

Painting in Counterpoint

Theresa Waugh

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I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge, 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 accepted for the award of another degree or diploma or a university or institution of higher learning.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'T. Wang', is written diagonally across the page.

5th October 2016

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ABSTRACT

This project is an exploration into the process of painting and problems that emerge during painting. In particular it explores how decisions are made in a continuous process of shifting relations of visual qualities that are themselves, continually differing. In this, it examines how painting comes to a condition of dynamic stasis, where the opposing tendencies towards harmony and dissonance become balanced in a way retains a potential—a sense of latency and imminent movement that gives life to the work. Colour is the basis of this exploration, in both its chromatic and achromatic aspects as they provide the contrast that gives rise to form, shape, texture and an illusion of space in the pictorial plane. The notion of counterpoint provides an analogy to the dialogical process of painting through continual, repeating, action and response until a work emerges in a condition of dynamic stasis. The project comes out of my past practice, and the need (as I perceive it) to problematise the aesthetic of beauty, inventively, so that the familiar order of beauty does not become anaesthetic to our perception, but continues to trigger further invention—to sustain the vitality of painting.

INTRODUCTION

The dilemma for abstract or non-figurative painting is that there is no model or form that can be referred to, so that the painter can use it as a basis to structure a painting that interprets this world from a particular angle, stopping short of mimesis. There is no obvious reference back to that world for the viewer; no clear index of signification such as those perspectival conventions that allow perception to be resolved into undeniable recognition. Yet this apparent difficulty is the virtue of abstraction, the very purpose of which, for me, is to escape the habits and clichés of perception, and so allow new modes of image-making to be explored, including those that are not established from ‘real’ world experience. My painting does however remain responsive to and reflective of everyday experience. Though such experience is filtered through a process of painting that turns-down the gain or amplitude on certain qualities, while amplifying others. It is in this process of visual-relational exploration that my paintings emerge as I play with qualities and interactions between colour, tonal value, line, and shape (the basis of perspectival signs), without responsibility to refer back to particular, recognisable, everyday experience. Instead, my work explores and negotiates a double tendency—towards beauty, and towards a troubled harmony, that in referring to an ever-present but latent chaos, brings urgency back to our desire for beauty. In this respect, while my painting is post-figurative as it is abstracted from the world, it continues to refer back to worldly embodied experience. In another respect it is pre-figurative, it returns to the basis of painting and perception, that is sensation, in order to explore how it could be other; how painting could avoid the traps of perception, the filters of figuration, and the habitual utilities of vision. I paint with colour and rhythm, and with sensation in order to explore such difference, in the hope that new experience will emerge as painting happens.

PART ONE: PAINTING IN COUNTERPOINT

Within my practice-led research project the image that emerges through the process of painting will be substantially unpredictable. What will this one look like? What issues will arise? How are the problems inherent in my abstract painting to be dealt with this time? It seems that painting demands that the artist be like the medium they are working with, flexible, fluid, and able to adapt when needed.¹ Most of my time while painting is spent looking at or for the image, as it develops through my play with materials and their aesthetic values. Each new image is reliant on time for it to be absorbed and accepted as a new thing coming into existence. Time is needed in order to establish some sort of connection between the maker and what is being made, to become attuned to it. This connection allows for some form of communication between the painter and the painting—a feedback loop of action and response develops, allowing time to make clear how to respond to the unfolding of previous decisions and consider what decisions should follow. This response differs from reaction, in that it does not necessarily refer back to the action as a directly cause and effect relationship, but is open to interpolation by multiple, indeterminate, other influences, both from sensation and from memory. What emerges from this ineffable process is an image, coming out of actions and responses, and influences, and contrasts and conflicts—a sort of dance in counterpoint.

Counterpoint, here used as an analogy, suggests that multiple elements work together in a rhythmical combination as if in continuous ebb and flow as they shift between contrasting and complimenting each other. It describes a technique of intermingling elements in conjunction with another. A relationship is formed between colours and forms that they manifest. Rupture occurs as new colours are introduced during painting, and as previous actions become over-written, and as dissonances emerge in the form of questions and problems—as a troubled beauty. Within each painting there are multiple elements made up of colour, texture, form, composition, shape, line etc. An analogy can be drawn between these elements and those that constitute music.

¹ Paton, Justin, *The Art of Creating a Sense of Necessity with Paint*, (Australia: Printed in The Australian, 2016)

They simultaneously work together to form an enlivened and dynamic combination, yet they are individual in their traits, qualities, and roles. Each layer in a painting acts both independently and interdependently, therefore forming subtle contrasts and quiet conflicts. At times each individual element may not be visible or even distinguishable from all other elements, but subtle contrasts emerge as each element is juxtaposed against every other element that makes up the image. It is not radical dissonances and ruptures that emerge in the work, but instead a restless, insistent questioning and problematising.



Figure 1²

² *Untitled*, August 2016, acrylic on panel, 375 x 350 mm, coloured paper, air dry clay cut out

For example, in Figure 1 the harlequin pattern provides a consistent rhythm, much like a grid it is repetitive in its shape and scale, despite being wonky and slightly irregular.³ I liken this to an underlying bass drum beat, a rhythmical forming and reforming of a foundation or armature for the other elements to work on, against, and to return to. The layer of scruffy orange brush marks in this painting forms a new rhythm, one that is less consistent, where strokes of differing length shift in multiple directions. This is countered by the carefully kept edge, not quite touching the edge of the picture frame on three sides. The chaos of the orange marks are contained to a very specific section of the image. The dull yellow paper that sits against the wall forms a half-hearted boarder, as it pretends it is a part of the image. The blue cut out balanced on top extends the painting into a 3D form, one that at any moment will abandon this painting and sit in beside a new one. An 'almost harmony' occurs between the elements and layers they form, they seem to simultaneously settle down and struggle against each other.

³ The Harlequin pattern creates an unease as it is a referent to real world pattern that most recognise, whereas every other element sits in a nonfigurative, abstract zone. The Harlequin pattern has been used consistently by painters since Watteau, Courbet, particularly Cezanne and Picasso. Cezanne who often painted the harlequin related the harlequin to the trickster or fool in a psychological context - the blue zig-zag object placed on top of the painting has this strange quality of the trickster, someone who can't be relied on but instead will do as they please.

DISSONANCE

It is not always clear what makes painting and music similar, or even comparable. It is that, as a picture is composed of individual colours, so a musical piece is composed of individual sounds? Or is it the fact that composition, that is, balanced and proper combination of varieties, or even contrasts and dissonances, is the central law governing both arts?⁴

Barasch suggests that the relationship between painting and music is perhaps the result of a piece being composed of multiple individual elements. He also offers up another factor that both hold the mutual understanding of the sensations of balanced harmonies and contrasting dissonances. He goes on to say that both painting and music are the "... manifestation of discord and conflict, but in an overall pattern that balanced the contradictions."⁵ There is a significant connection between harmony and dissonance, a relationship that is made up of contrasts and conflicts. It is this intermingling between two opposing sensations that form a vivacious work of art, a work that is visually stimulating. We have a tendency to want to correct or accommodate, a desire to want to do work and be interested and engaged, be provoked into a response.

The issue with this harmony and dissonance found in both painting and music is balancing between the two elements. Harmony tends to be considered beautiful, attractive, an element we are drawn to. It refers to deep order that is rooted in a past which continually frames our perceptions in the present—an order that promises the security of being already known, and of a future that might be predictable if conceived in these terms. It is rooted in cultural ideals and practices, in ways of seeing and thinking and organising and categorising, that we have been continually and consistently exposed to. To the extent that these modes are familiar, they no longer draw our attention, nor induce response beyond recognition and a sense of ease—that is, they require no work from us, and so have no life-tendency. This is both the virtue and the problem of beauty. This problem is at the core of

⁴ Barasch, Moshe, *Theories of Art, III : From Impressionism to Kandinsky*, (Routledge, New York: 2000), 330

⁵ Barasch, Moshe, *Theories of Art, III : From Impressionism to Kandinsky*, (Routledge, New York: 2000), 363-64

my project which came out of my past practice where there was a constant re-presentation of the beautiful, as if the role I had taken for my art was to find beautify, or otherwise beautify—a project that had obsessive, even desperate overtones. What has come out of this project, where I shifted the emphasis in my painting to an exploratory role (that is to an emphasis on process and movement) of exploration.

A harmonious work may be smooth or soft, it will likely not challenge or jar. It is comfortable, pleasing to the eye and safe enough to hang above the couch in your lounge. There is a predictable order involved in this beauty, a familiarity in the sensations it evokes. It is somehow already known, encountered before, recognisable in what it is trying to do. It is pleasing to the eye because it is already stored in our memory; it is no challenge, it is not new.

But the problem with beauty is that this pleasant harmony often lacks life. There is no work to be done in it, no questions or problems to consider. It easily becomes dull after a very short period of time. How do I keep painting new paintings? Perhaps through approaching paint as an endless exploration, by problematising aesthetic qualities and neglecting the nostalgia for beauty but instead embracing the contrasts that accompanies dissonance. Without an element of dissonance to disrupt the peace, an image lacks conviviality. It does not reflect the vibrancy we come across in life, but instead creates a utopia within the limit of the picture frame. An element of dissonance, or discord and conflict as Bartsch suggests, is vital in creating a painting or piece of music that is something we can continue to return to without losing interest. Dissonance can appear in many different forms, from contrasting hues and tones to disrupting textures.

On the other hand, a work that has too much dissonance could be off-putting. It might perhaps be repulsive or ugly. What makes it so, is hard to define. It is a sensibility that the elements that make up the work are not right, the relationships they form are uncomfortable and new. Too much of it is often overbearing, overwhelming the senses. To measure how much dissonance is too much, ultimately depends on the work, there is no criterion that covers all. Though, I have found that this discomfort that accompanies dissonance sometimes doesn't last. Just as the initial intrigue that a beautiful work may hold does not always continue, dissonance begins to settle over time. We begin to adjust to the newness in the dissonance, it no longer seems as harsh as it

did in the beginning. Familiarity is formed through time, patterns and rhythms emerge out of the chaos, a new form of order assembles through recognition in memory.

For example, my childhood home had a large brick fireplace built into the wall of the average sized living room. It was an eyesore, made up of rough bricks piled together asymmetrically. Initially, when we moved in it was obvious that it needed to be removed, we could not live alongside such an unattractive feature. It would be replaced by a simple, appropriately sized fireplace. A less intrusive one, something that we would no longer think about because it did not disrupt. For various reasons the fireplace was not replaced, instead over time we became accustomed to it. We became comfortable with the amount of space it consumed and attention it insisted. Eventually, we softened and learned how to live with it. It's unattractiveness became endearing, giving the room an interesting character. Time with the disruptive, dissonant element allowed our response to change. It became a new idea of comfortable. It was no longer what it was in the beginning because our perception changed over time.

The aim of the painting process isn't about forming ruptures, although there is an allowance for these ruptures to occur, for contrast to exist in constant relation to each other. Painting explores how we create understandings of the world, through perception. Through this thinking a work is produced, made up of all the artist has seen and heard and previously made. It becomes a gathering of past learnings, of the years of interacting with the world, noticing harmonies and discovering discords, all channeled into the picture frame. Through this making, ruptures occur, harmonies are formed, both attractiveness and repulsion emerge as a result. It is a complicated structure, shifting between harmony and dissonance until it comes to an arrangement that mingles between these two aesthetic tendencies. It is not anti-aesthetics, nor a protest against beauty. Rather it is a problematising and questioning of what is already known about aesthetics. It is an attempt to resist my habitual tendencies to make visually attractive work and instead problematise known orders, to move forward toward a new unrecognisable order.

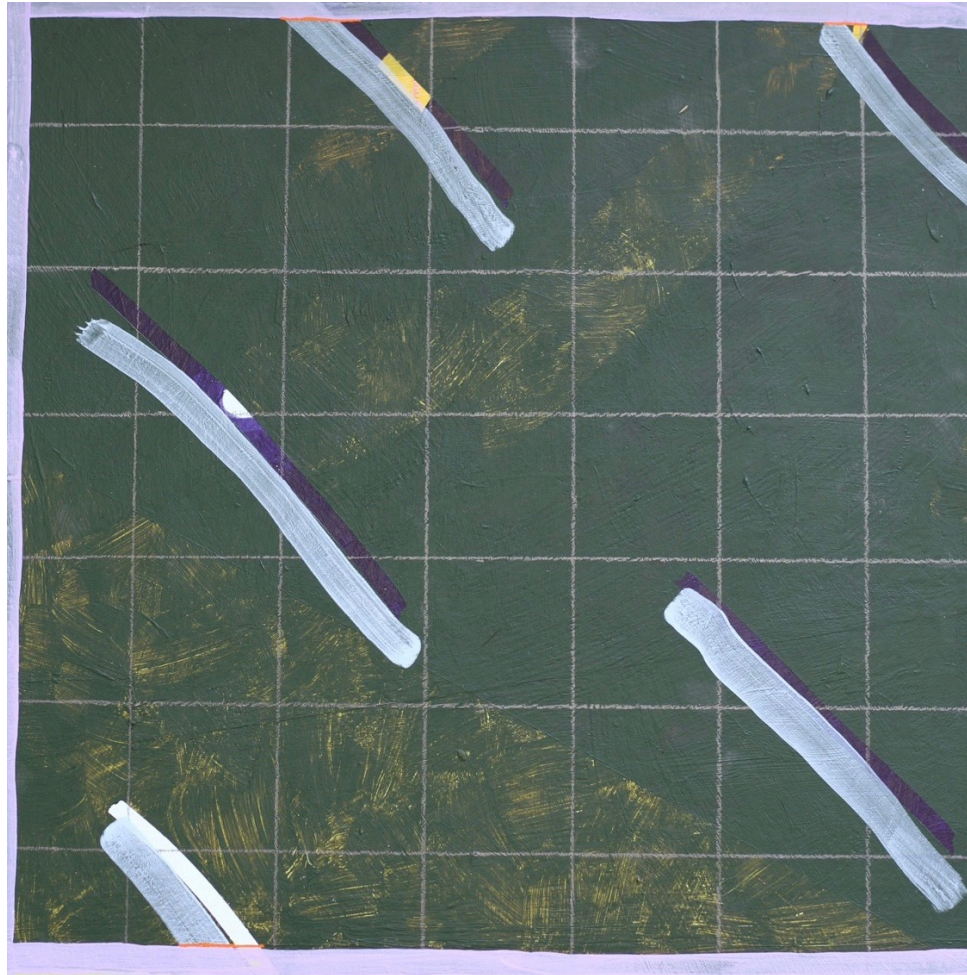


Figure 2⁶

⁶ *Untitled*, May 2016, acrylic and graphite on panel, 450 x 450 mm

PART TWO: STUDIO PRACTICE

Very little is clarified at the beginning of a painting. For example, in Figure 2 all that was on my mind as a background image were the spray paint marks on the side of the road that was noticed as I walked to the studio. This is a starting point, to explore whether this trigger presents a question that demands exploration or whether my exploration is to find and clarify a question, the trigger is sufficient to give in return to painting. The memory of it is somehow transferred into paint, without illustrating the original source. Once that first decision has been completed, then the second can then be decided on, all in consideration to how the first turned out. This continues, areas of the painting may stay the same, others will be continually obscured by multiple layers. Just as counterpoint in music talks of multiple elements working in conjunction and in contrast with each other, each element in the painting acts the same way, determining how the other will act and react. Painting is a process, a way of thinking about how visual qualities could be in relation to another.

TRIGGERS

A painting is often started in my mind months before it makes its way into paint, triggered by the idea of something I have observed when out walking. I become a *flâneur*: an observer of the things that I come across. I seek out moments that capture my attention and trigger my thoughts. The concept of the *flâneur* refers to a contemplative stroller, someone who Charles Baudelaire described as “a kaleidoscope gifted with consciousness”.⁷ This ‘conscious kaleidoscope’ is an idea of reflecting upon and reconfiguring the observations of visual urban experiences. It involves constant movement, always shifting and altering, questioning and problematising what is seen. Never pausing or stilling motion, it is a progression forward, away from the known past into a new form. It is the act of response to fragments of the encountered environment. In this project this manifests itself in the form of encounters with visual experiences that trigger thought and action within the painting process. The idea of the *flâneur* holds connotations of open plans, of actively but gently pursuing a flexible direction rather than following an ordered plan. Nothing in the painting process is decided from the beginning, but the general direction is guided through these triggers that appear.

Often these are encounters that I stumble across hold my entire attention for a moment because of some sort of aesthetic quality about them. These qualities change with each encounter; I do not have a criterion that needs to be fulfilled before I take notice of an object. Something about the encounter is either new to me or it doesn’t fit exactly with images in my memory. Somehow it opens a question about its nature and relationships to other objects. Each time I leave the studio I keenly observe the environment around me, going out with the intention to come across something that will make me think about painting, without determining what the encounter will be. The experience is not prefigured but allowed to play out in an undirected way. It is a purposeful action of setting out to notice things. These things that are noticed become triggers; they spark some sort of forward action. They provoke decisions to be made and visual sensations to be problematised.

⁷ Baudelaire, Charles, *The Painter of Modern Life*, (New York: Da Capo Press, 1964) Orig. published in *Le Figaro*, 1863

Figure 3⁸

⁸ Collection of various triggers

These triggers are an eclectic range and vary in what they are - for example, the colour combinations that a fellow bus passenger is wearing, or the way in which a construction worker has applied tape to a window (see Figure 3). The repetitive element between each of these encounters is that they trigger something that captures my attention and activates persistent questioning. I often contemplate this encounter for days after I have come across it. It sticks and holds some sort of power over me until I return to take a photograph of it or explore the sensation of that moment through drawing or painting. The acknowledgement of the trigger is the only way I can begin to release it from my mind. Photographs of these triggers are not often looked at once they have been taken, the act of capturing the moment is enough. The photographs freeze the moment of the encounter, becoming a portable record of enticing triggers. I become a collector of visual encounters, consuming and filtering what I come across, dislocating these moments from their original environments and translating the memory of them into some sort of image. Through the recycling of these triggers I seek to create something new, to form an image that offers up a new conversation.

Though a painting may originate from certain conditions, it does not mean that these conditions will determine the outcome. Through using triggers as a means to initiate a painting, there is a risk that painting may become limited if it becomes concerned with representation of what has already been experienced. Despite this, there is potential for the source to develop the painting beyond what I could have come up with on my own. Using triggers to initiate action helps prevent repetition and encourage a new thought processes with each new painting.

In a similar way, abstract painter, Thomas Nozkowski draws from his surroundings:

Everything I do has a source in reality. But I am talking about reality in the largest sense: not only in terms of what we can touch or see, but what we can think about, what we can imagine. We can draw upon a whole visual continuum that includes other works of art, landscapes, things in print, films.⁹

⁹ Samet, Jennifer, *Beer with a Painter: Thomas Nozkowski and Joyce Robins*, (June 2015)

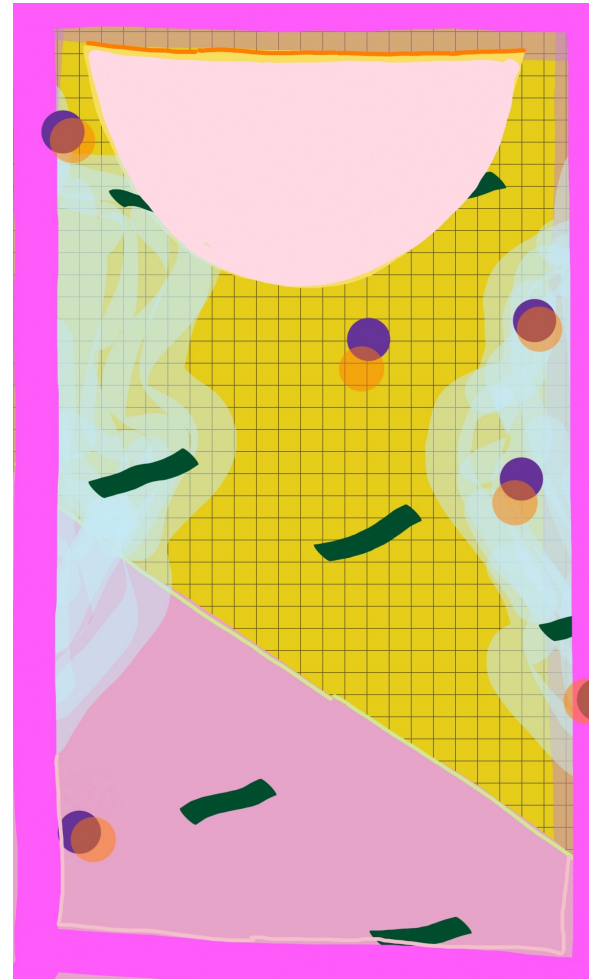
Nozkowski uses his encounters in the world to inform his paintings. He does not have rules as to how these sources are to be included in his work. They can be stretched, reduced and blended in with other visual qualities that come out of other moments of vision, of looking and noticing. The way the source is utilised is based on what he feels is an accurate reflection of the sensation of the moment he is thinking of. Nozkowski does not aim to illustrate or directly translate the trigger, but instead uses the visual sensations to aid his process. There are no restrictions as to how these moments may be transcribed into painting. It is a re-assembling of memory into painting, rather than a representation of it. The physical act of painting is a process of making use of the trigger, a way of understanding why it was noticed in the first place, and an exploration of its potential through and for image-making.

Unlike Nozkowski, it is not important that spectators know my work began in reality. The trigger is simply an aid, a means to begin painting and continue painting. The qualities and questions of dissonance discovered through a trigger initiate decisions, it allows for new elements to be inserted among previous. The trigger no longer is important once an action has been made in response to it, as it is no longer what it was, but now a *new* thing that has a life of its own and its own reality.

The images shown in Figures 4 and 5 provide an example of how a trigger may be fragmented into an image. The pink circular blanket caught my attention as I was walking by; it was a visually appealing moment as something about it was new to me. Each object was individually familiar, but the way in which they were casually arranged caused me to pause. There was a new order in this trigger, a visual combination that prompted questions. This moment was then translated into the pink half circle in the digital drawing. The digital drawing was able to be done immediately, through an application on my phone. Very little time took place between seeing and making. Often the triggers references are not obvious, usually being adjusted and changed, or perhaps covered up completely through the making process. Visual qualities sourced from other triggers could be combined and morphed, forming a new thing.



Figures 4 & 5¹⁰



¹⁰ Photograph of trigger, and digital drawing made in response to trigger

TO MAKE

The relationship between painting and technology is in constant tension. Stephen Scobie talks about how our visual experience is changing in his book *Earthquakes and Explorations: Language and Painting from Cubism to Concrete Poetry*: “It can certainly be argued that the nature of our visual experience has been changed, in the twentieth century, by the proliferation of the technologies of reproduction, to the point that the multiple, mass-produced image... has become the norm.”¹¹ In an image saturated society surrounded by visual noise, the proliferation and pervasiveness of images continue to bombard us everywhere we look. We can instantly bring up images of anything imaginable through a small device that connects to the internet. Photographs can be taken at high qualities in milliseconds, and then sent anywhere in the world. Painting acts in opposition to this rush of imagery; it is an invitation to look if and when one chooses. Painting allows time to come to terms with it.

As Scobie suggested, expectation of instantaneous image production has become normal, often something that is not thought of or regularly reflected upon. This is something generations before have not had to encounter, nor had to question how new technologies affect the way we think about painting. It is us, the ‘selfie generation’, that is learning how to navigate this image saturated culture. The drawn out process of painting is challenged through various technological advances from updated Photoshop ‘brushes’, down to the free drawing application that I occasionally use. How can I negotiate between the slow process of painting and the effortless ease that the drawing app supplies? How can these two opposites work in conjunction, in aid of each other? It is a new relationship that I am exploring.

¹¹ Scobie, Stephen, *Earthquakes and Explorations*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 18

Painting, for me, is a slow, unique process, especially when working with oil paints. It is also a slow looking process, painting demands time to be spent with it. Time allows for questions to form about the decisions that were carried out, and the problems of possible future decisions. Connections will form and rhythms will emerge within a work. Painting asks for a slowing down for the senses to establish a response, allowing time for a reaction to unfold. It takes time to physically make, but time also alters my responses to a work.



Figure 6¹²

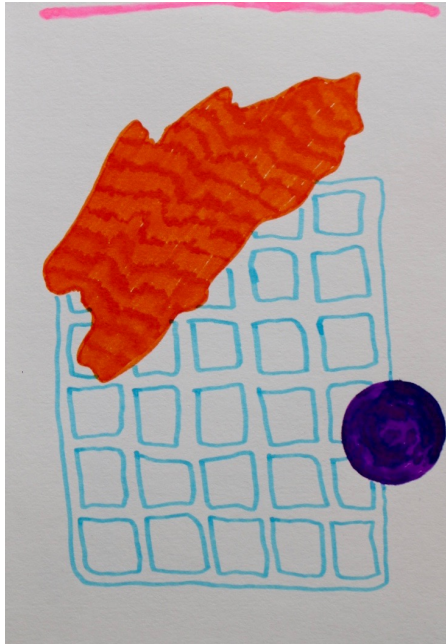
¹² Digital drawing on photograph of work in progress painting

The question of how to deal with triggers differs with each painting. Sometimes it is clear as to how I would use the trigger, as shown in Figure 5. While perhaps more often than not, it is unclear. Visually, the aim is to transfer the sensation of the encounter into a new form, though this usually only occupies a portion of a painting. The rest of the image is often determined by the way these triggers shift on the canvas. I work in a very methodical way, making a mark (sometimes prompted by a trigger) and then pausing. In this pause I reflect and take time to look at and interact with the image. This is the moment that I decide whether the mark is to stay the same or be adjusted.

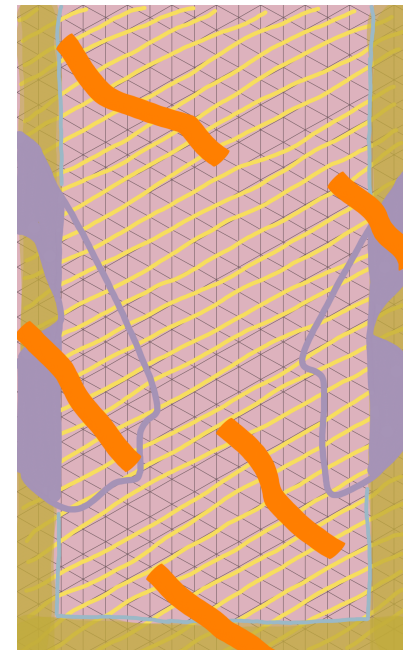
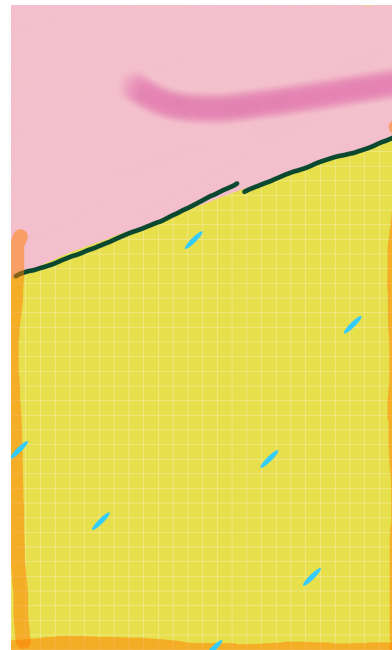
Sometimes it is days or weeks before I make the next mark in response to previous ones. Time is necessary for clarity. It is needed to allow the tension between harmony and dissonance to emerge, so that decisions as how to act next can be made. When a painting becomes difficult and it is unclear as to what I should do next, I may use a digital drawing application as an aid. I take photos of a painting that needs work and then digitally draw over the top to see what it would look like (see Figure 6). This is a quick way to trial decisions without delaying the making process.

Both entirely digital drawings and hand drawings are used as an aid to quicken the painting process. They are a way of teasing out complicated relationships between elements and textures, exploring how patterns work and compositions might interrelate. These drawings are never translated directly into paintings, but instead used like the triggers as a way of enticing action to be taken. These drawings are used as tactics not strategies,¹³ possible trajectories not plans. They are a fast way to figure out how a trigger could possibly be translated into another visual form in the moments after the encounter.

¹³ A tactic refers to following through on a short term idea, whereas a strategy refers to a long term plan. Forming thorough plans does not fit in with the rate of problematisation in my practice, as there is a constant turn over in questioning and responding that does not rely on planning. Instead, there develops loose inklings as to what the next decision could be.



Figures 7 & 8¹⁴



¹⁴ Hand drawings and digital drawings made in response to various triggers

TO DECIDE

Drawing is a by-product in response to the experience of discovering a trigger. Though my entire practice could be considered drawing through its provisional and exploratory nature, I am referring to drawing here as the act of making an image without paint (see Figures 7 and 8). This form of drawing is a compressed version of drawing done in paint. They become a shorthand way of exploring a visual affect and problematising it. There is little long term thinking involved as drawings are rarely shown. They become a personal aid in the making process. Drawing allows for a degree of freedom that paint does not provide through its quick execution and often small scale. Criticism and judgement are usually put aside while ideas and trains of thought are speedily transferred on to paper or onto the screen. Drawing is often a process of quickly reacting to a trigger, because there seems to be a need for action. The role that drawing plays differs. At times a drawing is used as a basis of a painting, referred to throughout the process as a referent to translate. In some situations drawings are not looked at at all. In other situations, previous drawings act as the vital key that fixes a visual problem. It helps the painting become 'unstuck' and continue to progress.

Drawings are a prompt, opening up possible trajectories for a painting to follow or to reject. Paintings emerge out of triggers, drawings and earlier paintings. It is a process of intuitive action in response to something, then reflection. This ambiguous process continues through many layers, building up through application. There is a need to give undivided attention to what is being made, to continually spend time with it. To seek out what I feel it needs, what would propel it forward, what would answer visual questions or create these questions. How can a painting be exploratory if it is thoroughly planned? This is a process of trusting the thing you are making in front of you to tell you what is needed and trusting of yourself to interpret this need and answer it with action.

Tomma Abts talks of her painting process in a similar way:

When I work I seem to go back and forth between very spontaneous intuitive moments, throwing whatever comes to mind into the equation, and then editing, being overly reflective and self-conscious. I am hardly ever able to leave something the way it came out in the first place.¹⁵

This mode of working involves a trust in one's own intuitive responses, allowing critical reflective response to unfold the work further. Holt describes the mind as having two functions "a reflective (mediated) process and an intuitive (non-mediated) process. Artists appear to use both processes in the creation of their work. This consciousness is often not mediated by any other concept and they often do not follow a preconceived set of procedures that is more characteristic of our usual rational thinking".¹⁶ Both processes are utilised throughout making. It is a process of testing out an intuitively led decision and reflecting on it as it is carried out. Working this way makes rationalising and explaining decisions difficult. Deciding what mark should be made and how, often comes naturally and at times with the aid of a trigger or drawing processes. How are elements to be dealt with? What directs decisions?

As Holt notes, there is not a preconceived image to work toward. But there is an undeniable need to do something, to make a mark and assess what sensation this mark has produced. Throughout every stage of the painting process "a decision is needed... how the decision turns out is not in the forefront of interests... the most important thing is that a decision is taken."¹⁷ It is a demand from the painting that action needs to be made, whatever that action may be. The primary concern in the moment of decision making is not what the results will be, but the need for a decision to be made so that it can be reflected on. It "is a slow and difficult process of addition, subtraction, and modification",¹⁸ a process that may never reach a resolution.

¹⁵ Abts, Tomma, and Fecteau, Vincent, *Some Similarities*, (Parkett, No. 84 December, 2008), 30-35

¹⁶ Holt, David Kenneth, *The Search for Aesthetic Meaning in the Visual Arts*, (USA: Greenwood Publishing Group Inc, 2001), 15

¹⁷ Verwoert, Jan, *Emergence: On the Painting of Tomma Abts*, (New York: David Zwirner No. 84, 2008)

¹⁸ Verwoert, Jan, *The Beauty and Politics of Latency: On the Work of Tomma Abts*, (New York: Phaidon Press Inc, 2008), 13

COLOUR

Colour is at the core of everything involved in painting. Shape, tone, texture, line etc are all elements that make up a painting, but ultimately are just qualities and matter that colour is manifested in. Despite colour being the basis that every other element refers back to, it is a difficult thing to talk about as it is never an absolute. While subjectively there are cultural responses to colour, the experience of colour is within our affective response. Nothing is guaranteed with colour. Painter Bridget Riley talks of colours instability in a collection of her writings, *The Eye's Mind*. She explains that “an element so responsive to relationships and interactions as colour cannot be stable and definite in the same way that forms described by line can be... one never sees a colour isolated, and so you never know exactly what any particular colour is in itself.”¹⁹ Colour is always in relation, always in conversation, continuously in the process of counterpoint. Colour cannot exist in isolation by itself, it exists in relation to adjacent colours. “In colour we find harmony, melody and counterpoint”.²⁰ Some sort of balance develops throughout the painting process between contrasting colours that exist in relation to each other.

The surrounding combination of colours determine visual sensations, ‘changing’ the colour depending on its neighbours. These relationships between colours are “based on observation, on sensitivity, on felt experiences”²¹ and also through trialling these combinations, testing to see how one colour will interact and react to another. How could colour gather together in new ways? Tonal ranges and paint application also challenge relationships. A transparent green gold will shimmer interestingly in relation to a creamy purple, but uncomfortably sour under an orange-vermillion tone (see Figures 9 and 10).

¹⁹ Kudiekla, Robert (Editor), *The Eye's Mind: Bridget Riley, Collected Writings 1965-1999* (UK: Thames and Hudson Ltd, 1999), 127

²⁰ Baudelaire, Charles, Quoted in Batchelor, David's, *Colour: Documents of Contemporary Art*, (London: Whitechapel, MIT Press, 2008), 24

²¹ Matisse, Henri, Quoted in Batchelor, David's, *Colour: Documents of Contemporary Art*, (London: Whitechapel, MIT Press, 2008), 53

Figures 9 & 10²²

My responses of interest and discomfort are based on initial reactions. When I first combined the purple and green gold I was both repulsed and simultaneously attracted to it. The relationship between the two colours was off putting but strangely seductive. The vermillion and green gold also activated a similar response, the sensation the two colours formed didn't settle but instead caused tension. This tension is the very reason I did not alter the colours. Although it is uncomfortable, it activates a response and creates a slight disturbance. This disturbance is vital to the life of the painting. Without it the image would become dull and lifeless. Dissonance is necessary for vitality, for painting to remain active.

²² Fig. 9 - *Untitled*, August 2016, acrylic on panel, 350 x 350 mm, Fig. 10 - Detail of Fig. 1

FINISHED

When is a painting finished? There is the assumption that a work of art is completed if it is exhibited, shown to the world outside the studio. Why would an artist show an incomplete work? Isn't the aim of making to complete what is being made, to take it right through to a resolution? Perhaps. Abstract painter, Tom Abts talks of a moment; "'click', and I realise that it's done, but usually it's more a feeling that I've exhausted possibilities and I've kind of backed myself into the solution."²³ Thomas Nozkowski describes the moment he knows he has finished a painting when he feels "satisfied that I found why I wanted to make it in the first place."²⁴ Both Nozkowski and Abts seek out a resolution, some sort of solution for the questions that arise out of their works. This solution is often unclear and unpredictable, unable to be logically explained or justified by reason. It is based on the sensation that a painting provides the maker with some sort of clarity that it no longer needs to be altered.

This does not usually happen when I make, every painting that I have worked on throughout this project is over the top of a previous painting. There always seems to be a restlessness in painting, an unquenchable need to be altered. There is always work to be done, very rarely is a painting left for long. I cannot leave it the way it is, it is stuck in a perpetual state of change. Layers build up over previous layers, the life of the image is continually extended. It is an endless cycle of problematising the order that forms in beauty.

²³ Abts, Tomma, and Fecteau, Vincent, *Some Similarities*, (Parkett, No. 84 December, 2008), 30-35

²⁴ Samet, Jennifer, *Beer with a Painter: Thomas Nozkowski and Joyce Robins*, (June 2015)

Art critic Chang Yen-Yuan suggested that there should an embrace of the unfinished, the incomplete:

In painting, one should avoid worrying about accomplishing a work that is too diligent and too finished in the depiction of forms and the notation of colours or one that makes too great a display of one's technique, thus depriving it of mystery and aura. That is why one should not fear the incomplete. From the moment one knows that a thing is complete, what need is there to complete it?²⁵

Yen-Yuan offers an interesting idea, that once a work has reached completion it loses its 'mystery' and it lacks some sort of intrigue. Through seeking out a resolution to the problems and questions that emerge, the painting will lose the strange life it develops as it is being made. Planning in advance will also remove the 'mystery' of the painting, it will become like a jigsaw puzzle, filling in the gaps until the image is whole. Once the puzzle is complete the thing that kept drawing you back to it is gone, the tension that exists in the incomplete disappears.

I imagine a completed image seems somehow correct in every way, there is a sense of rightness in the way the elements are interacting with each other. Harmony occurs and beauty settles. Instead of working toward an invisible ideal, my work is in a constant state of growth. It becomes a living creature evolving each time I approach the canvas, shifting it from one state to another. A viewer could see a work on display and then see a painting in my studio shortly afterwards and not be able to recognise that it was the same painting they had looked at previously. Each painting is an on-going project, a task that is open-ended and never assumed to be finished. Painting is in "a perpetual state of becoming",²⁶ an endless exploration.

²⁵ Chang Yen-Yuan, quoted by Cheng, Francois, *Empty and Full: The Language of Chinese Painting*, (Boston and London: Shambhala, 1994), 76

²⁶ Verwoert, Jan, *Open-Day Talk: Painting in the Present Tense*, (2013)

In saying that, there are few works that may stay the same. They are on pause, staying in that state until a need to change arises. These paintings could be announced as finished, but it is likely that I will come into the studio one day and feel the compulsion to adjust something. Adding a new colour or blocking out an area leaving a thin slither of the previous layers. Pentimento and palimpsest are both qualities that are evident. There is no hiding that previous layers exist under visible layers, there is an evident history of the painting. There is no clear ending or resolution, instead it is a moving on from a painting. Work may cease eventually as my attention shifts to other works.

Painters have often talked about failed paintings, ones that have been abandoned and now live facing the wall in a dark corner of the studio. If a painting is never finished, can a work ever be considered a failure? Can a painting fail if it is always in a state of adjustment? There are times when a painting has come to a point where nothing can be done to resuscitate it, it has been lost. No amount of tinkering will help it recover. Instead it must be gessoed, made clean and new again. The only traces of earlier works are the lumps and lines, the giveaway that something else once existed. From this stage it can develop new again, emerging a new visual sensation. Perhaps this is failure, perhaps it is the ultimate rejection of failure.

INSTALLATION: IN COLLABORATION

Simply to hang a painting on the wall and say that it's art is dreadful. The whole network is important!... When you say art, then everything possible belongs to it. In a gallery that is also the floor, the architecture, the colour of the walls.²⁷

As Kippenberger suggested, art exists in a network, an interlinked system of relationships to the wider space it occupies. Some of these relationships are taught to be ignored as we edit vision; generally a mark on the wall beside a painting will not be talked about in a critique. But the height of a painting in relation to the size of a wall is important. Consideration of the space beyond the limits of the picture frame will highlight this network. Just as colours cannot be seen individually, a painting cannot be looked at without some consideration of the surrounding space. When the floor, architecture and walls are utilised, an aggregate is formed. The gallery is no longer a passive platform to present paintings within but instead becomes a space where an installation can be developed in response. This process of counterpoint (multiple elements that are placed together and interact to form juxtapositions that result in a new form of attractive vitality) was present in an installation that ceramicist Eloise Worrall-Bader and I collaborated on: *When He Texts Back 14 Minutes Later / Put Your Timer On*.

Each element that is present in the space - paintings, ceramics and other objects depend on the others for support. They begin to interact; begin to flirt, flatter or frustrate. An independence also occurs between these elements as a result of the provisionality of installation. While all the elements are in place in relationship to each other, there is a mutual need for each others existence. Once an element is removed the entire installation is interrupted and the network is changed. The removed painting or ceramic piece then acts independently as it no longer needs the other elements for support. The work can exist as it is shifted into another environment, another network.

²⁷ Goldstein, Ann. Excerpt from *One Has to be Able to Take It!*, interview with Martin Kippenberger by Jutta Koether, 1990-91, in *Martin Kippenberger: The Problem Perspective*, (MIT Press, Cambridge: 2008)

But the installation as a whole cannot exist this way. It cannot be shifted as it is inherently provisional, made only to exist for the length of the event.²⁸ Unlike the process of painting, an installation needs to have some sort of preconceived requirements. A space must be set aside and time is needed to decide on how the space is to be responded to and filled. Once an installation is deinstalled, the event the installation existed within is no longer. Some of the elements that made up this installation outlast the event. They can be placed in a new event, a new installation and become active within a new counterpoint. An installation is provisional, temporary, existing within the event; not before or afterward.



Figures 11 & 12²⁹

²⁸ Though, the event is stretched when the installation is composed within the studio space. It slowly evolves as more elements are made and added. Arranging an installation within a studio is much like rearranging furniture within your bedroom; the space is already known and familiar, and how the objects fill the space can be predicted.

²⁹ Fig. 11 - Detail of Installation *When He Texts Back 14 Minutes Later / Put Your Timer On*. Fig. 12 - Installation view



Figures 13 & 14³⁰

³⁰ Fig. 13 & Fig. 14 - Installation views of exhibition *When He Texts Back 14 Minutes Later / Put Your Timer On*

Installation in response to architecture can be used as a tool to extend painting. A painting is often in relation to the size of the brush and the arm movements; to paint on the walls shifts this relationship to include the entire body. Now, the viewer may move around the space, stepping forward and back, shifting their body. Several works can be seen at once and the relationships between them become evident. We relearn how to renegotiate the space as the viewer who is front and centre is no longer privileged.

Movement is encouraged as the viewer steps forward to see details and steps back to see the links between objects that are placed on opposite ends of the space. What the viewer sees is only snippets at a time, the whole can only be seen through spending time moving throughout the space. Relationships were formed between the paintings and the space through the echoing of repeated colours, and the handmade ceramics that were made by my colleague Eloise and then painted by me. Patterns were visible in the paintings and drawings and repeated on the curve of the ceramics. They belonged together just as they were made together in the studio. As one of us made something we would discuss and talk about it, then the other would make something in response to what had just been made. A loop developed between us as makers, a call and response situation, feeding off what had just been made and therefore determine what could and should be made next. The network that developed in the installation began before the installation was physically assembled, it developed as each piece was made side by side.

Working in a collaborative process opened up new aesthetic challenges for my work. Eloise brought new forms of dissonance that I had not had to navigate before. The issues and questions that arise out of her practice are different than my own. This shifted the concerns beyond what we were making, instead of having to simply consider what was emerging in my paintings, I had to consider her makings also. A trust developed, allowing the other to make what they felt should to be made in response. Different tastes, aesthetic values and conceptual concerns slowed down the making process. New contrasts formed as well as new harmonies which were vital in making an installation that felt as though it was alive and rhythmic.

CONCLUSION

The questions surrounding the process of counterpoint in painting that have emerged throughout this project will likely continue to go unanswered. This project was not to seek out resolutions or for clarity but instead to problematise painting and ask unresolvable questions. A deliberate embrace of dissonances and quiet conflicts allow for movement and rhythms to continue. These dissonances evolve through the experimentation of installation, 3D objects, collaboration, and triggers. Habits are disrupted and new visual sensations are sparked through the use of elements that sit in conjunction to painting. Seeking the new is an impossible task, as everything comes from lived experience. Perhaps this project is more of a rejection of the known than an attempt to claim that what is made is entirely new.

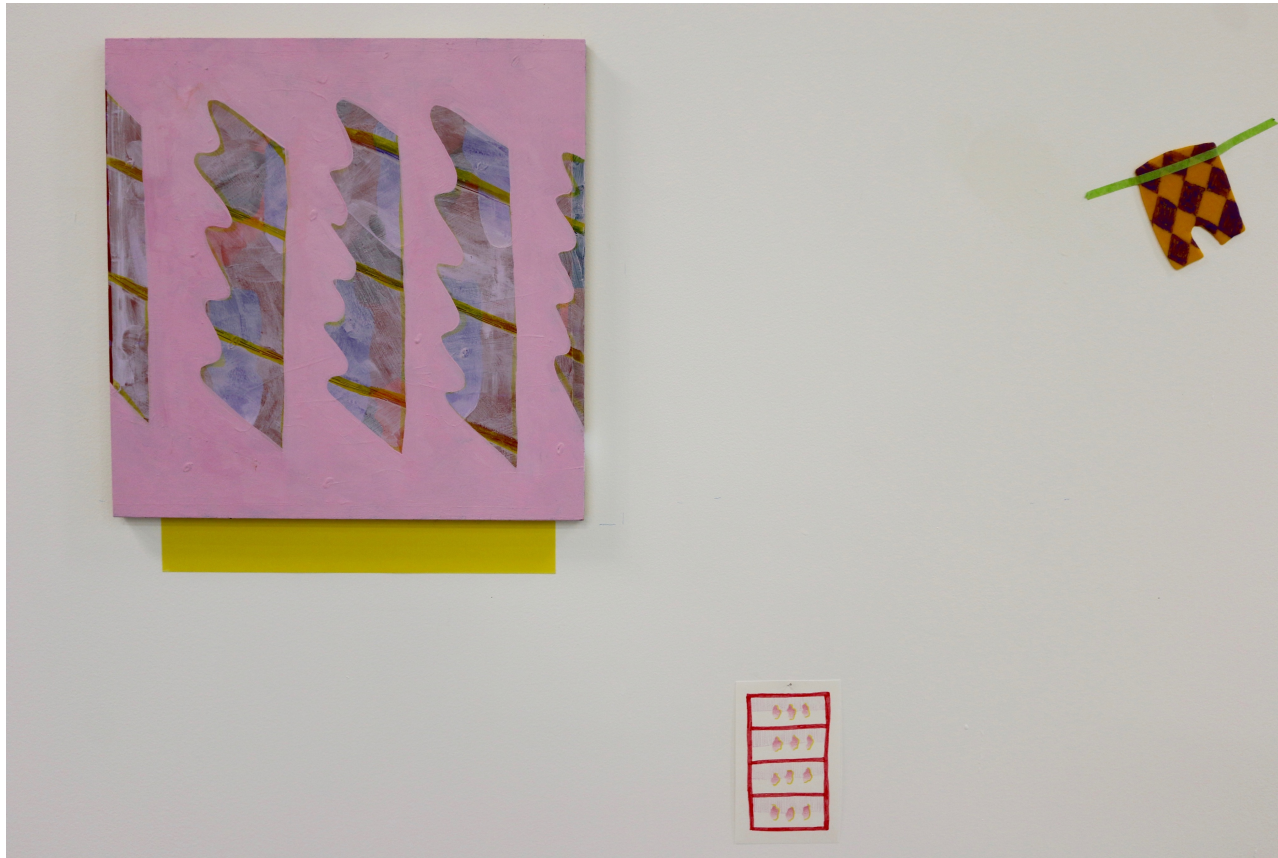
From here, there are many possible trajectories. I do not want to clarify a direction that this project will further progress in, as it is based on moving forward without entirely knowing what and where that will be. Paintings will likely continue to be the main support of my practice. This will be supplemented with further experimentation into the potential of installation, relationships to 3D objects, and the role of technology. The central question will remain: How do I keep painting? I am still not entirely sure of this.

FINAL EXHIBITION

The final exhibition was made up of 12 paintings in various sizes, scattered along two walls meeting at a 135-degree angle. One wall and part of the second wall was painted with a thin layer of pink paint to a height of roughly 1500mm. This broke the space up, joining the walls visually and forming a base for the paintings to bounce off and in relation to. Alongside the paintings were paper clay cut outs, echoing shapes repeated in the paintings. Small drawings (that were originally quick sketches in responses to triggers) were scattered throughout the space at varying heights, asking the viewer to step forward or bob down to see them. Natural relationships were formed between the paintings, drawings and paper clay cut outs - vibrant visual sensations were expanded and extended as they seeped into each other. Patterns emerged that were not planned but developed over the days the installation was assembled. The process of installation mimicked the process of painting, an idea was tested (eg. one painting placed in close proximity to another) and then reflected upon. After some thought it was likely to be altered - an object added or something taken away. This installation was one gathering of works in a process of making, if there had been more time to 'play' with relationships it would be different, if I were to assemble an installation in this same space in several months time I have no doubt that it would again be different - it is all part of an ever-growing, ever-changing exploration into the problem of painting in counterpoint.







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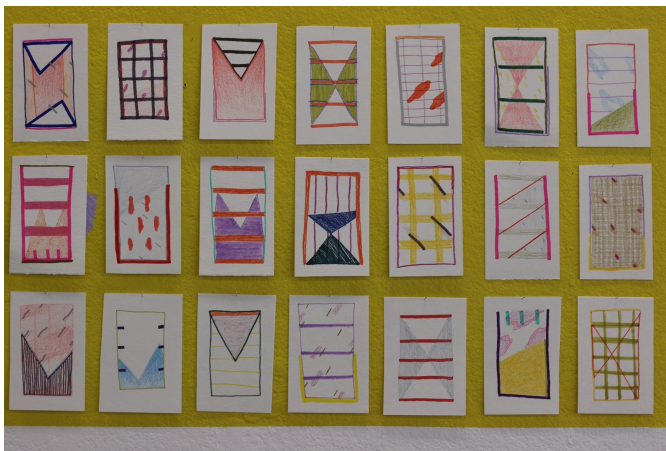
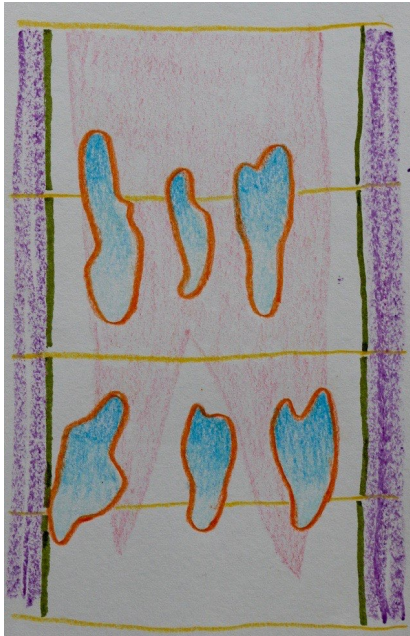
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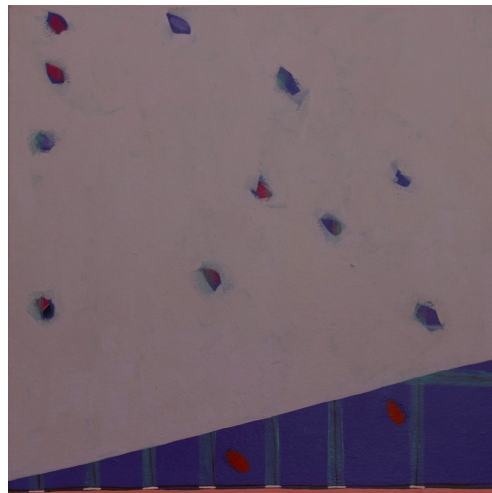
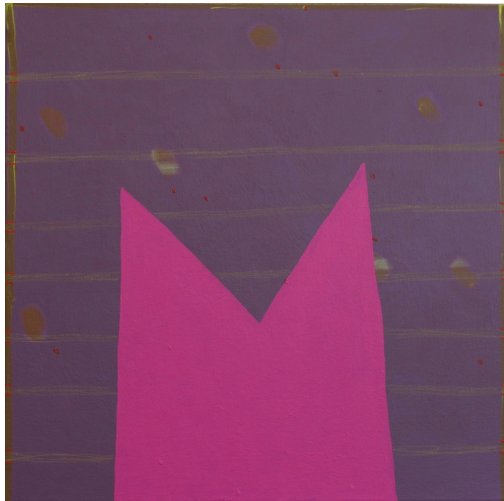
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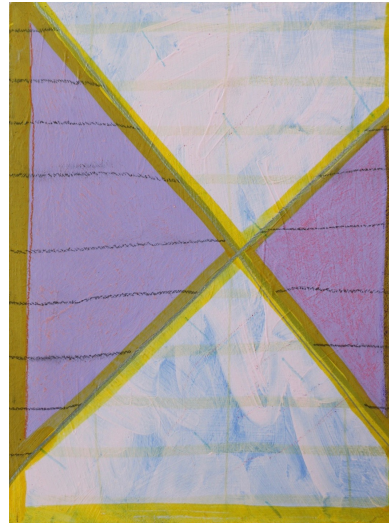
VISUAL DOCUMENTATION



These drawings are a part of an on going series which started in March and has continued throughout this project. Each drawing is roughly A6, and often made with coloured pencils, crayons, and markers. At this stage about 70 drawings have been made.



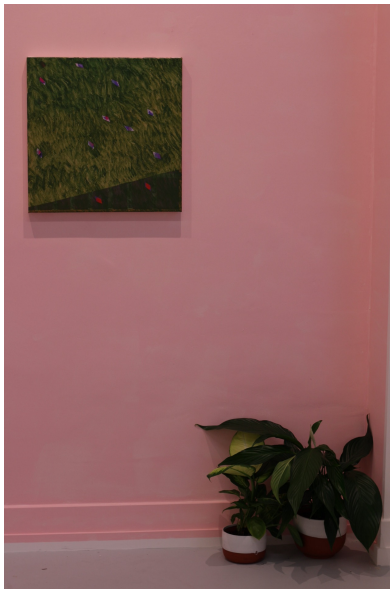
These paintings were installed in my studio space for a critique in April. Paintings are all acrylic on canvas, measuring 500 x 500 mm, 500 x 500 mm, and 300 x 300 , all untitled.



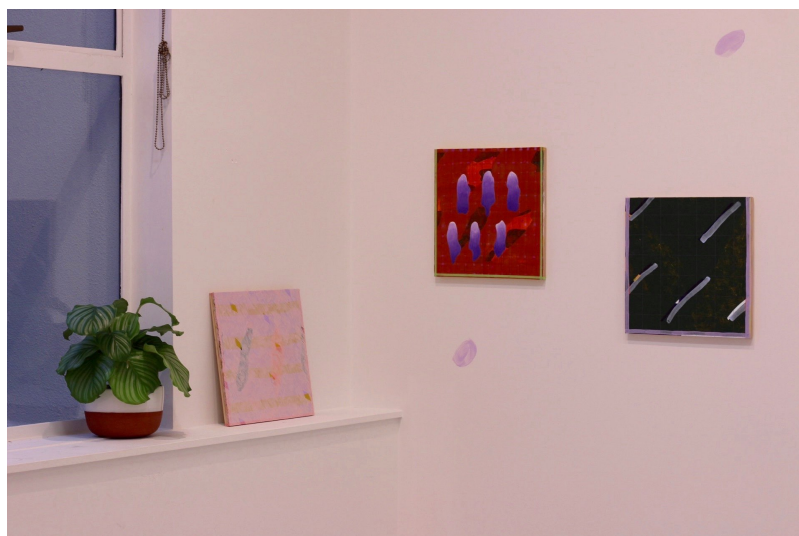
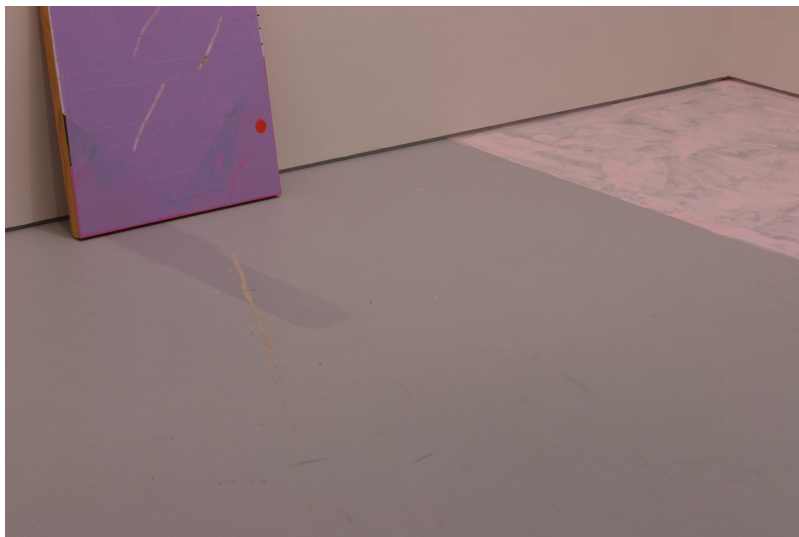
These three paintings are a part of an ongoing series of five paintings that were started in May. *Untitled*, 150 x 200 mm.



This painting was made as a pair with Fig. 2 in May.
Acrylic, marker, and coloured pencil on panel, *Untitled*, 450 x 450 mm.



Installation photographs of exhibition with Eloise Worrall-Bader, *When He Texts Back 14 Minutes Later / Put Your Timer On* (August).





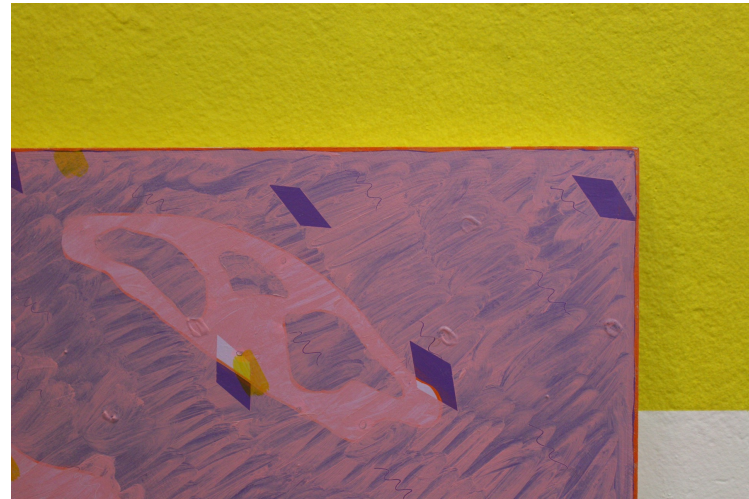
Installation photographs for a critique in August.



Untitled, acrylic on panel, 350 x 370 mm.



Untitled, acrylic on panel, 500 x 600 mm.



Untitled, September, acrylic and oil on panel, 450 x 550 mm.

