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Painting Through Time and Space

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1. Carolee Schneeman, *Up to and Including Her Limits* (1973–76)
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A painting that exceeds itself begs a profound question: How can one delimit any thing—even that most ostensibly autonomous thing, a painting?¹

**Introduction**

There are three canvases stretched, unprimed and raw hanging on the wall. They are 84” in height. Two are 72” wide with a 24” one hanging between them. I grab a piece of charcoal and move my body across the canvas, leaving lines that capture my movements. I pick up a brush soaked in paint and move it in and out, over and through the black lines. The watery paint allows for fluidity and speed. I am eager. I build marks intuitively, allowing my body the freedom to express the isolation I feel outside my studio. I have been scarred by loss and have been existing inside my own protective wall; on the inside of the wall is a pain not even I can comprehend. The freedom of lines and marks allows my emotions to pour out through my movements.

As I build marks, forms and planes start to emerge. I find a horizon and landforms. I see a figure. I know who he is. I begin to slightly render what I have discovered, without losing ambiguity. I use dirt and tar to build up textures, leaving other spaces thin and raw. I step back to take in the whole image. I make sure nothing is clear or recognizable. I am not interested in presenting distinguishable things. My intuitive approach gives me the freedom to un-guard my inner self. In the safety of my studio I take down my protective wall and unleash my true emotions. I am trying to make sense of it all.

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¹ Joselit, “Marking, Scoring, Storing, and Speculating (on Time),” 19. David Joselit is an art historian and critic perhaps best known for his 2009 essay “Painting Beside Itself,” which appeared in *October.*
I. A Space Beyond Painting

In the years that followed, painting became for me a companion. I had moved half way around the world to study Chinese ink painting and was deeply invested in trying to comprehend the meaning and power of line in eastern art. The way I used line in my own work led me to feel somehow connected to Chinese ink and brush painting. I spent years traveling and painting my surroundings as I made paintings and drawings that were records of my travels. In my sketchbook I wrote:

*I am no longer trying to ease my pain through paint, but rather trying to examine the power of the line— I want to get to the origin of my own expression— break it down to the gestures and allow them to live as if they are the finished product, not just the beginning.*

Gesture and mark-making became more and more the content of my paintings. While studying Chinese ink painting techniques, I was drawn to the importance of the preparation of mind and body before painting. Unlike my mentors from the West, teachers in China spent much of the time teaching breathing techniques, relaxation exercises, and good posture. The awareness of the body and how deeply this awareness is attached to the way marks flow onto a surface was what I connected with. In order for the marks to flow, the body had to be prepared and ready, like a performer. For me, the art was the whole process of making, so when the painting went to be hung on the wall, that journey through line and paint I felt was in some way missing. In my sketchbook I wrote:

*The painting is hanging on the wall. I look at it and mourn the loss of its underlayers— the initial marks full of life and energy, the remnants of the body in motion. They are gone. It is just an object now, a static image. It can only imply the movements of its creation. The viewers can only imagine its making— if they choose.*
The act of painting would become just a memory and the painting itself a static object resulting from the performance/action.

II. No Longer Ostensible Autonomy

More and more, because of the steady climb of the value put on paintings as commodities, I question the medium. Why was I creating static objects if I wasn’t interested in the object at all? Even in the late 60’s artists like Robert Smithson were writing about the dilemma of art-as-object:

_Critics, by focusing on the ‘art object,’ deprive the artist of any existence in the world of both mind and matter. The mental process of the artist which takes place in time is disowned, so that a commodity value can be maintained by a system independent of the artist. …this becomes a convenient way to exploit the artist out of his rightful claim to his temporal processes._

Finding a way of including the temporal processes as described by Smithson would preserve at least part of the artist’s thoughts and actions, and so ultimately, painting for me cannot exist simply as an object, it needs to be captured in time.

A 2013 conference at Harvard University convened to discuss painting in the “post-medium condition.” The conference questioned painting’s specificity through looking at its historical ties to the notion of medium and engaged with the possibilities of reimagining and redefining painting altogether. In the published work that followed, David Joselit defines modern painting’s specificity: “it marks, scores, stores, and speculates on time.” I am interested in Joselit’s definition and want the viewer to not

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3 Rosalind Krauss’s term as mentioned in the Preface of “Painting Beyond Itself: A Medium in the Post-Medium Condition,” edited by Isabelle Graw and Ewa Lajer-Burchar. 

only consider painting’s speculation on time, but to experience it. I want painting to exist in time and space. I imagine how I can expand painting, stretch it in different directions, use it as a material.

III. Process

Carolee Schneeman in a video interview with *Artforum* describes her moving away from painting and into what she calls “extended media.” She describes her experiences working with the Judson Dance Theater and recalls, “I met these amazing dancers and I conceived of them as a kind of collage material that was fully dimensional in real time and space.” Schneeman expanded her notion of painting, incorporating the body and time, especially in her performance works “Up to and Including Her Limits (1973-76)” and “Meat Joy (1962).” Her body was a key element and became, along with dance, a material.

Figure 1: Documentation from Carolee Schneeman’s performance work, *Up to and Including Her Limits (1973-76)*

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5 Schneeman, interview.

6 Schneeman, interview.
I relate to Schneeman’s thinking and use the body as a material. In my current process, I lay large unprimed canvases on the floor and use brushes attached to long poles to move around acrylic and enamel paint and water. The long poles enable my body to move around the canvas, while being able to reach all areas of its surface. Gravity pulls my body down putting weight behind my strokes. The paint captures the tension and release in my muscles’ movements. The paintings dry flat which preserves the patterns and lines. I image Helen Frankenthaler’s femininity and the masculinity of Jackson Pollack’s process and find myself painting somewhere in between.

From an aerial perspective, I use a cameraperson to make video recordings of the painting’s evolution. The camera is positioned over the canvas so as to capture only the movements on the canvas itself. I throw water over the paint and direct the cameraperson to zoom in on its flow. I use video footage of landscapes from my travels to inspire my marks. I think about the landscapes and how I filmed them from land, sea, and air. I try with paint and water to mimic the forms, colors, and patterns of the natural

Figure 2: Lingyun Zheng filming my paintings
forms in my documentary footage and direct the camera to capture similar movements. Knowing I will use the videos of the paintings and digitally combine them with the landscape footage also effects my movements and how I direct the camera.

I combine the videos using color keying and opacity adjustment. The videos of painting and the landscape footage form new compositions. I place the paintings in a room, some resting on the wall and some attached to one another becoming three-dimensional structures. The video montages are projected back onto the paintings and also screens stretched on stretchers. The paintings are no longer “ostensibly autonomous things,” rather they exist as characters in a space and are animated by their own movements flowing through time. Using the body to produce the paintings and to film the paintings and the landscape, and requiring the viewer’s body to move through the space, the body becomes an essential material in the installation. I think about Carolee Schneeman’s expansions. Through combining mediums, new forms emerge.

IV. Crossing Media and Embracing the Digital

I recently read a quote by Tacita Dean. She stated:

“Any artist who works in paint or chalk or film or whatever knows that sometimes the medium itself will give you something entirely unexpected, and something far better than what you intended. And at that point you follow the medium. Digital media do not have that resistance and I think that is a big problem. Nothing can really happen in digital that is not intended.”

I approach digital video editing in a physical way: cutting and pasting, layering and erasing. I stack clips on top of one another, adjust their opacities, and key out

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7 Joselit, “Marking, Scoring, Storing, and Speculating (on Time),” 19.
8 Dean, interview.
certain colors which allows for the many layers to create unexpected imagery and compositions. I add and subtract. When top layers are erased, bottom layers are revealed. Often times my timeline will be full of clips, disorganized and sitting on different tracks. I like to press play and watch for unexpected combinations. For me in fact, digital media is full of unintended surprises. I have found the process of painting and that of digital video editing to be strikingly similar. Painting becomes digital.

The ability to cross media and work between the lines is important to me. I don’t believe that to make a painting you only need paint, however, what are we to do with the categorization of things that has become the structure of our systems and modes of understanding even in art? Matt Saunders, an artist whose work is grounded in painting but also uses photography and printmaking to create digital animations that are projected in installations explains, “…there are mute and experimental ways to engage with (these categories), precisely by disregarding their borders and mucking deeply into their component parts, paying attention to what we’re really seeing?”

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9 Saunders, “Thread, Pixel, Grain,” 183.
With the dissolution of borders within media, there is an opportunity for the fluidity of crossing, extending, and expanding, therefore allowing us to see past boundaries and borders created by categorization. “We tend to attach too much import to painting’s baggage in particular… Defensiveness—a medium hemmed in, asked to justify itself—that’s the convention. But what about unpacking the means?” What happens to painting when it is captured in time, digitally layered into documentary video, and projected back onto itself in a room with the possibility of endless combinations of color, light, and shadow?

V. Painting as Environment: Nature and Space

“The image of the traveler depends not on power but on motion, on a willingness to go into different worlds, use different idioms, and understand a variety of disguises, masks, and rhetorics. Travelers must suspend the claim of customary routine in order to live in new rhythms and rituals. Most of all… the traveler crosses over, traverses territory, and abandons fixed positions, all the time.”

The journey of the traveler is not dissimilar to that of the artist. Starting out on any journey requires a strong impulse from within; a revolt against the old and familiar; and an openness to risk, obstacles, and uncertainty. It is in this willingness to succumb to the unknown that opens the self to encountering new territories.

Painting and traveling for me have always been deeply connected. I began art-making on my earliest family journeys and even today feel it necessary to paint, draw, photograph and film the landscapes where I am traveling. Painting now often dictates the places I visit, being drawn to cliffs and valleys of rare and unique shapes, the highest mountain peaks, and the Earth’s melting ice. Even though I still enjoy painting

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the landscape, I believe that the painting cannot contain this experience, and for me only acts as a means to reach a space beyond the painting itself.

In my installations, I am presenting the landscapes and paintings in their recorded, edited, and projected forms as well as including the physical paintings. The viewer is able to experience the work on a physical level, moving through the space, entering from one side and exiting from another. The movement of the viewer evokes a journey, bodies traveling through the space in real-time. The crossing of borders within media echoes that of the traveler who crosses into new territories, encounters the Other\textsuperscript{12}, and is open to the unknown.

Conclusion

My work is located in the crossover between the act of painting and its captured and edited versions. The overlapping of time codes: the physical action stilled in the painting, the recording of paint and travel, the projected videos of the landscape and painting process, and the choreography of the viewers moving through space in real time, overlap and create a well of past-present-future. I think of this as a new form of travel that aims to challenge our habits of experiencing time as linear and one-directional.

\textsuperscript{12} The Other as referred to Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel’s concept of the self-other relationship and the process by which encountering other is crucial in the understanding of the self. Hegel argued that one cannot achieve self-knowledge through mere introspection, that because one doesn’t exist in isolation from other selves, that introspection must be based on an examination of one’s relationships with others.
Bibliography:


Michelle O’Connell
Thesis Exhibition
April 19- May 5, 2018

Image List:

*Note: ‘There’s a Song Somewhere Among the Fjords’ is a single installation artwork. I have included here 4 photos so as to show the different parts and projections more clearly.

1. Folding screen view 1, projection 1 (right); paintings (left)
   There’s a Song Somewhere Among the Fjords
   Video projection, acrylic and enamel on canvas, spandex and wood
   Dimensions variable
   2018

2. Folding screen view 2, projection 1
   There’s a Song Somewhere Among the Fjords
   Video projection, spandex and wood, vinyl
   Dimensions variable
   2018

3. Side wall, projection 2
   There’s a Song Somewhere Among the Fjords
   Video projection, acrylic and enamel on canvas, spandex and wood
   Dimensions variable
   2018

4. Back wall, projection 3
   There’s a Song Somewhere Among the Fjords
   Video projection, acrylic and enamel on canvas
   Dimensions variable
   2018
Installation Views: