

Jens Pettersen
The Recital
Terminal Project Report

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A & E

This Terminal Creative Project thesis surveys and responds to the practice of contemporary painting and its conceptual contents and possibilities of inquiry and scrutiny. In this text I will categorize production methods and strategies while investigating painting's role as an immediate record of the body, its function as a stand-in or body double, and how gestural marks generate an inaccessible language which incites an analysis of painting's play with hidden bonuses, idiosyncrasies of articulation, and unresolved, yet unrelenting production and inquiry.

I will also respond to painting's function within a contemporary art network – its role as a catalyst for conversation and vigorous debate concerning philosophy and economy. To contextualize my practice I will engage with texts from contemporary scholars and writers such as Isabelle Graw, Sabeth Buchmann, and David Joselit, among others.

This thesis functions as a contemporary compendium for other painters working now, and as an instrument for further inquiry and analysis.

Shame on You

Merlin Carpenter, a stalwart of contemporary painting and former assistant to famed enfant terrible painter Martin Kippenberger said in conversation with Isabelle Graw, the Frankfurt based theorist and critic, that the painting is a 'readymade' object — a commercial, mass-producible, ordinarily recognizable object that through context and intention is described as art.¹ Painting on canvas originates in the Italian Renaissance, where canvas was used instead of panels because of its ease of storage and transportation – allowing it to be moved more easily as an economic asset. This tradition has been the defined standard for painting since, to the point where any fabric stretched over a frame can be argued as the recognizable object of a painting. Carpenter argues that the recognizability of the object that is canvas stretched over a wooden bars is at this point a clear cliché — a commodity based on its historical form, economic value and signifier of status. The same can be said for painterly gestures or tools, he also states 'A drip is a readymade'. A 'current' drip is a form of trick or signifier — referencing action painting of the late 1940's, 50's and 60's, where energy, bravery and risk was translated from the painter to the canvas inhabited by a postwar ethos of progressive advancement. Now, in the current hybrid moment of western neoliberalism and right wing accelerationism, a reference to these strategies falls under scrutiny because of their conservativeness, lack of problematization, and general acceptance and

¹ Carpenter, Merlin. "Painting as a Cover Story — A Conversation with Merlin Carpenter." *The Love of Painting: Genealogy of a Success Medium*, by Isabelle Graw, Sternberg Press, 2018, pp. 182–199.

historical privilege. Painting finds itself now in what art theorist Rosalind Krauss described as a 'Post Medium Condition'. In her essay *A Voyage on the North Sea*, she argues that the medium specificity of modernism has become obsolete to describe the art of today and that instead of searching for purity of medium, we must rather investigate the purity of art itself. In what she calls 'differential specificity', which are multimedia art forms that are 'medium specific' in the way they function and interrogate capitalist structures.² Krauss establishes a new artistic realm that allows for notions of art, art theory, and aestheticism involved with, but not indistinguishable from capitalistic society due to capitalism being the pervading principle behind art, rather than aesthetics. She explains that even art that tries to subvert capitalism may end up serving it; "the master of detournement (subversive appropriation) turns out to be capitalism itself, which can appropriate and reprogram anything to serve its own ends". Painting throughout the last 50 years has maintained its economic steadfastness, claiming consistently high prices at auction and through gallery sales. According to The 2025 Art Basel market report, painting represented 59% of all works sold by fine arts dealers and 78% of all works sold for more than 1 million dollars.³ Therefore Krauss' analysis becomes a starting point from which to analyze the perpetual importance of painting, and it is essential for any painter to acknowledge and accept this link between commerce and art.

Tangerine

Painting still holds value in its activation of the body, akin to dance or song. Your senses are activated as you move your arms, jump around the studio to articulate a mark, inhale the smell of walnut oil, paint thinner, and varnish. Holding a tube of oil paint in your hand is, as writer Susan Sontag would describe it, an erotics of art -- a physical closeness and sensory experience that itself constitutes and functions as art.⁴ The heavy, strangely cold tube sits in your hand until you perversely squeeze its contents out, dragging the paint with your brush, pallet knife, or hands across a canvas. Philosopher George Bataille's theory of base materialism is a helpful perspective when analyzing paint and painting. In his inquiry he argues that 'matter' is not subservient to higher ideals or meaning, rather it exists in perpetual chaos. Therefore the study of transgression of norms or an exploration of excess which can occur through art or ecstasy becomes important in an effort to see or experience reality. Bataille argues therefore that things

² Rosalind Krauss, **A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition**, 1999.

³ Clare McAndrew, **The Art Market 2025: An Art Basel & UBS Report**, p. 77.

⁴ Susan Sontag, **Against Interpretation and Other Essays**, 1966.

such as mud, decay, and its different allegories or metaphors must be studied and integrated into life. Bataille's erotic novel *Story of the Eye*, in which the two main characters engage in sexual exploration and games with 'alive' objects such as eggs and bodily fluids becomes a way in which to view ascent and ecstasy as indicative of a more true reality.

*"That was the period when Simone developed a mania for breaking eggs with her behind "... " I would put the egg right on the hole in her ass, and she would skillfully amuse herself by shaking it in the deep crack of her buttocks. The moment my come shot out and trickled down her eyes, her buttocks would squeeze together and she would come while I smeared my face abundantly in her ass. "*⁵

Roland Barthes wrote in a 1962 essay on *Story of the Eye* that "a poem is something that could never happen under any circumstances-except, that is, in the shadowy or burning realm of fantasy, which by that very token it alone can indicate."⁶ Barthes argues that something like Bataille's novel *The Story of the Eye* creates a tactility and slipperiness within the medium of literature – an oscillation between the 'reality' and physicality of bodily fluids alongside fantastical, imaginary scenes and characters. The tactility of painting can create an evasiveness. Wet paint can generate an unclear and 'fictitious' image, because of the way it is unsettled, still in conversation with the layers underneath it, and presenting an untrue reality – chains of infinite metaphorical potential and imagined events. There is in the use of dense and thick paint a relationship and closeness between oneself and the object. Smell, touch and physical sensations are critical to engage with the artwork as something other than merely an object intended for display. This engagement of smell and touch, alongside painting's historical steadfastness, turns the painting into the status of a quasi-person, an avatar thinking and acting on its own terms. Smell, texture, and touch – body odor almost, creates an assertiveness of the otherwise 'dead' objecthood or commodity of an artwork. The relationship between investigative critical object analysis can, in this way, be flipped. A painting can in this configuration of quasi personhood be the one who is critical, the one who is judging, the one who knows more than you do. (figure 1)

This makes you proud

Through a cynical perspective it is worth arguing the question of — does it even matter what's being painted? If, according to Carpenter, a painting is itself considered a readymade, 'complete' before a mark has been made to it and open to unlimited potential compositions is there still

⁵ Georges Bataille, *Story of the Eye*, 1928.

⁶ Roland Barthes, "The Metaphor of the Eye," 1962.

value in the act of painting? When beginning to paint however, this particular protective seal is broken as you open yourself to ‘stakes’ such as potential incomplete or unresolved works, herein lies risk and excitement and a space for exploration. Throughout my time spent in the studio at University of Oregon I have been dedicated to the notion of practice and rehearsal. Painting is a continuous exercise of building material knowledge and skill. The end product however will therefore always be the action of painting itself. Works that were completed 6 months ago have been reworked, gessoed over, taken off the stretcher, or thrown out the window. The fixedness of the painting is less essential than the production and general studio practice. My primary research is based in physical production and practice. I have oscillated back and forth from making many paintings on different canvases to working through numerous works on the same surface. In the context of graduate school studies in art, a single work is decidedly ‘un-precious’ as it can be worked over without any clear risk. Rather than a physical archive, I have an extended photographic archive of my works. This archive exists as a blog at jensnonprofit.tumblr.com Here I have continuously published documentation of works that are caught in a temporal ‘completeness’, meaning I am satisfied with their form and content. This archive is important as a compendium to my practice, as the photographs of the work exist in a structure of digital circulation – positioning myself as a painter, but also as an artist in a post-internet structure and within a larger network of influence.

Sauv Blanc

I paint decidedly fast and I ‘work’ a lot, this work is separated between moments of ‘productive’ and ‘unproductive’ labor. Stretching canvas and walking around thinking about the stretched canvas is in the context of the paradoxical notion of ‘art production’ both moments of work and labor. However, for three years I have been to the studio every day I have been in Eugene. Why I return every day is a question of clique and environment. My main activity is the act of making art. I don’t have hobbies, I am interested in other things outside art, but painting and art is what occupies my time. The idea of ‘hobbies’ is what German philosopher Theodor Adorno would call a ‘mockery’ of my prevailing interests – there is no other form of time spent outside of my artistic inquiry and production. The day starts and ends with thinking about and looking at art. In Adorno’s 1977 essay *Free Time* he argues how free time is a capitalist construct and symbolizes a paradoxical anti freedom in its effort to escape work and labor.⁷ Eugene, Oregon doesn’t allow for large social cliques of artists, there are other social milieus (Punks, strippers, drug dealers). Contemporary painting darling and master Amy Sillman says that painting is like cocaine, famed multimedia artist Mike Kelley stated that the artist is lower on a social hierarchy than a drug

⁷ Theodor Adorno, "Free Time," in **The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture**, 1991.

dealer – sucking up public funding to mill around in a studio. Sillman also states that painting is about getting in and out of trouble. Trouble happens inside and outside the studio, I consider them both important. Truly, trouble is where art lives most of the time in a contemporary art canon, gossip and rumors are the most fun part. but the most pertinent artistic environment, where artists share a similar vocabulary in physical space, exists in principle within our collective studio building, therefore I tend to spend most of my time here immersing myself in my work. So while living in an internet-connected world, I still value physical space. I enjoy conversation, body language, jokes, and greetings, being knowingly in reality. (figure 2)

Camera

In a 2009 edition of the art journal *October*, art theorist David Joselit published an essay entitled *Painting Beside Itself*. The text covers the concept of the ‘network’ of decisions and circumstances which are important byproducts of an art work, the text slyly begins with A Martin Kippenberger quote stating that the dinner you ate is just as important as the art on the wall of the gallery. Joselit goes on to explain that painting does therefore not just function within its own medium or form, but as a network based on symbols and actions connected to subcultures, cliques, and cities.⁸ My work and paintings function therefore in a knowing relation to a closed audience. They are paintings focused on painting, and function in a social climate of other people interested in paintings. In an anonymous essay published at the art blog *Manhattan Art Review*, the writer elaborates on the work of Photographer Sara Deraedt and argues how something like choosing a specific painting ‘style’ is a false choice and making one type of painting puts you in an anxiety. Instead of an emphasis on look or style the painter or photographer should rather make work within a closed system of a shared aesthetic sentimentality. As stated in the text as a metaphorical example: “The dancer makes no choice of how to dance because that is how dancing is done in their village.”⁹

Plie

Getting to this point of dance or performance within the structure of painting requires time spent in the studio, with the doors closed. In her work, the art critic Sabeth Buchmann discusses the concept of rehearsal as an artistic process that is analyzed on a formal level, a voluntary and

⁸ David Joselit, “Painting Beside Itself,” *October*, vol. 130, Fall 2009.

⁹ “Sara Deraedt @ Essex Street (2016).” *The Manhattan Art Review*, 19933.biz, <https://19933.biz/saraderaedt.html>.

participatory routine, and repetition that is itself an artistic product.¹⁰ Not only being a place for repeated practice, the rehearsal space is also an arena for self-critical questioning, where the artist is in a space of ultimate freedom, where anything goes, and failure is acceptable.

Connecting my work to the theory of rehearsal puts painting in a system of experimental performing art – ‘continued rehearsal’ past the bounds of studio walls. My gestural abstractions are mirrors of performed, yet meticulously practiced action. The surface of the canvas absorbs whatever action I perform, safflower oil mixed with oil paints take forever to dry, maintaining an aliveness well past the point of installation and exhibition. Within this painting there are also moments of ‘performed rehearsal’, scraped off paint, moments of fresh starts and breaks.

Painting is in its historical lineage also primed for a rehearsal. Painting is knowingly unsolvable, its poetics are not intended to be foils of political progress or technological advances. (figure 3)

Lemons

Stretch canvas, gesso, start the dance. Apply layers of color using a thick brush, respond to the moves, do it again, then again. Compositions will form after a while, a more solid image. In these moments one has to be both free and honest with oneself. Do I paint over the bad part or the good part, Is my next color one that I hate or one I love? How will text, or polka dots look in conjunction with gestural marks? A recent strategy has been to use spray paint to ‘defile’ or create errors in the painting which can then be worked over and adjusted. I paint blind, which in one instance can be literal, closing my eyes, trusting myself to conduct potent mark making. I also paint backwards, placing my body in front of the canvas with my back turned to it, moving up and down and side to side without having the instant recognizable observance of the mark. I also do not make sketches beforehand, either on paper or on smaller canvases. By sketching or overly preparing you set yourself up to lose, you have set a goal, something which is opted for disappointment or failure – I say let the failure come naturally. Painting to me is a non-deterministic process. It is complete freedom within what Hegel would call ‘freedom in the state’ which knowingly and willingly complies with the terms and rules that political and societal systems prescribe us. This type of freedom can therefore occur through making art in a studio space. Freedom in this state is in opposition to ‘abstract freedom’ which disregards, or is unaware of political and societal laws and boundaries. As an artist in the studio, I aim to clearly exercise my freedom within a closed system, which is maybe as close to freedom as one can come. A day in the studio will consist of looking at the current work, making adjustments, making adjustments to the adjustments, and end up in a place where a work no longer irks to be changed

¹⁰ Buchmann, Sabeth. “Rehearsing in Media, Some Remarks on the Relationship between Dance, Film and Painting.” *The Medium in the Post Medium Condition*, edited by Isabelle Graw and Ewa Lajer-Burcharth, Sternberg Press, 2013, pp. 145–169.

further. I state this in a passive voice, because the painting itself is at this point a full entity, having achieved the status of avatar or convincing body double. The opposition to this is the ‘incomplete work’. This work is in a state of illiteracy, as incomplete work lack the *je ne sais quoi* of an awareness or ‘knowingness’. Complete work therefore knows that it is capable of articulation, yet still potentially maintains an assertive reluctance or restraint. This fission of language and articulation is most clearly exemplified through the use of letters which do not constitute comprehensible syntax as the letter forms in my work are the language of painting itself, not text within a system of sentence structure or comprehension. My own writing, including this document is connected to the work, yet must exist peripherally, as a ghost or shadow in the corner of your eye. The other piece of completed text that will appear outside of this document in the work are the thesis and painting titles – all named The Recital. Recitals invoke schooling – middle school assemblies where there is the relational aesthetics and affects of performer and audience, often with the expectation of breakage, or slippage or error. Within this relationship there is excitement and unclear expectations. (figure 4)

Shostakovich

Contemporary minimalist Choreographer Yvonne Rainer says that ‘Dance is hard to see’.¹¹ In my paintings I am interested in a pictorial instability – something which is uneasy, fleeting, coy and knowing. Painterly abstraction is a mode of that language, as it generates symbols and fragments of action within a structure. Gesture or action is the fragmented, unsolvable language set inside the system of the painted rectangle. My work is also responding to the painterly theory of ‘Push,Pull’, invented by early Abstract Expressionist Hans Hoffman in which he defines this strategy as a pictorial expansion and the energy created by contracting forces. Through Hegel’s dialectical analysis of contrast. One can create picture planes that react automatically in the opposite direction to the stimulus received; thus action continues as long as it receives stimulus in the creative process. *Push* answers with *pull* and *pull* with *push*. Push, pull, contrast, and composition however creates something *new*,¹² Nietzsche calls the excitement in the unsolvable “the delight in the X” – the unending possibility of a future arrival to come.¹³ There is also Jacques Lacan’s *objet petit a*, the forever hidden object of desire. *Objet petit a* sets the feeling of desire in motion. This feeling of desire is also known as *drive*. Drive however is different from instinct, as drive does not consider biological need. Rather, drive is content circling around the

¹¹ Lambert-Beatty, Carrie. *Being Watched: Yvonne Rainer and the 1960s*. MIT Press/October Books, 2008.

¹² Hans Hofmann, *Search for the Real and Other Essays*, 1948.

¹³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 1882.

object of desire in perpetuity. Drive is not about full satisfaction, rather it is about returning to a circular path, acknowledging the enjoyment of repetitive movement and action within a closed circuit or network.¹⁴ There is visual representation of this circulation within the work, as lines are either flowing from one side to the other or in swoops. The use of circles and negative space is important in generating a rotational and evolving sensation.

Contemporary painting, and my painting, is an evolving endeavor that escapes specificity. It is important for me to investigate how a painting functions in its completed form, how many simultaneous conversations it has across time. Painting is esoteric and academic, but still functions with potency in its simplicity. Painting is freedom within a closed state and network, and exists as a contract between painter and the painting to never reach an understanding. It is perpetual rehearsal, the circularity of the search for “a”, that which generates emotion and infinite potential energy.

¹⁴ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 1973.

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Fig1.
The Recital, 78,72, oil, spray paint on canvas, 2025



Fig 2
The Recital, 78,72, oil, spray paint, vinyl on canvas, 2025



Fig 3

The Recital, 78,72, oil, spray paint, vinyl on canvas, 2025

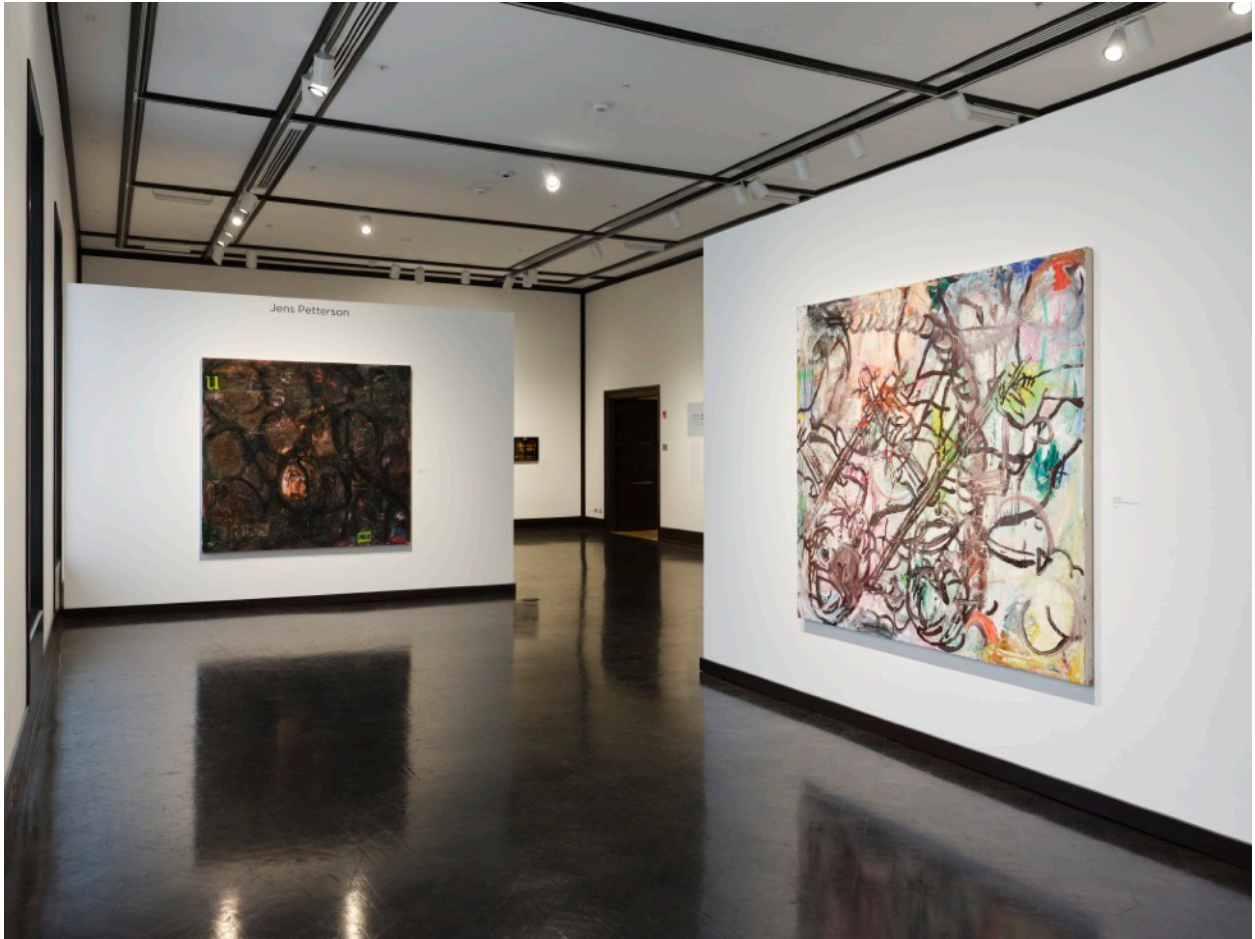


Fig 4

The Recital, 78,72, oil, spray paint, inkjet print on canvas, 2025



Install view



Install view