

MEMORY AND SPACE: AN ARTISTIC INQUIRY

by

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A THESIS

Presented to the Department of Printmaking
and the Robert D. Clark Honors College
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Fine Arts

June 2014

An Abstract of the Thesis of

Cole Goodwin for the degree of Bachelor of Fine Arts
in the Department of Printmaking to be taken June, 2014

Title: Memory and Space: An Artistic Inquiry

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Professor Charlene Liu

This thesis traces my body of work produced throughout my BFA year both conceptually and art historically. My work explores the artistic potential present in prefabricated construction materials and familiar architectural spaces as a means and source for the production of images and objects. The resultant artworks examine the dialogue between memory, space, material, and representation through the language of painting. By the superimposition of the pictorial onto the literal, the works examine cognitive and perceptual dissonance, as well as visual and intellectual pleasure.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Professors Liu, Lionni, and Howell for their assistance and guidance both artistically and intellectually. Their help has encouraged my curiosity and grown my understanding of art and its potential. I am thankful for their assistance through this arduous thesis process; without it, this document and the work that it concerns would be far less than it is. I am thankful for the privilege of having access to professors of their caliber and for their generosity. I would also like to thank my grandmother, Carol Foster, for her constant support and encouragement, which proved integral to my health, confidence, and the completion of my degree.

Contents

Introduction	1
Fall and Winter Terms' Work	5
Terminal Show	21
Bibliography	28

Introduction

The manner in which space becomes memory, memory becomes image, and image becomes object, and all of the other permutations of such, forms the core of my artistic inquiry. My work draws on an individual's experience of common architectural spaces, and the conformity of materials and forms, that have been filtered through regulation and mass production. I restrict my visual palette to prefabricated construction materials present in familiar architectural spaces, such as suburban homes, churches, schools, and office buildings. With these materials, I employ perspectival and trompe-l'œil effects that challenge the uniformity and flatness of my chosen materials with the language of painting. At the same time, the use of these familiar construction materials engages with my own biography and memory, which have been shaped by the ubiquitous spaces of my suburban background. This connection to my biography acts primarily as an initial source, which allows a connection to the collective experience of the viewer.

My creative practice is not tied to any particular medium. Instead, I believe that media (painting, printmaking, sculpture, etc.) exist primarily as ideas with histories and connotations that can be applied at will to complicate and enhance the reading of my work. I use the various attributes and histories of diverse media as tools that challenge and explore traditional notions of image making. Painting holds a central position in my recent work; I use my chosen materials as surrogate for literal paint. By constructing images from materials rooted outside of pictorial representation, I layer the pictorial onto the literal. This superimposition disorients the viewer and incites inquiry.

My work plays with the inherent visual characteristics and literal identities of the materials through the visual language of painting to occupy a midpoint between two modes of expression: the literal and the abstract.

My work leans heavily on efficiency. I draw on the pared down aesthetics of Minimalism and a strict limitation of arbitrary decisions. I seek to limit superfluous marks and cumbersome connotations that work against the completion of an ideal whole, one that strikes a balance between the perceptual and the conceptual. The removal of visual and cognitive clutter isolates the materials and amplifies the feedback loop that exists between the pictorial composition and its physical elements. This allows my work to function as an armature for an array of experience, namely, visual pleasure, humor, introspection, and dissonance.

Sol Lewitt's "Sentences on Conceptual Art" has proven to be foundational in my artistic paradigm and practice. He likens conceptual artists to "mystics" rather than "rationalists" (Lewitt, 849). Illogic and irrationality are inherently intertwined with logic and rationality. Although irrationality and illogic allow one to "leap to conclusions that logic cannot reach" (Lewitt, 849), logic is still required. They are two sides of the same coin, and each allows the full realization of the potential of the other. "Irrational thoughts should be followed absolutely and logically" (Lewitt, 849). This statement intrigues me for two reasons. First, it allows art to reach its natural conclusion. The initial artistic gesture is, to one degree or another, inherently irrational having little or no practical, physical purpose. The only way to truly find the resolution of a piece is to follow its innate logic, however illogical it may be. The other reason stems from my own obsessive nature, which spans from my artistic practice to the mundane everyday.

In my practice, I am drawn to clean aesthetics with simple, controllable elements. I plan my work extensively and execute a given piece once its composition and materials have been determined. The vast majority of the thinking and conceptual work is front-loaded in the process of planning. I fuss over the painting to guarantee that lines are as clean as possible and that flats of color are uninterrupted.

Minimalism is the biggest influence on my artistic practice. The pared down aesthetic emphasizes the relationships within the work, specifically those between the material, form, and space. In the absence of nonessential elements, each remaining gesture carries tremendous weight, and each component becomes purposeful. In my practice, I approach Minimalism pragmatically by acknowledging the practical limitations of authorship and by referencing my own biography. “That the artists associated with minimalism were mostly spared extensive biographical inquiries is unsurprising, not only because of the intently impersonal aspects of their practices but also because the period of their work’s ascendancy overlapped with the broaching of certain critical paradigms entailing the diminishment or outright erasure of considerations of artistic subjectivity” (Chave, 149). Many of the minimalists’ claims about extreme, if not total, detachment from their work went unchallenged. As impersonal and distant as Minimalism can be, a total separation from one’s work is impossible. Carl Andre’s use of bricks, while falling into the realm of mass-produced, industrial materials, also allows a small kernel of insight into his character. He was “the overall-clad grandson of a humble but proud Swedish bricklayer and son of a marine draftsman and housewife-poetess, who grew up by the shipbuilding yards and the

granite quarries of historic, blue-collar Quincy, Massachusetts, and took further vital aesthetic sustenance from a stint in the early 1960s working on the railroads” (Chave, 157). His material choices proved to be closely tied to his experiences. “The sculptor further characterized bricks as ‘Almost a personal emblem, or a psychological emblem, that relates to earliest experiences.’ In short, if Minimalism is more emphatically depersonalized than any prior visual art idiom, Minimalism and biography, nevertheless, are not such utterly incommensurable terms as they at first appear” (Chave, 149).

Personal history—such as the culture, geographical location, and socioeconomic station of one’s upbringing—finds its way into an individual’s artistic practice to one degree or another. Biases and taste shape decisions, no matter how closed off the resultant art may seem. I aim to embrace this, as Chave discussed in her essay by “using autobiography as a ‘found object’” (Chave, 157). I aim to recognize the influence that my biography has on my own work and to use it as a guide through the architectural spaces from my experience. Nicolas Bourriaud described the relationship between the artist and the world thusly:

Today’s artists do not so much express the tradition from which they come as the path they take between that tradition and the various contexts they traverse, and they do this by performing acts of translation. Where modernism proceeded by subtraction in an effort to unearth the root, or principle, contemporary artists proceed by selection, addition, and then acts of multiplication. They do not seek an ideal state of the self or society. Instead, they organize signs in order to multiply one identity by another. (Bourriaud, 51–52)

I have made an effort to engage with my own biography in a critical manner in the hopes that I can craft the connections between my identity, my materials, and all the signs and influences that I have picked up along the way.

Fall and Winter Terms' Work

The body of work from fall term marked my first use of construction materials and consisted of a collection of shaped wall paintings. The group comprises a series of small corner doorjambs in three different colors, a vertical piece that depicts two doorjambs next to each other, and a horizontal piece that depicts a baseboard. These moments all occur at points of transition within domestic spaces, from one room to another in the case of the doorjambs, and from the wall to the floor in the case of the baseboard. The trim serves two purposes: to embellish these transitional spaces and to hide the seams of construction. The primary concept is to instigate a dialogue with the tradition of shaped paintings, specifically inspired by Imi Knoebel's *24 Colors—for Blinky*. Knoebel's *24 Colors* consists of 24 moderately sized monochrome, shaped paintings. I admire these paintings both for the simplicity of their concept and the beauty of their execution. The shapes vary in complexity, but the colors are rich, vibrant, and evenly applied.

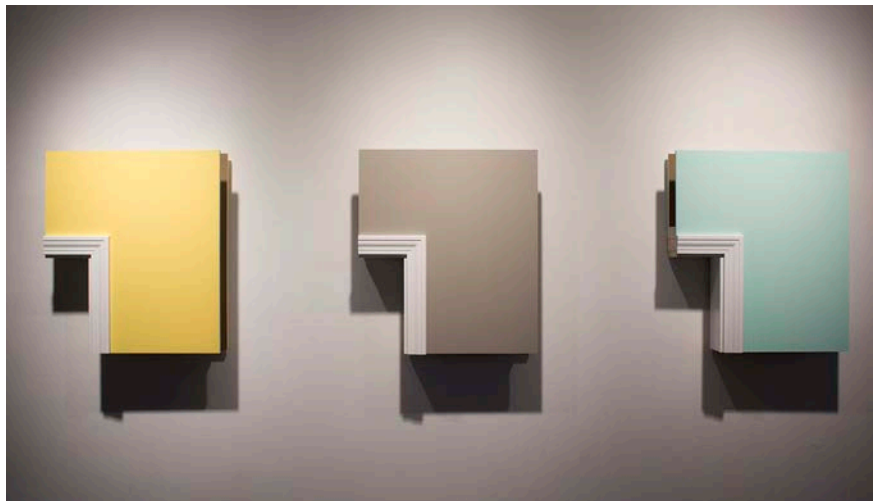


Figure 1: Untitled (Corner Jambs)



Figure 2: Untitled (Two Jambs)

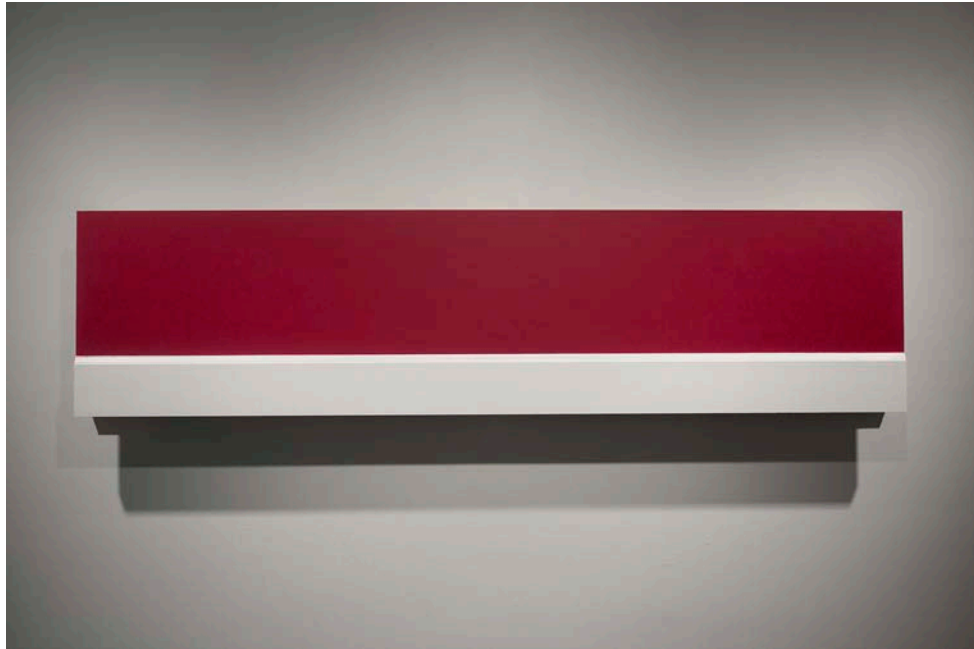


Figure 3: Untitled (Baseboard)

Ultimately, the work came to be about the interaction of surfaces. The paintings are to scale and (albeit with details altered) largely conform to building code. The surfaces wrap around the edges of the pieces and continue into their interiors. This is where the paintings happen visually—at the various moments of transition. The matte color paint of the front meets the semigloss white of the trim and the raw primer along the edges, which does its best to become chalky, exposed sheetrock, which in turn meets the matte brown ink standing in for the paper backing of drywall. The backs of the pieces are painted in the same manner as the fronts, and in between is a framework of 2-by-4-inch studs arranged roughly to code for a nonload bearing interior wall. At this point, I realized my materials were demanding more than a simple nod to Knoebel’s work and needed to be handled in a more nuanced manner for their potential to be fully realized.

On a fundamental level, I agree with Donald Judd's assertion, "A work needs only to be interesting" (Judd, 184). As with most things, though, "interesting" is a spectrum rather than a simple yes/no dichotomy. Interestingness is not a passive trait; grammatically, something can "be interesting." But this understates the matter. In Walter Benjamin's essay "Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," he stated: "Art demands concentration from the spectator" (Benjamin). Although there were moments of visual interest in these wall paintings, they were not visually compelling enough. What the paintings depict and what they are made of is simply a one-to-one relationship that closes off other possibilities. This leaves a static relationship between the paintings and their materials.

Byron Kim's paintings and artistic practice shed some light on what exactly I was after in my own work. Kim's work exists at the intersection of a number of different artistic modes. His "paintings can be seen as a depiction of reality, but also as abstractions and conceptual art," (Menéndez-Conde). Kim's repetitive action of painting the night sky at regular intervals engages a perceptual and conceptual experience of the work. The paintings become both a series of simple abstract paintings and a complex examination of light, color, repetition, and time that unfolds across the work. This layering allows for a more fulfilling experience of the work. Kim's general approach to painting has informed my own approach to art.

For me, feeling often lags far behind perceiving or of thinking. I make an artwork which is based in perception or memory, and often it is after I have finished the work and I am examining the finished work (sometimes through the eyes or the sentiment of another viewer), [that] I realize that I felt something, that feeling must have been involved. There is often this sense of belatedness, which, further, engenders something

like a sense of loss, an additional feeling in retrospect. (Menéndez-Conde)

My artistic process always begins with a flash of interest in a visual element or an idea, such as the interaction between materials and the manner in which they create and delineate spaces. Through rigorous examination, I attempt to determine the manner in which my idea ought to be manifested and much of the meaning or “feeling” becomes known as the process matures. The significance of the work is often embedded in the layers of perceptual and intellectual experience and pleasure.

After the wall paintings, I continued to push toward the fringes of painting in order to find and explore this in-between or neither-nor place between the physical and the intellectual. Robert Musil once stated, “If some painting is still to come, if painters are still to come, they will not come from where we expect them” (Birnbaum, 157). I am looking for new or less trodden approaches to painting and art making in general, where the landscape might be a little more fertile. Painting, in the contemporary context, is a particularly flexible thing and, for my purposes, is a perfectly adequate vehicle for exploration. As Howard Halle put it in his essay “Photo-unrealism,” in his effort to make a case for the painterly nature of Andreas Gursky’s work, “‘Painting’ is a philosophical enterprise that doesn’t always involve paint. Above all, it’s a way of organizing the world that represents neither truth nor fiction exclusively but rather a little of both. Whether an artist uses a brush or a camera to accomplish that goal scarcely matters” (Halle, 132–133).

This is particularly poignant within my practice, as some of my paintings include no actual paint. Painting allows contradictory elements to exist on an equal footing, even on the level of a superposition, occupying the same visual and intellectual

space. Halle went on to suggest a new definition of painting that would open up the discourse to be more inclusive and productive: “If it hangs on a wall and compels you to take a look, it’s painting. And if it transports you to a new realm emotionally, spiritually, intellectually, whatever—all the better” (Halle, 133). I find this attitude invigorating because the more that I have embraced nontraditional or found materials, the more my materials begin to open new avenues for exploration. As Lane Relyea put it in her essay “Virtually Formal,” “What matters most is how developing technologies jolt and loosen painterly attitudes toward colour and form, as well as the very space of painting itself—the space it physically shares with its viewer as well as the space it pictures, the space of both its body and message” (Relyea, 129). Although her essay is primarily concerned with the emergence of digital technology (namely computers), I would argue that this same statement holds true when one considers the tremendous advancements in virtually all modes of production. With this in mind, I approach new materials hoping to challenge and surprise myself with the possibilities allowed by flexible thinking.

I use architectural materials as a point of access for my work. The material language of American domestic spaces has been working its way toward a common vernacular since the Great Depression, when the whole of the economy (including the housing market) ground to a halt. In an effort to right the ship, the United States government passed the “National Housing Act of 1934, [which] in addition to establishing a public-housing program, set up the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) to stimulate the moderate-cost private-housing market” (Wright, 240). The implementation of regulation marked a major turning point in American housing. In its

attempts to ensure the return of their investments, the FHA “tried to control design and construction of suburban homes in an effort to achieve ‘neighborhood stability’” (Wright, 247). In these attempts to control and shape the market, “FHA evaluators were instructed to lower the rating score of houses with conspicuously modern designs because they were not considered a sound investment. . . . Even noted architects like Frank Lloyd Wright had their work rejected because of a low rating in the ‘adjustment for conformity’ category” (Wright, 252). Regulatory bodies established a trend toward safe, inoffensive home design. This one-size-fits-all approach to suburban housing (specifically for the middle class) emphasized sensibility, which in turn led toward a general homogenization of housing, its appearances, and materials.

All objects and materials are filtered through practicality. Donald Judd wrote about this in relation to Claes Oldenburg’s work: “All of Oldenburg’s grossly anthropomorphized objects are manmade—which right away is an empirical matter. Someone or many made these things and incorporated their preferences. As practical as an ice-cream cone is, a lot of people made a choice, and more agreed, as to its appearance and existence” (Judd). Like the practical and tasty ice cream cone, housing materials have been filtered through preference and practicality, largely dwindling down to a handful of variations of the same basic thing.

My next two paintings illuminate what has become central to my artistic practice, namely a nuanced relationship between my paintings and their materials in which my materials act literally as themselves and become pictorial space. Rather than continue with walls, I shifted my focus to flooring materials as a source for the work. The resultant paintings are carpet, vinyl, and aluminum carpet bars composed and

mounted on ¼-inch plywood. Vinyl flooring is printed in repeating patterns that are meant to mimic traditional flooring materials, such as wood, marble, and tile. Vinyl flooring is in its very nature inauthentic; it is pretending to be something that it is not. As Walter Benjamin put it, “To ask for the ‘authentic’ print makes no sense,” (Benjamin). These are mechanically reproduced materials and, in the case of the vinyl, mechanically printed as well. The vinyl is illusionistic; it is meant to create the illusion of another material. Its identity is inherently that of an imposter. Even though some brands are more convincing than others are, vinyl fails to fool our senses for long; it may look like wood and mimic the texture of wood but falls short of the genuine article. The existence of these materials serves two purposes: to decorate and to cover the raw subfloor.

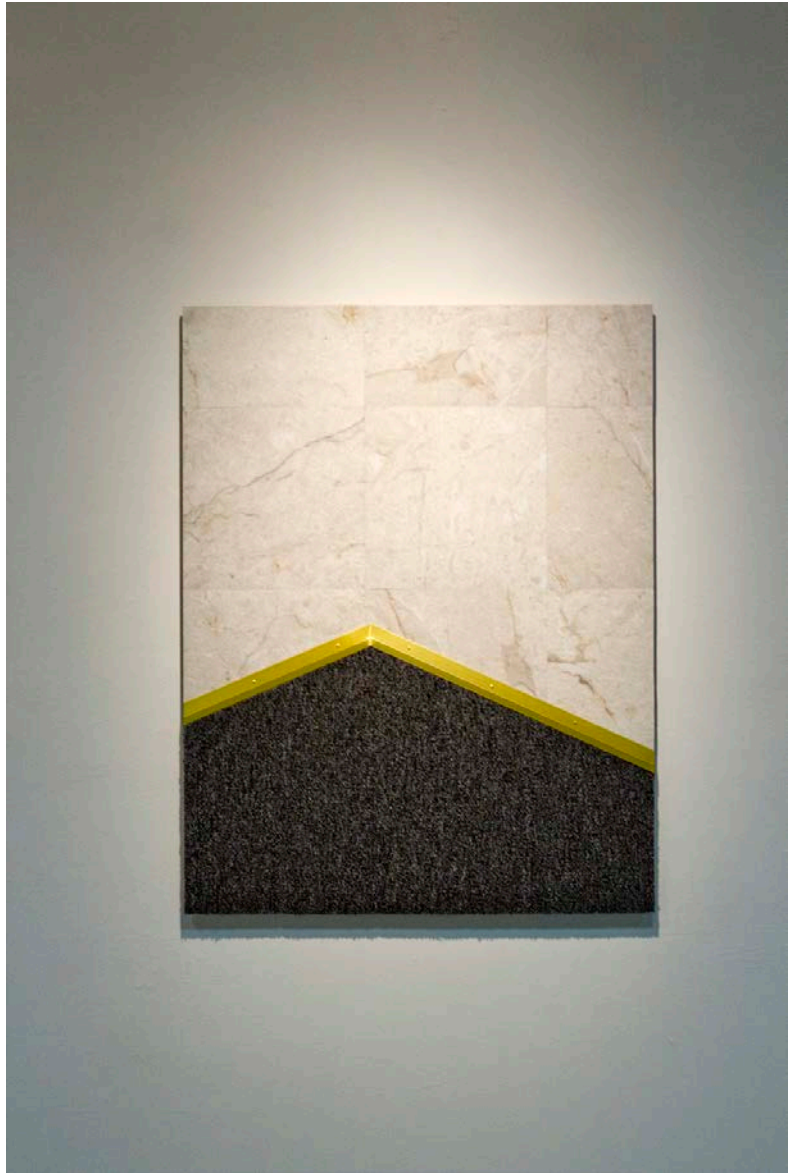


Figure 4: Untitled (Floor 1)



Figure 5: Untitled (Floor 2)

There is a peculiar intimacy to domestic materials. These materials have surrounded us our entire lives. We know them, know how they feel, know how they smell. We know them intellectually (we can perceive them), and we know them through our memory and interaction with them. Donald Judd wrote about materials and their specificity in his essay “Specific Objects.” His conclusion was “materials vary greatly and are simply materials—Formica, aluminum, cold-rolled steel, Plexiglas, red and

common brass, and so forth. They are specific. If they are used directly, they are more specific. Also, they are usually aggressive. There is an objectivity to the obdurate identity of a material” (Judd). Even though Judd wrote these statements 50 years ago, they still hold a great deal of weight within my practice. The idea that identity could be aggressive is integral to the function of my work. These materials are aggressively themselves. They are not anything else.

The materials in my floor paintings are both unassuming and aggressive. They are common, even cheap, materials, but they are so firmly entrenched in the experience of interior space that there is no ambiguity as to their true identity. They are products of filtration through regulation and preference. They are mechanically reproduced, are often a mimicry of natural materials, but they are not thought of as being tied strongly to painterly traditions or the creation of pictorial space. In these floor paintings, I use the materials as malleable paint to fully express their complex nature by engaging and pushing their literal and pictorial potential. The elements are composed so that they exist as themselves (flooring), which, given their specificity, is a relatively simple task.

Illusionism complicates the paintings and challenges the viewer’s experience of flooring. For example, the carpet bars form angles that are not 90 degrees. These irregular angles cause a break with the known tendencies of the materials and allow them to act as pictorial elements. The dark gray carpet folds into a perspectival corner of a room against the imitation stone tile, or perhaps the carpet becomes a roof set against a gray sky. The painting with the blue carpet behaves in a similar manner as the blue carpet recedes into endless space against the wood-printed vinyl. The pieces

engage with their supports in much the same way that these flooring materials behave in their natural environments, with the imitation wood sitting on top of its genuine article.

In these prefabricated materials, all the colors and patterns are predetermined and chosen rather than mixed and made. As with all painting, the shapes and colors within the pieces are in constant dialogue with one another. “It’s possible that not much can be done with both an upright rectangular plane and an absence of space. Anything on a surface has space behind it. Two colors on the same surface almost always lie on different depths. An even color, especially in oil paint, covering all or much of a painting is almost always both flat and infinitely special” (Judd). Although my materials do not have the same established tradition as oil paint, prefabricated materials behave in much the same way with regards to illusionistic space. “Except for a complete and unvaried field of color or marks, anything spaced in a rectangle and on a plane suggests something in and on something else, something in its surround, which suggests an object or figure in its space, in which these are clearer instances of a similar world—that’s the main purpose of painting” (Judd). I sought to capitalize on these formal relationships fairly explicitly in my next two paintings.

I made the next two paintings, which are essentially white monochromes, out of drop ceiling tile, paint, and medium density fiberboard (MDF) on wood. The first of the two paintings is composed primarily of ceiling tiles that extend the width of the panel at the top and gradually taper as they near the bottom of the piece. This painting references perspective fairly directly and thus oscillates between the inherent flatness of the materials and the space constructed through the composition. The second of the paintings is a fair bit more abstract and has less to ground the viewer. With only one

edge of MDF (intended to represent wall) to anchor the piece, both elements jockey for position, pulling forward and falling back, becoming architectural, and infinite texture. The random pattern on the tile distinguishes the white of the tiles from that of the paint. It is part of what makes the tiles so recognizably themselves, but it is also what allows them to become other things. They become a negative of deep space—ceilings in schoolrooms, office hallways. The paintings are ready to exist visually and intellectually as a plurality.



Figure 6: Untitled (Ceiling)



Figure 7: Untitled (Ceiling 2)

I admire Minimalism, in part, for its unyielding nature; it has frankness to it, which is a quality I seek to emulate. Although not Minimalist, Andreas Gursky's work has influenced my artistic practice greatly, both in the manner that I think about painting as a medium and how I consider the tone and presence of my work. Gursky produces incredibly rich and very large photographic prints. "All of these prosaic images are rendered in the deadpan, conceptualist style that Gursky learned from his teachers, Bernd and Hilla Becher, although in his hands colour and scale conspire to

make the deadpan sumptuous” (Halle, 133). The impassive deadpan is an intriguing character and falls in line with how I perceive my own work, and how I hope its audience perceives it. Michael Fried described the nature of this phenomenon well in “Art and Objecthood.”

The presence of literalist art, which Greenberg was the first to analyze, is basically a theatrical effect or quality—a kind of *stage* presence. It is a function, not just of the obtrusiveness and, often, even aggressiveness of literalist work, but of the special complicity that that work extorts from the beholder. Something is said to have presence when it demands that the beholder take it into account, that he take it *seriously*—and when the fulfillment of that demand consists simply in being *aware* of it and, so to speak, in acting accordingly. (Fried, 839)

Gursky’s work behaves in a manner similar to what Fried described, and I believe that my work does too. The assertiveness of my materials and the manner in which they behave demands attention and contemplation; as such, the work is both open and closed.

Here again the experience of being distanced by the work in question seems crucial: the beholder knows himself to stand in an indeterminate, open-ended—and unexacting—relation as *subject* to the impassive object on the wall or floor. In fact, being distanced by such objects is not, I suggest, entirely unlike being distanced, or crowded, by the silent presence of another person; the experience of coming upon literalist objects unexpectedly—for example, in somewhat darkened rooms—can be strongly, if momentarily, disquieting in just this way. (Fried, 840)

The experience of this sort of work emphasizes awareness of one’s presence in relation to the work, the relation of the work to one’s identity, and the relation of the work to itself.

Through the floor and the ceiling paintings, I realized that the moment of rupture, when the materials exist both as literally what they are and the pictorial space

that they represent, holds a central position in the function of my work. Roland Barthes described this moment in relation to myth in “Myth Today.”

Myth is a *value*, truth is no guarantee for it; nothing prevents it from being a perpetual alibi: it is enough that its signifier has two sides for it always to have an “elsewhere” at its disposal. The meaning is always there to *present* the form: the form is always there to *outdistance* the meaning. And there never is any contradiction, conflict, or split between the meaning and the form: they are never in the same place. In the same way, if I am in a car and I look at the scenery through the window, I can at will focus on the scenery or on the window-pane. At one moment I grasp the presence of the glass and the distance of the landscape; at another, on the contrary, the transparence of the glass and the depth of the landscape; but the result of this alternation is constant: the glass is at once present and empty to me, and the landscape unreal and full. The same thing occurs in the mythical signifier: its form is empty but present, its meaning absent but full. (Barthes, 57)

Just as one can focus on either the glass of the window or the landscape beyond, one can observe my work at its surface (the material) or beyond (the abstract/pictorial). I hope to throw a funny wrinkle in this cycle of perception by using the materials to represent themselves, a sort of visual pun, which is perhaps most apparent in the ceiling paintings. The tiles are tile as material, but they fold into a pictorial space where they are tile as ceiling; they represent themselves literally and pictorially. This is a job facilitated by our knowledge and memory of the materials in question. Woven into this process are the connotations and the histories of the materials themselves.

Barthes in “Death of the Author” spoke to the questions of meaning quite eloquently. “We know that a text is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning (the ‘message’ of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture” (Barthes, 146). The intended experience of my work hinges on the disorientation that results from the superposition

of the visual and intellectual spaces presented in the paintings. As such, I am content to allow the connotations and “meanings” present in my work swirl about or perhaps even lie dormant.

Terminal Show

The first two paintings for the terminal show are two new ceiling paintings, both of which are larger than their predecessors. I opted to further pursue the ceiling over the floor for two reasons: for its aesthetic value (there is something pleasant about the white monochromes) and that they elegantly embodied the moment of rupture and the superposition of layers of existence.

The shift upward in scale serves more than one purpose as well. The first is that it brings the paintings closer to the scale of their own materials. Standard ceiling tiles are 2-by-4 inches. The larger space allows them to exist more naturally in the work. The second reason is that it boosts their impact—there is literally more of these paintings, and as scale made Gursky’s deadpan more sumptuous, scale amplifies the impact of my work. The horizontal painting uses the line of intersection between the white paint of the MDF and the tiles to allude to the juncture between wall and ceiling, which creates a pictorial space. The natural gridlines of the tiles conflict with the implied perspective of the line that connects the two substances, which continues the oscillation between illusion and the literality of the materials. The vertical ceiling painting functions in much the same way, with the two sections of white paint alluding to a hallway. Again, the grid of the tiles clashes against this possibility.

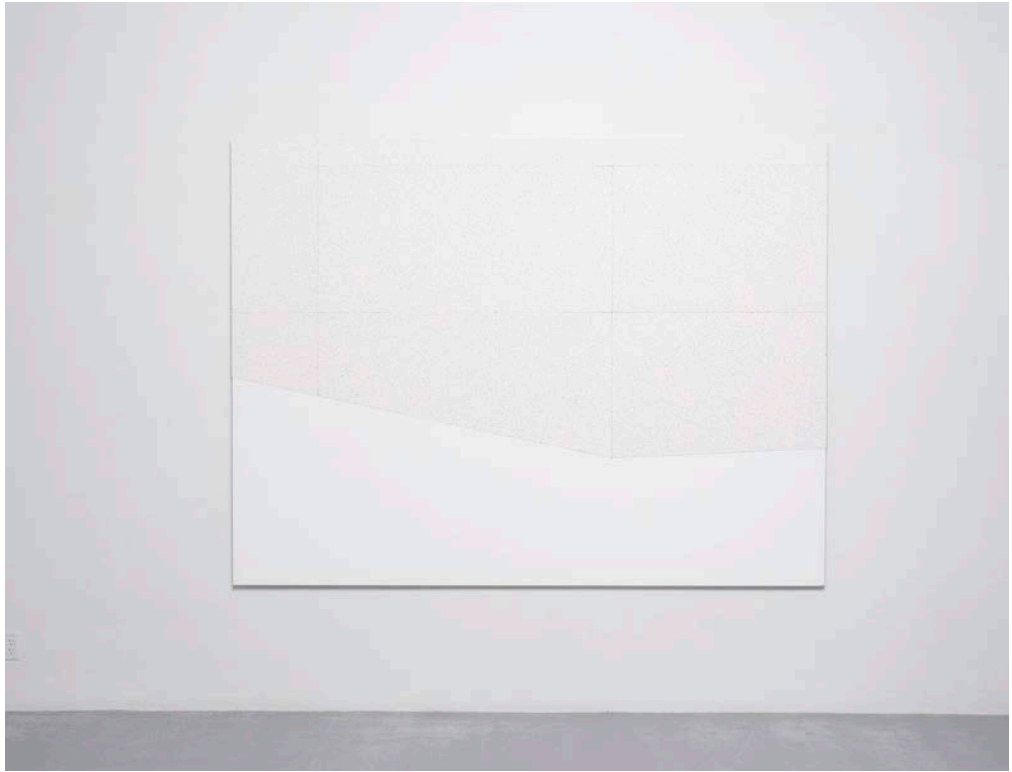


Figure 8: Untitled (Large Ceiling 1)

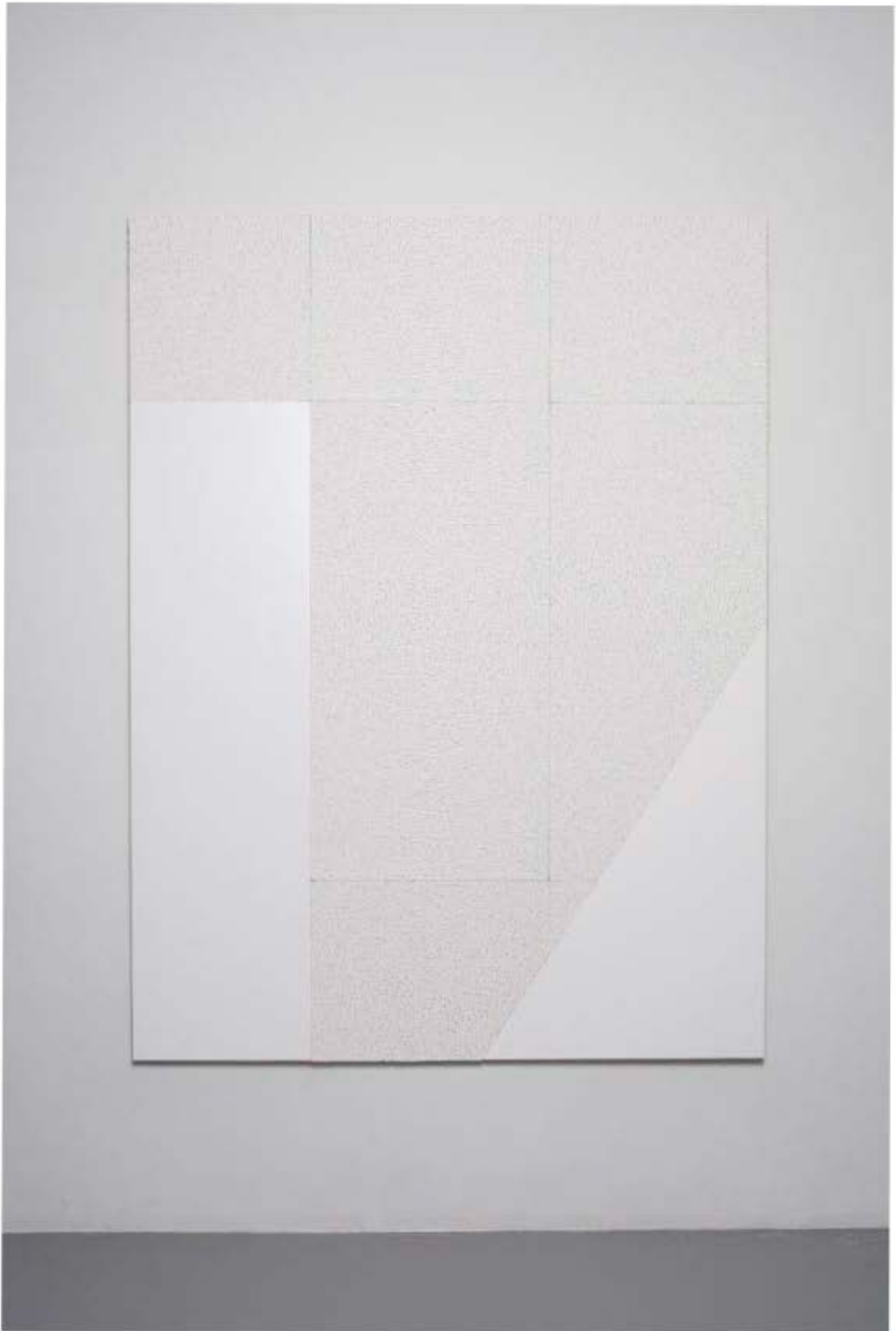


Figure 9: Untitled (Large Ceiling 2)

The crucifix/four windows piece attempts to further explore rupture using the material vocabulary of my initial wall paintings. It illustrates the intersection of four windows and the peculiar sliver of wall that exists between them and is thus a depiction of domestic space. The shape of the cross is undeniable as an icon, being so firmly embedded in the collective reference set of Western culture. The materials and proportions run counter to traditional notions of the cross, bringing it back around to its domestic identity. Both existences occur completely within the single object. Unlike the initial wall paintings that failed to reach a complex resolution, the crucifix/four windows succeeds though in its ability to exist as a plurality.



Figure 10: Untitled (Crucifix)

The final painting consists of only one material. It is a painting of clapboard siding in perspective, which uses literal siding to represent itself. All of the boards taper and point toward a vanishing point. The illusionistic depth of the painting conflicts with the known flatness of the picture plane. The knowledge of what is being portrayed and that of the materials used to depict it clash, creating a moment of dissonance between two things perceived to be known.

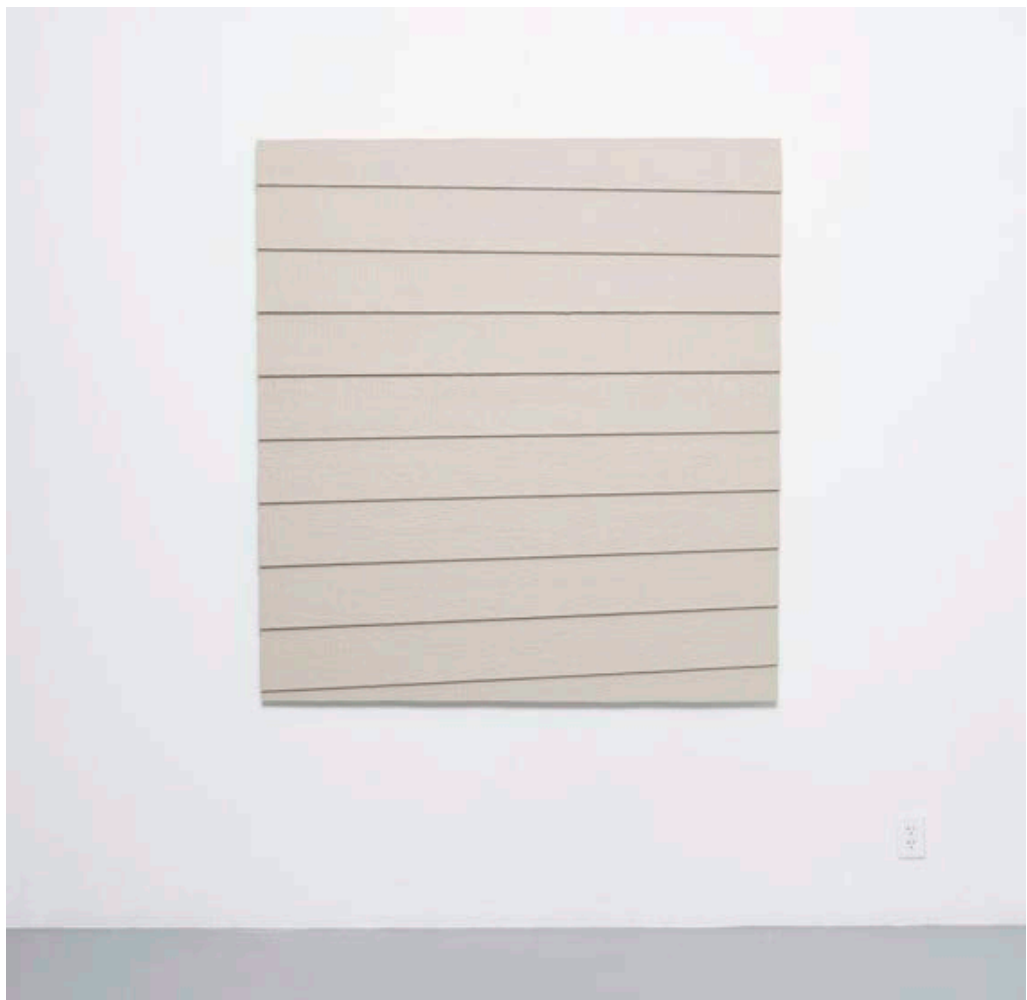


Figure 11: Untitled (Siding)

In this final body of work, my primary goal was to exemplify the multiplicity within my work. Jordan Kantor touched upon a theme that I find present in my work when he described the work of Luc Tuymans and Eberhard Haverkost. “These artists make everyday objects strange. Thereby raising fundamental questions about the nature of perception. Indeed, in a general way, they are both concerned with how particular formal devices can trigger broader thematic meanings, specifically with regard to the mediation of the image and of vision itself” (Kantor, 173). Ultimately, I seek not only a balance but also an active dialogue between the visual elements of my work and the concepts at play. The visual and the intellectual elements push and pull against one another, each calling the other into question as they settle into the same object. This is the point at which artworks become fully realized, having reached their natural conclusions.

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