

An Experiment in Assembling: A Generative Painting Practice

Josh Whitaker, 2025, Exegesis in support of practice-based Thesis, Master of Visual Arts, Auckland University of Technology

Abstract:

In this project, I explore how notions of systems thinking, assemblage and abstraction can be both a methodology and method(s) within a painting practice. Systems thinking describes particular dynamics and functions between various creative outputs, such as paintings, drawings or structures, in relation to each other, to space, and to me. It gives conceptual structure as to why artist's media are inherent systems as they mediate the input of creative intent to create different results. In the studio environment, systems thinking modifies the understanding of the elements present in the studio, and how they interact with each other and myself. For example, a projector grants the ability to reproduce images and video at various scales, which can become an outcome or processual tool, or the absorbency rates of differently primed surfaces changing paint application. Assemblage as a methodology posits that all matter in the described assemblage is interrelated and interconnected within dynamic relationships of varying degrees of agency and affect. A work created in colour pencil can change the way I work with a different medium by offering a new perspective on how my creative output can be mediated; this notion is extended to all elements of the studio environment as an assemblage. This methodology works in tandem with a positioning of abstraction as a process intrinsic to experience and communication, in which experience, as mediated by environment and through the self, becomes memory information, which in turn become creative actions. All these concepts work together to encourage emergence in the paintings, the creation of something new generated through the abstraction that occurs during the dialogue between me and between the works, a vital impetus of the paintings. Systems within the assemblage, abstraction and emergence are all positioned within an ecological framework which connects to grounded metaphors of gardening and propagation.

Contents

Attestation of Authorship	4
Acknowledgments	5
List of Figures	6
Introduction	8
Chapter 1: Assemblage as methodology	11
Chapter 2: Emergence	16
Chapter 3: Systems in/of Play.....	23
Chapter 4: Micro-culturing, an Ecological Framework	34
Chapter 5: Assembling.....	39
Conclusion.....	43
Bibliography	44
Documentation of Exhibition Installation	48

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 (except where explicitly defined in the Acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Signed,

14 / 05 / 2025

Acknowledgments

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List of Figures

Figure 1. Josh Whitaker, Documentation of ‘Assemblage (19.11.24 - 13.12.24)’	11
Figure 2. Josh Whitaker, Storage Trolley En Route to Field of Possibility (19.11.24 – 13.12.24).....	12
Figure 3. Josh Whitaker, Actants in ‘Assemblage (19.11.24 - 13.12.24)’	13
Figure 4. Josh Whitaker, Documentation of ‘Assemblage (19.11.24 - 13.12.24)’	14
Figure 5. Josh Whitaker, Actant(s) in the Studio Assemblage, (23.4.25)	15
Figure 6. Josh Whitaker, Arrival at Field of Possibility, ‘Assemblage (19.11.24 - 13.12.24)’	16
Figure 7. Josh Whitaker, Assembling in Studio, (5.5.25).....	17
Figure 8. Josh Whitaker, Earlier Form of Assemblage Methodology, (10.5.24).....	18
Figure 9. Josh Whitaker, Earlier Form of Assemblage Methodology, (6.6.24).....	19
Figure 10. Josh Whitaker, Beginning Stages of Painting, (22.4.24)	24
Figure 11. Josh Whitaker, Later Stage of Painting, (23.4.24)	24
Figure 12. Jack Whitten, Black Monolith XI, Six Kinky Strings: For Chuck Berry, 2017, Acrylic on Canvas, 213.36 x 160.02 cm. https://www.glenstone.org/artworks/black-monolith-xi-six-kinky-strings-for-chuck-berry	25
Figure 13. Josh Whitaker, Acrylic Paint Chips in Re-Used Tea Box, (16.4.24)	26
Figure 14. Josh Whitaker, Image Created by Scanning Acrylic Paint Chips Iteratively, (2.8.24)	26
Figure 15. Josh Whitaker, Documentation of ‘Assemblage (19.11.24 - 13.12.24)’	27
Figure 16. Josh Whitaker, Systems of Painting, Naming Colours, (16.4.25)	27
Figure 17. Josh Whitaker, Systems of Painting, Acrylic-Wash Tissue Paper, (16.4.25).....	28
Figure 18. Josh Whitaker, Systems of Painting, Acrylic-Wash Tissue Paper Drying, (16.4.25)	28
Figure 19. Josh Whitaker, Documentation of ‘Assemblage (19.11.24 - 13.12.24)’	29
Figure 20. Josh Whitaker, Documentation of ‘Assemblage (19.11.24 - 13.12.24),’ Projecting Photos on to Varying Surfaces.....	29
Figure 21. Helen Frankenthaler, Desert Pulse, 1991, Acrylic on canvas, 182.9 x 299.7 cm. https://www.frankenthalerfoundation.org/artworks/desert-pulse/details/all	30
Figure 22. Josh Whitaker, Early Stage of Painting, (14.5.25).....	30
Figure 23. Simon Ingram, Radio Painting: Looking for the Waterhole (installation view), 2017, ZKM Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe. https://zkm.de/en/artwork/radio-painting-station-looking-for-the-waterhole-0	31
Figure 24. Josh Whitaker, Diagram of Structural Systems: Scaffolding, (14.5.25)	32
Figure 25. Josh Whitaker, Diagram of Structural Systems: Pegboards, (14.5.25)	33
Figure 26. Josh Whitaker, Diagram of Structural Systems: Tables/Walls, (14.5.25)	33

Figure 27. Josh Whitaker, Earlier Version of Assemblage Methodology, (23.7.24) 34

Figure 28. Josh Whitaker, Photograph of a Wall I Took in Wellington, (23.2.25) 35

Figure 29. Josh Whitaker, 'Cutting' Made from the Photograph of a Wall in Wellington, (27.2.25)..... 35

Figure 30. Josh Whitaker, 'Cutting' Propagating, (16.4.25) 36

Figure 31. Josh Whitaker, Storage Trolley with Collection of 'Cuttings' and 'Compost,' (16.4.25) 37

Figure 32. Josh Whitaker, Close-up of Storage Trolley Draw, (16.4.25) 37

Figure 33. Josh Whitaker, Close-up of 'Cuttings' in Storage Trolley, (16.4.25) 38

Figure 34. Josh Whitaker, Early Stage of Painting, (23.4.25) 38

Figure 35. Josh Whitaker, In Transit to Field of Possibility, 'Assemblage (19.11.24 - 13.12.24)' 39

Figure 36. Josh Whitaker, Documentation of 'Assemblage (19.11.24 - 13.12.24)' 40

Figure 37. Josh Whitaker, Documentation of 'Assemblage (19.11.24 - 13.12.24)' 41

Figure 38. Josh Whitaker, Documentation of 'Assemblage (19.11.24 - 13.12.24)' 41

Figure 39. Josh Whitaker, Documentation of 'Assemblage (19.11.24 - 13.12.24)' 42

Figure 40. Josh Whitaker, Documentation of 'Assemblage (19.11.24 - 13.12.24)' 42

Introduction

I was born in Coromandel, a small town, but have lived my life in almost as many places as I have years lived. I believe this pseudo-nomadic life has cemented in me a familiarity with change that is reflected in the sensibilities that have directed my practice. I have a strong desire to understand the world around me, I want to know how it works and why it works in a very broad and general sense. My desire to understand led me to the concept of the system as a way of creating an analytical context in which to generate and reflect on art and the self.

My studio practice combines system and assemblage as method(s) and methodology for exploring being and becoming as a durational process of abstraction. This practice manifests as abstract paintings and systemic structures, that are framed within an ecological/botanical lens, while also acknowledging my-self as both system and assemblage.¹ The notion of assemblage is acknowledged at multiple scales: the self, constant perception, local lived environment, and systems of communication that extend the reach of perception globally. I use systems in the form of physical structures that organise or structure space in a manner that provides convenience and potential. The main rule of these systems is they only encourage

¹ I hyphenated my-self to exemplify the compound nature of the word. You *are your-self*. I do this at specific moments throughout the paper in reference to the notion of the self as system.

certain paths of making, never discourage. This methodology of system and assemblage facilitates an environment in which the affectual nature of existence becomes abstracted through painting.

There is a cyclical process that takes place through the assemblage; there is an ebb and flow, an internalisation and an externalisation, a collapsing of boundaries between myself and the assemblage, I become work and work becomes me. In this cyclical process an abstraction occurs at every point of mediation. The degree to which experience is abstracted is dependent on the level of ‘noise’ or dissemination intrinsic to the medium of potential, i.e., an instance recorded in memory, a photograph or in language.

To commence, I will introduce some of the key concepts in my research, including self and assembling, the system and the role of intuition in my practice.

Self As(sembling) System

What do I mean by ‘Self As(sembling) System?’ When I say system, I mean using the concept of system, which is a thing, made of many things, that determine or effect things to some degree.² As a human, I am made of many things, depending on

² Jack Burnham, *Systems Esthetics*, Artforum, (September, 1968). https://monoskop.org/images/e/e6/Burnham_Jack_1968_Systems_Esthetics.pdf He also notes; “Any situation, either in or outside the context of art, may be designed and judged as a system.”

the scale and lens at which you are discerning how many things I am made of, it could be a number so large it loses all meaning.³ The elements of my-self that I am considering as a system are my biology, psychology and my experience or memory, all of which are things that to a varying degree determine or effect things.

An ecological analogy for this self as system is that of stalactites and stalagmites; in the analogy, you are the ground in which the mineral rich water drops, the 'outside of you' or the world, is the roof of the cave. There are many conditions that decide where a water droplet will form, how much of any mineral will be in it and where it may land. So, before you have even come into contact with this water, many decisions have already been made. Beginning at an 'empty' cave where none of these formations exist, water may drop from many different locations, the lowest points of the cave roof will have more, as well as the routes water may take. As the cave ages, stalactites will begin to form in the places where water gathers most often, which leads to water dropping in those places more often.

³ When I say lens here, I am talking about viewing the human body from different perspectives such as biology, microbiology, physics, metaphysical, posthumanist, etc.

⁴ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Duke University Press, 2010), 24.

In *Vibrant Matter* (2010) Jane Bennett describes assemblages as having "uneven topographies, because some of the points at which the various affects and bodies cross paths are more heavily trafficked than others."⁴ In my analogy, I am referring to self as 'system' rather than assemblage, so as to focus on specific aspects of becoming. Bennett's description of assemblages resonates with the relationship between the 'parts and whole' assemblages of the cave that I have described. We are born with 'uneven topographies' in which the cave's roof drops water on, which splashes and moves around particular to our makeup "so power is not distributed equally across its surface."⁵ As we age, stalagmites will inevitably form that indicate the connections between 'us' and 'the world.' Even in this analogy there is no real separation between us and the world, the floor and roof of a cave, as well as the air/gasses and water in between are just distinctions between things that are all just 'a cave.' The floor of the cave is the self, constantly in flux, a duration and accumulation of experience and change.⁶

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ This differs from Plato's well-known cave allegory. The purpose of my analogy is to show how experience makes us become in the world, albeit differently for each person, in a more contemporary and ecological sense.

Intuition

Intuition is a core part of my methodology; decisions around what to paint and how to paint are catalysed by intuition as a vital force.⁷ Intuition emerges from the ‘system of self,’ so what constitutes intuition? What does the ‘system of self’ have to do with intuition? I think of intuition as a practice of becoming, having faith that what you are doing, creatively or otherwise, is enacting ‘you.’ There is a materiality to intuition which I suggest in my analogy of the self as a cave floor, uneven, sedimentary and of varying levels of connection to material reality.

Philosopher Gilles Deleuze touches on this in his reading of philosopher Henri Bergson’s writing on intuition, which Bergson calls an ‘attention to life,’ “past experience does not disappear, Bergson writes: “...the past literally moves toward the present in order to find a point of contact (or of contraction) with it.”⁸ In every moment, your entire past exists within you, in what Bergson calls a “nonpsychological reality” (as opposed to ‘unconscious’), as only the psychological, or the conscious is the present.⁹ Intuition then becomes its own ‘system,’ one of observation, memory and creative impetus, enacting your own material self, an ‘attention to life’ which grows your connection to reality. In living, I am always observing, watching out for the affectual qualities of things, recording into my memory whether conscious or more tacitly, my experience becomes me, before it becomes my work.¹⁰ In reading this exegesis you are also

⁷ Gilles Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, (Zone Books, 1988), 56.

⁸ Ibid, 70.

⁹ Ibid, 56, 70.

making the work; one of the central theorists in this research, David Bohm, writes, “It may be said that the (...actants) are making something in common, i.e., creating something new together.”

In the first chapter, *Assemblage as Methodology*, I will cover how I use the term assemblage in my practice, what it refers to, and what it is made up of. This leads into the second chapter, *Emergence*, where I cover what emergence is in a painting context. I explore how my methodology encourages emergence in my practice before addressing a form of romanticism that I believe appears in my own, and other painters’ practices. In the third chapter, *Systems In/Of Play*, I describe what systems are present in my practice, and what they do for my practice as well as further exploring abstraction as an intrinsic occurrence of mediation. In the fourth chapter, *Micro-Culturing, An Ecological Framework*, I will use ecological and biological terms to build a framework from which to interpret my practice. Finally in the fifth chapter, *Assembling*, I cover the non-static nature of the assemblage, its emergence in and out of spaces as an intuitive process, as well as how the assemblages avoid definitive concepts.

¹⁰ Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension*, Reprint, (Peter Smith, 1983), 20.

Chapter 1: Assemblage as methodology

What is an assemblage?

In my practice, assemblage as a methodology allows a re-evaluation of hierarchy in process/studio and exhibiting; all parts, whether paintings, materials or tools, are understood as dynamically related to one another, not necessarily 'equal' as that would assign a value to their place. An assemblage, as a noun, is much like a system in that it is a thing made up of many things that determine or affect things to some degree. In my use of the term, it differs from a system in that 'assemblage' is an all-encompassing entity and is not necessarily focused on any outcome or process. For example, a person could be described as an assemblage, at any level, whether organs, tissues, cells, or atoms, a constant coalescing of matter.

An assemblage could also refer to a classroom with a group of individuals, walls, floors, posters, localised noises and radio waves. Such an assemblage acknowledges the relationships between participants. The classroom walls could be a soft yellow, this colour may ease some or irritate others, the posters may be reminiscent of ones from a previous school, reminding people of their past, or perhaps they are of art, music or films that the teacher appreciates, giving insight into their person.

You tell your friend how that poster reminds you of something, and they respond by telling you how the yellow walls feel sickly and the low intermittent radio noise coming from the teacher's desk makes them uncomfortable; the sticky floor acknowledges their discomfort by revealing the noise of their shuffling feet. Another classmate recognises the pattern of that sound without having to look and asks them if they are okay.

The 'classroom' may be the designated zone in which we are assessing an assemblage, but many 'parts' are not limited physically to the space, such as the radio noise or memories formed somewhere else; the assembling occurs in particular relationships and dynamics.



Figure 1. Josh Whitaker, Documentation of 'Assemblage (19.11.24 - 13.12.24)'

In my practice, an assemblage, whether understood as a process or an installation, acknowledges the relationality and dialogue between works and things. To quote physicist David Bohm, "Even in

relationships with inanimate objects and with nature in general, something very like communication is involved.”¹¹ Understanding things do not exist separately; for me, this becomes its own methodology and method.

Another assemblage is the storage trolley, in which a part's affectual intensity can be increased or decreased by being 'stored' or not. The storage trolley was built by me as a key part of the assemblage, yet it is also a system; in this case it is an open system as it does not intrinsically limit possibilities but catalyses others by nature of its design.¹² By acknowledging these connections as dynamic relations, I can accentuate them in process and installation, leading works to bleed into each other more willingly and consciously. To return to Bohm, “Thus, something new is continually created that is common to the artist and the material on which he is working.”¹³ This dialogue between parts of the assemblage is key to its generative potential.



Figure 2. Josh Whitaker, Storage Trolley En Route to Field of Possibility (19.11.24 – 13.12.24)

¹¹ David Bohm and Lee Nichol, *On Dialogue* (Routledge, 1996), 3.

¹² Niklas Luhmann, *Social Systems*, Writing Science (Stanford University Press, 1995).

¹³ David Bohm and Lee Nichol, *On Dialogue* (Routledge, 1996), 3.

Actants

The paintings, drawings, structures, materials, paints, pens, pencils, paper, wood, surrounding architecture, sounds, floor, walls, people, lights, light, shadows, textures and smells are considered parts or "actants" in my assemblage.¹⁴ Actants is a term used by Bruno Latour to describe things in his Actor-Network-Theory, a sociological theory of associations.¹⁵ However, I will be using the term actant more in line with Jane Bennett's reading of Latour's work in *Vibrant Matter* (2010). A part is, as it sounds, a thing which can be identified individually as part of an assemblage. The term actant is used in the same way; however, it acknowledges the agency a part has within an assemblage. According to Bennett,

While the smallest or simplest body or bit may indeed express a vital impetus, conatus or clinamen, an actant never really acts alone. Its efficacy or agency always depends on the collaboration, cooperation, or interactive interference of many bodies and forces.¹⁶

In the assemblage, an actant is something that is and/or does something. Anything I can perceive while making can be considered as part of the assemblage. Not all the actants are 'mine,' not all the actants are my work, and actants in the assemblage vary to the degree to which they are 'mine.' For example, my staple remover is mine, but I would argue less mine than one of my paintings, but more mine than the building I am in. There is nothing stopping everything from becoming a considered actant in the assemblage; however, I

¹⁴ There is nothing stopping all matter in the universe from becoming a part of the considered assemblage, the main distinction between considered and not considered is how qualitatively perceptible something is, and the degree to which it is affective.

would organise a hypothetical list of actants by the degree of both its affectual intensity and its relative 'mine-ness' (not necessarily in legal ownership terms) more so in how I've affected an actant and to what degree, i.e., the architecture of a space has great affectual intensity, but very low 'mine-ness.'



Figure 3. Josh Whitaker, Actants in 'Assemblage (19.11.24 - 13.12.24)'

¹⁵ Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, 1. Clarendon Lectures in Management Studies (Oxford University Press, 2007).

¹⁶ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Duke University Press, 2010), 21.



Figure 4. Josh Whitaker, Documentation of 'Assemblage (19.11.24 - 13.12.24)'

A painting is something, (a collection of matter that is understood contextually as a painting) and does something, in that it can be experienced and affect me, making it an actant. Within the assemblage, this affect can manifest to varying degrees; perception of things, having created a change in me, however subtle, changes how I create, and therefore, the work I make. 'Paintings' in the assemblage affect (are perceived) and are affected (when painted). They exist across different configurations of matter, whether canvas, wall, tissue paper, board or any other substrate. Different configurations of

matter, in substrate and 'paint' (in an expanded sense), intrinsically reinterpret the actions of the painter (me). This resonates with Bohm's notion of dialogue, which I cite at length:

For example, consider a dialogue. In such a dialogue, when one person says something, the other person does not in general respond with exactly the same meaning as that seen by the first person. Rather, the meanings are only similar and not identical. Thus, when the second person replies, the first person sees a difference between what he meant to say and what the other person understood. On considering this difference, he may then be able to see something new, which is relevant both to his own views and to those of the other person. And so, it can go back and forth, with the continual emergence of a new content that is common to both participants.¹⁷

Agency is typically applied to 'living' or 'sentient' things. From a vital materialist perspective though, agency is something that all matter has, to varying degrees and differences in how that agency might be expressed. To apply this notion of material agency to the paintings to the left, a work might express a degree of agency, by the degree to which it affects me and other works through me. For instance these works were installed in relation to the concrete pillar, the particular configurations of paint-matter perceived as colour, line, forms, etc., connected with me and other work through me at a tacit level.¹⁸ Considering the painting or any 'object' as an actant within the assemblage rather than an inert material configuration gives it the agency to participate in dialogue, rather than just be 'used.'¹⁹

¹⁷ David Bohm and Lee Nichol, *On Dialogue* (Routledge, 1996), 2.

¹⁸ Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension*, Reprinted (Peter Smith, 1983), 15.

¹⁹ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Duke University Press, 2010), 21.

To give another example of material agency, the matter that makes up a table might express agency in how it affects matter in relation to it. A person for instance, sees a table, enraptured by its sublime beauty, decides to become a carpenter and furniture maker for the rest of their life. I would argue that the affect the table had on this individual was an expression of its agency, but not all persons become carpenters.



Figure 5. Josh Whitaker, Actant(s) in the Studio Assemblage, (23.4.25)

Chapter 2: Emergence

Emergence as a communal affective happening

In my practice, emergence arises in both the assemblage and the painting. In the assemblage, the configuration specific to that assemblage is an emergent quality as it cannot be predicted, as it is the result of an intuitive, responsive process between myself, my work and the space it is taking place in.

The dynamic between assemblage and emergence in my practice is akin to what Jan Voerwert describes as "designating the field of its possibility as a third space" for making; bringing in your own work, materials or tools as you choose, whether they are responsive to the space or not, and working in the space.²⁰ Any space has its own characteristics, that will affect the manner in which you work in that space whether you realise it or not; assemblage as methodology is about leaning into that affect of space and the matter within it. It is a continuous dialogue between all that is present in the designated zone, Voerwert continues, "allowing social logic and structure to freely emerge."²¹ It is not necessarily a spatial zone but rather a spatio-perceptual zone, in which I perceive the relations or dialogue between actants, manifesting this perception in making or installation. As mentioned in the classroom example, communication technology (and others) can extend this perceptual space, though mediated, by material or digital systems/language.

²⁰ Jan Verwoert, "Why are Conceptual Artists Painting Again? Because They Think it's a Good Idea," 2013, <https://vimeo.com/60549110>



Figure 6. Josh Whitaker, Arrival at Field of Possibility, 'Assemblage (19.11.24 - 13.12.24)'

²¹ Ibid.

The purpose of applying the concept of assemblage to my practice is to encourage emergence in the paintings, which is to create paintings that are only possible by the conditions in which they are made. As defined by Wikipedia (an emergent, collective platform),

Emergence is the term for the process of deriving new structures and qualities from the interaction of elements in a complex system. Qualities of a "whole" are described as emergent when they cannot be derived directly from the "single" parts but can only be explained by the interaction of the parts.²²

In the paintings, formal qualities result from the dialogue between actants in the assemblage as perceived and actualised through me; the paintings are the emergent quality of the assemblage. The paintings emerge from multiple forces; as philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari write, "A book does not exist on its own – it comes to life and is co-produced by the assemblage it is plugged into."²³ This applies to the emergent process that generates the paintings, but also throughout the process of production. The paintings also act on the assemblage they are a part of; it is a multi-directional dialogue between actants.

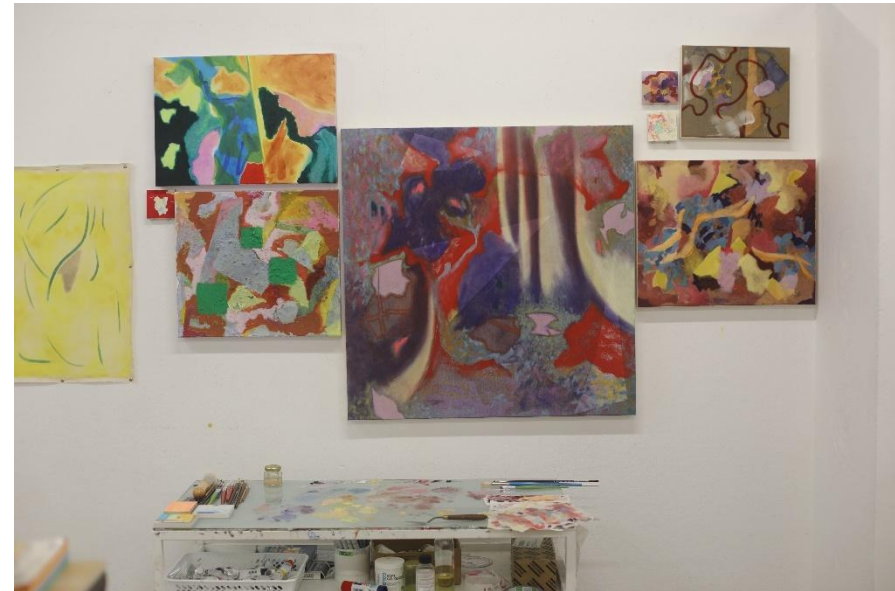


Figure 7. Josh Whitaker, *Assembling in Studio*, (5.5.25)

²² "Emergence," in *Wikipedia*, March 12, 2025, <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Emergence&oldid=1280071991>

²³ Félix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 12. (University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

Vitality of the Emergent Painting

Emergence in my paintings is a result of difference, for example, a red circle painted atop a blue layer of paint becomes different when the red circle is again painted onto a yellow layer of paint on another canvas. It may be a similar red circle, but due to the constitution of the plane in which it has been reproduced, or reinterpreted, there is now a new thing. This new thing, or emergent factor, isn't the red circle – it is the difference and dialogue between the genesis of the red circle coming into contention with a new plane that has a different constitution than previous instances.

Sociologist Niklas Luhmann touches on this concept in *The Medium of Art*, where he states: “Forms by contrast (emerge) through the concentration of relations of dependence between elements, i.e., through selection from the possibilities offered by a medium.”²⁴ He is not talking about painting forms specifically but about something intrinsic to the creative process, in which in all its disciplines have particulars that emerge as a result of their specific elements.²⁵ But to apply this to painting, in every moment one has to select from the possibilities, in order for the emergent process to take place, for the forms to emerge out of their relations of dependence between elements.²⁶

Art emerges—it is created—in our experimental relations, as what lives, as the increase or decrease in a body's power to act.

²⁴ Niklas Luhmann and David Roberts, “The Medium of Art,” *Thesis Eleven* 18–19, no. 1 (August 1987): 101–13, <https://doi.org/10.1177/072551368701800107>

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ I'm using ‘forms’ loosely here, referring to typical elements of painting, form, line, colour, tonality, etc.

This will lead us out of our human, all too human form of understanding: our imagination, and the passions it evokes.²⁷

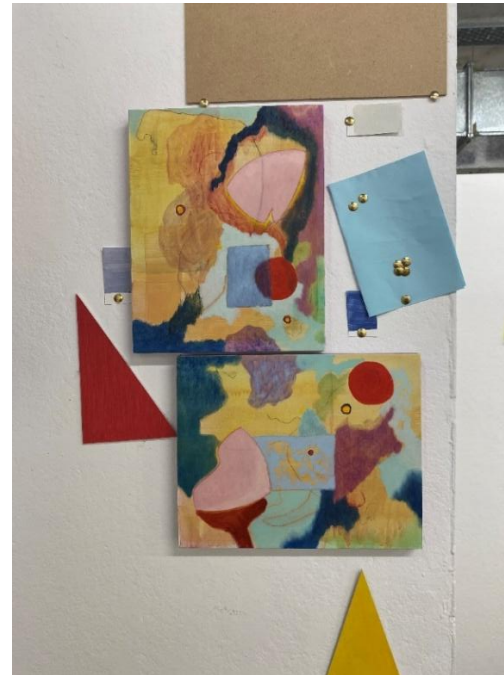


Figure 8. Josh Whitaker, *Earlier Form of Assemblage Methodology*, (10.5.24)

Painter Jadé Fadojutimi appears to agree, saying: “When I am painting, I love to listen to my paintings, sometimes you can see forms evolving, and you just have to embrace them.”²⁸ This expression of

²⁷ Stephen Zepke, *Art as Abstract Machine: Ontology and Aesthetics in Deleuze and Guatarri* (Routledge, 2005), 52.

²⁸ Jadé Fadojutimi in Conversation with Alex Gartenfeld, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7HtHE8UHTw4>

closeness in Fadojutimi's "listening" is reflected by many painters such as Jackson Pollock or Phillip Guston.²⁹ Listening is a particularly apt word to use in relation to painting. Recalling Bohm, it acknowledges the dialogue that happens between the painter and the painting, the painter says one thing and the painting says something else, the mutual understanding constitutes the emergent factor of the painting.³⁰

In my practice, I see my paintings as an emergent factor of the assemblage, a materialisation of the dialogue between actants. The logics that create them are often errant and disjointed, which gives them a complexity that would be difficult to plan, they are a product of an environment, an assemblage. Artist Amy Sillman touches both on the emergent qualities of painting, and the nature of a painting in her description of drawing,

You build a drawing line by line over time (...), fragile, instantaneous, in a state of flux, all drawing is of the moment. (...), the drawing itself is simply the residue of such relations. Making them visible and showing how they linger together.³¹

Sillman here, is talking about relations within the drawing and between the drawing and the artist. For me, the painting is the residue of relations between the actants of the assemblage as mediated through me. This notion is prefigured by Deleuze, where he writes "What is specific to the image, (...) is to make perceptible, to make visible, relationships of time which cannot be seen in the represented object and do not allow themselves to be reduced to the present."³²

²⁹ Jackson Pollock on painting, "The painting has a life of its own (...) I try to let it come through. It is only when I lose contact with the painting that the result is a mess."

³⁰ David Bohm, Lee Nichol, *On Dialogue* (Routledge, 1996).

The paintings and by extension the assemblage, are temporal much in the same way as you or I, the relations which make us cannot be reduced to our present material form at any point in time.



Figure 9. Josh Whitaker, *Earlier Form of Assemblage Methodology*, (6.6.24)

The suggestions of a vitality, closeness, embrace, listening, lingering, a relationship with and across matter, in painting, is evocative of an underlying romanticism. In multiple areas of research that fed into this methodology, hints and even acknowledgments of the romantic and the historical romanticism come up. In this next section I will look into this underlying romantic theme, that seems particularly pervasive in painting and new materialism.

³¹ Conversation with Amy Sillman: *Drawing in the Continuous Present*, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BL0gc466nRk>.

³² Stephen Zepke, *Art as Abstract Machine: Ontology and Aesthetics in Deleuze and Guatarri* (Routledge, 2005), 78.

An Underlying Romanticism

The emergent painting is a living one, it is a practice of dialogue with material reality. I would like to create a distinction of what I mean by romantic and/or romanticism in this section, rather than an idealisation of nature in the historical romanticism, this romanticism is merely an acknowledgement of what I believe is something intrinsic to human nature, that is particularly evident in some painting practices, including mine. In *Vibrant Matter* (2010), Bennett writes of “developing a capacity for naivete” by revisiting now discredited philosophies in order to become “temporarily infected” by them, which includes romanticism-adjacent models of thought.³³ In doing this she is hoping to recontextualise the “affinities,” that “vital materialism as a doctrine” has with these “pre-modern” schools of thought.³⁴ Romanticism is also addressed in *Art as Abstract Machine: Ontology and Aesthetics in Deleuze and Guatarri* (2005), when Stephen Zepke articulates the distinction Deleuze and Guatarri make between “three ages of art, Classicism, Romanticism and Modernism.”³⁵ An important argument was made for Romanticism as a type of “disjunction,” of what is “forever beyond the artist.”³⁶ But I believe a vital materialism erodes this disjunction, where we become ontologically inseparable from nature, in which a romanticism intrinsic to creativity and becoming can become a vital force that fuels the abstract machine.

There is an undeniable hint of romanticism that emerges out of the discussion of a vital materialism regarding painting, though rather

³³ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Duke University Press, 2010), 18.

³⁴ Ibid. xvii.

³⁵ Stephen Zepke, *Art as Abstract Machine: Ontology and Aesthetics in Deleuze and Guatarri* (Routledge, 2005), 168.

than ‘forces of nature’ being expressed in an optically figurative way, a ‘vital materialist’ painting practice is the figuration of affectual forces appearing as contextually abstract. To recall my analogy of the self as an uneven topography resembling the floor of a cave, the stalactites we form are the points at which we closely connect to ‘the world’ (not that we are disconnected in the first place). These points are the places I travel in which to attempt to connect with the material world on the deepest possible level, in which the dialogue between myself and material reality co-actualises an emergent painting practice. Where the “unthought of thought, the insensible in sensation,” is not a transcending of humanity, in order to connect with material reality, but a destruction of ones ‘humanity.’³⁷ This is where the romanticism lies, the painting practice is one of humanistic futility, to undo one’s humanity, this is the destruction before creation, as Stephen Zepke writes,

Not, once more, to transcend the world, but to discover it as it is, to create a thought, a sensation, a life that participates in the world’s joyful birth of itself: a dancing star.³⁸

This faith, this belief in the world is an undeniably humanistic and romantic notion, but it is recontextualised in the contemporary light, in which we are less subject to the forces of nature, but *are*, or become the forces of nature.

³⁶ Ibid, 173.

³⁷ Ibid, 8. Deleuze & Guatarri.

³⁸ Ibid.

The emergent painting is one of being in relationship, born out of a desire to connect with something. Amy Sillman has described painting in these terms many times saying, “Yeah, I have an ongoing relationship to painting! (..) But often my relationship to painting is ambivalent, not one of love.”³⁹ She also says, “I realised that I find new ways to understand my love/hate relationship with painting. I’m always working against what I feel to be a force or a form that I deeply love.” I believe this is a subtle and unassuming kind of romanticism, she speaks to an understanding of nature and our relationship to it. This is an intrinsic human romantic love for a non-human media, less portentous than the historical Romanticism, but one that is reflected in all human endeavours even if it is denied to many. An off-beat example of this, being the episode ‘Reincarnation’ (2011) of *Futurama*, in which at one point in the episode, Professor Farnsworth discovers that all life and the universe is made of pixels.⁴⁰ Professor Farnsworth is overjoyed that he has solved the last mystery there was, but he eventually comes to realise with no mysteries to solve his job no longer has a reason to exist, and by extension neither does he.

To call this romantic may seem like a stretch but it also helps illustrate my motivations as a painter, to experiment with materials is to understand them, to know them like they ‘know’ themselves, a desire to understand and be understood. I now refer to writer Anne Carson’s elucidation of romantic desire to explore this idea further. In the preface of *Eros the Bittersweet* (2022), Carson writes on Kafka’s story *The Top*, saying,

³⁹ Camden Arts Centre, “In Conversation: Amy Sillman & Martin Clark,” *Medium* (blog), October 30, 2018, <https://medium.com/@camdenartscentre/in-conversation-amy-sillman-martin-clark-d3615a7ab08b>

⁴⁰ “Reincarnation,” *Futurama Wiki*, accessed April 10, 2025, <https://futurama.fandom.com/wiki/Reincarnation>

The Top is a story about a philosopher who spends his spare time around children so he can grab their tops in spin. “[...] that the understanding of any detail, that of a spinning top for instance, was sufficient for the understanding of all things.”⁴¹

Continuing, Carson writes, “The story is about the delight we take in metaphor,” where *The Top* reflects the nature of falling in love, a moment in which one is entranced, “beauty spins and the mind moves.” Following that, a hope, a desire, “to catch beauty would be to understand how that impertinent stability in vertigo is possible.”⁴² And where this connects to Professor Farnsworth’s conundrum is here,

To be running breathlessly, but not yet arrived, is itself delightful, a suspended moment of living hope. Suppression of impertinence is not the lover’s aim.⁴³

Much like Kafka’s philosopher, or Professor Farnsworth, a ‘vital materialist’ painter (such as myself) is practicing an intellectual practice purely as a pretext for enacting romantic desire experienced as painting. The ‘bittersweet’ Carson refers to, is that the delight one takes in romantic desire is the lack, the attempting to attain something, which is also the suffering of that lack. Carson writes that the nature of romantic desire is a paradoxical one, the desire, *eros*, “denotes ‘want,’ ‘lack,’ ‘desire for that which is missing.’”⁴⁴ But if one succeeds in attaining what they desire, like Professor Farnsworth, they are no longer left wanting, “it is by definition impossible for him to

⁴¹ Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, 7th printing, Dalkey Essentials (Dalkey Archive Press, 2022).

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

have what he wants if, as soon as it is had, it is no longer wanting.”⁴⁵ I believe this is why Sillman refers to painting with terms like ‘ambivalent’ and ‘love/hate.’ There may be moments where you feel like you have connected, but in that moment, you are no longer left wanting, you have no reason to paint.

The remaining question for me is, what is it that I or any painter lacks that they desire to find in painting? My first instinct is to say to understand the nature of being, but I’m not sure that is true, I think it may be something beyond words, or nothing at all, any words that take the place of that answer merely become the new pretext in which to continue desiring. To quote Stephen Zepke on writer Henry Miller,

All objective interrogations of the form “what is...?” Must be revalued in answering the question “what wills?” a question whose answer in turn, re-values the subjective question “what does this mean to me?” we lose ourselves in finding the answer, for the answer is neither a subject nor an object, but something existing between them, a becoming—active or reactive, an affect.⁴⁶

There is a part of me that wants to believe that this romantic desire that seems to manifest so strongly in my painting runs much deeper. I thought to myself, what if the same force that brought together atoms, was this same desire for connection? The same force that brings together stars is the same as that, which brings me to paint, wouldn’t that be lovely?

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Stephen Zepke, *Art as Abstract Machine: Ontology and Aesthetics in Deleuze and Guatarri* (Routledge, 2005), 18.

To return to the ‘what,’ rather than ‘why’ of painting, there is often a meandering, waiting and listening that takes place in the assemblage. I often find myself unsure of what to do next and will simply pull up a chair until the work has ‘something to say.’ Or more-so that I will finally understand what it has been saying the whole time but for whatever reason could only understand in that specific moment. Painter Phillip Guston speaks of the act of painting as follows,

You want to feel resistance. Or I want to. All my pictures must be fought for. Lots of overpainting and rubbing out. You want to have lived it. The complicated problem is when you do a painting that you think looks good. Then you go into the house and you go to sleep and you wake up in an hour convinced that you’re kidding yourself. You haven’t lived it yet. So, without even looking at the picture you scrape the whole thing out and stay with it until – this is the mysterious part – you feel transparent.⁴⁷

To further position the ‘what’ of painting within my practice, I will cover the forms in which systems thinking appears in my practice and connect them directly with the work I create.

⁴⁷ “Philip Guston in Conversation with Mark Stevens - Ursula,” Hauser & Wirth, accessed April 10, 2025, <https://www.hauserwirth.com/ursula/25111-philip-guston-conversation-mark-stevens/>

Chapter 3: Systems in/of Play

In this chapter I will investigate the various forms in which systems appear in my practice. Beginning with abstraction, which occurs when an affective ‘signal’ is mediated through configurations of matter understood systematically. These configurations of matter could range from the medium from which an affective force originates: the self, the tool, the medium and the substrate. Then I will write on systems of painting in Jack Whitten’s painting practice, before contrasting with materials as a form of system in my practice, then conclude with structures as systems.

Systems in/of Play – The Affective Signal: Abstraction of an Abstraction of an Abstraction

Drawings very intimacy, is that it records what lies beyond the body, but from the site of the body. And in the form of touch from the body. And in this way, drawing is always literally a form of abstraction ‘ab’ meaning away from, and ‘trehere’ meaning to draw.⁴⁸

Abstraction is intrinsic to being, to perception. It is impossible to perceive reality in its entirety; it is a limitation of being human. All perception is mediated through the system of self, the assemblage of being, and again in the expression of one’s being. This is both the

⁴⁸ Conversation with Amy Sillman: Drawing in the Continuous Present, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BL0gc466nRk>

⁴⁹ This metaphor occurred to me and then found it is central to Karen Barad, in Meeting the universe halfway. Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum*

intimacy and abstraction Sillman talks about (see opening quote), my perception of reality is my own abstraction specific to me, and in expressing that personal abstraction it becomes abstracted again, as a specific relation between myself, the tool, the medium and the substrate.

Abstraction occurs at every point in which experience, or information is (re)mediated. When I experience a gust of wind and I put into words, “I felt the wind across my face,” the experience and the re-mediation through language of that experience are wholly not the same thing. If I were to repeat to someone “I felt the wind across my face,” would they experience what I had? No, of course not, they might re-interpret what I’ve said in combination with their own experience, giving them some sort of psychological sensation, but it is not what I experienced, there is no stand-in for first-hand experience.

The paintings are abstract when considered as a remediation of experience, they are not abstract when considered as a material object. Not unlike a double slit experiment in which light can be both a wave function and a classical particle, changing its nature under the apparatus of observation.⁴⁹ Can a painting be both figurative (illusory) and abstract (real) at the same time, is it purely the nature of perception that makes a painting abstract or figurative?

Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning (Duke University Press, 2007), 101.



Figure 10. Josh Whitaker, Beginning Stages of Painting, (22.4.24)



Figure 11. Josh Whitaker, Later Stage of Painting, (23.4.24)

⁵⁰ The paintings are a 'system' in the same way I have described the self as a system, an uneven topography in which experience falls upon. Its substrate is its uneven topography, canvas, linen, paper, board or any other material. The substrate responds in its own particular way specific to its material configuration. The way it

My paintings are an encoding of knowledge and/or information, the logic, whether 'rational,' intuitive, romantic, or otherwise, becomes the very constitution of the image my paintings are perceived as.

In the painting to the left, you can see the stages the painting goes through, the forming of its uneven topography due to variations of materials.⁵⁰ Using washes of acrylic paint, mediums, primers, tissue paper, applied in various ways. In the next stage, the painting is becoming, an emergent process in which it becomes itself, an actualisation of its material constitution in collaboration with its 'local' assemblage.⁵¹

But the painting does not just absorb experience, it projects it in every moment, every action a re-action unto others, the painting doesn't merely exist in context, it *is* context. The paintings are also beholden to the context in which they first came into being, existing in the present moment does not mean they are necessarily contemporaneous within the assemblage. Much like different generations of people, some of the senior generation formed the sediment of their being within an assemblage with entirely different

responds also changes, as it changes, as the layers of paint and other materials bring to the fore its experience.

⁵¹ Its material constitution is also its particular uneven topography. Local in that the most affective forces by degree are the most important ones.

values and understandings.⁵² Paintings hold onto their experience and values tightly and it is difficult to convince them without rewriting everything they are.⁵³ It is often the earliest decisions which are the hardest to undo, as everything that came after was made with that in mind, their existence continuously resonates throughout everything that comes after, in ways that are hard, if not impossible to quantify.

Systems in/of Play -- Systems of Painting, Material as System

In artist Jack Whitten's 'Black Monolith' series of work, he employs the use of what I would call a system of painting, which he calls the 'tesserae.'⁵⁴ In this series of work, Whitten creates these mosaic paintings of "a black person who has contributed a lot to society" in which he is trying to "memorialise" them. He finds that in doing this he has to "locate the essence of that person, and that person becomes a symbol."⁵⁵ What is particularly interesting to me about this process, especially considering the historical connotations of tessera being used as a "means of identification," is that the painting, the symbol of this individual, is formed out of what could be considered many parts, the 'paintings' are one and many. The parts, which in most cases are pieces of acrylic that have been cut, all have individual characteristics that come together, the symbol and memorialisation of these figures

⁵² There is also something to be said here about nature vs nurture. The contention between the DNA/genesis of an 'individual' and the assemblage in which they become themselves.

⁵³ The 'experience and values' is the content of their being, their 'stalactites' so to speak, which become as a direct result of their material potentiality in collaboration with their 'local' assemblage.

is an emergent factor of an assemblage of many parts.

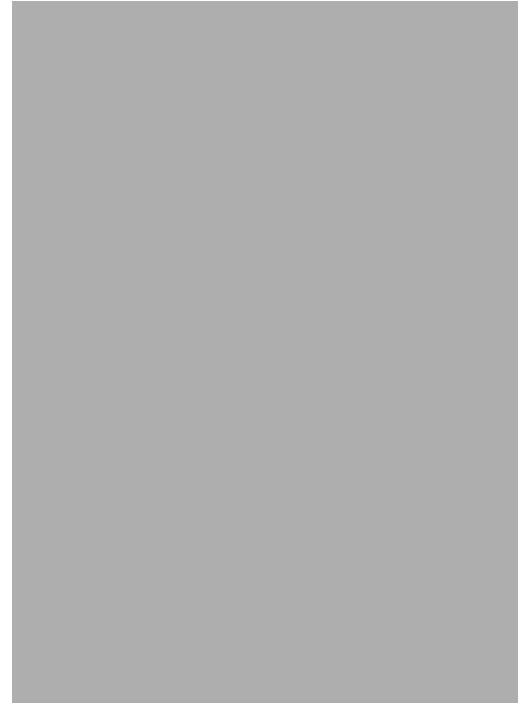


Figure 12. Jack Whitten, Black Monolith XI, Six Kinky Strings: For Chuck Berry, 2017, Acrylic on Canvas, 213.36 x 160.02 cm. <https://www.glenstone.org/artworks/black-monolith-xi-six-kinky-strings-for-chuck-berry>

⁵⁴ "Used by the ancient Romans as a ticket, tally, voucher, or means of identification," a tessera is a "small piece (as of marble, glass, or tile) used in mosaic work." See "Definition of TESSERA," accessed April 8, 2025, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/tessera>. A small tablet (as of wood, bone, or ivory).

⁵⁵ Jack Whitten: An Artist's Life | Art21 "Extended Play," 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GFVsd450nCU>

In my practice, systems of painting exist across mediums, methods, materials, and substrates. Substrates such as stretched canvas, unstretched canvas, paper towels, paper mounted to board, paper and board individually, are all systematic in how their material composition mediates medium and intent. Mediums themselves are also systems of painting in the way they too are a mediation of intent, their particular materiality and the tool if they use one (paint + paintbrush) process artist intent through their materiality. Methods of painting, in an expanded sense, for example to include Whitten's mosaic paintings, are another layer of systems of painting. Methods often combine tools, mediums, substrates and conceptual concerns into the act of making.



Figure 13. Josh Whitaker, Acrylic Paint Chips in Re-Used Tea Box, (16.4.24)

⁵⁶ System is being used pretty loosely here, as the system for collecting things more lies in the potential to collect offered by the 'Storage Trolley.'



Figure 14. Josh Whitaker, Image Created by Scanning Acrylic Paint Chips Iteratively, (2.8.24)

One system of mine is to collect different forms of what would normally be considered 'waste,' such as paper towels with paint stains on them, pencil shavings, scraps of paper, dried chips of paint from my acrylic and oil palettes, offcuts of canvas and other things.⁵⁶ I often don't know if all of these will come of any use, but I collect them anyway as I believe there is some potential in them, particularly the paper towels and the paint chips. Both of which have become a part

of the work in process and/or installation. The paper towels have been used in the same way as any other painting has been used, becoming a part of the assemblage, expressing their affectual intensity to other works in process or installation. The paper towels have a very different 'feel' compared to other more 'typical' paintings. Their creation is antithetical to the creation of other paintings, they are inconsequential, incidental and didn't start with a goal to be a painting.⁵⁷ In collecting these waste materials I became sentimental over them, suddenly they were just as important as a painting on canvas, board or paper. This method of creating and collecting things is similar to Whitten's tesserae, though our methods diverge as I do not literally assemble these physical collections into other paintings but respond to their affectual quality in the act of painting.



Figure 15. Josh Whitaker, Documentation of 'Assemblage (19.11.24 - 13.12.24)'

⁵⁷ Though funnily enough, after beginning to collect them I began to think about how they looked when I was cleaning my brushes on them, I would stop cleaning off paint



Figure 16. Josh Whitaker, Systems of Painting, Naming Colours, (16.4.25)

I have another system where I will often record colours that have been mixed by painting a swatch in a book with the pigments used and then naming them. The names are a way of loosely systemising or codifying information. By naming colours, I am more inclined to remember them and their particular affectual quality. I do not record and name every colour I mix, just ones that particularly resonate with me. By creating identifiable 'points' in the potential colour spectrum of my palette I can internalise a more conscious understanding of colour outside of pre-existing colour name conventions. This is an attempt to link a tacit understanding of colour with a more conscious form of understanding, an understanding that extends to language rather than intuition alone.⁵⁸

on them and start on a new paper towel because I became precious about their particular composition as a painting.

⁵⁸ Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension*, Reprint. (Peter Smith, 1983), 9.

Another system is creating a collection of hand-torn tissue paper which has been soaked in an acrylic paint wash. This collection of tissue paper can be used like compost to create the foundation or 'sediment' of a painting, starting from a raw or primed canvas and applying it either permanently or temporarily. In a permanent case, the tissue paper alters the material 'system' of the canvas by altering absorbency rates, surface quality and introduces surface 'form'/texture due to the shape of the tissue. In a temporary usage of tissue paper, the soaked tissue left to dry on the surface of the canvas will leave a stain where it was after it has been removed. This stain of acrylic wash alters the 'system' of the canvas as all actions after will be reactive of the stains left behind.

Every material I use is, in a sense, its own intrinsic system. When I tear tissue paper, I do not control the tear with perfect accuracy, I make a suggestion, an input, which the material of the tissue paper translates into the tear.⁵⁹ There is an input (my physical force and will), a system (the organising physics and matter that constitute the tissue), and an output (the tear in the paper that forms when my will comes into contention with the systemic principles of the tissue). This is again reflected in a medium's materiality, for example watercolour pencils, which can be used both as pencils and paint, offer ways to create both line and form.



Figure 17. Josh Whitaker, Systems of Painting, Acrylic-Wash Tissue Paper, (16.4.25)



Figure 18. Josh Whitaker, Systems of Painting, Acrylic-Wash Tissue Paper Drying, (16.4.25)

⁵⁹ Jack Burnham, Systems Esthetics, *Artforum*, (September, 1968).
https://monoskop.org/images/e/e6/Burnham_Jack_1968_Systems_Esthetics.pdf

Another system I employ in my practice involves the use of a digital projector. Slideshows of photos I have taken for their affectual potential or video works, such as animations with paint, are projected in the assemblage installation-in-process. This is another form of abstraction through mediation, digitisation through photography, and materially through light and surface. The durational nature of the projector is indicative of the accumulation of experience that is the becoming of the assemblage.⁶⁰



Figure 19. Josh Whitaker, Documentation of 'Assemblage (19.11.24 - 13.12.24)'

⁶⁰ This 'accumulation of experience' is an example of the Deleuze-Bergson Intuition I talk about in the introduction. Here, intuition becomes materialised outside of myself. Gilles Deleuze, *Bergsonism* (Zone Books, 1988), 56.



Figure 20. Josh Whitaker, Documentation of 'Assemblage (19.11.24 - 13.12.24),' Projecting Photos on to Varying Surfaces

With every medium there is a systemic mediation particular to it, and again when you consider the tool (assuming the medium isn't the tool such as a graphite pencil), and again with the substrate on which you are working.⁶¹

I try to work across many mediums to understand the potential of those mediums and understand the potential of how I can re-mediate affect into material reality. Understanding mediums as systems, means understanding their strengths and weaknesses in relation to the affectual 'signal' I intend to express.

⁶¹ 'Tool' in my practice, like system, is used quite loosely, I would consider the ice cream containers that I mix acrylic washes in tools as much as a paintbrush or craft knife.

To visualise this point, I would like to bring up the paintings of Helen Frankenthaler; her expressive use of paint sings in harmony with the materiality of the medium and substrate she is using. In the painting 'Desert Pulse' (1991), there are variable levels of thickness and fluidity to the paint, but none of these intensities of pigment belie the material of paint, they do not attempt to disguise paint through figuration, the paint appears as paint, its use not contrived for the purpose of a figurative illusion. This is not to say it is 'purely abstract,' as that is a fallacy, but the degree to which the materiality of paint and its 'figurative' use are in ecological harmony is very high.⁶²



Figure 21. Helen Frankenthaler, *Desert Pulse*, 1991, Acrylic on canvas, 182.9 x 299.7 cm. <https://www.frankenthalerfoundation.org/artworks/desert-pulse/details/all>

⁶² It is figurative in the sense the intent was to 'represent' expression, translated through paint. Frankenthaler, connected the work to a 'desert pulse,' in titling the work.

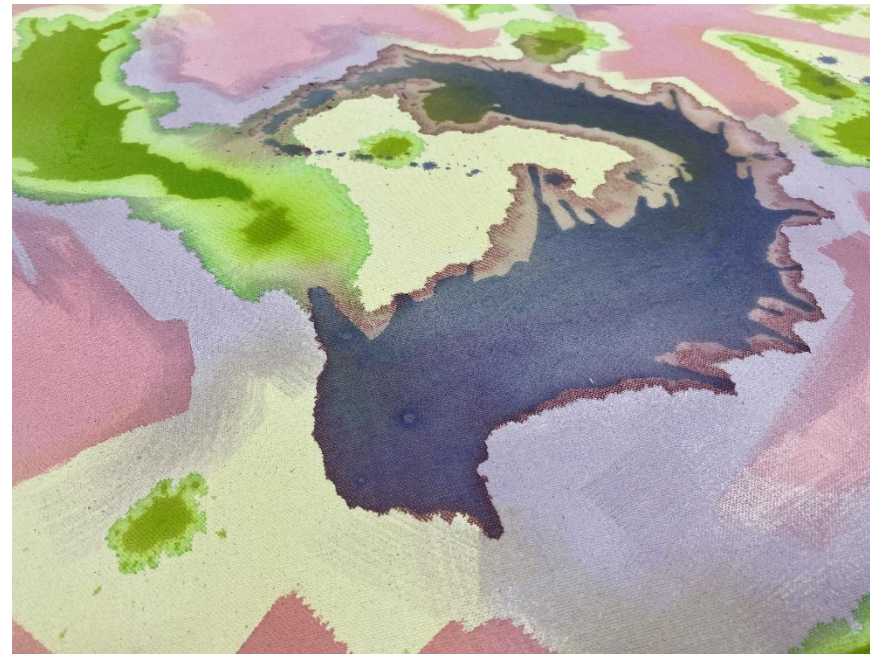


Figure 22. Josh Whitaker, *Early Stage of Painting*, (14.5.25)

Systems in/of Play -- Structural Systems

The structural systems in my practice consist of the 'Storage Trolley,' 'Peg Boards,' 'Tables/Walls,' and 'Scaffolding.' The purpose of these systems is to catalyse the power of an assemblage methodology. They give structure to the assemblage so that certain 'paths of travel' have roads and cars rather than walking. These structural systems are the infrastructure of the assemblage, of the practice, both in process and installation. To give an example of how 'structural systems' catalyse the power of the assemblage, I would like to use Simon Ingram's work *'Radio Painting: Looking for the Waterhole'* (2017) as an example.



Figure 23. Simon Ingram, *Radio Painting: Looking for the Waterhole* (installation view), 2017, ZKM Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe. <https://zkm.de/en/artwork/radio-painting-station-looking-for-the-waterhole-0>

⁶³ Simon Ingram et al., eds., *The Dialogics of Contemporary Art: Painting Politics* (Kerber Verlag, 2022), 104.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 107.

In this work, Ingram “works with the techniques of the amateur radio astronomer to paint invisible cosmic radio energy in messy and contingent ways. (...) expressing higher powers and unseen forces.”⁶³ In the “painting assemblage,” as Ingram calls it, radio waves are systematically catalysed into being the creative genesis in which the paintings emerge out of, the physical structures and systems are merely the infrastructure that allows this possibility to take place.⁶⁴ The paintings themselves are painted by a machinic translation of these radio waves, removing Ingram himself from the act of painting, in what he would call a “distribution and re-distribution of control.”⁶⁵ This work is what writer, philosopher and artist Manuel De Landa might call “staging interactions,” where the infrastructure increases the radio waves “capacity” to affect, which allows their affective force to become the paintings, whereas in my practice, radio waves do not have a ‘significant’ capacity to affect my work as there are no systems that catalyse that capacity.⁶⁶ Part of why I’m using this work specifically is to recall my classroom analogy of an assemblage. In that analogy, the technology present (a radio) gave radio waves an increased capacity to affect, which changed the dynamics and relationships of that assemblage.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Manuel De Landa, *Assemblage Theory* (Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 180.

Returning to my practice, the structural systems I create are not trying to give any particular affective force a greater capacity to affect but rather catalysing the creative process itself. The 'Storage Trolley,' catalyses the creative practice by essentially reversing the phrase 'out of sight, out of mind,' by giving the ability to store a large number of things with affective potential in the assemblage. My Peg Boards catalyse the power of works being affective bodies, by increasing the efficiency to which things can be placed in relation to each other, rather than a slow process of measuring and guesswork when working with a wall, work can be easily and quickly placed in relation to each other to gauge their affective resonance. Tables/Walls are simply tables and walls in my practice, they offer horizontal or vertical potential as working space, while in an installation they themselves might become paintings as they wear their history on their primed surface. Lastly, Scaffolding allows the Peg Boards, and the Tables/Walls, to alter space by giving them a structure to be fixed to, creating the possibility for the assemblage to take on a 'three-dimensional' form rather than a 'two-dimensional' one.⁶⁷ This allows me to 'stage interactions' between paintings in the act of painting and installation, changing the dynamics of the assemblage and by the extension paintings capacity to affect.⁶⁸

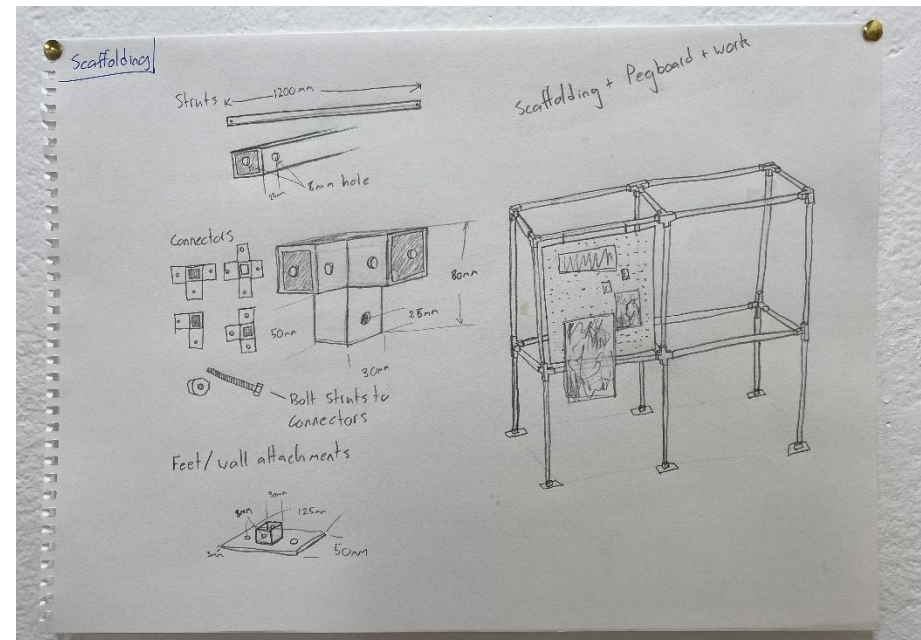


Figure 24. Josh Whitaker, Diagram of Structural Systems: Scaffolding, (14.5.25)

⁶⁷ The assemblage (and paintings) always exists in three-dimensions, however particularly in installation, the assemblage becomes 'two-dimensional' as it has

typically been on a single wall in which you can view the 'entirety' of the assemblage from one perspective.

⁶⁸ Manuel De Landa, *Assemblage Theory* (Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 180.

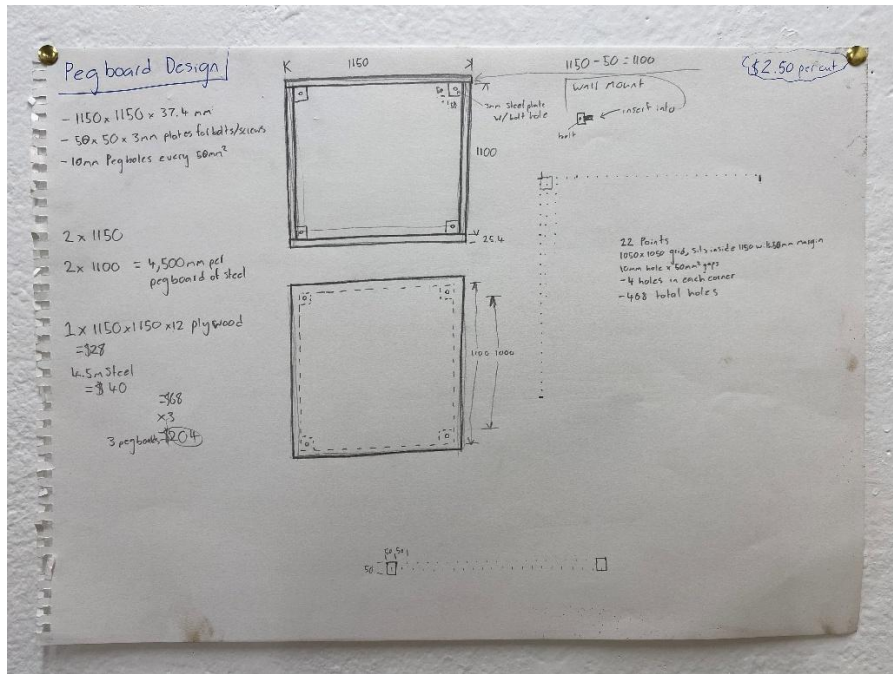


Figure 25. Josh Whitaker, Diagram of Structural Systems: Pegboards, (14.5.25)

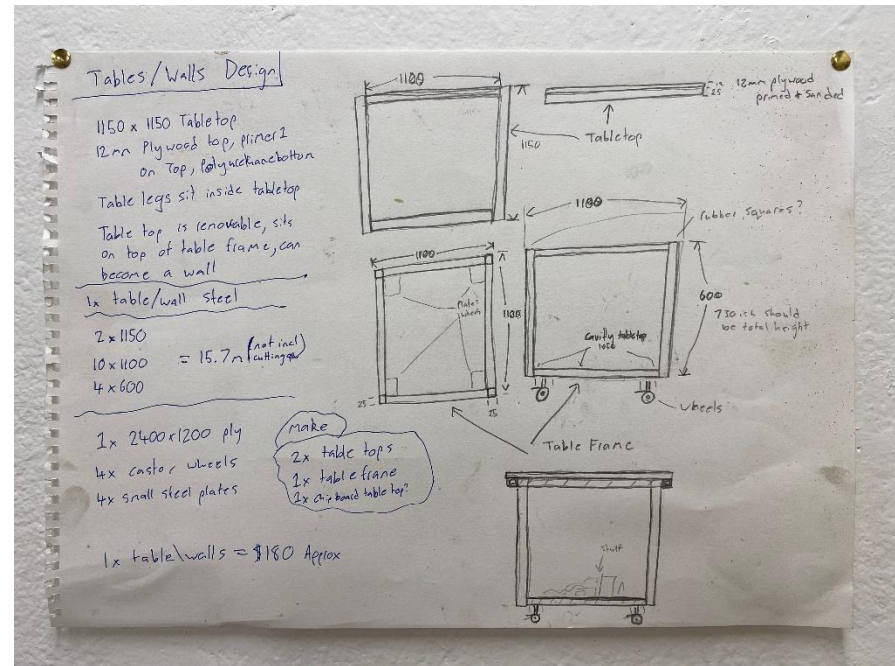


Figure 26. Josh Whitaker, Diagram of Structural Systems: Tables/Walls, (14.5.25)

Chapter 4: Micro-culturing, an Ecological Framework

To begin this chapter, I will refer to Deleuze and Guattari's notion of the "abstract machine" before developing it within an ecological field. The abstract machine is a phrase they use to describe the nature of artistic practice, a 'machine' that operates between the artist and the world. According to Deleuze and Guattari, "the diagrammatic or abstract machine does not function to represent, even something real, but rather constructs a real that is yet to come, a new type of reality."⁶⁹ To reconfigure this to my practice, the methodological goal of my 'abstract machine,' is to deconstruct everything that comes into it down to its most essential parts, then reconstruct "new realities" from the mess of parts.⁷⁰ These new realities are not separate from 'the real,' but are an abstraction of an abstraction of an abstraction of that reality — so divorced from all representational meaning that they may become new again. To build a framework from which to understand the assemblage as an 'abstract machine,' I will approach it with an ecological metaphor rather than a mechanistic one. This ecological positioning from which to understand the assemblage is present in both Bohm's writing on dialogue and Austrian-born American writer and systems theorist, Fritjof Capra's writing on systems theory. Bohm writes, "The theory of the 'microculture' proposes that a sampling of an entire culture can exist in a group of

⁶⁹ Stephen Zepke, *Art as Abstract Machine: Ontology and Aesthetics in Deleuze and Guattari* (Routledge, 2005), 1.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ David Bohm, Lee Nichol, *On Dialogue* (Routledge, 1996), X.

⁷² (Not pictured). In a collaborative work with artist and fellow student, Nikita Hesketh, we used a scanning electron microscope to view a sample of the local

twenty or more people, thereby charging it with multiple views and value systems."⁷¹ In my assemblage, a micro-culture forms, constituted of 'cuttings' which are drawn from reality as the 'whole culture,' which I will expand on in the next page.⁷² Continuing this sentiment of an ecological framework from which to understand the dynamics of the assemblage, Fritjof Capra writes on a paradigm shift,

The emerging new paradigm may be called a holistic, or an ecological worldview, using the term ecological here in a much broader and deeper sense (...). Ecological awareness in that deep sense, recognises the fundamental interdependence of all phenomena and the embeddedness of individuals and societies in the cyclical processes of nature.⁷³



Figure 27. Josh Whitaker, Earlier Version of Assemblage Methodology, (23.7.24)

atmosphere. Images produced from this sample then became 'subject matter' for abstract paintings which in turn became a new sample for the (S)EM. This is an earlier example of a 'cutting' methodology appearing in my practice that also uses technology of an extension of my perceptual ability.

⁷³ Edward A. Shanken, ed., *Systems, Whitechapel: Documents of Contemporary Art* (MIT Press, 2015), 22.

In my practice, the painting process that takes place within the assemblage is one in which all works are created under varying degrees of affectual resonance from other work. This reflects Capra's notion of the 'interdependence of phenomena,' and the 'cyclical processes of nature,' in that my paintings feed into each other and back out. This ecological/botanical framework can be found in my practice via the conceptual metaphors of microculture, cuttings, propagation and composting.

A 'cutting' in botanical language is a section from a plant, whether the root, stem or leaf, which is capable of growing into a new plant. This method of growing plants from cuttings is very commonplace for many garden and/or horticultural varieties.⁷⁴ In my practice I use the term 'cutting' to describe a work of a particular intensity and origin, whether it is something 'drawn from' within the painting assemblage, or from 'outside' the assemblage.⁷⁵ It is a work that attempts to capture the essence of a particular affectual experience, whether a sunset, abandoned knitwear, wilting flower or even something beyond words. It is something 'drawn from' a 'whole,' for example a watercolour painting of a flower.⁷⁶ This painting could be of a flower in front of me, or a photo of a flower, or a memory of a flower, each variation introduces a different degree of abstraction. A cutting is like a seed, it is the genetic instructions from which something can be 'planted' again and again, reproduced, but every time different as the genesis of this affect is in dialogue with its circumstances and atmospheric conditions. It is a cutting though, in the sense that it has been taken from the whole, to be reconstructed in every reproduction.

⁷⁴ "Cutting | Cloning, Grafting & Layering | Britannica," March 2, 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/science/cutting-plant-propagation>



Figure 28. Josh Whitaker, Photograph of a Wall I Took in Wellington, (23.2.25)



Figure 29. Josh Whitaker, 'Cutting' Made from the Photograph of a Wall in Wellington, (27.2.25)

⁷⁵ 'Drawn from' is in single quotes as I am referring to Amy Sillman on the definition of abstraction.

⁷⁶ The 'whole' is the first-hand experience of affect, in its least abstracted form.



Figure 30. Josh Whitaker, 'Cutting' Propagating, (16.4.25)

For my practice, this means using 'cuttings' as an 'artificial' means of propagating (reproducing) affectual experience in the substrate of a painting.⁷⁷ In this sense the painting is something of a garden bed, or soil, in which the genesis of variable affectual experience can fall into, grow and change. Another aspect of this framework is 'composting,' the act of recycling waste material to become the 'fertile ground' in which the cuttings can propagate. The 'fertile ground' is not

⁷⁷ Continuing with the botanical language, "propagation, in horticulture, is the reproduction of plants by any number of natural or artificial means." See "Propagation | Seeds, Cuttings & Layering | Britannica," accessed April 9, 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/science/propagation-of-plants>

⁷⁸ Catherine Mason, "Infinite Variety: Harold Cohen and Cybernetics in the 1960s," accessed April 10, 2024, <https://www.studiointernational.com/index.php/infinite-variety-harold-cohen-and-cybernetics-in-the-1960s-refactoring-gazelli-art-house-london>

necessarily the substrate to be painted, but can be considered as the assemblage itself, not all recycled materials will become physically part of the paintings but instead form what Gordon Pask calls "aesthetically potent environments."⁷⁸ An aesthetically potent environment, is a system that emerges by itself or with interaction from a participant.⁷⁹ Pask is writing from the perspective of cybernetics, but this notion can be re-contextualised into an assemblage of matter-participants (actants) which evolve (emerge) intra-actively.⁸⁰ Pask's conversation theory works are described as follows:

The theory is about learning behaviour occurring through circularly causal feedback-based conversations between entities and it is this that ultimately makes knowledge explicit. ... (incorporating) theories of self-organising systems, communication, learning and simulation of biological processes.⁸¹

Re-contextualising these cybernetic theories into an ecological framework helps to bolster the nature of the assemblage as one of 'conversation between entities' (dialogue, intra-action), 'circularly causal feedback loops' (genesis, propagation, composting), which become a 'self-organising system' (emergent assemblage).

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Duke University Press, 2007).

⁸¹ Catherine Mason, "Infinite Variety: Harold Cohen and Cybernetics in the 1960s," accessed April 10, 2024, <https://www.studiointernational.com/index.php/infinite-variety-harold-cohen-and-cybernetics-in-the-1960s-refactoring-gazelli-art-house-london>

An important part of the assemblage in my work is the structural systems I create. Particularly, the 'storage trolley' which takes on new meaning in relation to the notion of 'composting.' It has become a composting station which can store materials as 'compost' ripe for creating new work and 'cuttings' as seeds to 'plant' in new 'garden beds.' Something important to note is that there is no hard line that can possibly be drawn between a 'cutting/seed' and 'compost' in my practice — any material in itself could be considered a seed, and cuttings are also substrates to be painted on.



Figure 31. Josh Whitaker, Storage Trolley with Collection of 'Cuttings' and 'Compost,' (16.4.25)

⁸² Maria Lind, ed., *Abstraction, Documents of Contemporary Art* (Whitechapel Gallery: The MIT Press, 2013), 101.



Figure 32. Josh Whitaker, Close-up of Storage Trolley Draw, (16.4.25)

This approach to 'composting' and 'cuttings' has some similarity to Blinky Palermo's "left-overs." Art historian Briony Fer writes of him, "It is unclear whether Palermo makes a space for left-overs, of found, redundant things and materials or whether he makes a space of new possibilities. [...] in the end, I think, it has to be both."⁸² The generative power I believe this methodology has, is reinforced by Bennett, who in turn highlights philosopher Baruch Spinoza's writing,

Bodies enhance their power in or as a heterogeneous assemblage. What this suggests for the concept of agency is that the efficacy or effectivity to which that term has traditionally referred becomes distributed across an ontologically heterogeneous field, rather than being a capacity localised in a human body or in a collective produced (only) by human efforts.⁸³

⁸³ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Duke University Press, 2010), 23.

Returning to the painting, the stretched canvas is akin to a garden bed, ready for soil, compost and seeds to be planted, in which forms grow and respond to each other. The work to the right is in an earlier stage which the botanical metaphor could continue to give structure to. The acrylic paint washes, primers, mediums and tissue paper are the soil, compost and perhaps fertiliser, this forms the uneven topography in which experience falls upon, which is comically apt when painting horizontally.⁸⁴



Figure 33. Josh Whitaker, Close-up of 'Cuttings' in Storage Trolley, (16.4.25)



Figure 34. Josh Whitaker, Early Stage of Painting, (23.4.25)

⁸⁴ Painting horizontally rather than vertically is normally dependent purely on the method of 'painting' I am employing and not necessarily tied to the beginning stages of a painting.

Chapter 5: Assembling

The assembling of the assemblage is an intuitive and emergent process. It is a co-actualising of the participating actants; utilising the capacity enabled by the structural systems to work spatially in collaboration with space and the paintings.

In the case of an installation, it first requires, “designating the field of its possibility as a third space” and then bringing in the assemblage actants as mentioned in the emergence chapter.⁸⁵ From there decisions are made intuitively regarding the installation of actants in relation to each other, including the structural systems.⁸⁶ The assemblage is not a separate ‘thing’ to the space in which it emerges, as the space itself is an actant, referring back to the classroom analogy, the assessment is of particular relationships and dynamics. To explore assembling within the ecological framework, assembling in a new space is like moving house and having to build your garden again. You build your garden beds and set up your greenhouse and compost bin, all in relation to your available space. The only major difference is I can take my plants with me whether they’re a cutting or going to seed.

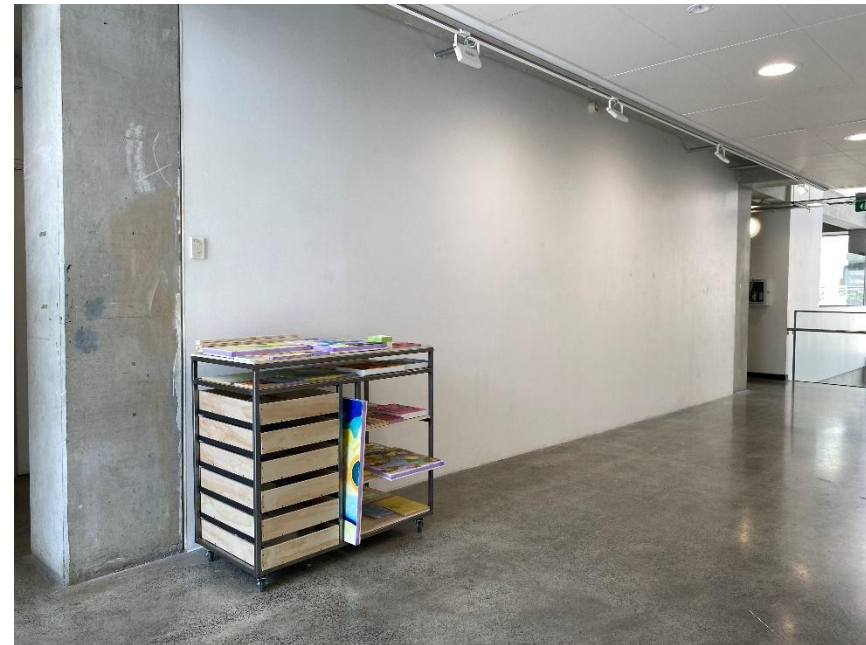


Figure 35. Josh Whitaker, In Transit to Field of Possibility, ‘Assemblage (19.11.24 - 13.12.24)’

In a previous installation of my work in late 2024, there was a key moment in which the assemblage was something that took shape in space, it was no longer just an ‘image.’⁸⁷ The most impactful change was the relationship between a viewer of the work and the assemblage, they became a part of it in a way they were not before.

⁸⁵ Jan Verwoert, “Why Are Conceptual Artists Painting Again? Because They Think it’s a Good Idea,” 2013, <https://vimeo.com/60549110>

⁸⁶ “Wassily Kandinsky - Gesamtkunstwerk,” accessed May 14, 2025, <https://www.wassilykandinsky.net/gesamtkunstwerk.php> There is a historical link to

be made with the German word ‘*Gesamtkunstwerk*,’ which translates to ‘total work of art’ formalised by Richard Wagner. However, my methodology continues and resists this notion in its continuous provisionality.

⁸⁷ An image in the sense that you don’t experience it spatially in any significant way.

Assembling the work throughout space (as pictured right), gave it literally another dimension, but also a greater capacity for potential, a viewer could not visually experience the entire assemblage at one time.⁸⁸ Viewers were encouraged by the nature of the assemblage to look closer, and to look around and make perceptual/conceptual connections for themselves.

The methodology of assemblage in my practice adopts a similar logic to that of language in terms of triangulating meaning from something.⁸⁹ I want the work (the assemblage) to be precisely imprecise, to have a conceptual/contextual noise to it, after all, radio static makes you listen harder for the parts that you can recognise.⁹⁰ I think this is important, in order to escape an attempt at a clear definition, to instil a sense of doubt about what the work is 'saying.'⁹¹ Rather than having the precision of certain 'modernist' conceptual works of art which intend to translate information without abstraction; I create work that attempts articulation through redundancy and noise rather than clarity and/or precision.⁹² The assemblage should be more like a person, in that it is reflexive of a sensibility, something you could never fully understand as they're laden with errant logic, but that sensibility creates itself in every change of the contemporaneous moment. After all, the assemblage is merely an abstraction of my own sensibility.

⁸⁸ Manuel De Landa, *Assemblage Theory* (Edinburgh University Press, 2016).

⁸⁹ It is similar to language in that it is very difficult to define a word without using other words, even if you can point to the thing the word is that might not work, is it the bus or the person on the bus?

⁹⁰ This 'noise' can be considered as an avoidance of consistency, aesthetic or otherwise in relation to contextual understandings of what a painting practice is. For example, in the picture above purple masking tape is used as a form of mark-making

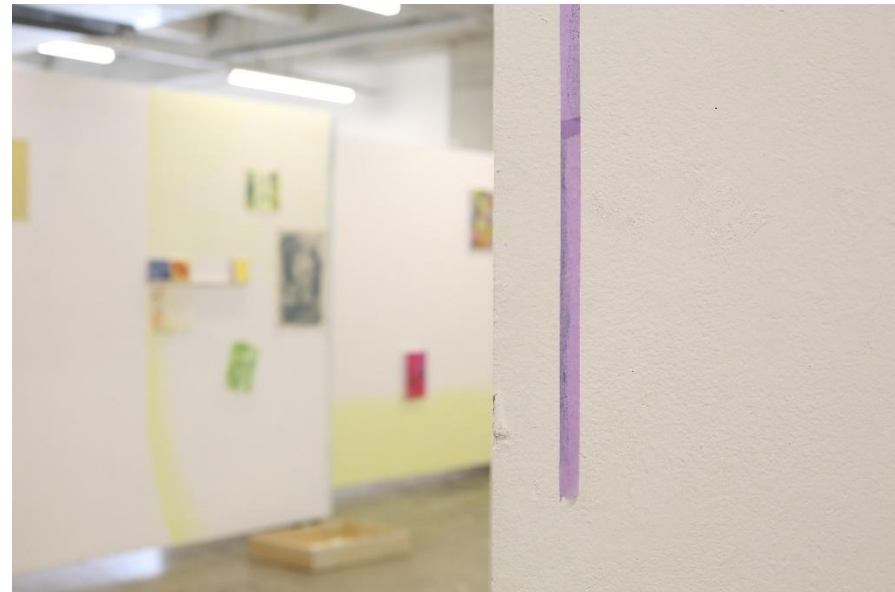


Figure 36. Josh Whitaker, Documentation of 'Assemblage (19.11.24 - 13.12.24)'

on the wall, upsetting notions of masking tapes relation to painting. The 'noise' is a misdirection of sorts, an attempt to remove one's compass so they have to reorient themselves to what 'is' rather than what they already 'know.'

⁹¹ I wouldn't describe my work as necessarily having something to say, but meaning may be derived of it as a byproduct of its sensibility.

⁹² Jan Verwoert, "Why Are Conceptual Artists Painting Again? Because They Think it's a Good Idea," 2013, <https://vimeo.com/60549110>

If a 'typical' installation of paintings is like putting your fruit and vegetables in a basket and presenting them at the local market, then the assemblage is like a tour through my garden. Some paintings will be just sprouting while others are seeding, all in different stages of their 'lives.' The methodology of the assemblage deconstructs a more typical 'life cycle' of a painting, rather than planned, executed and presented; they are always in process, a "permanent work in progress."⁹³



Figure 37. Josh Whitaker, Documentation of 'Assemblage (19.11.24 - 13.12.24)'



Figure 38. Josh Whitaker, Documentation of 'Assemblage (19.11.24 - 13.12.24)'

⁹³ Stephen Zepke, *Art as Abstract Machine: Ontology and Aesthetics in Deleuze and Guatarri* (Routledge, 2005), 182.



Figure 39. Josh Whitaker, Documentation of 'Assemblage (19.11.24 - 13.12.24)'

This methodology of the assemblage and its 'installation,' can be extrapolated by returning to the work of artist Blinky Palermo once more. Art curator Lyne Cooke writes, "Palermo probed what he called 'space activation' by focusing exclusively on the site itself. (...) each work was intended to make the viewer reflexively aware of the spatial character of the site."⁹⁴ Palermo was clearly aware of the affect that place had on his work, titling some works after specific places.⁹⁵ For the thesis exhibition I intend to title my work (the assemblage) as the dates the assemblage is installed between, while the individual

⁹⁴ Maria Lind, ed., *Abstraction, Documents of Contemporary Art* (Whitechapel Gallery: The MIT Press, 2013), 103.

⁹⁵ *Ibid*, 103.

actants will remain undistinguished (untitled) from each other. I will approach the installation of the assemblage by bringing the actants of the assemblage into the designated space and assembling them in an intuitive manner which I feel connects the space with the work and vice versa. At this point the assemblage will remain relatively static for the duration of the exhibition, outside of the slideshow/video works displayed by the projector which will add a particular temporal element.⁹⁶



Figure 40. Josh Whitaker, Documentation of 'Assemblage (19.11.24 - 13.12.24)'

⁹⁶ Relative in the sense that paint drying/curing, and deteriorating paper towels are hardly perceptual durational aspects. Also relative in the sense of the world changing in relation to the assemblage.

Conclusion

This project has been an experiment in becoming, a continual iterating of a methodology reflexive of my nature. Finding “a place to meet the universe halfway,” manifests in my practice, as connecting through the garden-assemblage.⁹⁷ This process continues to be an endless search for meaning and understanding in an ever-abstracting world. It is a practice that thinks the world through creative action.

Understanding the nature of experience by experiencing;
understanding the relations and dynamics of the world by working within an assemblage; understanding systems by attempting to enforce them on myself only to undermine or avoid them;
understanding the material world by being in dialogue with it; this turbulent relationship with reality, fuelled by what I believe to be a romanticism intrinsic to life.

The assemblage of work that is constantly coalescing around me is a cyclical process, there is an ebb and flow, an internalisation and an externalisation, a collapsing of boundaries between myself and the assemblage, I become work and the work becomes me. If I have a question I ask it through the assemblage. My composite of methodologies are all reflections of ways I believe the world shapes me and in turn the work I create. These methodologies and/or notions of assemblage, emergence, ecology and systems, all deconstruct and reconstruct my-self in a way that allows an expression of my sensibilities.

This way of working will continue to change as I do, where I find a wall (conceptual or material) that has been built without me realising, I will break it down and plant a garden. I would like to think this way of working can serve as a methodology for interrogating things I believe are issues in the world. Systems in my practice have continually iterated to become ones that are more sustainable for my creative practice, and I believe this is reflexive of a need for more sustainable systems in the greater world concerning all corners of life. I have particular concerns about the entangled systems of governments, capital, mass media, corporate influence and now A.I. that form an assemblage that is extractive and completely unsustainable. Many aspects of my practice are reflexive acts in response to these entangled systems, for instance abstracting the world through my own systems rather than pre-existing systems such as the internet. An ecological understanding of the assemblage is a relatively recent development for me that feels like a logical progression of systems thinking, when considering it as an abstraction of reality.

I hope that others connect with my garden and might consider planting their own.

⁹⁷ Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Duke University Press, 2007).

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Documentation of Exhibition Installation

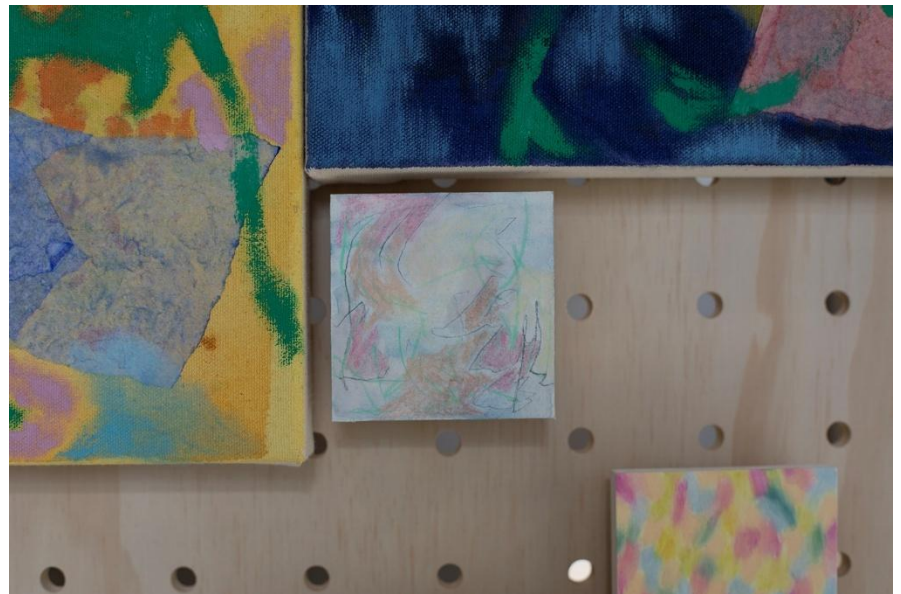
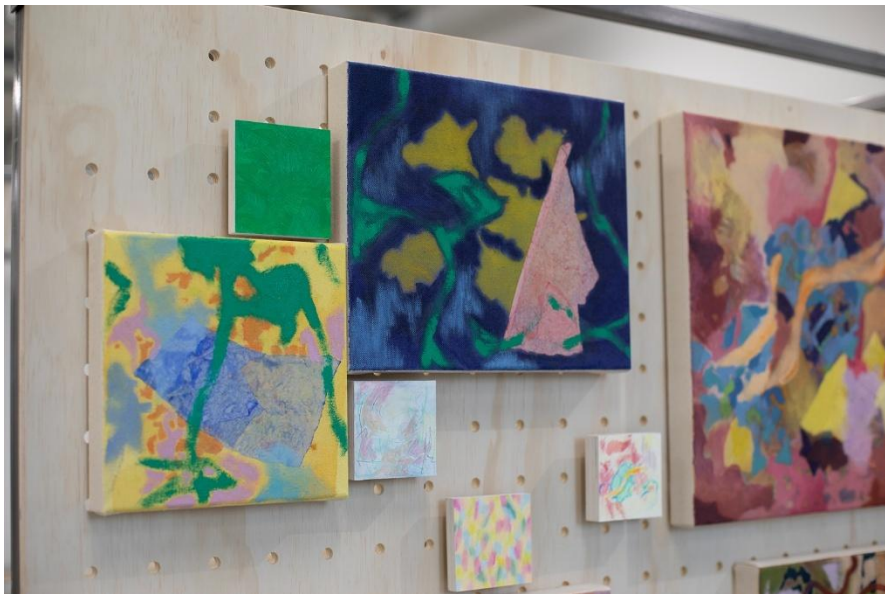


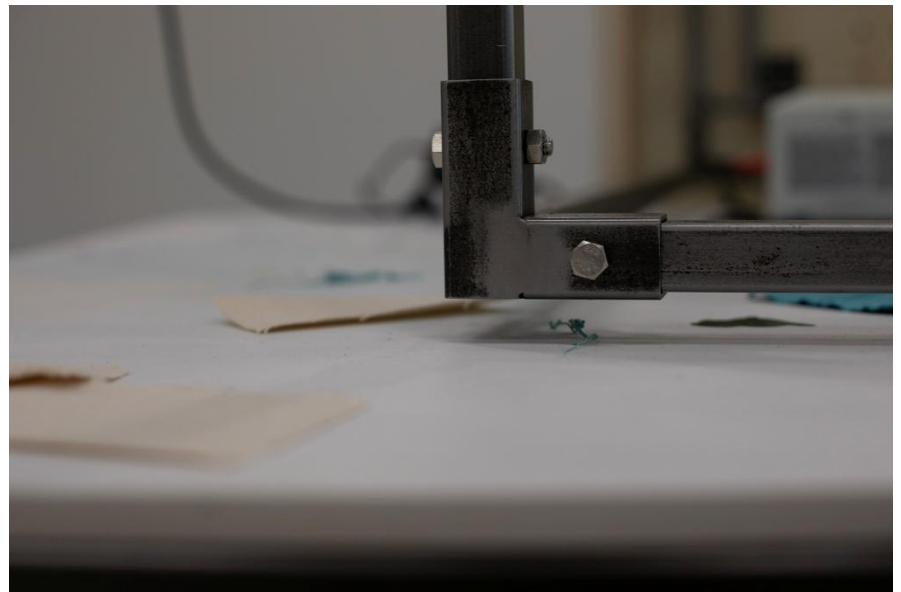
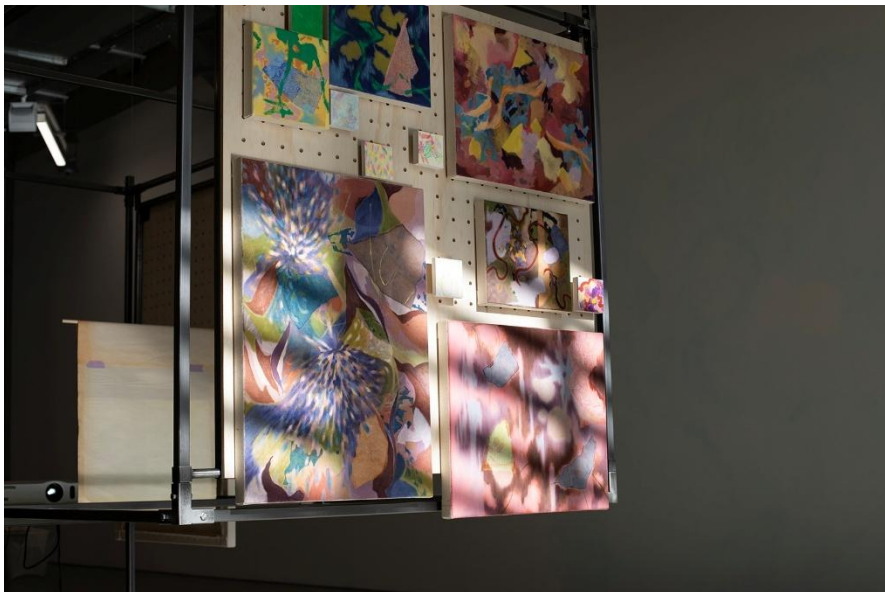
















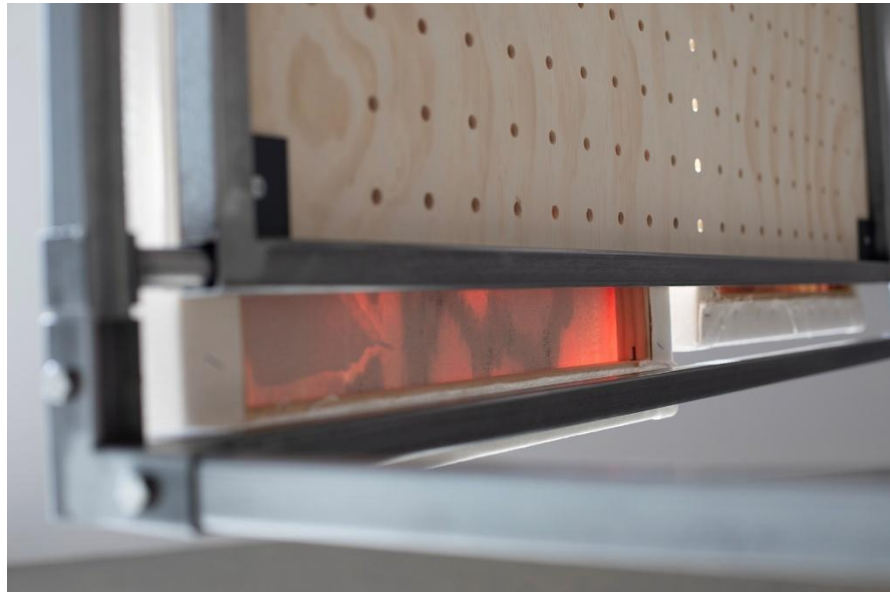
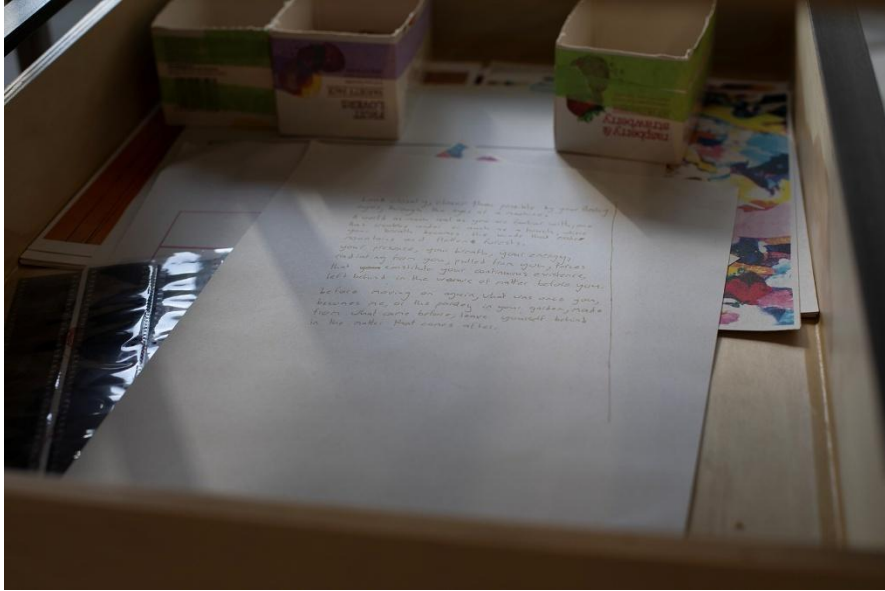










Image on page 53 taken by Paul Chapman

Youtube link for video documentation of projection:
<https://youtu.be/yNGKnRaFUj4>

Thank you for reading :)