Get Me Out of Here

Wendy F. Liszt

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Get Me Out of Here

by

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of the requirements for the degree of
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When I sit with a painting, I get out of my head. I travel into a metaphoric space that I am drawn to for its inner light. There are disparate experiences in my own head that will not lie down in peace. When I make a painting, I make a structural being that my thoughts can swarm around, like fish in and out of a coral reef. I am inside and outside of my body at the same time.

My paintings are metaphors for multi-dimensional life on a two-dimensional picture plane. When I build a painting on canvas, it is built up with layers of acrylic paint, twine, canvas threads, sawdust, sharpie marker, paint pen, spray paint, and oil paint. These ingredients are derived from the actual materials of painting: the threads of the canvas when separated become twine, the sanded stretcher bar creates sawdust, the razor carving out the line was used to cut the canvas. Each of these elements is applied in various ways: poured, attached between pieces of tape, put on and scraped off with blades, stencils, yarn, twine, and brushes. Each flat layer of material has a life of its own, and works in relationship with its peers in a metaphoric space. The material relationships on the flat surface imaginatively reflect back a three-dimensional object that I construct from wire, mesh, and string. As ghostly figures wrestling with themselves, drawing based on observing my hand-built object interacts with layers of abstract mark-making. It is in that space that I aim to create a pause, a suspended in-between moment where thoughts can travel, bump into each other, and hopefully spark something new.

Beyond my own subjective experience, my work can be contextualized by a variety of texts and visual art. “Thing-power” is an idea articulated by Jane Bennett in “The Force of Things: Steps toward an Ecology of Matter.” Bennet explores how every element of matter has an existence or a life force of its own. As these elements relate,
they have an effect on each other. She discusses thing-power’s capacity to “shift or vibrate between different states of being, from to treasure/animate/alert. trash/inanimate/resting … a relational effect, a function of several things operating at the same time or in conjunction with one another.”¹ This vibrational or relational effect contributes to the “power” in thing-power. Elements gain power once they are in concert with one another. A rock on its own will not ignite, but if rubbed against another stone, it will cause a spark. She theorizes that our planet is “natura naturans, a swarm of productive activity,”² or, as Deleuze and Guattari describe it, "an immense Abstract Machine [whose] pieces are the various assemblages and individuals… in… an infinity of more or less interconnected relations.”³

My interest in these “interconnected relations” leads me to explore a variety of ways to use materials. I am inspired by Elliott Hundley’s use of materials in his 2009 piece, Some poured leaves over the dead girl (fig. 1), ranging from paint to suspended figural sculptures to pinned cut-outs. His combinations of marks, materials, and imagery create forms reminiscent to things we know, but they are in fact new life forms. His compositions are created by pinning photographs, string, plastic, gold leaf, and other ephemeral materials onto a supporting structure. His “shallow reliefs form a palimpsest that teems with humble materials… and recycles leftover scraps from one work to the next… creating continuity between old and new.”⁴

²Ibid., 365.
³Ibid.
Bennett’s view of “thing-power materialism… focuses on energetic forces that course through humans and cultures.” In reading Bennett’s text, I was moved by the idea that there are relationships between materials due to the nature of these materials and their interactions, not necessarily through their ability to come together in the services of naming or describing. The twine is respected for its inherent qualities as part of the canvas, not for its role in a story.

An artist who explores materials with this sensibility is Arlene Shechet. Some of her most powerful work comes from the use of molds from Meissen, an eighteenth century European porcelain manufacturer. Shechet shatters those molds and re-sets them into a new form in combination with her own globs of clay. The European aristocratic and “high art” values attached to Meissen porcelain clashes with the “low” associations of the dirt of the clay and its resemblance to rubble or feces. Her piece Gangsta Girl from 2012 (fig. 2) uses opposing qualities together in one piece without trying to hybridize or “resolve” them formally.

As a painter, I am looking for a similar energy between disparate materials and make sure that each layer has a different enough identity from the next. These relationships can be pushed as they intermix with layers of drawing. A line created by rolling a string playfully along canvas is necessarily distanced from the hand and is therefore experienced as light to the touch. When it is applied on top of the areas of the canvas that are overworked, sanded, and wrought through human muscle, their interaction can work metaphorically. The lightness of touch can be experienced as grace in moments of abuse.

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5 Bennett, Political Theory, 367.
The drawing in the paintings comes from the objects that I make in dialogue with the painting. The objects are variations of bodies, but they are made from porous, non-organic materials. They are not of the body, but are beings constructed out of mesh, wire, or rope. The ghostly presence of the object serves as means to explore concerns of the body without being pressed between layers of flesh. Sensuality evolves as drawing of the objects establishes a relationship with the materiality of the paint, not through a depiction of fleshiness or imagery that is traditionally associated with sensuality. I’m creating a way for the eye to travel through a body so porous that the viewer doesn’t know if they’re looking at structure or escape route.

Giacometti spoke of his 1932 work, *The Palace at 4 A.M.* (fig. 3) as an attempt to “describe a ‘sharpness’ that he saw in reality, ‘a kind of skeleton in space’; human bodies, he added, ‘were never for me a compact mass but like a transparent construction.’” The *Palace at 4 A.M.* is a cavernous space of possibility, yet it is made of ordinary materials (wood, glass, wire and string) at a relatively domestic scale – the entire sculpture could sit on a small coffee table. It has an architecture that is both fragile and sturdy. It conveys life out of, in and around a structure, simultaneous rubble and construction of some kind with space to roam and ideas to unlock -- my coral reef.

The objects that I create in dialogue with the paintings allow me to achieve the specificity that I am drawn to in Giacometti’s work. I can evoke that sense of space through the specificity and variation of layered mark making. Mark making as evocative of texture or its remains, is a way to evoke touch and the body, and is also somewhat removed from the body. Specificity of a line can be created by twine laden with paint

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and then imprinted onto the surface of the painting, or by the sharp edge of a razor scratching away paint. The grid can be evoked by the pixilated weave of the canvas revealed through sanding, or thick paint imprinted with mesh. A black dot can be created by sanding a hole into the canvas or by applying a black drop of heavy oil paint that bubbles up from the surface. Smalls dots and lines resulting from the imprint of a woven material imprinted onto the canvas can converge to evoke a scale that is either microscopic or galactic.

In *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick discusses the role of texture as comprising “an array of perceptual data that includes repetition, but whose degree of organization hovers just below the level of shape or structure.” Texture has specificity, but does not name into a shape. Sedgwick associates texture with affect as it allows for a state that is different from drive. It allows for meditation or reflection or thought that is not rushed by a need to act, a pause.

My interest in the pause, or a specific, unnamed moment, should not be confused with uncertainty. Martin Herbert’s text, *The Uncertainty Principle/Martin Herbert* opens with a 1971 quote from Donald Barthelme “You stay away from what can be said and you try to reach what can’t be said.” Herbert also makes note of what he describes as a current “perceived privileging of incertitude... practices [that] figure uncertainty purposefully... a generalized resurging of affect, an upsurging in the number of artists for whom a condition of twinkling enigma appears not only desirable but pretty much the

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whole point." He acknowledges this as a current popular interest, trying to sort out what about this tendency is important and what is “a period style.” He explains that a reason to value this interest is to "distinguish intentions in mobilizing uncertainty from ‘meaning’ to point up the dynamics that constitute encounters irreducible to mere words." These “encounters” become manifest in my paintings through overlapping material and drawing. I hope to pose questions about how such encounters contribute to who we are, and how we make meaning of those encounters. The figure that might emerge from the encounters in the painting can be explored in “irreducible” ways: as an independent being, a magnet for clusters of debris, emptiness, a light form.

Getting to a suspended moment during the metamorphosis of a figure in a two-dimensional painting is a challenging task. Terry Winters has a powerful ability to internalize the visual experiences drawn from life, and then re-specify them through an innovative use of repeating organic shapes in an organized system or internal order. He is building something related to life, but not through imitation.

His painting Tesselation Figures from 2011 (fig. 4) builds through layers of alternating translucent and opaque paint, and as those layers interact, a radiating orb emerges, hovering in a suspended state and giving the viewer a similar feeling of suspension. Its’ porous structure allows the viewer a way to travel in and out of it. This is the quality I am interested in for the emerging bodies in my paintings.

My painting She Came in through the Bathroom Window (fig. 5) is painted on stretched canvas and stands 84” tall by 64” wide. It has an aquatic atmospheric space that

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9Ibid., 37.
10Ibid., 38.
11Ibid., 39.
is built through layers of pthalo green and blue paint, intense flashes of light created with a power sander, and translucent areas of black oil paint. Light seems to travel from the upper right-hand corner (the darkest area) down to the center left of the canvas then diagonally back down towards the lower right-hand corner. As the eye follows these marks, it travels through a watery space. In the lower half of the painting, an underwater creature emerges through a glowing area built with layers of fluorescent orange washes and imprinted blue acrylic paint applied with twine. Inspired by a hand-built chicken-wire structure, a phantom form drawn in black sharpie floats on top. The delicacy of the drawing over the roughed up canvas implies agility in the presence of disrepair. The canvas is stretched over the top and the bottom of the stretcher, but is fraying at the left and right edges. This state of the canvas evokes deterioration or debris out of which something glowing and beautiful can emerge.

Out of Her Claw (fig. 6) is a painting that is 58” tall by 54” wide. It is built up with layers of acrylic on canvas with twine laid into the gesso and then removed. Swept-up dust and debris from the studio floor is embedded in the gesso-ed ground and then covered with thin washes of fluorescent acrylic. Through sanding the surface becomes rough to the touch. A thin layer of rosy, fleshy oil paint is layered on top, implying my human presence, and is then layered with thin layers of black, silver and malachite paint. Once that dries, the twine is loaded with black oil paint, stuck to a Brayer and rolled onto the canvas. The surface of the painting becomes a field which I respond to through drawing. It is a structure I build in three-dimensional reality out of non-human elements, the trace of a bodily form in space. The center of the picture is physically built-up, reinforcing the “body” of this creature and creating a variation of texture around which
the eye can roam. The porous nature of the body lets the viewer travel in, around, and out of it.

Wrestling with our three-dimensional lives on a two-dimensional surface has become a rich space for painting invention for me. Nietzsche’s 1873 text *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense* discusses how “to transfer a nerve stimulus into an image—first metaphor! The image again copied in sound—second metaphor! And each time a complete leap out of one sphere, into an entirely new and different one.”12 The idea that one experience would be interpreted in the same way by every one of its participants seems impossible to me. Each experience we have effects how something else is experienced, and those overlapping experiences come together to provide a set of experiences unique to us, something like the overlapping circles of a Venn diagram. I explore the way that these overlapping circles effect one other through overlapping layers of material and drawing in my paintings. Nietzsche writes that “between two such absolutely different spheres as subject and object there is no causality, no correctness, no expression, but at most an aesthetic comportment… a… freely inventive intermediate sphere and mediating force.”13 I want to create paintings in that “intermediate sphere.”

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13 Ibid., 17.
Bibliography


Illustrations

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