

Tim McKay
Artist Statement and Research
SMP in Studio Art, 2018

Pigment and Plywood

I was an athlete. I was strong and fit. I was sharp and bold. But after the accident, none of these characteristics could be accurately attributed to me. It happened during a match. I tried to make a play but got hit in the head instead. They said the analytical side of my brain was hit. They were right.

Light was painful for my eyes. Sounds were overwhelming to my ears. What was worse than that pain was lacking the ability to talk about the pain. However, I quickly learned that talking isn't the only form of self-expression.

My analytical brain was out of order, but my creative brain was not. I took up painting and instantly realized that I had an intuitive capacity to express exactly what I was feeling in terms of color and stroke. This realization was like a breath of fresh air because I didn't feel overwhelmed by my overwhelming perceptions. This creative outlet became an obsession. I painted every day for hours. There was nothing else that I felt adequately able to do.

Fast forward 18 months and my analytical brain was back in action. I had an impressive body of work behind me. Additionally, I had a new way of relating to my art-making practice through the changes in my brain. What this translated to, is an interest in analyzing the art I was making to extract the core of the idea with less words (strokes, colors, gestures, etc.). Additionally, I began studying mathematics and art history when I transferred to St. Mary's College of Maryland, and both of these fields of study would prove fruitful to my art-making practice.

Math intrigues me because it is the study of truth. Not truth in a spiritual or emotional sense, but in a logical sense. $1+1=2$ every second of every day no matter what. This method of thinking is calming for me. It allows me to make decisions because I can see the world in black and white. However, if I think like this too much, I feel like a robot. During the first semester of my St. Mary's Project in Art (SMP), I attempted to make art in this fashion. I had an idea for a body of work involving the exploration of partitioning the pictorial plane and filling the sections (or not) with primary colors and then exploring how their arrangement would create different effects. However, I realized I detested making art in this fashion. It gave me a headache. Hence, I arrived in the second semester of my SMP with the understanding that I had to make open-ended work because the process is freeing and it is the opposite of doing mathematics.

In art there is no right or wrong. There just *is*. Thus, to be able to create authentic work there must be a sense of letting go. This makes the artist vulnerable but this is key to being honest. Hence, I don't *try* when I make art. I force nothing. However, I have learned that it is necessary to place restrictions on this method of making because otherwise the art objects will lack the structure necessary for the work to make sense to other people.

Through the study of art history, I've learned about the necessity to pare down my artistic vocabulary. At first, I was utterly opposed to the idea of studying art history because I knew true art comes from within and, in a way, it can never be taught. Although I still believe true art comes from within, I think ignorance leads artists to reject studying the work and writings of past artists because art history is *long*. Hence, no matter who you are, there exists an artist (whose work and writing have been documented) who's more talented and more experienced than you that does something remarkably similar to you. Therefore, studying art history is humbling. Piet Mondrian is the artist who has this effect on me.

Piet Mondrian was one of the most influential artists of the 20th century because he was able to successfully embody the modernist role of the painter. The dominant art critic of the Modernist movement was Clement Greenberg. In his essay "Modernist Painting", Greenberg argues in favor of artists who make art under the pretense of the utilization of the mediums properties in order to criticize itself. In other words, artists should make self-referential art to their medium. In terms of Mondrian, he reduced his painterly arsenal to a bare minimum: straight, horizontal and vertical lines, whose negative space were filled with a solid primary color (or not). Since each of these elements directly reference the medium of painting, Mondrian was a poster-boy for the likes of Clement Greenberg. Although Mondrian's ability to reference painting as a medium isn't the direct reason I resonate with Mondrian, the implications of his mastery to achieve such a level of discourse are the reasons why I resonate with him. These implications revolve around Mondrian's evolutions as a painter. (Greenberg)

Mondrian focus as a painter began with landscapes. He made landscape paintings in the rural areas of the Netherlands for many years before moving to Paris and learning from the cubists, Picasso and Braque. There he was able to see the beauty in the Spaniards technique of reducing forms. This train of thought continued for him. He continued to reduce the elements he was using until he arrived at the aforementioned straight black lines closing spaces filled with primary colors. With this minimal toolset, he was able to say more than he had previously when his works dealt with more elements. Thus, he was doing more with less, and this is exactly what he was after. (Art History Unstuffed)

Mondrian was an artist but he was also a Theosophist. This was very important to his journey as a painter. He was concerned with purity in life and the absolute of things, especially painting. He believed that the spirit of a human was their core essence. He also believed there

was a way to paint in a manner related to the core essence of painting and thus the pure, painted representation of things. Hence, his path as a painter reflected his spiritual path because both paths started with the appearance of things and ended with what he found to be the core essence. Therefore, by studying Mondrian and his progression, I have gained insight into the necessity of the artist to pare down their arsenal. (Deicher)

I have arrived at SMP 2 with a specific set of elements. I repeat them in a variety of ways to create harmony and visual rhythm. So even though I maintain an open mind towards my art making, I limit my options in order to visually structure my art objects because I want them to do more with less. The set of elements I have limited myself to are: recycled wood, rectangles and nails.

I like the concept of recycling. There is something so essential about taking old life and giving it a new breathe. So, when I pull my little rectangles out of the scrap bin, they already have a story. They've been touched by another artist. They've been altered in the name of art. Additionally, the scraps have been deemed unusable by the original worker. However, I believe the imperfections and non-consequential size of the rectangle are seductive. Furthermore, this idea contributes to working in an open ended manner because my options are affected by someone else's decision regarding how they cut the rectangle.

I choose the rectangle as the vessel for my creation because it is simultaneously basic and dynamic. It has four sides, each meeting with the next at ninety degree angles. There's nothing else necessary outside of these simple requirements. Additionally, the ratio of the sides to each other affects what the surface should or should not yield. Hence, the rectangle is self-sufficient and effective as a vessel for abstract expressionist work.

When I work, I close my right eye and use my left hand in order to isolate my right brain and flatten my visual field. By isolating my right brain, I am able to purely create. It's as if my analytical brain is shut off when I work like this. The colors and gestures flow to me. There is no effort involved for me. Also, with a flat visual field, I can focus on the subject matter in front of me. Any blemishes are more readily apparent as such when I work in this manner.

I like the idea of sealing the act with a nail for two reasons. One, when I was a construction worker in Seattle during the summer of 2016, by sending a nail successfully into a surface I was completing a portion of my duty as a labor man in the creation of a building. Every nail was essential. Every nail was an act with a beginning and an end. Thus by sending a nail into a little piece of plywood, I am declaring it done. Additionally, for aesthetically functional reasons, by applying paint to the head of the nail, it creates a focal point of the piece. It also creates an illusion. The piece is two dimensional when viewed at one angle and three dimensional when viewed from the others.

The rectangular wooden scraps I work with are quite small in scale. Hence it is a reasonable choice to group them together. In general, the handful of pieces I make in a single sitting will lend themselves to each other because they follow a train of thought. Additionally, the works will be tied together by other patterns related to color, line, shape, or gesture. Thus, since they are similar enough to one another, they can be shown together.

For example, to the right we see an excerpt from an installation from a set up in the art annex for the mid semester critique. As mentioned above, the fact that these works are a permutation of the elements: small rectangle, paint and nail, they have a certain visual rhythm and they are attractive to the eye. Here the, placement



“These Notes”, 12” x 7” (Acrylic Paint, Nails, and Pastel on Plywood). 2018

and orientation of the pieces are directly tied to their individual characteristics. For example, the pink one is the brightest and biggest. Hence it makes sense to place it on the top left. Next comes the muted yellow piece with the textured paint. This serves to tie together both sides. Hence, it is a midway point between two ends and the horizontal orientation is reasonable. Finally, the bottom right yields a slightly muddy and dirt piece because of the use of pastel. This work is actually vital because it serves to balance the other cleaner brighter pieces. Otherwise, the composition would be boring.

The method of working in an open-ended manner I employ is by no means a new concept. Specifically, Richard Tuttle is a contemporary artist who successfully works in this manner. He is labelled as a post-minimalist because he is considerably younger than the first minimalists and because his works are simple in nature. Yet, although they are simple, Tuttle’s works are very successful and appreciated by a broad audience.

One thing I’m drawn to in Tuttle’s work are his choices for materials. The choices are humble. He employs elements like cotton, styrofoam, plywood and carpet. Yet he applies them in a beautiful way. His works are often read as poetic and fragile. He doesn’t work with a

specific reference point. This allows his investigations of the formal elements to have a sense of spirituality and intellectual curiosity. (Pace Gallery)

Another thing I appreciate about Tuttle is how he doesn't succumb to the pressures of the market he exists in. He continues, time and time again, to pursue his own investigations instead of responding to the fluctuations of the art market. He follows his own inner voice. This notion is deeply important to me because it inspires me to retain a sense of individuality as I become a professional artist.

Most importantly, I think I like Tuttle's work because it is subtly weird. He generally makes tiny pieces involving few elements. They are indirect and unable to be understood at first glance. Yet they *are* appealing at first glance, however the reason why they're attractive doesn't always make itself known right away. After spending time with his art objects, it's possible to pick up on appealing relationships. In turn, it's possible to see these same relationships in the external world. This subtle beauty is what I want to cultivate as well. (Salamon)

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