Words Are a Pipe

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Words Are a Pipe

by

Kyle Utter

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of the requirements for the degree of
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I am a painter. I make paintings in my studio.

Sometimes, reading art historical texts from the 20th century, artists and scholars refer to paintings as ‘pictures.’ This may seem antiquated, but I don’t mind it applied to my paintings. In studio, I paint images. My paintings both embrace the objectness of a painting and employ techniques of portraying illusory space, light and volume. They are pictures of some alternative or fantastical reality which are bound to our own material realities through their explicit objectness.

I prefer the group of paintings, which I presented as my thesis exhibition, to remain enigmatic. I don’t want to prescribe a meaning for my viewer but would rather provide them with an experience of trying to construct meaning for themselves. The depictions of mid-century suburban American homes, contained in the paintings, in a sense, are iconic every-houses. They may be based on a former home of mine, but could just as easily have been sourced from outside my personal history via popular imagery and media. They could be mimetic representations of real dwellings. On the other hand, they could be completely uninhabitable non-places, presented merely as symbols of nostalgia or retrospection. Uncertainty leads to contemplation, not resolution. The little boys in my paintings may be representations of my former self or my current self. But also, they feel enough like types to not be representations of any individual. The portrayals of late 19th/early 20th century Western men could be renderings of specific politicians, musicians, philosophers or artists. Although, one can’t put a name to the face. Are these specific figures from some sort of historical narrative? Of course not - paintings are always merely paintings. The factual content\(^1\) of a painting is inanimate material, which I compile so as to create a fictional, pictorial space. With naturalistic rendering and perspectival schemas, I pull the viewer into the spaces I depict, but only so far as to present them with the sheer inanimate materiality of painting and push them back out into their real space with a set of unanswered questions. What is this pictorial stage set that has been placed before us, populated with disparate and allusive references, and what is the performance that is about to take place?

In the words of Nicholas Poussin, “\textit{Moy qui fais profession des choses muettes} [I, who make a profession of mute things]”\(^2\) may find writing an essay about (my) painting a particularly hardy challenge. Magritte explains, “if a picture could be explained in words, words would suffice and the picture would be superfluous.”\(^3\) Maybe I can’t offer a full explanation of what my studio practice entails, what my paintings are or what they do to a viewer. What I can offer is a reflection on the process of making a specific painting, the material and intellectual choices and

\(^{1}\) I am pulling the term factual contents from Clark, \textit{The Sight of Death: an Experiment in Art Writing}, 216, and take it to mean the contents of a painting which are perceived first hand, through the senses, such as color, visual representations and arrangement of form, which may stimulate further thinking.

\(^{2}\) Clark, 2

\(^{3}\) Magritte, \textit{Selected Writings}, 10
considerations which occur over the duration of its making. The aim is to create for my viewer and reader a richer appreciation of my paintings, my painting processes and my thinking.

I don’t necessarily know what my next painting will look like. Picasso explained, “A picture is not thought out and settled beforehand. While it is being done it changes as one’s thoughts change.” 4 I think following a step-by-step recall of what went into making a specific painting will provide an illustration of this sentiment. Paintings take time to make. Given my curiosity, my propensity for daydreaming, my constant self-doubting and my insatiable consumption of literature and media, my thinking may change dramatically from one painting to the next or even within the course of making a single painting. I cannot say what guides or guided my studio practice in general.

What I can say is that I made a painting. I titled it Proceed w/ Caution. It is made of oil and acrylic paints and plaster on canvas, mounted on wooden panel. It is about 55x66” in size.

I began this painting around February of 2018. For the past year or two leading up to this, I had been making small, intensely detailed paintings that read as landscapes, which were actually facades or theatrical backdrops: artificial, constructed landscapes that were actually interiors. Historically, they were akin to other small paintings with large intensity: early Sienese painting (Duccio), Van Eyck, Dutch Baroque paintings. Small paintings imbued with a sense of macabre and/or humor and an intense psychological charge, they might be compared to my contemporary, Mark Greenwold.

From the start, Proceed w/ Caution was a departure for me in terms of scale. It is huge compared to what I was working on previously. The decision to go big was practical: I was finally allotted a large studio space. I figured it may be the last time I am able to comfortably work large in a long time, so I might as well go for it. Plus, I like a challenge and I like disrupting my own working conventions.

I started by stapling a 84”x84” ft canvas to the wall. I always paint on the wall, unstretched. I prefer working this way for several reasons:
1) It allows me to work on canvas without the canvas giving when I apply pressure.
   a) This makes it easier to paint and sand repeatedly, creating textures from goopy to super smooth.
   b) I use tape to mask areas off and make straight lines. Tape on a stretched canvas may delaminate from the surface with the slight bowing of the canvas that happens when pressure is applied to it.
2) It allows me to easily carry perspectival orthogonals and vanishing points off the canvas, onto the wall. This helps me maintain the integrity of the perspectival schemas I

4 Protter, Painters on Painting, 202
use in creating illusory space. In a sense, it gives me more control over the world I am creating, expanding and contracting it as I see fit.

3) It allows me to crop the picture as I go. Working unstretched on the wall, I am not beholden to a canvas or panel size as I work. Perhaps, feeling entitled to crop an image as you go is a result of having grown up with digital photography. I am not stuck with any predetermined picture size as I construct a view.

In this case, I began the image-making process with a Photoshop collage. With smaller substrates, I might just put a color, a mark or a layer of paint down without a plan and then see what image I can pull out from it, a sort of Rorschach test that I administer to myself. For this painting, however, the scale was such that this more playful approach could result in a massive waste of money and material. Maybe, one day, when I have more resources or I just stop caring, I can start by simply playing on a large canvas.

I scanned 2 drawings I had made from observation. One was of the interior of my apartment I lived in from 2014-2018. The other was a plein-air landscape study I had made in an historic cemetery in New Haven, CT. In Photoshop, I took a wall of my apartment out of the drawing, so that it opened onto a receding space featuring a tree from the cemetery. On the intact wall of my apartment, I fashioned a window (which wasn’t there in real life). I used the window to frame an image of a mid-century American home.

The image of the home was sourced from a catalogue in the 1930s. These “house pattern books” presented images of houses along with their blueprints. If a customer liked what they saw, they could have the blueprints, along with all the necessary building materials delivered to a lot, where they could build their own American dream. The collage amounted to my interior space looking out towards a mid-century American pastoral and a graveyard.

This lugubrious, nostalgic sense of mourning may come from several sources. I grew up in a wealthy suburban neighborhood that shared a border with Detroit, MI. I never wanted for anything personally, but I came of age in a county saturated with a sense of mourning for a once great American city that sits at its center. Detroit being the textbook example of White flight, the suburbs are as much a graveyard marking the failure of the 1960s progressive efforts to achieve equality and integration as they are reason to rejoice.

I started the painting by making a grid. I used this to transfer the composition from Photoshop print to canvas. Also a painting of an American suburban home using grid is very appropriate, as it is the means by which land is parceled into ‘real-estate’. I started the painting

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5 Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 77 provides a historical account of the “house pattern book” in America

6 For an in-depth look at the shifts in demographics and populations between American suburbs and cities throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, see Jackson, 272-307, and for a particularly poignant description of the relationship between Detroit and Grosse Pointe, MI, see Jackson, 278.
with an acrylic underpainting so that I can quickly and dramatically change the composition of the painting in its initial stages. For the sky I used a paint sprayer (normally used to paint interiors) to achieve the effect of a large gradient with latex paint. On top of this, I used tape, and modeling paste, applied with a 12-inch taping knife to create three-dimensional, geometric clouds. The clouds are all the same size and shape: What is normally a whimsical, natural form has been standardized, repeatedly cut in the same shape.

At this point, I had transferred my Photoshop composition onto the canvas. In addition to this composition, I painted another doorway. This doorway is closer to the viewer within the pictorial space of the painting, placing the viewer so they are looking through it, into an interior space that looks out on a landscape. In the West, landscapes have often been understood as signs of a national identity while interior spaces have a history of representing individual, psychological spaces. The addition of this last doorframe as a framing device shows me in conversation with myself. It is an attempt to look into my own interior, which is looking at an American narrative as a real thing and as a concept.

The house is rendered, meticulously, with acrylic paints, using a brush and an airbrush. This was a painstaking process of masking off, painting, airbrushing in shadows and repeat. An airbrush is a tool that would have been used in illustrations for advertising, etc., before the same effects could be produced with Adobe software. I rendered the house methodically to a point. Then, certain details, like trim, banister railings and waterspouts are hastily and sloppily inserted. Certain details are omitted, like window frames. Completing this architectural rendering began to feel like a chore and busy work. Once there is enough visual information for the viewer to understand that this is a realistic house, I don’t feel compelled to demonstrate my capacity for self-flagellation, via rendering this house with a jewelers lens. The partially-rendered house is reminiscent of a video game where a failure to load fast enough leads one to experience houses as un-detailed cubes or trees as non-leafed green spheres. The viewer gazes upon a constructed image that is failing to realize itself.

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7 Adams, “Competing Communities in the ‘Great Bog of Europe’ explains how Holland overwhelmed its Spanish overlords in the 17th century. Subsequently, not having a Monarch or a strong Catholic contingent, the Dutch embraced landscape imagery as an emblem of national identity. Novak, Nature and Culture is the canonical text examining 19th century American landscape painting and the Hudson River School as part of a larger program of promoting American Western expansion, nationalism and forging a national identity.

8 Crary, “The Camera Obscura and Its Subject” examines how the invention of the camera obscura in late 16th century Europe affected and set a precedent for western conceptions of the subject and the interior; That is, the subject was conceptually separated from the object of its perception. The subject became understood as existing in an interior space (like that of a camera obscura), where they processed the “manifold contents of the now ‘exterior’ world.” 245

* See fig. 2 for detail image of the house from Proceed w/ Caution
The green under the house (out the window) was initially conceived of as an underpainting, to be later covered by a more enticing, less chalky color. As such, it accumulated smudge marks, perspectival drafting chalk lines, random paint spatter, and fragments of deleted painted figures. At a certain point, it felt unnecessary to hide these things and the underpainting stayed.

As a painter, one of the hardest questions to answer is, how do you know when a painting is done? Rather, it’s a hard question to answer and sound intelligent, because it almost invariably comes down to the painter’s personal feeling, sensibility, taste or intuition. I could have covered the various pieces of evidence but I don’t think the painting would have gained anything from this. The smudge marks on the ugly chalky green, the overspray, and the errant fingerprints become a sort of visual noise, divorced from the larger image or narrative, kind of like the one-off electronic instrumental album or track within a band’s larger oeuvre that usually includes lyrics.*

The same logic of ‘not finishing’ persisted in painting the windowsill framing the house. I had made a drawing of a windowsill in my apartment after the painting began to use as a reference for inserting a windowsill into the painting. I tried to paint it, but it didn’t look right. I destroyed the bottom sill to fix at a later date. The way I had destroyed it was actually enough. Again, the painting didn’t need a better-rendered windowsill than what I had given it in a few fat gestural strokes. It stayed.

The Green on the right and the green on the left, out the window, are different. This creates an interior space, which looks out upon a landscape that is fractured. Is one side a façade? Maybe both?

Next came the wood floors of the interior. For this I used a technique from an interior decorative painting book.9 One of the oldest critiques against painting is that it is decorative. Since ancient Greece, painting has been accused of being a deceptive, decorative veneer, which hides the true essence of things.10 I use decorative painting techniques such as faux bois, because I have worked as a decorative painter, and as a means of owning the decorative nature of painting. In this instance, decorative strategies and visual deception become my intention, annulling the most predictable critiques of painting.

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9 Finkelstein, *The Art of Faux*, 182
10 Lichtenstein, *The Eloquence of Color*, 63 contains a description of Quintilian’s condemnation of painting, likening its’ use of colored pigments to the deceptive application of makeup to slaves, to make their complexion appear healthy, just before sale.

Hyde, *Making up The Rococo* examines La Font de Saint-Yenne’s (among others) criticisms of Francois Boucher and Rococo painting. La Font wrote “It is a kind of painting almost indistinguishable from the painting of women’s faces with rouge and blanc d’Espagne”, 62
Like I said, I take perspectival orthogonals off the canvas, to a vanishing point on the wall as a means of building a pictorial space. I did this for the rendered home out the window and it is spatially convincing. I tried to do it for the interior space.

Next, I placed a table in the interior space. I rotated it so it is not parallel to the interior walls in my picture. Given the scale of the image, this rotation brought the table’s vanishing point so far past the length of the actual wall in my studio that I decided to construct it in paraline perspective. This brought about the collision of two systems of perspective which rarely meet on a single plane. The result is a disorienting table that is both grounded and floating in pictorial space. I placed the tables’ legs on unpainted raw canvas that acted as a border to the unstretched painting. I initially considered this untreated canvas as “bleed” that wouldn’t be seen once the painting had been stretched onto a support at its final stage. Bringing this pictorial table onto raw canvas, the most primordial material of painting, creates another collision. The table casts a shadow across the raw canvas and extends into the pictorial, rendered space, simultaneously creating a union and collision between painting as picture and painting as object/material.

At this point, I ripped off about 29” of canvas from the right side of the painting. At moments such as this, I make decisions based on intuition and formal considerations. This area I removed contained imagery. However, it was a sort of empty landscape expanse. I didn’t know what I would do with it and it just didn’t feel like it would work formally in terms of composition so I ripped it off. Working unstretched provided me with such liberty. The painting was now about 52” x 84,” including ‘bleed area’ outside the image, unstretched.

I was assigned in class to use a classmate of mine, Noa Ginzberg, as a collaborator on the painting. I gave her some paints, brushes, and said, have fun. I left the studio and came back in a couple of hours to see what she had done. She had painted a blue ‘TARDIS’ from the T.V. show, *Doctor Who* floating in pictorial space. I covered it, erased it, but repainted the TARDIS, trying to be faithful to its original scale and paint handling. I repainted it so that it spatially sat on the table referenced earlier. I like the idea that the TARDIS is a souvenir trinket someone brought back from a visit to a television studio or theme park. It was a relief because it gave me something to put on a table. In my experience, a table in an American suburban dwelling can’t be empty. It has to be a home for some stuff; a trinket, a picture frame etc. Trying to reposition my new TARDIS trinket in this metaphysical domicile, I was reminded of George Carlin. He asks his audience, “That’s the whole meaning of life isn’t it - trying to find a place for your stuff?”

Collaboration, or having different people intervene in my process of making/thinking/presenting art, as Noa did, is important. I feel like I am already collaborating with myself; that is, acting as the current manifestation of myself who has to deal with and react against the decisions made in a painting by a previous manifestation of myself. I use different

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11 Carlin, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MvgN5gCuLac
modes of paint handling and rendering on a single painting. Allowing other people to actually paint or disrupt my spaces just seems like a natural evolution of this thinking.

When someone else physically intervenes in your work it can provide an on-ramp to real play. A collaborative back and forth can ease one into acting outside their comfort zone, as a painting or its presentation cease to be a presentation of one responsible person. Instead, whatever is presented becomes a record of a conversation between multiple voices. This lifts the onus from any individual and frees everyone from fear of a ‘wrong’ move.

At this point I took a trip to Italy and Bavaria using a Kossak Painting Foundation Grant. I took in a wide breadth of figurative painting, murals and ornamental architecture from the Western canon: Frescoes in Pompeii, Giotto, Piero, Ghirlandaio, Rubens, Tiepolo, Neo Rauch (the list goes on). I hadn’t painted the figure in a sustained and serious effort since 2010, but I was moved to do so by this trip. I feel that constantly innovating my own process in the studio is a necessity. Adding figures to paintings of landscapes or interiors is by no means revolutionary. In a sense, I have reinvented the wheel, but at least it is some sort of movement. If you aren’t questioning your own ways of making and thinking you are dying an artistic and intellectual death.

Erwin Panofsky creates a comparison between the use of perspective in early Italian Renaissance painting versus Dutch Baroque painting. Panofsky posits that the former is based upon a mathematical perspectival system, (initiated by Giotto, formalized into a communicable system by Brunelleschi and then used by Piero). Dutch Baroque painting, on the other hand, uses a perspectival system that is pulled from trecento Italian painting, but uses it to construct images more informed by empiricism (observation). Looking at fresco cycles in Assisi by Giotto or in Arezzo by Piero, their pictorial constructions are self-contained worlds informed by observation but ultimately dictated by the construction of the picture, a mode of illusory, spatial construction based largely upon abstract principles of math and geometry. The later illusory achievements of Dutch Baroque (Vermeer) are informed by a practice of world building via perspective, although the picture plane presents a space that reads more like the world we inhabit, which a painting or photograph can only depict a small part of and which will extend past the borders of any image-containing object.12

Oftentimes, my paintings are presented such that the painted image does not extend to the edge of the rectilinear substrate. Sometimes through a plastered edge or a frayed canvas edge, the paintings break out of their rectangle. They enter the viewers’ space as objects. This smashes their potential to pose as mere illusory windows into a space behind the gallery wall. My painted images may at moments look like they are our reality, but the space they convey is strange enough so that they do not point to extending into our reality. They are self-contained models of

12 Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, 55-66
some type of reality. I draw (literally drawing with graphite, pen, etc.) from observation often and use these drawings to populate the spaces I create, but in the Panofsky comparison I fall more into the camp of the Early Italians. Working from drawings or photographs, I will change the proportions of objects or figures in service of perspectival schemas, even if a schema doesn’t lead to a naturalistic image. I prioritize orchestrating a world over describing any body or thing in it. That is, I am more interested building a space based on systems than I am in creating a representation of observation.

Because I render components of an image differently on the same picture plane, my viewer may think of collage when viewing my painting. As much as I may be collaging paint-handling techniques, I am equally concerned with creating a pictorial space in which I place objects and figures. This being said, I think of my paintings as models, in two senses. First, I am presenting my viewer with a space that may read as a stage set or a model-train world. Secondly, my paintings are models in accordance with the theories of behavioral psychologist, William T. Powers. He explains, “A model in the sense I intend is a description of subsystems within the system being studied, each having its own properties and all interacting together according to their individual properties being responsible for observed appearances.” 13 My paintings are combinations of disparate parts, interacting to make a larger entity: This could be said of many things: biological systems, societies, our mental processes.

I came back from Europe and Proceed W/ Caution still needed something.

All the while, during the above described process of making this painting I was creating other paintings in studio as well. I like working on multiple paintings in studio at the same time. Sometimes, I have a painting all planned out in my head prior to starting it. If I am only working on one painting, I can acquire tunnel vision, focused on my preconceived end point for that one painting. By working on different paintings at the same time, I may come into studio, and not have time to work on that painting, but in coming into studio, to work on its counterparts, I am looking at it. I spend more time looking, and may realize that the garnish I thought necessary to reach an end point is actually superfluous, thus achieving a greater economy of making. Also, having multiple paintings up in process on the studio walls at the same time is a good way for an artist to notice their own habits and the recurring elements in their work. Being self-aware of your idiosyncrasies is a good thing, as is self-awareness in general.

I put an oddly shaped T.V. on the table in the painting. I invented it based on memories of T.V.’s from my childhood. As a child in the early 90s, I used to watch a T.V. that was already old (probably from the mid-late 80s), that had faux-wood paneling. I combined this with memories of small T.V.’s in kitchens that were as deep as their screen was wide.

13 Powers, Behavior, the Control of Perception, 14
At this point, I knew I would not crop the image any further. It was time to mount the canvas onto a panel.

In the past, I may have just nailed this canvas into the wall for its final presentation. However, I wanted this to be more modular, a more conventionally presented painting. I wanted it to be somewhat enticing as a traditional decorative object. I wanted someone to be able to look at it and consider what it would look like if they bought it and hung it in their living room. If they don’t, it’s just going to go into storage somewhere, get thrown out, or be slowly destroyed.

So I took the measurements of the image and built a panel of the same size (52x66”). I built it between midnight and 6 a.m. during a 24 hour access period at 205 Hudson. This was a learning experience: All-nighters are good for painting and writing, not so great for arithmetic and carpentry. I built the panel 4 inches wider than the width of the canvas.

I had to figure out what to do with the 4 inches of panel that won’t be covered by my canvas. I stretched the canvas over the panel flush to the right side, so that 4 inches of panel stuck out on the left. I adhered the left and right edges to the panel. Using layers of joint compound and plaster, I buried the left edge of the canvas and built up a surface that extended slightly off the panel. This created a trompe leoil situation where the doorway which is pictorially closest to the viewer actually becomes the material that walls are made out of and slightly extends off the picture plane into their world.

I put a screw in the new pictorial plaster wall. At moments in the painting, I’m so invested in illusory rendering via paint, that actually fixing a real screw to the surface of the painting confounds expectations. * 

Philip Guston said, “failure is the only quality which ensures continuity of creation.” 14 Building my panel to the ‘wrong’ size and plastering on the surface of my paintings was one of the last and most exciting moves I made within my thesis body of work. It opens the door for a lot of future experimentation and development in terms of painting presentation and surface treatment.

The oddly-shaped T.V. still had a blank screen. I wanted to turn it on.

Meanwhile, I was making my way through Timothy Hyman’s most recent book, wherein, I happened upon the concept of the Ruckenfigur. 15 Traditionally, art historians framed the

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* See fig. 3 for an oblique detail image of Proceed w/ Caution, which makes the plastering and found screw evident

14 Guston and Coolidge, Philip Guston: Collected Writings, Lectures, and Conversations, 249

15 Hyman, The World New Made, 103. Hyman traces the use of the Ruckenfigur from Caspar David Friedrich to the solitary figure with his back to us in Edward Hopper’s Nighthawks.
Ruckenfigur as a sign of an individual contemplating nature and a device which both allows the viewer to enter the pictorial space by identifying with the Ruckenfigur and pushes them out, presented with a disinterested figure whose back is turned to them. More recently, Sabine Rewald sums up the Ruckenfigur “as allegories for Romantic yearning.”

I have stacks of photocopies of my drawings floating around my studio. There was one showing a figure with his back to us, looking into the distance. I made it from a screenshot of the movie Holy Motors. I decided to put it on the T.V. screen. I painted it with a cool brown on a white ground, creating a high contrast, black and white image reminiscent of black and white television.

The painting was finished.

All these decisions amount to presenting a painting that is a view through a doorway (which to an extent, may be in your real space), into an interior space which contains objects, one of which contains an image of a figure in contemplation, looking towards a landscape featuring a mid-century 20th century American home. I think of the painting as a record of me inspecting myself; a symptom of metacognition. In studio, I privately scrutinize my own romanticism. This can be disorienting, but is necessary; a longing for an idealized past and an appeal to felt emotions are preyed upon by despots as a means to seize the masses.

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16 Doesschate Chu Petra. Nineteenth-Century European Art, 17
17 Rewald, Rooms with a View, 36
* See fig. 4 for a historical example of a Ruckenfigur
** See fig. 5 for a detail of my Ruckenfigur from Proceed w/ Caution
Bibliography


fig. 1) Kyle Utter, *Proceed w/ Caution*, oil and acrylic paint, screw and plaster on canvas stretched over wooden panel. 55x66” 2018
fig.2) Detail from *Proceed w/ Caution*
fig. 3) Oblique view detail from Proceed w/ Caution
fig 4) Caspar David Friedrich *Woman at the Window*, Oil on Canvas, 44x37 cm. 1822. Image Courtesy of Artstor.org and the National Galerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin
fig. 5) Detail from Proceed w/ Caution
fig.6) View of *Proceed w/ Caution* installed at Hunter College’s gallery at 205 Hudson St, NYC
fig. 7) View of *Proceed w/ Caution* installed at Hunter College’s gallery at 205 Hudson St, NYC, alongside installations by Christopher K. Ho and Nathan Sinai Rayman