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The Potency of Emptiness

by

Kennedy Bailey

Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts Studio Art, Hunter College  
The City University of New York

2020

12/13/2020

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Date

Lisa Corinne Davis

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Thesis Sponsor

12/13/2020

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Date

Susan Crile

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Second Reader

To my mom, Chris Slowey.

## Acknowledgements

Chris Slowey- you have been the greatest mom and friend anyone could ever ask for. No words can truly express my deep appreciation for your patience and guidance throughout all of the trauma my brain has endured and put me through, since I was a child. I could never have even dreamed of getting to this point in my life where I would be able to write a full paper, or function as an adult without you.

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I want to give a shout out to my very special friends Lily Wong and Sisi Chen. I don't think I could have survived Hunter without you two. Thank you for always being there for me.

I would like to end by saying thank you to all of the heroes out there who are risking their lives for the rest of us during this tragic COVID-19 pandemic. As you have stood strong for our communities you have continued to be the highest example of what it means to show unconditional love, maintain patience, and have hope in this hurting world.

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## The Potency of Emptiness

There is meaning within a structure and a structure's construction is specific to its purpose. In that context, architecture is constructed for the needs of the body and language is created for communication between bodies. Similar to how a stroke can dismantle the delicate construction of the brain's structures, I paint to navigate the sensibility of a dismantled moment in time where forms indicate doubt and obstruction, causing one to question the stability of a foundation. These ideas derive from my private psychosomatic experiences where ischemic strokes and multiple seizures actively warped and manipulated my reality and understanding of the logic of structure. I paint to investigate language and neurology by integrating intangible personal experiences through physical manifestations of rupture within structures.

I see architecture and language as interlinked structures; the construction of letters and the way they connote meaning through words is a form of architecture. Marks constructed with lines and dots turn into letters, an alphabet, which gives birth to a word, and blossoms into a meaning housed by the lines in a group of letters. Lines turn into vantage points, which turn into walls and corners--fundamental structures that become foundations for housing visceral spaces and an experience. Forms of empty space and space filled with empty forms are fluctuating forces swimming on the canvas plane. Emptiness becomes potent. There is a push and pull of emptiness and fullness, a dance of structural control. A continuous paradox of timelessness. Chaos and entropy. All elements within the paintings are put to use, both the empty (negative) "scapes" and filled spaces have a specific function. Boundaries are not concrete; logic is not always accurate. Space is no longer viewed as a functionless area between two borders. The space itself consists of the forces of the forms within the painting rather than stasis.

I paint a mental space meant to be maneuvered. I imagine my body in the work in order to map out the linear choreography of walls and vessels that rupture the picture plane and disorient and manipulate the perceptual relationship that space constructs. I try to capture the pressure points within spaces in my paintings, internal “scapes,” that activate endless juxtapositions of elements from logical structures, which shape and guide the physicalized gaze. Like Isamu Noguchi’s playscapes (Fig. 1), made of simple functional forms which activate an elemental investigation, I work to locate and represent points which activate an endless exploration of self and space.<sup>1</sup> I reference the familiar language and understanding of architecture as a structure to shape and guide the body through newly warped channels and act as a tool to translate and materialize psychosomatic experiences within my paintings. Noguchi states, “The playground, instead of telling the child what to do (swing here, climb there), becomes a place for endless exploration, of endless opportunity for changing play.”<sup>2</sup> Influenced by Noguchi’s lifelong interest in child’s play, I aim to paint a particular space that guides the viewer to experience the cognitive space rather forcefully telling them what to see and experience.

When planning the “scapes” of these introspective spaces, I think about the overall ideology of what an exhibition is. Inspired by Frederick Kiesler’s curatorial work in Peggy Guggenheim’s art exhibition *The Art of This Century*, I reflect on perspective and how the concept is presented or displayed and therefore molds the audience’s reception of the concept. In the exhibition Kiesler focused on the importance of the exhibition’s influence on the viewer when engaging with the work.<sup>3</sup> Specifically in the Surrealist Gallery (Fig.2) of the exhibition,

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<sup>1</sup> Alexandra Lange . “The Story Behind Isamu Noguchi’s Playscapes in Atlanta.”

<sup>2</sup> “Biography.” The Noguchi Museum.

<sup>3</sup> Lily Goldberg. “Frederick Kiesler: MoMA.” The Museum of Modern Art, 2016.

Kiesler extends the dreamlike ethos of the paintings into the exhibition space. The work was suspended on curvilinear walls, accompanied with a light show, randomly timed allowing the viewer an immersive experience. There were moments where the gallery was in complete darkness or only a few paintings were illuminated with spotlights. Kiesler's interests in connectivity and the idea of the visual becoming the real, inspired me to critically think about space and atmosphere, not only in an exhibition space but in the paintings themselves.<sup>4</sup>

Influenced by Kiesler's ideas and curation of the Surrealist Gallery, I think of how we respond to certain environments and the power of how that sets up a narrow and specific lens for us to interpret through. In imagining the idea of space guiding our perception when viewing work, I constructed a hypothetical installation space. In *Installation Sketches 1, 2, and 3* (Fig. 3) (Fig. 4) (Fig. 5), I transformed a gestural mark that was in a previous painting of mine *Untitled Experience* (Fig. 6) (Fig. 7) into the foundation for my floor plan and then drew undulating walls, curved into an exhibition space. By transforming the gestures of my painting marks into an actualized installation sketch, I sought to determine the pressure points within a space and how the life of a gesture could live beyond the lines made by a paintbrush. In placing my body in the painting's gesture, I became interested in how parts of a painting's depiction of space could force the viewer to question structural logic and have an immersive experience of disorientation. There is a specific perception of architecture and structure that implies a sense of security. Guidelines are set up to follow and believe in, suggesting logic, stability, and practicality. Beyond architecture, I see how we are drawn to the anchored character of structures, such as grids, geometry, and symmetry. In planning my paintings, I challenge the viewer's comfort in the stability of traditional structure.

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<sup>4</sup> Lily Goldberg. "Frederick Kiesler: MoMA."

In addition to language and architecture, which are both material representations of structure, symmetry can be used as structure in painting. Due to the relationship between neurology and brain imaging, I begin with symmetry in my paintings. Eventually, I divert from this symmetry, which serves as an immediate indicator that something is wrong. Even without knowing how to read radiological imaging such as MRIs, one can assume that the lack of symmetry in a brain image implies damage or a flaw within the structure of the brain. In the MRI image (Fig. 9), you can see a bright white spot that is present on only one side of the brain, an indication that a stroke (death in brain tissue) took place. Although the spot is minute compared to the darkness that makes up the majority of the brain, the blemish is notable enough to suggest a disruption within the structure. This visual imbalance is an example of a structure (symmetry) that we trust, now subject to dysfunctionality. The visual implications of such a simple moment of disruption in symmetry is one of many visual phenomena that I seek to investigate.

I question how to represent the dismantling of a structure. When trying to address something not comprehensible or logical, it can only be described through the physical creation of a narrative; a mark, a characteristic, the result of bodily engagement with the paintbrush. The artist Henri Michaux employed the rhythm of his hand and brush to document an experience. Despite Michaux's lack of representation, in his works, *Untitled* (Fig. 10) and *Untitled* (Fig. 11), I sensed an internal struggle, trying to understand the psychosomatic experience he was having while under the influence of mescaline.<sup>5</sup> I was inspired by Michaux's use of scale, as intuitive strokes of motion guided the eyes to sense waves of chaos. He introduced a visual language that describes the unimaginable. Unlike him, my paintings such as *Watershed Stroke* (Fig.12), *Left Brain Seizure No.2* (Fig.13), and *Stroke in the Parking Lot* (Fig. 14), are not inspired by an

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<sup>5</sup> "Henri Michaux: MoMA." The Museum of Modern Art.

induced drug experience, but a result of exercising similar methods in extending my own psychosomatic experiences through a visual narrative consisting of the lines and contours of a swirling space. By limiting my color palette to black and white, I was challenged to inscribe a language of marks, almost as if I was using my own invented letters to describe the experience and tracing my body's reaction to such situations. Utilizing the material of paint and its relationship to my body, I work towards having my paintings showcase the narrative of my echoing a more acute visual extension of psychosomatic moments.

I think painting offers an aperture with which to oscillate between contradictory aspects within the same surface or internal space. While thinking about the construction of a mental space, my paintings reference the medical imagery that is used in the investigation of neurology. The imagery illustrates an acute visual and medical understanding of a neurological experience. Due to my personal experiences, I became interested in how black and white are mapped onto neurological brain imaging: a healthy brain is denoted in black, whereas brain damage is marked by white spots: an absence of healthy tissue that is aggressively (rather than passively) altering the brain. Analysis of black and white, through these medical connotations led to thinking about how passivity becomes aggression, and absence becomes presence, in the process of making my work.

I start painting by building a form of structure with brush strokes and oil paint, which represents the mind, a cognitive space with an internal experience. I start with the blank canvas, which is white: a passive background, representing nothing. I establish a structure, constructed of lines built through gestures from my body, making up vantage points and hard edges, as I use my brush to maneuver the structure. The canvas is then covered with marks of black paint. After setting up the structure, I work towards taking it apart, erasing the marks I painted, applying

paint to cover what was once established, smudging lines and eradicating order. I wipe away the black gestures with turpentine: thus aggressively re-revealing the white background, in a moment of erasure as real (significant) presence. The wiping/erasing is thus an aggressive nothingness applied to the paintings rather than a passive nothingness, as it is now actively presenting itself.

The colors I use in my paintings follow the meanings attached to medical imagery such as MRI scans.<sup>6</sup> The collaboration between my structure and medical discourse, guides my choice of achromatic color palettes which are similar to black text making a mark on a white sheet of paper, or the grayscale contours of an x-ray. White and black are utilized for their connotations of addition and obliteration which I use to project a disorienting, haunting experience of an abyss. In addition, white and black reference silence, death, and an obliterated sense of time, extending the characterization of absence, lack of harmony, and access through the process of rubbing, erasing, and blocking out areas.

Although white is traditionally utilized more often in painting for light, and often serves as a symbol of hope, I think about white matter in medicine being an indication of death. White cloudy spaces in brain scans indicate a landscape of a brain which is damaged and dead. White signifies an absence with no activity, while also indicating the presence of some sort of force which ripped, blinded and obliterated all that was active. In my paintings white is symbolic for damage, dead mass, white matter, subtraction, void and is generally detrimental. It is the color of nothing or absence and yet the force is something in itself, despite its unseen nature. The color white is something that can obliterate and is something that brings attention to the deficits present in a structure. I use it as a sign of erasure, and an impairment of other aspects and forms

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<sup>6</sup> "Brain Lesions," *Mayo Clinic*, 2018.

within the work, as death would appear as white matter in medical imagery. White signifies a void of life which simultaneously is an indicator of the presence of death. Something is hidden within and beyond white; it provides a clear message that something is wrong with the system. It is deployed as an inconvenience to the viewer to disable the comprehension of any recognizable mark or structure created on the canvas. It distorts the structure painted on the canvas, rubbing and obliterating the lines and logic created in the space.

Contradictory to white, black symbolizes presence, life, matter and activity in my work and in the world of medicine. It can exist, make a mark, and inscribe language, unlike its opposite. Black is existence. It is the existence of a gesture, a consequence of movement, whether a brush stroke or the flooding of fluids. It shows life existing in the brain, blood flowing with oxygen. Black is logic and stability. It is the lines that make up a structure-grid, blood vessels, walls, mass and matter. It is the color of order, but also the absence of obliterating light. It stands as a mark of my muscle intuitively forming a live structure painted on the canvas. Rather than one color dismantling the other, white and black dismantle and construct one another for the viewer, and need to be thought of together, in order to be understood.

Medical imaging projects whiteness to be dismantling (and destroying) blackness. Likewise, in my painting process, the disjunction and conjunction of black and white is played out in ways that, depending on the context, can show the dominance of one over the other. This reverses the common frame in painting interpretation in which the mark is more significant (and active) than the background/canvas. This hopefully challenges the viewer's assumptions and sets specific parameters in viewing the power dynamics in painting and guides them in viewing the work in a specific medically related lens.

I contemplate the temporal order in my process and how the order of my application of paint engages with the deconstruction of the painted structure. I intentionally paint with oil paints, which are slow to dry, allowing time for erasure in my process. I entertain the battle of power among forms, black and white, polar opposites on the spectrum. The order of my paint application in my process plays a role in the structural control of the canvas plane. Having only an achromatic color palette, I constantly evaluate the consequences of my mark making. I think of a viewer's response when seeing an image or painting, and how the specific marks and edges contrive different responses. The crisp lines of a brushstroke, taped off or measured, forges a very different response than soft edges. I try to manufacture marks and lines that imply slowness and momentum by pragmatically applying layers of paint and manipulating the canvas through the action of my hand rubbing and erasing with turpentine. My process often leads to unanticipated events within the work and just as the brain does not have a straightforward response to climatic events, such as an ischemic stroke, there can be unpredictable outcomes when dismantling a structure.

Ultimately, my work is a window into the intuitive moment in which I am painting, and also a public gesture and narration of my navigation of viscerality. This hyperbolic translation of white and black's embodiment within the paintings, and investigation of dismantling a structure through painting, is an explicit quotation of space, matter, existence, and an expansion of the spirit of the mind. As I work towards finalizing my paintings, I cannot help but think that they will never be complete. Just as a brain never ceases to renavigate itself and reinvent itself, the work of investigating the visual narrative of the intangible does not have a finite ending.

Image Index

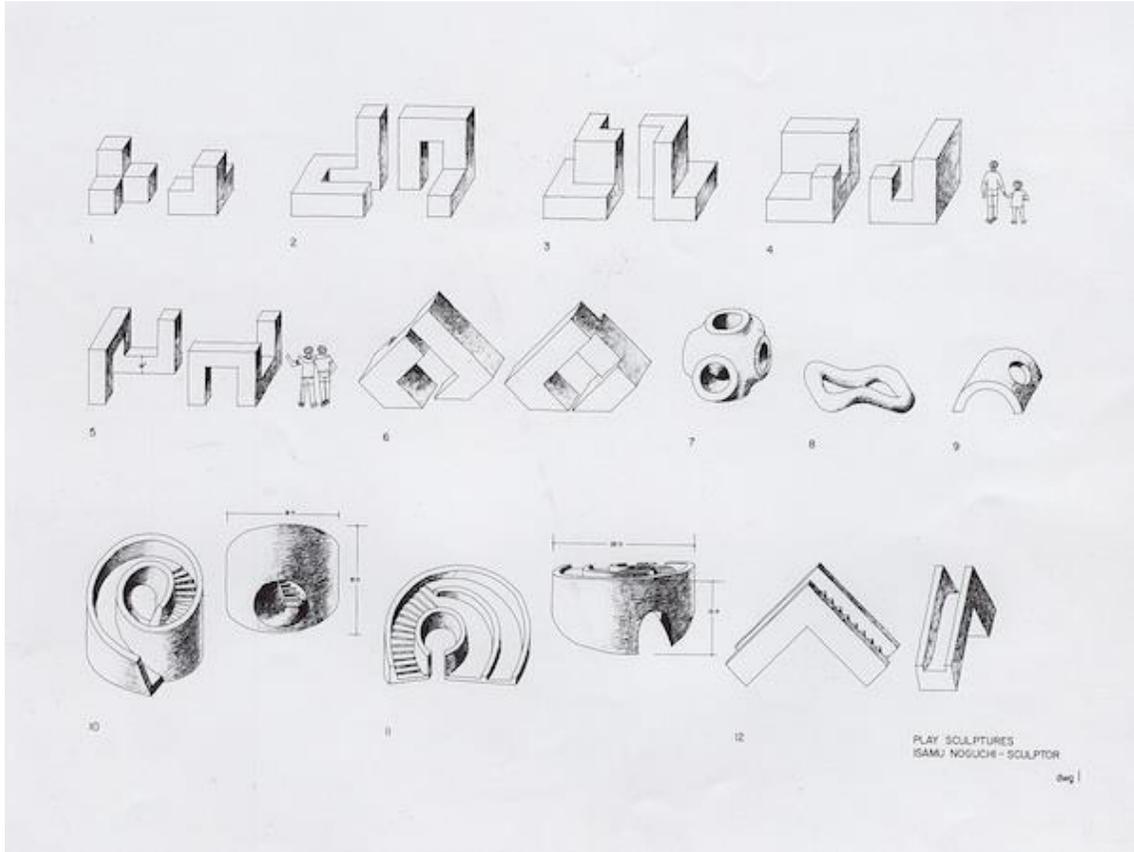


Figure 1. Isamu Noguchi, Drawings for play equipment, 1966-1967. Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum.



Figure 2. Abbott, Bernice. Still shot image of Peggy Guggenheim's *The Art of This Century*. "Insight of the Surrealist Gallery." Exhibition designed by Frederick Kiesler. Frederick Kiesler Foundation, Getty Images. 1942.

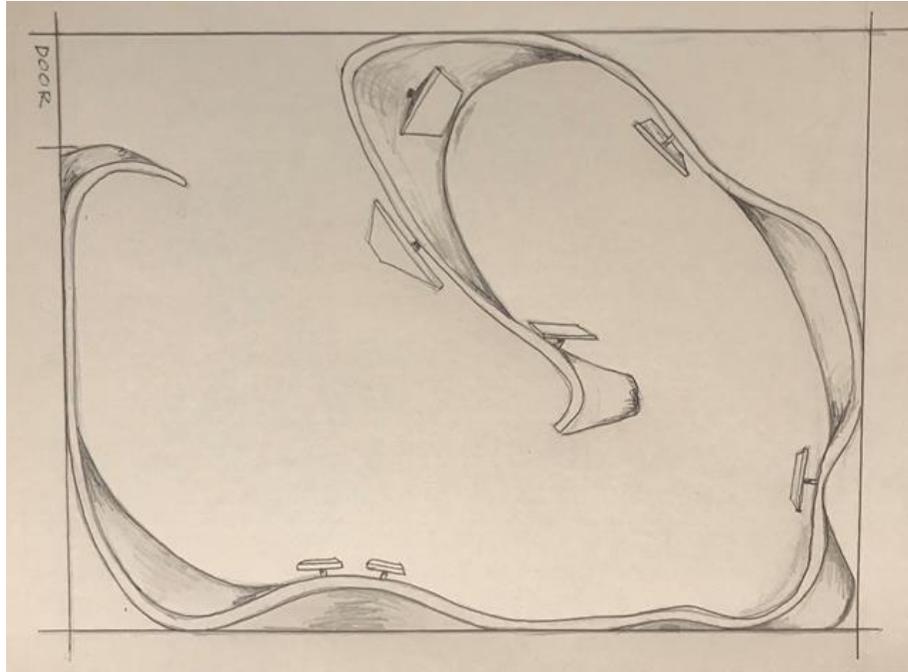


Figure 3. *Installation Sketch 1*, Graphite on Paper, 2020.



Figure 4. *Installation Sketch 2*, Graphite on Paper, 2020.

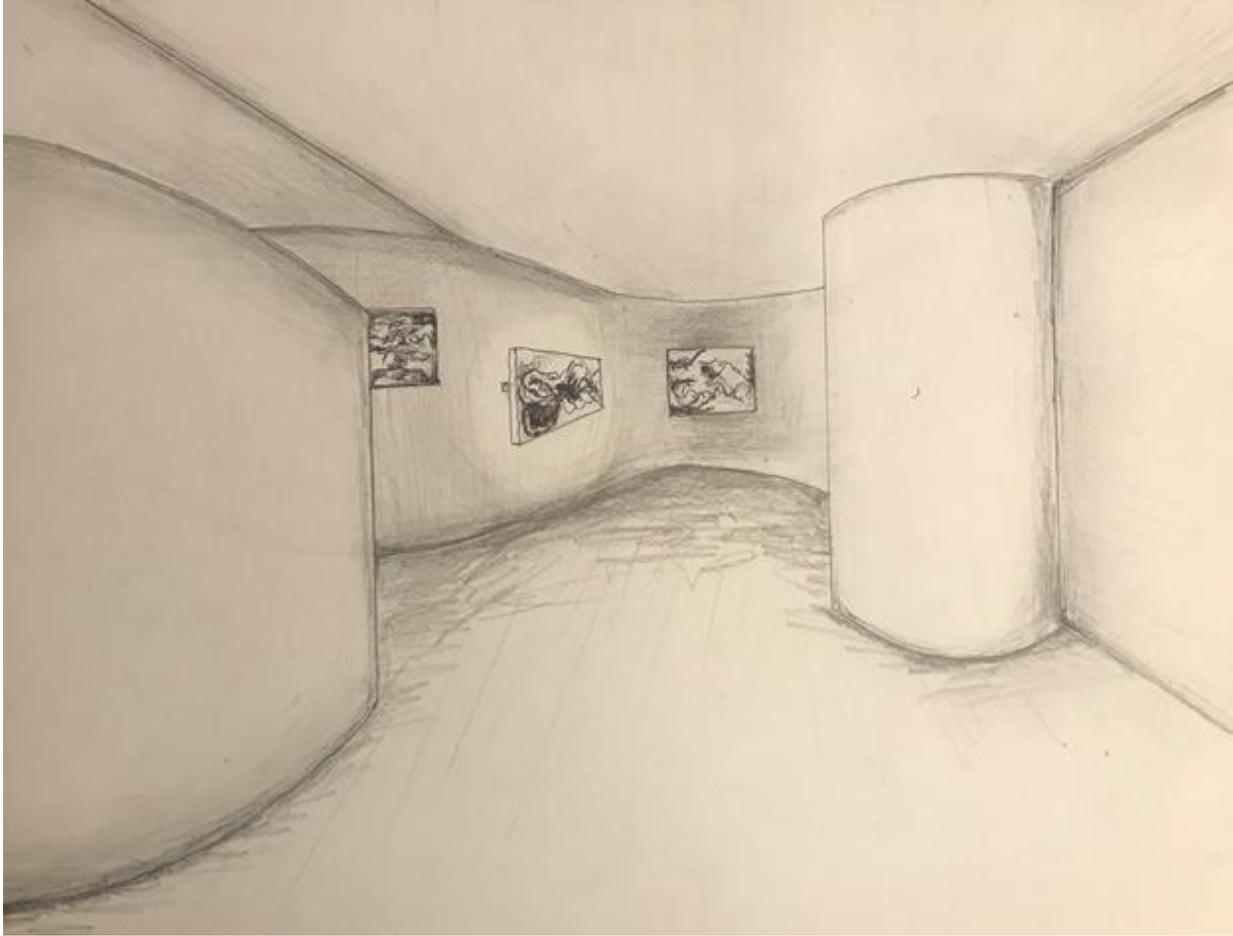


Figure 5. *Installation Sketch 3*, Graphite on Paper, 2020.



Figure 6. *Untitled Experience*, Oil, Acrylic and Charcoal on Canvas, 2020.



Figure 7. detail of *Untitled Experience*.

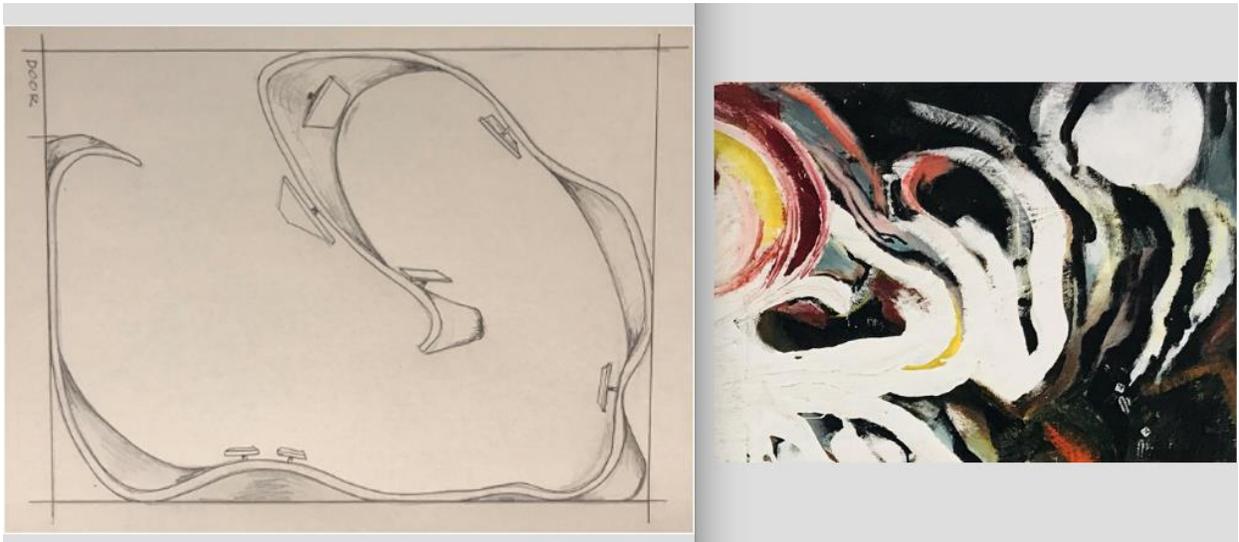


Figure 8. *Installation Sketch 1* next to *Untitled Experience* detail for reference.

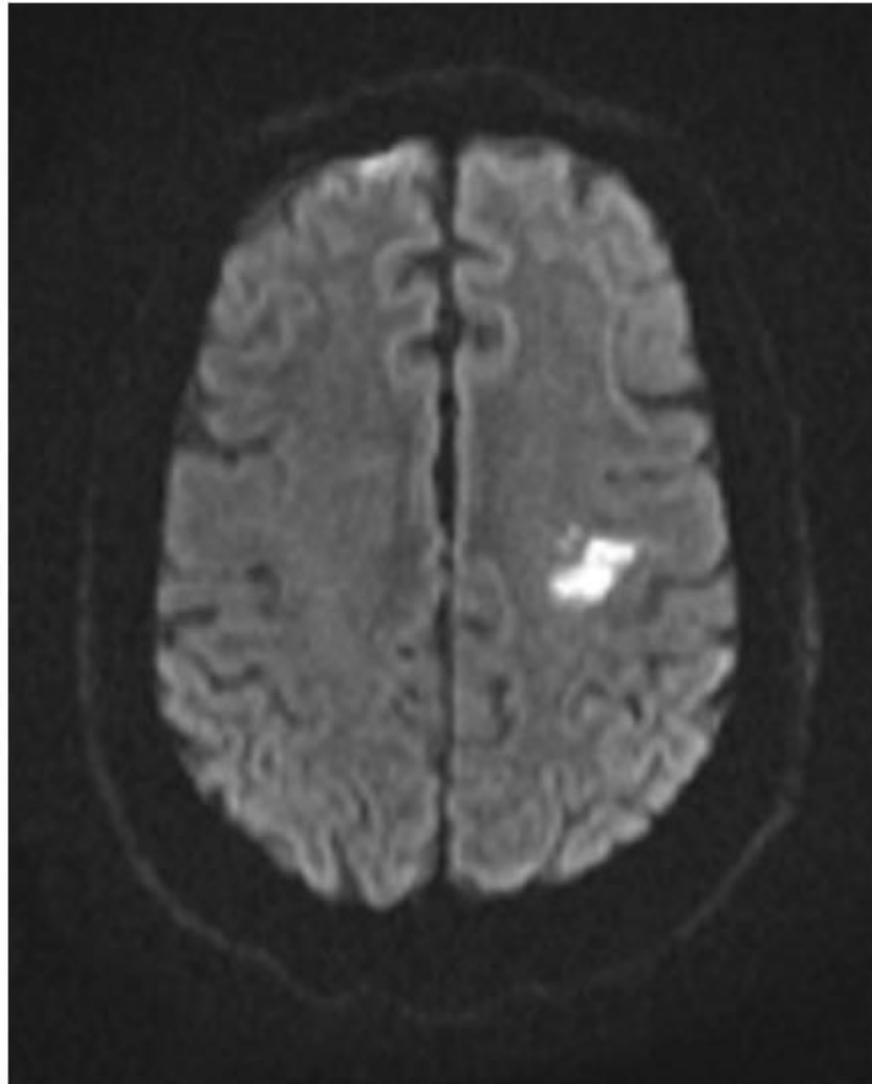


Figure 9. MRI scan showing a clear sign of an ischemic stroke.



Figure 10. Henri Michaux, *Untitled*, One of thirteen Lithographs published in *Meidosems*, 1948. Les Éditions du Point du Jour, Paris. The Museum of Modern Art.



Figure 11. Henri Michaux, *Untitled*, ink on paper, 1959. Edward Thorp Gallery.



Figure 12. *Watershed Stroke*, Oil on Canvas, 2019



Figure 13. *Left Brain Seizure No. 2*, Oil on Canvas, 2019



Figure 14. *Stroke in the Parking Lot*, Oil on Canvas, 2019

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