of life and, by association, makes me a moral person. However, over the years, I’ve realised I don’t gain a sense of moral well-being through completing housekeeping chores; instead, I maintain my home environment for the ethical rationale that it is the right thing to do as a practical act of care.

Mierle Laderman Ukeles performatively explored maintenance actions as art in 1969 when she created her *Maintenance for Manifesto Art*. She said, “I have the freedom to name maintenance as art. I can collide freedom into its supposed opposite and call that art. I name necessity art.”²¹

²⁰ Chen-Bo Zhong and Katie Liljenquist, “Washing Away Your Sins: Threatened Morality and Physical Cleansing,” *Science* 313, no. 5792 (2006): 1451–52.

²¹ Allison Johnson, “Radical Care as Social Action: Mierle Laderman Ukeles’ Manifesto and Maintenance Art,” Harvard University Division of Continuing Education. 27.

Ukeles was frustrated by how repetition and systems in the context of the progressive art scene were valued, but dismissed it as drudgery when it came to her other roles as a mother and wife. In response, she has spent her career attempting to give voice to undignified labour—her own and that of a disregarded undervalued workforce.²² To do this, Ukeles recontextualised the systems of maintenance as art, for example, by cleaning a museum as a performance piece.²³ Although I am using methods of cleaning to specifically investigate body memory, I do take account of maintenance and care in a similar way to Ukeles. I have experienced my own frustration at the lack of regard and value that housekeeping engenders, and I work through feelings of disempowerment through the agency of body-expressed gestures.

My body has learned to navigate household surfaces with control and care. Each sensorial touch is a responsive encounter mediated by skin contact and visual observation.²⁴ During these events, I notice the feeling of a perfectly smooth bench; when it's interrupted by a scratch, crumbs, or dried smears of grease. I see shadowing and reflections interrupting what should be a seamless expanse and feel changes to the smooth texture through touch. To better understand the nature of these messes in my home, I took regular photographs of surfaces and spaces (see figure 24).

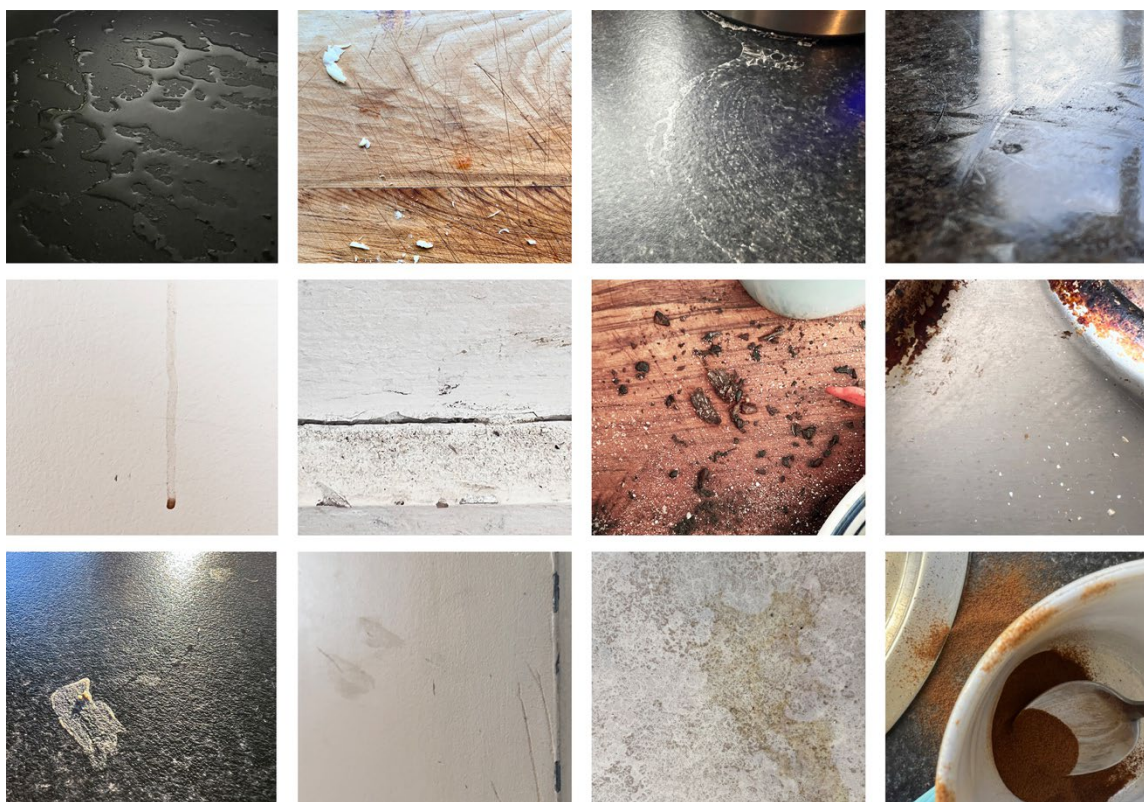


Figure 24. Photos of dirty surfaces in my home that exemplify messes are a by-product of daily life.

²² Andrea K. Scott, "Mierle Laderman Ukeles and the Art of Work," *The New Yorker*, October 28, 2016: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/11/07/mierle-laderman-ukeles-and-the-art-of-work>.

²³ Johnson, "Radical Care." 31.

²⁴ Bruno, *Surface : Matters of Aesthetics, Materiality, and Media*.



Figure 25. Paint and mediums reproduce the material qualities of domestic mess.

Messy surface textures in my home appear as transitions from shiny to matte and smooth to lumpy with each type of smear, grit or puddle. Applying paints and mediums to substrates like paper and board using sponges, cloths, and scrubbing brushes can re-produce these qualities; however, perceptions of the marks are altered when seen as elements occurring within my paintings (see figure 25).

To examine my body's relationship with domestic messiness through painting, it has been necessary to make types of messes by employing the materiality of mediums and then noticing how I instinctively or intentionally interact with them.

I work at my painting as if feeling and noticing dirt on the membrane of the countertops. The lumpy pumice-based matte paste is analogous to domestic grit, like crumbs. Thick congealed paint squishes through my cloth and fingers like cream cleanser, and liquid acrylic medium slicked over the surface of previously dried paint has a slippery consistency like spilt milk.

To create yucky material states similar to those captured by my resource photographs, I haphazardly apply thick paint and liquid colour to a substrate placed on the floor by squeezing it from a tube, tipping paint freely from a test pot, can, or repurposed ice-cream container, allowing random splashes and drips to occur in spots and lines (see figure 26, *left*). The ice-cream container might combine four or more watery colours from odds and ends of unused acrylic tubes and squeezed-out sponges, slowly mixed over different sessions (see figure 26, *right*). The colour choices have no logic; they are a hodgepodge of remnants. The sponge, as well as being a tool, also behaves like a container.



Figure 26. Splashes of paint (*left*). Messy paint container (*right*).

The sponge is a vehicle for transporting the mediums, and I am a body-as-vehicle transporting and enacting collected movement knowledge. As I squeeze the sponge, I squeeze myself around it, and it pushes back. We are both shaped by the squeezing of my hand²⁵ and, subject to that pressure, release what is contained within, spilling out onto the surface, visceral and fresh (see figure 27).

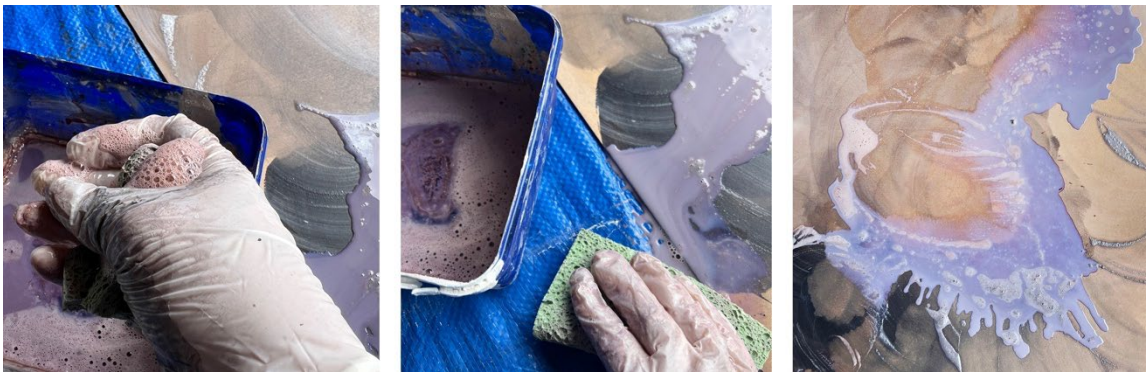


Figure 27. Bucket of discards (*left*). Paint and sponge (*middle*). Adding and removing materials (*right*).

Choices about what to accept and alter during painting encounters are influenced by noticing what is happening in and around my body. I feel my way through additive and subtractive techniques and methods, continually responding to what is happening on the substrate. I don't overthink what I'm doing and what might come next; the process allows erratic chance-as-mishap to allocate materials to the surface.

²⁵ Massumi, *Politics of Affect*. ix.

I also observe my paintings by repeatedly checking the surface of the paintwork to see what kind of sheen it has acquired. I duck to the side, crouching low to catch light reflections as they strike the board or paper, as I would assess a messy bench or cupboard door. My experience of the material qualities of cleansers and domestic-based mess is translated through painting mediums. I feel free to allow materials to interact, run away, bleed, collect and muddy, unencumbered by a sense of duty or concern normally reserved for tending to household mess.

Taming a Mess

If messiness conjures memories or images of unwanted spills and unacceptable dirt, taming the messes suggests gaining control using tools and cleaning agents. I use paints and mediums to replicate cleaning methods because they are similar in composition to soapy water, detergent and cream cleansers. Each time I apply the material, I wipe back into it—straight away, five minutes later or hours afterwards because, unlike housework and household mess, I value some of the residual paint and captured gesture.

When painting, I toy with my ability to bring the surface back to its pristine condition, but each time I add more material, I thwart that intention. Perhaps taming a mess is like taming a wild animal, a domestication of sorts, though I am not trying to domesticate my painting practice, the painting, or myself. Painting as a method of taming materials is never fully resolved either way, representing my struggles with domestic routines and expectations.

Still, throughout the process of interacting with messiness in the painting, I am conscious of how the painting is formed. Each time I paint, unexpected events or feelings occur, and I respond to them (or choose not to) as they arise. I might leave a patch of colour alone from the near outset because it has character or presence, as if alive, and the whole painting might develop based on that one spot. It's a sensitive place of creation, and I want to consciously support it by staying focused and centred. This means I try to maintain a balance between my subconscious and my awareness of what the materials are doing. I intuit how the painting and I are affecting each other.

To paint, I use large oval, grouting and general household cellulose sponges, thin cloth all-purpose wipes, foam-backed scouring pads, dish and nail-scrubbing brushes and occasionally, toothbrushes. They are familiar objects, and after years of practice working with them, I exert precise control over how they are applied effectively. For example, in my painting *Organic Smear* (see figure 28), I spread, contained, and absorbed the mixed olive-green transparent material, blending intentions of application and removal into one experienced motion.

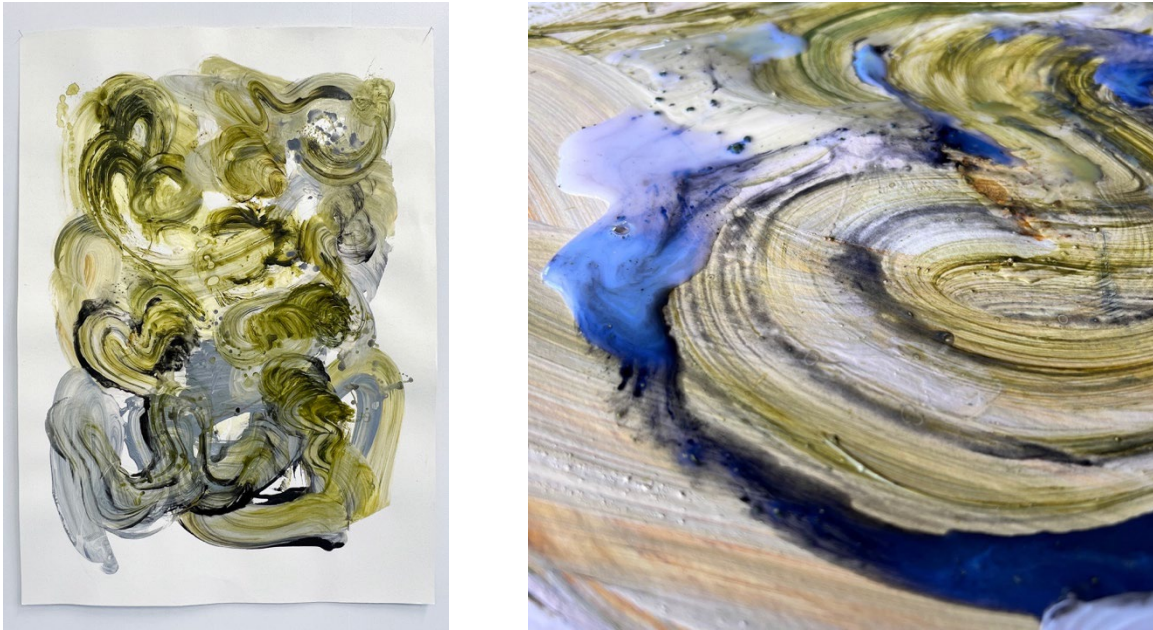


Figure 28. Arwen Flowers, *Organic Smear* (2023). Dried paint and mediums on paper, 860 mm x 1220 mm (left). Arwen Flowers, *Organic Smear*, detail (2023). Work in progress, wet paint, application and removal (right).

I keep interacting with painterly messiness until I reach a place where the artwork feels precarious but balanced, tamed but untamed. It gets there at some point, in some way, through moments of push-pull, or through and out, or this-way-then-that. It's not a still space; there is always some tension in the making process and the completed piece.

Close Touch

Housework practice utilises embodied knowledge,²⁶ and encountering surfaces in the home through touch produces an affective relationship,²⁷ particularly if the surfaces are seen as a skin-like membrane. I must also be physically near a surface to touch it, so I must make my paintings at a close range.²⁸

Transformations occur as I participate in sensorial interactions during painting through relations between my body, tools, mediums and surfaces. I am changed as the painting changes; something shifts between us. The painting also becomes a conduit for affective encounters between itself and the viewer.

According to Brian Massumi's theories, affective relations exist in relationship with lived experience. Affective events are abstract moments—unformed, unstructured potential, separate

²⁶ Sodhi, "Embodied Knowing."

²⁷ Massumi, *Politics of Affect*.

²⁸ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*. Page 544.

from feelings and emotions.²⁹ Affect has intensity that is naturally processed by our body, which plays a role in locating us within environments and helping us make sense of subjective thoughts and feelings, preparing us for action. Our awareness is amplified, creating a sense of immediacy.

When I stay in the moment and work with close touch-making methods while moving between close vision-haptic space and long-distance vision,³⁰ my body and I gather knowledge by trusting its sensations.³¹ My hands, as an extension of my body, are discerning tools that provide haptic perception through touch.³²

Traditional long-handled paint brushes distance my hand from the surface, inhibiting my sense of closeness through touch. By discarding them, I gain an intimate connection to the substrate and can assess my materials' tactile qualities, resulting in natural, uninhibited and intuitive manoeuvres.

Cornelia Elbrecht asserts that touching a person or object with a flat palm provides intense and complete information. The base of the hand is useful for pressure and pushing, and the thumb helps to execute its manoeuvres; the palm helps us to connect to surfaces and needs to be flat to be effective in this way. The fingers are perceptive of subtle functions; they can “see”.³³

My fingers didn't enjoy feeling (as if seeing) smooshed paint into carpet (see figure 29, *left*), they responded by creating a tight grip on the cloth to reduce contact with the paint, a haptic response to the discomfort of touching squidgy material on a rough surface. In contrast, wiping with an open palm is a more relaxing sensation that connects me to the surface inducing a feeling of closeness (see figure 29, *right*).

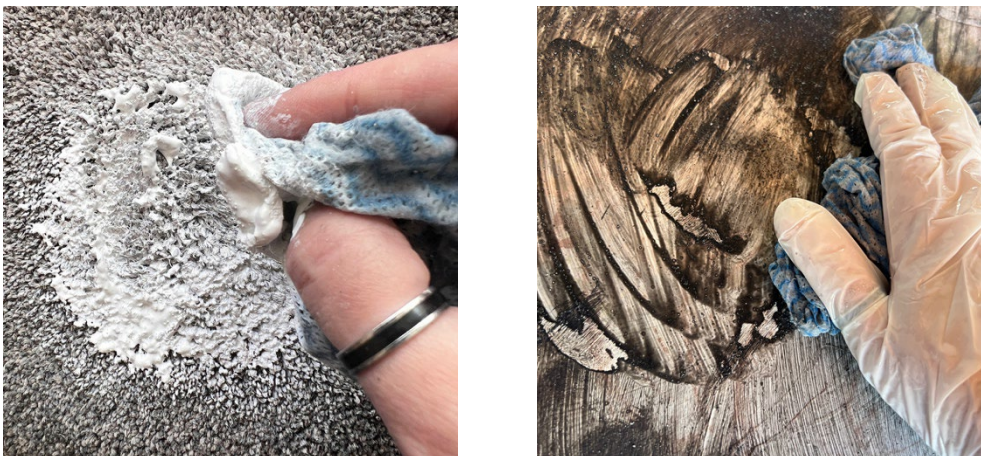


Figure 29. Painting directly onto domestic furnishings like floor vinyl and carpet, contracting fingers as touch avoidance (*left*). Wiping with a fluid, relaxed open palm grip (*right*).

²⁹ Eric Shouse, “Feeling, Emotion, Affect.” *M/C Journal* 8, no. 6 (December 1, 2005): <https://doi.org/10.5204/mcj.2443>.

³⁰ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*. Page 543.

³¹ Sodhi, “Embodied Knowing.”

³² Cornelia Elbrecht and Liz Antcliff, “Being in Touch: Healing Developmental and Attachment Trauma at the Clay Field,” *Children Australia* 40, no. 3 (September 2015): 209–20, <https://doi.org/10.1017/cha.2015.30>.

³³ Elbrecht and Antcliff. 213.

Painter Raukura Turei enjoys handling the material body of *kere* (clay)³⁴ while collecting it and pressing it with her fingers into the canvas. I almost feel Turei's haptic responses at work, the pleasure of pushing into the natural clay with thumb and fingers and the resistance of the soft linen weave (see figure 30).



Figure 30. Raukura Turei, *Maraetai Blue*, 2022. Photo by Chelsea Brown. Image courtesy of Bartley and Co. and the Artist. Raukura Turei, Portfolio, accessed September 20, 2023, https://raukuraturei.com/2022_taumauri.

Viewing and making textural artworks at close range ignites haptic responses in areas of my brain that respond to touch.³⁵ Viewers of the work have taken a closer look at the surfaces, mentioning how different textures remind them of the feeling of spilling cigarette ash or touching smeared avocado.³⁶ When Amy Sillman saw Jasper Johns' paintings, she noted that they appeared touchable and tactile, as if connecting the painting's surface through his hand to arm and body, and she could feel the textures at the ends of her own fingertips just by viewing the images.³⁷

Visible Language

Each painting captures traces of my body's motion and physicality and these markings bear a direct relationship to my body in fingerprint smears, thumb impressions or because the arc of a painted swipe is heavier at one end due to the weight of my body pressure. These remnants, like a footprint, point to the body that made them. Rosalind Krauss, notes that traces which have a direct referential relationship to their origin are indexical.³⁸ My gestural markings are a unique capture, a fingerprint that specifically infers the existence of my body, the only body that has made and could make them (see figure 31). Still, although the marks are indexical they gather further meaning within my painting through colour, texture, scale and position.

³⁴ "Raukura Turei," accessed March 23, 2024, <https://vessel-magazine.no/artists/raukura-turei>.

³⁵ Marta Calbi et al., "Haptic Aesthetics and Bodily Properties of Ori Gersht's Digital Art: A Behavioral and Eye-Tracking Study," *Frontiers in Psychology* 10 (November 7, 2019): <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.02520>.

³⁶ Comments made by peers in studio critique sessions.

³⁷ Garrels, Gary. *Oranges and Sardines : Conversations on Abstract Painting : Mark Grotjahn, Wade Guyton, Mary Heilmann, Amy Sillman, Charline von Heyl, Christopher Wool*. Hammer Museum (2008). 65.

³⁸ Krauss, Rosalind. "Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America." *October* 3 (1977): 68–81. <https://doi.org/10.2307/778437>.

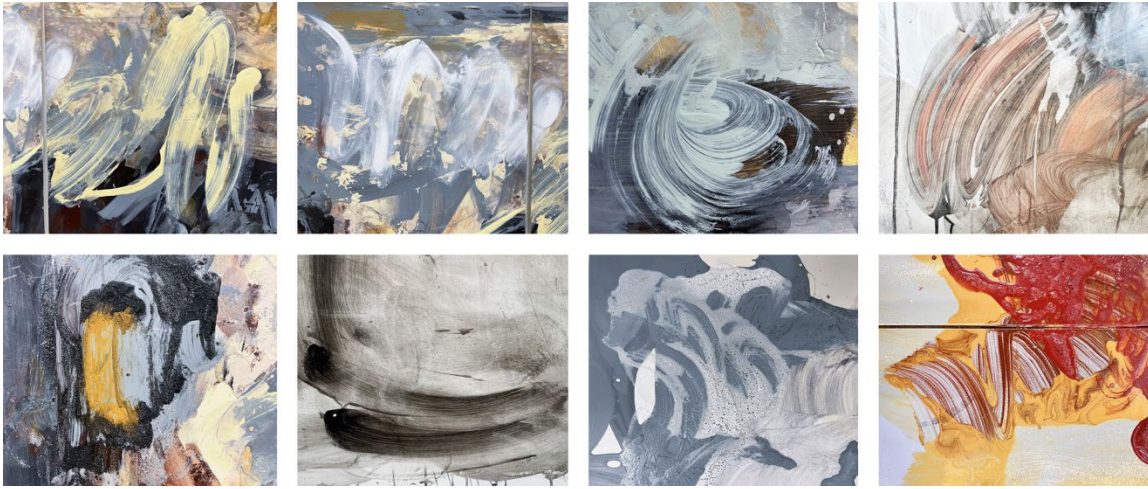


Figure 31. Gestural markings slip in and around each other.



Figure 32. Arwen Flowers, *Soft Language* (2023). Paint and mediums on three panels of paper, 2580 mm x 1220 mm.

In my painting, *Soft Language*, evidential marks appear as scrawls and shapes like capital letters, punctuation marks or glyphs (see figure 32). Perceptions of the initial reference point—a body doing domestic work—are shifted as sequences emerge from the patterns and painted symbols suggestive of words or phrases.

When I view these coloured marks, they have audible qualities via my internal monologue as a form of inner speech or sound that takes place in my mind.³⁹ This could be a synaesthesia-type experience.⁴⁰ It's as if my arms and hands have spoken with a soft but insistent manner through

³⁹ Daniel Gregory, "Inner Speech: A Philosophical Analysis," (PhD thesis, Australian National University, 2017), accessed April 16, 2024, https://www.academia.edu/34751796/PhD_Thesis_Inner_Speech_A_Philosophical_Analysis.

⁴⁰ Christine Elizabeth Bronson, "Making Meaning With Synesthesia: Perception, Aspiration, And Olivier Messiaen's Reality," n.d.

thick opaque colour, my fingers have left murmurings in thin, barely-there paintwork, and the collective actions of my body have produced layers of paintwork like white-noise static.

The decision to apply undiluted colour to highlight specific gestural elements creates sonic nuances. Flat pastel or grey paint overlap other tones, dampening or silencing the voice of previous gestures and colours. Elsewhere, I intentionally mess with any conversational dominance by wiping pigment away before it dries. Hushed, the gesture slips in and around the existing paintwork, shifting power balances. On reflection, was my body intending to liberate or restrain its voice?

Amy Sillman's paintings offer a peek into her subliminal world, and she manipulates the dimensions within them by developing an extensive repertoire of linear structures, shapes, colours, and shading (see figure 33). These elements signify moods and feelings that lend those emotive qualities to almost recognisable forms.⁴¹ Sillman studied Japanese literature before becoming a painter and spoke of Japanese as a division between image and sound, one informing the other. Her interest in this writing system's characters and sonic aspects seems to influence her work.⁴² As I produce more paintings, my calligraphic gestures accrue personality through colour, scale, opacity and movement, and voice my bodily experience, memory and perceptions as they interact within the space of the paintings.



Figure 33. Amy Sillman, *Split 2* (2020). Acrylic and oil on canvas, 182.9 cm x 153.7 cm. Digital image courtesy of The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York/Scala, Florence.

By recording my gestural motion in paint, invisible expressions of embodied movement become visible, sensory experiences that communicate the intensity of my body's lived existence.⁴³ As it emerges, this intuitive learning results in complex calligraphic and signature vocabularies as back-and-forth exchanges between the body and surface. Each documented dialogue is an aspect of personal expression affected by ethical concerns regarding care as an attempt to create order in a messy world.

⁴¹ "Amy Sillman >> Saatchi Gallery," February 3, 2023: https://www.saatchigallery.com/artist/amy_sillman.

⁴² Megan Hinton, "Amy Sillman: Provincetown Arts," *Provincetown Arts*, 2014/2015 2014, 91–93.

⁴³ Massumi, *Politics of Affect*. 45.

Visual Documentation of Exhibition

Te Wai Ngutu Kākā, Gallery One, 40 St Paul Street, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland.

The exhibition of my paintings comprised six artworks—four of the same-sized paintings hung along one wall, installed in pairs. To their right, a singular painting occupied its own space. This painting leaned against a nearby wall and rested on hand-made concrete bricks. All the paintings were made on board using mixed paints and mediums and completed during this project's final months.

The event of their installation was influenced by affective relationships, which arose as I added, subtracted, and muddled paintings in and around each other, a process reflecting my painting methods. However, despite the initial spontaneous approach to selecting works, I kept my painting *Elsewhere Thoughts* in the mix throughout the selection period as it best evidenced the methodology and methods of known and practised gestures. I installed the largest painting titled, *On a Good Day*, propped against the wall in portrait format. My original plan was to hang it horizontally, but at the time of installation, I found the gestural paintwork became activated in the vertical position. I also chose to maintain a kinship that formed between this painting's borrowed grey paint colours, its textural mediums, the grey hand-made concrete bricks borrowed from the Gallery's doorway and the grey polished aggregate concrete floor. The decision to keep the painting grounded instead of hanging it up on the wall instilled a sense of agency over the intuitive and haphazard installation process.



Figure 34. Installed exhibition. Image courtesy of Paul Chapman.



Figure 35. Installed exhibition. Image courtesy of Paul Chapman.

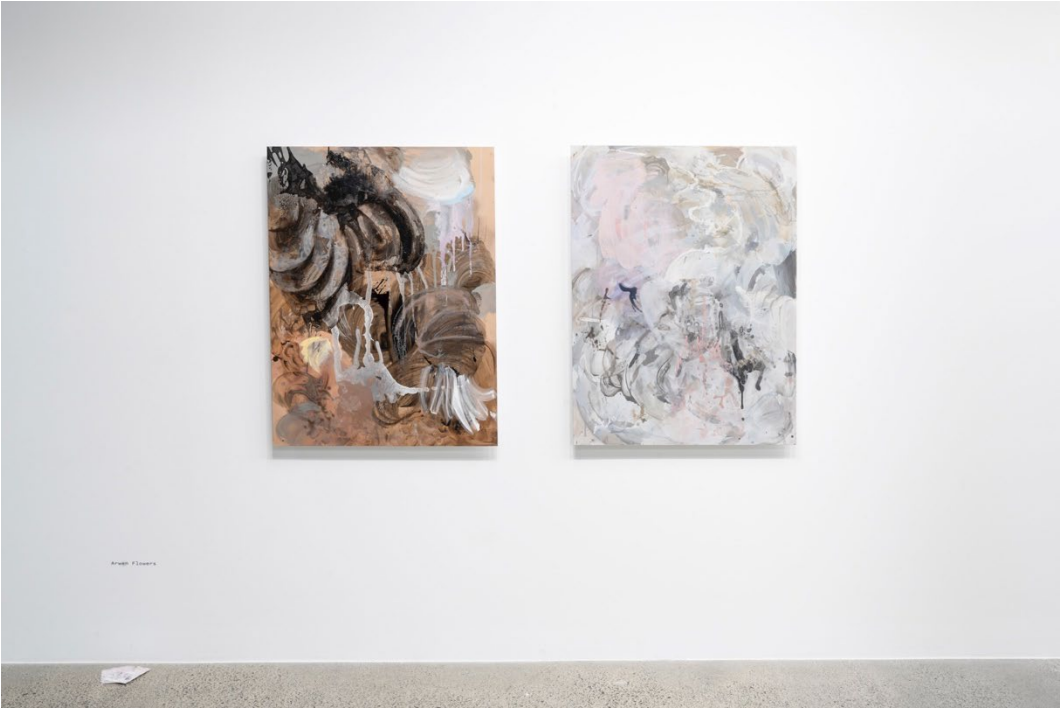


Figure 36. Installed exhibition. Image courtesy of Paul Chapman.



Figure 37. Installed exhibition. Image courtesy of Paul Chapman.



Figure 38. Arwen Flowers, *The Sixth* (2024). Paint and mediums on board, 900 mm x 1200 mm.



Figure 4 Arwen Flowers, *Elsewhere thoughts* (2024). Paint and mediums on board, 900 mm x 1200 mm.



Figure 40. Arwen Flowers, *Dispensation* (2024). Paint and mediums on board, 900 mm x 1200 mm.



Figure 41. Arwen Flowers, *Thus spoke!* (2024). Paint and mediums on board, 900 mm x 1200 mm.



Figure 42. Arwen Flowers, *No matter how vast* (2024). Paint and mediums on board, 900 mm x 1200 mm.



Figure 43. Arwen Flowers, *On a Good Day* (2024). Paint and mediums on board, 1220 mm x 2440 mm.
Image courtesy of Paul Chapman.



Figure 44. Arwen Flowers, *On a Good Day*, detail (2024). Paint and mediums on board, 1220 mm x 2440 mm. Image courtesy of Paul Chapman.

Conclusion

This practice-led painting project began through my interest in the residues of human use left in the fabric stains of doilies, tea towels and tablecloths. I began to consider how domestic messiness occurs and why I work to remove it. After years of repetitious housework practice, cleaning up messes like coffee spills and crumbs, I wondered what my body's memory of these actions might look and feel like expressed through painting. I also began this research by acknowledging I was frustrated with dividing time between domestic care and my painting practice and wondered what might occur if one informed the other.

While completing this project, I drew from many years of body-based learning. These were first-hand experiences of sensorial actions like wiping and scrubbing with sponges, cloths and scrubbing tools. Cleaning processes are inherently tied to their source in domestic work; however, once I use them for painting, they become methods of manipulating surface materials. I let go of traditional painting brushes and prioritised haptic senses as an opportunity to intimately know or see things within my body and also in my paintings.

I have gone through a rigorous journey of self-revelation, starting with examining exteriors—the configuration and surfaces of my home, the physical actions of my cleaning habits and the effects of maintenance. Then, I took an inward and instinctive approach. While drawing from body-knowledge memory as a method for painting, I questioned what care felt like and why it mattered. My body responded to the messy surfaces I made and also to the remnants of its own gestural traces; I could see them within the paint, unlike cleaning, where no traces remain to signify my presence.

Through reflection and analysis, I realise my expressive abstract paintings are something other than tracings or recordings of how I go about domestic-based actions; they are conversations steeped in the whys of my endeavours. Unexpectedly active, expressive and vigorous dialogues emerged between my subconscious and conscious self. As I manipulate materials on surfaces I built affective relationships within the painting through tone, colour and mark-making, pushing familiar methods of house cleaning away from their source in the domestic realm.

By being in the moment of making and taming messy mediums, I have explored and controlled states of wildness. By borrowing colours, using mis-tinted paint and working with and against abjection, I can whisper, shout, state, argue and question notions of care, ownership and agency. Through and in paint, my body is active, and my mind swings from arguing, approving, relenting, to at times being still, letting the child-like appreciation for material-play work its magic or intuitively, insistently working to see and hear the knowing voice of my body emerge.

The expression and variety within my body-based visual language is growing, becoming a lexicon of developing marks with encoded meaning that I can expand and amplify. I am excited to see how the intimate and sensory experiences of touchable/untouchable qualities of mediums will influence the nuances of mark-making as I navigate between and within smooth-space and striated-space orientations.

My painting space, situated away from the routines and structure of daily domestic life, enables me to exist in horizonless moments of swirling colour and gesture while exerting

some control over the scaffolding effects of line and shape. I aim to continue upending gravitational weight and making marks that weave in and out, appearing and disappearing, indetermined as they play with balance and tension.

This project has been executed through a period of intense effort and questioning, led by my ability to recognise essential occurrences in my painting practice. By pulling on the methods that belong to housework, I channelled them into a methodology of exploring subconscious body memory and awareness of agency. A sense of symmetry has emerged. My daily housework routines have begun integrating with my painting practice as I attend to each in a symbiotic rhythm, instinctively and consciously engaging in a dialogue of care and regard. By reflecting on who I am and why I do what I do, I take ownership of my actions, which provides me with a sense of authority over my life. Daily attention to cleaning chores now inspires interest rather than fuelling resentment. As a result, the paintings have moved from a gutsy, aggressive feel to encompass sensitivity and softness. Still, as I continue to record traces of my body's remembrance, the vocal gestures that emerge through the messiness of paint are never quite tamed.

Image List

Figure 1. My dining room table.

Figure 2. Wiping my kitchen.

Figure 3. Arwen Flowers, *Untitled*, 2023. Poured paint on unprimed MDF board.

Figure 4. Helen Frankenthaler pouring paint. Photographer Ernst Hass. Image © Getty Images.

Figure 5. Flattening surfaces and space with photography.

Figure 6. Arwen Flowers, *Wall Scraw*, 2023. Painted background on boards, work in progress.

Figure 7. Arwen Flowers, *Wall Scrawl*, 2023. Different configurations during three studio installations.

Figure 8. Arwen Flowers, *Threshold*, 2024. Paint and mediums on door panel.

Figure 9. Janine Antoni, *Loving Care*, 1992. Performance with Loving Care hair dye, Natural Black. Dimensions variable. Photographed by Prudence Cuming Associates at Anthony d'Offay Gallery, London, 1993. © Janine Antoni; Courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York.

Figure 10. Arwen Flowers, *Here, not there*, 2024. Paint and mediums on board.

Figure 11. Judy Millar, *Learning to Eat Fire*, 2022. Acrylic and oil on canvas. Michael Lett. Photographer, Samuel Hartnett. Image courtesy of Michael Lett Gallery.

Figure 12. Mirdidingkingathi Juwarnda Sally Gabori, *Dibirdibi Country*, 2012. Synthetic polymer paint on canvas. Image from *Present: First Peoples Art of Australia Exhibition*, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki. Photographer Arwen Flowers. © Sally Gabori/Copyright Agency, 2024.

Figure 13. The journey from my kitchen to my garage studio and back again.

Figure 14. Arwen Flowers, *Rental walls are never perfect*, 2023. Paint and mediums on loose canvas.

Figure 15. Rental colour scheme.

Figure 16. Photographic images of décor colours in my home.

Figure 17. Coloured swatches made from the photos taken around my home.

Figure 18. Colour swatches used to choose a colour from mis-tint paint for my painting *Accrue*.

Figure 19. Arwen Flowers, *Accrue*, 2024. Paint and mediums on board.

Figure 20. John Spiteri, *Small Amusements*, 2017. Oil on canvas. Image courtesy of Sarah Cottier Gallery and John Spiteri.

Figure 21. Abject colours and textures in painting.

Figure 22. (*left*): Grey paint colour and texture; (*right*) Abject yellow ochre paint colour.

Figure 23. My bedside drawers.

- Figure 24. Photos of dirty surfaces in my home that exemplify messes are a by-product of daily life.
- Figure 25. Paint and mediums reproduce the material qualities of domestic mess.
- Figure 26. (*left*): Splashes of paint; (*right*) Messy paint container.
- Figure 27. (*left*): Bucket of discards; (*middle*) Paint and sponge; (*right*) Adding and removing materials.
- Figure 28. (*left*): Arwen Flowers, *Organic Smear*, 2023. Paint and mediums on paper; (*right*): Arwen Flowers, *Organic Smear* (detail) 2023. Work in progress showing wet paint application and removal.
- Figure 29. (*left*): Painting directly onto domestic furnishings like floor vinyl and carpet, contracting fingers as touch avoidance; (*right*) Wiping with a fluid, relaxed open palm grip.
- Figure 30. Raukura Turei, *Maraetai Blue*, 2022. Raukura Turei, Portfolio. Photo by Chelsea Brown. Image courtesy of Bartley and Co. and the Artist.
- Figure 31. Gestural markings slip in and around each other.
- Figure 32. Arwen Flowers, *Soft Language*, 2023. Paint and mediums on three panels of paper.
- Figure 33. Amy Sillman, *Split 2*, 2020. Acrylic and oil on canvas, Digital image courtesy of The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York/Scala, Florence.
- Figure 54. Installed exhibition. Image courtesy of Paul Chapman.
- Figure 35. Installed exhibition. Image courtesy of Paul Chapman.
- Figure 36. Installed exhibition. Image courtesy of Paul Chapman.
- Figure 37. Installed exhibition. Image courtesy of Paul Chapman.
- Figure 38. Arwen Flowers, *The Sixth*, 2024. Paint and mediums on board.
- Figure 39. Arwen Flowers, *Elsewhere thoughts*, 2024) Paint and mediums on board.
- Figure 40. Arwen Flowers, *Dispensation*, 2024. Paint and mediums on board.
- Figure 41. Arwen Flowers, *Thus spoke!*, 2024. Paint and mediums on board.
- Figure 42. Arwen Flowers, *No matter how vast*, 2024. Paint and mediums on board.
- Figure 43. Arwen Flowers, *On a Good Day*, 2024. Paint and mediums on board. Image courtesy of Paul Chapman.
- Figure 44. Arwen Flowers, *On a Good Day*, detail, 2024. Paint and mediums on board. Image courtesy of Paul Chapman.

Bibliography

- "Amy Sillman » Saatchi Gallery," February 3, 2023.
https://www.saatchigallery.com/artist/amy_sillman.
- Bronson, Christine Elizabeth. "Making Meaning With Synesthesia: Perception, Aspiration, And Olivier Messiaen's Reality," n.d.
- Bruno, Giuliana. *Surface: Matters of Aesthetics, Materiality, and Media*. Chicago, UNITED STATES: University of Chicago Press, 2014.
<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/aut/detail.action?docID=3038578>.
- Calbi, Marta, Hava Aldouby, Ori Gersht, Nunzio Langiulli, Vittorio Gallese, and Maria Alessandra Umiltà. "Haptic Aesthetics and Bodily Properties of Ori Gersht's Digital Art: A Behavioral and Eye-Tracking Study." *Frontiers in Psychology* 10 (November 7, 2019).
<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.02520>.
- "Credo Reference - Abject." Accessed March 24, 2024.
<https://search.credoreference.com/articles/Qm9va0FydGljbGU6MjM5MTQ0NQ==>.
- "Definition of MESS," April 26, 2024. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/mess>.
- Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus : Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Continuum, 2004.
- Elbrecht, Cornelia, and Liz Antcliff. "Being in Touch: Healing Developmental and Attachment Trauma at the Clay Field." *Children Australia* 40, no. 3 (September 2015): 209–20.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/cha.2015.30>.
- Fisher, Jennifer, and Jim Drobnick. "Janine Antoni: Performance and Its Objects," n.d.
- Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain. "Mirdidingkingathi Juwarnda Sally Gabori," December 5, 2023. <https://www.fondationcartier.com/en/exhibitions/mirdidingkingathi-juwarnda-sally-gabori>.
- Garrels, Gary. *Oranges and Sardines : Conversations on Abstract Painting : Mark Grotjahn, Wade Guyton, Mary Heilmann, Amy Sillman, Charline von Heyl, Christopher Wool*. Hammer Museum, 2008.
- Gregory, Daniel. "PhD Thesis - Inner Speech: A Philosophical Analysis." Accessed April 16, 2024.
https://www.academia.edu/34751796/PhD_Thesis_Inner_Speech_A_Philosophical_Analysis.
- Hinton, Megan. "Amy Sillman: Provincetown Arts." *Provincetown Arts*, 2014/2015 2014, 91–93.
- "John Spiteri." Accessed April 24, 2024. <https://sarahcottiergallery.com/artist/john-spiteri/>.
- Johnson, Allison. "Radical Care as Social Action: Mierle Laderman Ukeles' Manifesto and Maintenance Art." *Harvard University Division of Continuing Education*, n.d., 78.
- Massumi, Brian. *Politics of Affect*. Newark, UNITED KINGDOM: Polity Press, 2015.
<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/aut/detail.action?docID=4029964>.
- "Nelson Pine Industries Ltd." Accessed March 21, 2024. <https://www.nelsonpine.co.nz/>.

- “Raukura Turei.” Accessed March 23, 2024. <https://vessel-magazine.no/artists/raukura-turei>.
- Ridler, Morgan. “Landscaping Helen Frankenthaler,” January 1, 2006. https://www.academia.edu/29719867/Landscaping_Helen_Frankenthaler.
- Scott, Andrea K. “Mierle Laderman Ukeles and the Art of Work.” *The New Yorker*, October 28, 2016. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/11/07/mierle-laderman-ukeles-and-the-art-of-work>.
- Sodhi, Mimi. “Embodied Knowing: An Experiential, Contextual, and Reflective Process.” *Adult Education Research Conference*, October 23, 2008. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2008/papers/59>.
- “Te Uru Waitākere Contemporary Gallery | Underfoot.” Accessed April 22, 2024. <https://www.teuru.org.nz/whats-on/calendar/underfoot/>.
- The Museum of Modern Art. “Amy Sillman. Split 2. 2020 | MoMA.” Accessed March 12, 2024. <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/420753>.
- ThoughtCo. “The Abstract Soak-Stain Painting Technique of Helen Frankenthaler.” Accessed April 17, 2024. <https://www.thoughtco.com/painting-technique-of-helen-frankenthaler-4118620>.
- Turei, Raukura. “Raukura Turei.” Portfolio. Accessed September 20, 2023. <https://raukuraturei.com/info>.
- Zhong, Chen-Bo, and Katie Liljenquist. “Washing Away Your Sins: Threatened Morality and Physical Cleansing.” *Science* 313, no. 5792 (2006): 1451–52.