

Against Flesh and Blood

A yearlong investigation into abstract painting

Benjamin Derlan

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Mentors: Professors Carrie Patterson and Sue Johnson

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The ‘subject’ of a painting brings up an important phenomenological element of art— Images created on canvas are assembled parts of our objective reality, distorted by our subjective experience. The perception of the art piece (and indeed any object) is undoubtedly a subjective experience; no two people see a painting the same way. The existence of the painting though, once created and even as it is being made, is an objective reality, a new entity in our world. Once created, the painting acts upon the viewer just as any other object would. So in effect, the goal of painting is to create a new presence in our world by the sum of other phenomena already existing. The painter is creating a new experience from her own perceptions of the world, a physical expression of thought, emotion and sensation in union. The goal of painting is to move beyond mere identification and create a new presence in our world.

Philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty writes on the relationship between subject and reality in his seminal work *Cezanne’s Doubt*. Ponty used Cezanne’s work to examine the experience of painting. He explains how Cezanne’s paintings exude an illumination from within— the object projects into world after creation.¹ We work to gain some sort of pure understanding out of our phenomenological experience of the world, but we are ourselves part of the system. “We never get away from our life. We never see ideas or freedom face to face.”² The artist is always held within the parameters of our world. Indeed, no painting is truly autonomous because the artist must place parameters upon his creation in order for it to be executed. The struggle of painting centers around this inability to escape our parameters while simultaneously attempting to create something ‘new,’ or make discovery through the interpretation of experience. We must acknowledge the impossibility of this task and recognize painting for the magnificent tool it is; a magnifying glass with which one can inspect the seams of the phenomenon of now.

I began my foray into painting less than a year ago; in the summer of 2016. I was sketching and looking at art in DC museums, and decided I would try my hand at the time-tested two-dimensional media. Before painting, I had drawn, and made sculpture, really doing it for only about a year before then. I am still new to the journey of visual art making. Approaching the subject is in itself an expression of self. I did not feel a strong identity of my work and my self purpose. And so the outcome of my work was not directed, but nebulous and unsatisfying.

I wanted to find a truth; of what I was unsure. The more I became aware of the painter’s toolbox, the more I realized that the ‘what’ was only a vehicle for the ‘how’ and the ‘why.’ I was ensnared in the subject when in reality the importance was the truth I wished to find within this object. I began to experiment with abstraction in order to express more than the sum of parts of a photographic understanding of a visualisation. Through research of other artists attempting to solve similar problems I gained a foothold in understanding my own structures.

The brilliance of a good artist comes from her dualistic ability to capture that of the passing moment and of that of the eternal. One can think back to favorite songs, books, films,

¹ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, and Galen A. Johnson. "Cezanne's Doubt." *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1994. N. pag. Print.

² Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, and Galen A. Johnson. "Cezanne's Doubt." *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1994. N. pag. Print.

and images. All of these things had a subject; a specific theme, location, or mood. But the one thing they all share is their capture of the eternal means of existence, the pains and joys of being alive, communicated through art. This is something which my art as of yet lacks. I cannot express clearly those feelings with my novice painter's palette and undefined brushstrokes. My knowledge of art stems often from the symbolic meaning of works under the guise of academic study; the history of art. I have been overlooking an important, perhaps the most important part of studying art: the physical structure of the painting. And this is why I have decided to research deeply the work of Richard Diebenkorn. Diebenkorn was a master of capturing the moment within a larger universal rhythm. His *Ocean Park* paintings speak to universal beauty, geometry, and color, but also to the specific color of a location, the light of an exact observed time and space. This is something I have yet to realize in my own art, and why I intend to study not the writing, symbols, subject of Diebenkorn, but this paint itself, the simultaneously broad and specific, light and space, now and forever of painting.

When I paint, I enjoy a mark which is spontaneously beautiful. A curve of a charcoal line, the texture of thin graphite lines, the drip of paint. I am in love with interesting marks. Diebenkorn has these in his work, along with brilliant planar relations. Unlike many of the 'minimalists' and 'post painterly' artist to follow out of abstract expressionism, Diebenkorn left his hand in the work throughout his career. No matter how art changes over the years, the warmth of a human hand in the work is vital to beauty. Think of the Chauvet cave paintings. The power of seeing images so old, and yet so human. There is something human about the measuring lines and layers left in Diebenkorn's work. The *Ocean Park* series would not work without the aesthetics of thin line v.s. color fields. The size of the works themselves contribute to their power. Elizabeth Broun explains the power of size of the canvases well in her review of *Ocean Park No. 6*: "It's almost eight feet tall and exactly six feet wide--about the reach of a grown man. The canvas is vertical, with uneven parallel strips of color that flex roughly at midpoint, the way a figure bends at the waist and legs."³ Although being abstract, these works are very much connected to our world and our experience. Reminiscent of human scale, of doorways or architecture, they feel *right*. I think that's what much of important art comes down to; the intuitive 'feeling right' or certain pieces over others. Some shapes just work well with the human mind; convey more than we can explain, convey cursory feelings; eternal feelings. The duality of representation and abstraction, momentary and eternal, local and universal; Diebenkorn rode the line for all of these, building his own place in the spectrum to create feelings unique to the human experience.

After understanding better the work of Diebenkorn and the abstract expressionists of the 1950s, I found myself diving into painting in the 1980s. One artist in particular who seemed to be dealing with the same concepts as my own (our bodies, systems within the universe, source imagery, and translation) is Terry Winters. When Terry Winters rose to critical acclaim, painting was resurging from a time when other media such as photography, film, and land art were being heralded as more freely expressive modes. Artists were concerned with methods and materials,

³ Broun, Elizabeth. "Richard Diebenkorn's Ocean Park No. 6." *American Art* 13, no. 2 (Summer99 1999): 80.

with an 'art as object' approach. The 'illusion' of painting was not appealing. As Terry Winters began his career in earnest he wanted to advance these ideas of process within the act of painting. "In some way I wanted to connect process and picture-making. I wanted to figure out a way to reconcile those interests. And to figure out a way to paint pictures that didn't seem like a fallback to representational imagery."⁴ Winters' work is abstract, layered, and based in reality. His source materials are often biological; cells, structures, charts. These structures become an 'organizing principle' for the painting. They build a structure over which the process can develop. Terry Winters uses the logic behind his source images to expand beyond the initial source. I am interested in this relationship between source material and abstraction. Somehow, though repetition of simple forms within oil paint Winters creates a strong visually pleasing artwork through which societal, biological, and psychological changes can be observed.

My first introduction to Terry Winters was just months ago at the Whitney museum in New York. As I walked along their show of paintings from the 1980s, I turned a corner and was struck with the presence of *Good Government* (see Appendix 1). I knew nothing of the subject or source image, or the artist; I took the painting in completely unbiased. I was particularly fascinated with the depth created within the painting, for looking at individual parts it is rather opaque but as a whole creates an oscillation of space. "There's a particular kind of experience that is available in painting and looking at painting. A variety of imaginary subjects and dimensions can be accessed. If you're into it, you can go really deep."⁵ Said by Winters himself, this proclamation certainly holds true when experiencing his works. To some, the work may appear simple; the image seeming to be degenerating cellular structures. But as the image fades away, new expressions are made. The improvisation of his building on the source image becomes what the painting is. It is not mimicking the original; just the opposite. The painter is using ambiguous data from the source to drive at a whole new expression. At the crossroads of recognizability and ambiguity is a unique voice for which all artists seek to define.

Perhaps most important to Winters is his process. The actual act of painting is what the art is all about. It is both vessel for ideas and ideas themselves. What the minimalists were trying to do with their objective painting Winters expands. He allows the hand to be seen in the artist; but creates subjects lacking in specific self; copies as they are from diagrams and not life. Somehow he expresses concepts of human thought through objects with an "...emphatic absence of conscious 'selfhood.'"⁶ Despite conjuring all sort of meaning within the state of painting and the highbrow, cerebral art world, Terry Winters is humble in his practice. It is clear that he enjoys painting; uses it to understand the world and discover new ideas. In his own words: "It's important to reach a place where you don't know what you're doing. Painting is a combination of carpentry and catastrophe. There are parts of the painting process that are civilized: a

⁴ Princenthal, Nancy. "TERRY WINTERS." *Art In America* 97, no. 2 (February 2009): 92. *MasterFILE Premier*, EBSCOhost (accessed March 15, 2017).

⁵ Samet, Jennifer. "Beer with a Painter: Terry Winters," *Hyperallergic*, February 7th 2015. <http://hyperallergic.com/180766/beer-with-a-painter-terry-winters/>

⁶ Plous, Phyllis, Terry Winters, and Christopher Knight. 1987. *Terry Winters : painting and drawing*. n.p.: Santa Barbara : University Art Museum ; Seattle : Distributed by University of Washington Press, 1987.

deliberate application of procedures. I take pleasure in that — the tools, the materials, the efficiently run studio, etcetera. But then, at a certain point, the carpentry needs to hit the catastrophe. That instability allows for significant or surprising things to happen, or at least the possibility.”⁷ This brilliant balance, that between ‘outer and inner worlds’, ‘clarity and obscurity,’⁸ chaos and order, soul and mind is the balance which all artists seek. Each one of us modulates the scales for the right weight to find our own balanced expression.

And so through this extensive research, I began to develop my own process, my own balanced expression. My paintings are an investigation of bodily structure and movement through the study and abstraction of diagrams. To understand art is to understand that it is beyond our ability to transcend our sensory bounds. Therefore, when I paint I am intentionally and automatically abstracting from the reality I perceive. Painting is the cross product of observation and declaration; my work is a study of forms through the lens of my own autonomy. When the painting is defined by the schema of the subject, the expression of the painting itself is limited and so I strive to express more than the physical subject portrayed. Through the process of painting, I strive to express the union of thought, emotion, and sensation surrounding the body.

In my most recent series, I choose a small section of the body which fascinates me. I am abstracting small sections of a 1960s era anatomy chart in order to understand the power of image and its functions in a larger system. By focusing on a small detail of a reproduction of the human body, I am able to investigate the experience of painting. A 2x2 inch section of the anatomy reproductions becomes a 46x46 inch painting. In order to see large, one must sometimes focus in small. It is only when you concentrate on a part of the universe that you begin to realize its inseparability from everything else. Non-dualist thinking dictates that there is no separate; and this paradigm works well to understanding art. I use the understanding of my art within a system to comment on the present moment and action of my body (my physical body + its environment, because nothing can be defined without its context, what I mean is; I am not simply my brain nor my body but the canvas, the room, the world, etc.) through time. Through decisions in scale, focus, color, and gesture, the painting becomes a representation of my sensory observation of the source image and a physical record of my corporeal experience. Each informs the other throughout the series, highlighting the relationship between interpretation and execution.

The canvases bring into focus things which we have never seen, but are inside of us working to keep us alive. They are part of us. The strokes I make are an expression of the size and movement of my own body. Indeed, the marks I make with my body are powered by the structures I am painting. The painting process becomes a system in which the structures I am painting function to keep me alive, sustaining myself and the artwork.

⁷ Samet, Jennifer. “Beer with a Painter: Terry Winters,” *Hyperallergic*, February 7th 2015. <http://hyperallergic.com/180766/beer-with-a-painter-terry-winters/>

⁸ Phillips, Lisa, Terry Winters, and Klaus Kertess. 1991. *Terry Winters*. n.p.: New York : Whitney Museum of American Art : distributed by Harry N. Abrams, 1991.

What is the function of my work as I continue forward? It is to expand indefinitely into the void, into the present moment with the unflinching race necessary to attempt to catch infinity, the push into explaining what you already know to be true, that we exist only now⁹ and the paintings we leave behind are recordings of our perception of this fact. The body is everything, everything can be described in bodies, for there is but one true medium of reality and that is its definition by our perception of it through our senses. I will continue on through my painting perception in a form of meditation on the system and flow of information within our unreflectively unique cosmos.

⁹ Watts, Alan. *The Book*, Collier Books, New York, 1966.