

**WAYS OF SEEING: EXPLORING THE INTERSECTION OF  
REPRESENTATION AND ABSTRACTION IN A  
CONTEMPORARY OIL PAINTING PRACTICE**

By

Roxanne Rebecca McKee

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Primary Advisor: Jan Reaves, Career Instructor

This portfolio thesis seeks to better understand the relationship between abstraction and representation in oil painting. To do so I researched past schools of thought that continue to hold influence, beginning with Greenberg's views on modernism. I also considered select contemporary artists who contend with both aesthetics in their work. Most significantly, I created a collection of oil paintings to explore my research questions and resolve the rift in how I used abstraction and representation in my own work. As art critic Terry Myers discusses, today's artistic climate embraces coalition, which is what I aimed to foster in my own artistic practice through this undertaking. This thesis contributes insight on the creative process as well as a new collection of oil paintings that furthers my personal growth as an artist and addresses a topical question in the field of contemporary painting.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Representation and abstraction constitute two fundamental approaches to making art.

Representation, at a literal level, means to present for a second time; a painting that describes some recognizable aspect of the visual world would be representational.

Whether highly realistic or a stick figure, a representational drawing seeks to portray something visible. Abstraction, on the other hand, is not interested in the depiction of the real world. Priorities of aesthetics and expression in most cases distinguish abstraction from representation. Some abstract works draw from concrete source material, altering or obscuring it to varying extents, sometimes beyond recognition. Other works might be called more “extremely” or “purely” abstract, with no representational or real-world source.

For years, prior to undertaking this project, I painted under the assumption that representation and abstraction were diametrically opposed. My work consisted of either faithful representations or pieces that were entirely abstract in origin, and my portfolio was shaping into a conflict of still lifes and portraits against concentric circles, splotches of color, and haptic swirls of paint. Eventually, I grew concerned by the lack of cohesion and continuity in my body of work. These disparate paintings reflected my perception of these modes as existing on opposite ends of a spectrum. My paintings aligned themselves unbendingly with an abstract or representational aesthetic, and had little to do with one another. This meant that my work was not able to happen

organically – my diametric understanding was forcing my hand, to an extent, and ultimately each piece wasn't growing out of what came before. I was stymied.

An emphasis on reductivism dominated modernism roughly from the 40's through the 70's. The history of painting was treated as a trajectory or a narrative progressing from representational to abstract. In retrospect, I feel this belief was enforced in my early (pre-university) art education. Typically in a high school art class, one begins working representationally, painting the visible world as it is – striving to imitate shape, light, color, perspective – with the goal of “graduating” to working in the elite conceptual realm of abstraction.

Eventually I came to realize that ideas of intellectual and aesthetic stratification no longer seem to be the dominant school of thought. Painters and critics today exhibit and discuss extensive coalescence of styles and techniques. Tempting as it is to organize abstract and representational art and practices as opposites on a spectrum, I am no longer convinced this is accurate. Now that I've completed my collection of paintings, calling abstraction and representation opposites just seems too simple. Certainly, the priorities of representational art are different from abstraction, but to an extent, “all art consists largely of elements that can be called abstract—elements of form, color, line, tone, and texture” (Encyclopedia Britannica). At the very least the relationship is more complex than a binary division between abstract and representational. The two exist in a continuum; neighboring, overlapping, and not always distinctly separate from one another.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### THE TEXTS

Clement Greenberg was a prolific art critic, highly influential during the 40's through the 70's. Greenberg "helped redefine the parameters of modernism by advocating the rejection of illusionism\* and the exploration of the properties of each artistic medium" (Kleiner 784). Greenberg's core tenets were purity of form and medium. In painting this meant abandoning the idea of painting as a window onto the world, and embracing the inherent flatness of the painted surface. So, rather than trying to create the illusion of realistic depth, the artist should, according to Greenberg, champion the flatness of the picture plane. Because painting is inherently flat, and this quality is unique to painting, painting must adopt a flat appearance to justify its continued existence. As contemporary critic Terry Myers points out, the narrative of painting has been tied to its perpetual death in the face of a succession of new visual forms – photography, installation, digital media, and plain lack of interest ("Painting's Unfinished Business") – for over a century.

Greenberg recognized that painting was no longer a cultural focal point in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. In considering the place of art in a larger cultural context, Greenberg vocalized the need for it to justify its continued existence in order to survive. He believed that art, to preserve itself from obsolescence, should "narrow its area of competence" ("Modernist Painting" 193). What this meant for painting was that it got flatter and

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\* Illusionism emerged with the Renaissance discovery of mathematical perspective. It involves creating depth in the picture plane and rendering the subject matter with as much realism as possible, as though the viewer is looking through a window.



more abstract, because, if nothing else, paintings were competent in their flatness.

Priorities shifted away from transforming the picture plane into a believable depiction of realistic space. In Greenberg's own words, from "Sculpture in Our Time":

Art must try, in principle, to avoid communication with any order of experience not inherent in the most literally and essentially construed nature of its medium. Among other things, this means renouncing illusion and explicit subject matter. The arts are to achieve concreteness, "purity," by dealing solely with their respective selves – that is by becoming "abstract" or nonfigurative." (22)

If the "purity" of Greenberg's modernism didn't summon a dichotomy between representation and abstraction, it certainly deepened it. Abstraction in and of itself may not have been the goal, as flat does not necessarily mean abstract. Depth is a key element of illusionism, but not necessarily of representation. Similarly, abstract art can, in fact, have depth. But flatness ended up playing an important role in painting delineating its territory in accordance with Greenberg's vision. "Flatness alone was unique to [painting]..." Greenberg writes in "Modernist Painting," "flatness, two-dimensionality, was the only condition painting shared with no other art, and so modernist painting oriented itself to flatness and it did to nothing else" (195).

Greenberg's doctrine was neither absolute nor uncontested, and eventually his chokehold on the world of painting loosened. Pop art and minimalism broke with history, challenging modernist formalism, and by the 80's diverse formalist movements reacting to past ideologies gathered under the umbrella of post-modernism (Kleiner 987). Representation returned to the stage as abstract painting faced rejection for its ties to modernist philosophies. Post-modernism began to establish its position in the 80's, yet, like with abstraction and representation, there is no clear division between the two –

they bleed together. Once abstraction broke from the bonds of modernist purity it reappeared, opened to more diverse application and a more fluid relationship with representation.

Greenberg's fingerprints can still be found all over the art world. Critics continue to discuss him, artists continue to respond to his ideas; he has proven to be one of the characteristic voices of a major artistic movement. Contemporary critic Terry Myers, in his book, *Painting*, and in the lecture he gave in January at the University of Oregon, describes painting's emergence from the "purity" of modernism into today's state of composites, mixtures, and complexities. Myers argues that painting continues because of its contradictory nature – so it's no surprise that by the 1980's artists and critics began to vocalize dissent against the death of painting and significantly depart from purist modernism (*Painting* 13-14).

Post-modernism embraced diverse formalist movements, eclecticism, and dissolution of boundaries (Kleiner 763). In many ways these characteristics have, I think, expanded to characterize today's artistic climate. Artists seem to have dispensed with the confines of modernism – of having to justify themselves and their practices. Myers describes the current heterogeneous climate, far removed from Greenberg's purity, in which the "either-or ness [of a painting] is less clear" ("Painting's Unfinished Business"); categorization becomes less straightforward and ultimately less important. He calls this effect 'coalition,' and posits that "painting, since the late 1970s version of its 'end', has not only survived but also thrived because of its embrace of the coalitional" (*Painting*

18). From Myers' point of view, it is precisely the opposite of Greenberg's prescribed specialization and single-mindedness that keeps painting alive and relevant in today's world.

Myers writes, "painting seems pretty together these days when it comes to its ability to accommodate multiple modes simultaneously" (18). Contemporary painting reflects a culture of connections, synthesis, and pluralism. New media opens up an expanded field of painting, fostering "the necessary paradoxical state of contemporary painting, alongside the expansion of its material and philosophical conditions" (19). Many boundaries of experience and expression are being questioned and dissolved, including abstraction and representation. It would appear that the separation of these forms and the hierarchical drive toward abstraction has ended.

"The opposition between abstraction and figurative representation... has been dramatically recast in recent painting... as aspects and approaches of one so-called category are increasingly put to use in the other" (16). This sentiment from Myers encapsulates a major breakthrough in my research process as well as a personal artistic realization. The conceptual and practical changes currently taking place in the field of painting align with the aims I had for my project. Myers describes the kind of coalition I tried to foster in my own work by processing these ideas through my painting practice.

## THE ARTISTS

### Mary Heilmann

Much of Mary Heilmann's work seems highly abstract – sometimes inaccessibly so, in that it doesn't easily connect to representational, real-world, or associative counterpoints, and can therefore be difficult to interpret. Terry Myers describes her work as “deceptively simple” (*Save the Last Dance*). Although Heilmann's paintings convey a strong abstract aesthetic, she does seem to at least occasionally work from representational source material. Pop culture references frequently crop up in her work – usually in the titles. The book *Mary Heilmann: To Be Someone* offered a few supplementary reference photos, which made it possible to trace a lineage from representation to abstraction that is not inherently present in the painting. Supplying a representational point of reference also made it possible to see her interpretation of the image. One gets a sense of her process of selection – choosing what to carry over from the photograph. This approach of editing the representational has become an important part of my own method of painting and development of my aesthetic sensibility.

Heilmann sometimes employs a cancellation process that bridges the source material and the final painting. In works like *Lola* (1996), it looks like she creates her painting, and then adds a flat layer over the top, partially concealing the picture underneath. *Lola* gives the viewer glimpses into a blue-green atmospheric plane populated with bright whorls of color, all concealed behind a thick lattice grid of flat white. Johanna Burton describes how the whorls “flit between the boxes, as if on the run, so their nebulous pigment bodies are caught as part-objects. Here a rounded corner, there a moonlike

sliver; a ruby red blob revels in its infidelity, two-timing a pair of squares” (Armstrong 59). A cancellation process, like Heilmann’s white grid, interests me as a means of negotiating representation and abstraction. I like the idea of presenting a full set of visual information on the canvas, then selecting and obscuring various portions of the composition.

The painting-photograph pairings in *To Be Someone* are taken from a slide show called *Her Life* created by Heilmann herself. One pair consisted of the painting *The Thief of Baghdad* (1983) and a photo of rows of colorful cars viewed from above (Armstrong 49). *The Thief* on its own communicates nothing of thieves or cars – it consists of an irregular black checkerboard alternating with squares of bright primary and secondary colors. With the coupling, however, ““pure” abstraction unabashedly tips its hat toward “straight” representation and vice versa” (50). *Heaven* (2004) hints at celestial affiliations. Its aqua surface fades and deepens and meets areas of white scribbles. An unidentifiable pink squiggle emerges from a cloudy space. The painting is placed beside two photographs of cloudy atmospheres high above landscapes (71). One was clearly taken from a plane. *Heaven* possesses the same hazy optics of accumulated atmosphere. Importantly, these combinations don’t reduce the paintings and photos to sameness. Instead they expand the paintings’ syncretism and possibilities of association (50). Heilmann’s paintings have complex, flexible relationships with real experiences and images, beyond direct equivalence.

Amy Sillman

I deeply admire the collusion of abstract and representational elements that occurs in Amy Sillman's paintings. She appears to transform and restructure the terms of abstraction beyond modernist purity, often arriving at an abstract resolution through recognizable paths. Identifiable glimmers of figurative elements emerge and are "submerged in a field of gestural vectors" (Joselit 222). *Cliff I* gives the immediate impression of a largely abstract composition. Layers of different painterly marks accrue unevenly across the painting, but as the eye moves around in the composition, slivers of a scene emerge. A bird can be identified, perched amongst flowers and foliage atop a cliff. Beyond the cliff's edge, a cacophony of orange, red, pink, blue and gray marks collide and compete for positions in space, returning the viewer to abstraction.

Sillman's paintings give a sense of dreamlike simultaneity. Parallel worlds seem to collide and collapse into one another. Pieces of the visual realm pass between worlds and materialize as Sillman deftly navigates the languages of abstraction and representation. She is able to combine these recognizable glimmers and abstract marks smoothly, so her paintings don't express a pastiche or collage-like effect. Instead of juxtaposing different modes of working, the elements of the painting just pool together beautifully.

In *Psychology Today* (2007) the blue outline of a three-legged figure emerges from behind a blocky mass. That mass, in turn, could be a sidelong approach to rendering a head, but perhaps not. It doesn't seem important to give it a definite denotation. In *Get*

*the Moon* (2006) a stylized arm thrusts out of the abstract fence-like aggregation on the right half of the painting, its clumsy fingers grasp at a coal-black lump. In Sillman's paintings, "figuration is partially digested... a fragment obtrudes here and there, just to remind us of the enormity of those procedures of abstraction" (Joselit 222). Sillman's effortless combinations of abstract and representational elements in a unified composition influenced my own work greatly. In the past, I found it difficult to fuse the two in a way that looks natural and balanced, but Sillman's paintings provided elegant examples of how this hurdle might be overcome.

#### Neo Rauch

Terry Myers hails the work of Neo Rauch as the way forward. Myers uses Rauch to illustrate contemporary painting embracing the coalitional: "Neo Rauch's paintings emerge as markers of 'coalition' in the midst of the current 'post-reunification' of painting itself" (*Painting* 18). His work contains a more representational approach to negotiating multiple registers of space and experience within a painting. Various human characters populate his paintings in largely illusionistic spaces. Real-world architecture, objects, and scenery are rendered naturalistically, but Rauch does allow himself room to incorporate abstract embellishments.

Unlike Sillman's work, Rauch's features strong collage-like characteristics. His paintings are filled with miscellany that clearly doesn't belong together. Further complexity is cultivated through Rauch's deviation from composing logical scenes. "Architectural elements peter out; men in uniform from throughout history intimidate

men and women from other centuries; great struggles occur but their reason is never apparent; styles change at a whim” (Mullins 140). Despite featuring far more representational elements than Heilmann’s work, Rauch’s can be just difficult to interpret.

### Dana Schutz

Contemporary artist Dana Schutz also combines abstract and representational elements in her paintings. *The Breeders* is a particularly interesting case. At first glance, it makes a representational impression. There is illusionistic depth to the picture plane; the painting reads like a forested scene with two central characters. Afternoon sunlight seems to filter through the leaves and illuminate the scene. When considered more closely, complications and enigmas arise. The figures look like crude, fleshy humanoids with button-like eyes. Instead of legs, their torsos sit atop strange pink shrimp-shaped blobs (or maybe uterus-shaped, given the title). Down in the right corner is a brown heap that eerily suggests a toppled head. Amidst the bursts of ambiguity, recognizable objects reassert themselves. One can locate two broken guitar necks and a microphone stand. A skull crowns a mysterious rusty wire-like structure. A pair of glasses rests on what looks like cracked stone ground.

Schutz’s paintings have incredible surface physicality. In *Feelings* (2003) a large face balloons into frame, filling most of the canvas with the thick, visible brushstrokes that describe it. This odd individual consumes a pile of paint. Schutz has compiled a tactile area of abstract marks for her character to eat, and topped it off with blobs squirted



straight from the tube. The meal is the heaviest, densest part of the painting, and literally projects off the canvas. Interestingly, given the proliferation of abstract elements in her work, Schutz doesn't consider herself an abstract artist. In an interview for the New York Times she explained, "I wanted to stay away from figures and really saturated colors," (two of her trademarks) "so I started making abstract paintings, mostly because I have no idea how to make an abstract painting, and I was interested in that" (Fineman). Certainly her work has representational (although not naturalistic) priorities – she paints people in places carrying out actions – but I tend to view her as editing her images in ways that lead to significant leaps of abstraction.

## **MEDIUM, MATERIALS, AND METHODS**

Why painting? As Terry Myers says, “there’s nothing else like it” (*Painting’s Unfinished Business*). There’s something inherently appealing, affirming, and vital about applying paint to surface. I paint to explore my project questions because they arose from painting and concern painting, so it makes sense to try and paint my way to the answers. Furthermore, painting is a means of expression that continually challenges me. It keeps me on my toes – there’s no relaxing in painting. The challenge of ‘how to make a painting’ is fresh each time I approach a canvas. And along with the conceptual challenges of my project, working on these paintings presented the opportunity to finesse the techniques with which I handle paint.

Oil paints, specifically, are my medium of choice because they possess an openness that I adore. Oils can be diluted and mixed with solvents and other media to manipulate the paint’s thickness, luster, translucence, and dry time. I myself am partial to oil’s infamously long drying time. It makes oils flexible; the paint stays wet, so it can be reworked and brushed back and forth across the canvas indefinitely. Undesirable or problematic areas can be entirely wiped away with a rag.

One approach to oil painting, glazing, involves gradually building up translucent layers of paint, allowing them to dry between applications (which can take weeks, depending on the thickness of the layer). “Alla prima,” on the other hand, means painting wet-into-wet paint. The hand of the artist is more evident in ‘alla prima’ and it generates

more immediate effects. Painting wet-into-wet does come with its own set of challenges – wet paint is mutable, liable to mix and smear in unintended ways, but I enjoy the push and pull of wet-on-wet, and the active brushwork it leads to appeals to me. Usually I work in a combination of layering and ‘alla prima’. As I’ve progressed over the course of this thesis, I’ve moved toward applying much more paint to my surface, which suits wet-on-wet in particular. I painted almost exclusively on stretched canvas because I prefer a toothier surface and the slight bounce that canvas offers. I also capitalized on how art on a canvas comes across as a painting. My project isn’t about challenging the conventions of defining a painting, so executing my pieces on unconventional supports would have unnecessarily complicated my message and aesthetic, and distracted from what I’m trying to do.

As I painted my way to a solution, I explored different strategies of creating a painting and addressed my painterly problems from a more informed standpoint. I went through a process of looking at other paintings, analyzing the solutions and approaches of these artists, and applying or adapting them to form my own resolutions. I tried translating representational sources into a painterly solution, like Heilmann does, and fusing abstract and representational elements in a single work, as Schutz and Sillman are able to do. I also explored an approach of executing relatively realistic “portraits” of something with an inherently abstract appearance – a portrait of my palette, for example. Throughout these ventures, I strived to nurture a natural lineage from one painting to the next, and to develop a rigorous and independent painting practice.

## **THE PAINTINGS**

### ITERATION PAINTINGS

While not particularly polished or successful, this trio formed the unintended conceptual and practical starting point of the collection. These paintings originated with an assignment to fuse two different registers of experience in a single painting, and to then evolve the imagery over the course of three iterations. I consider the finished products akin to sketches or studies – not pieces I would be inclined to show anywhere – but they established an important foundation for the work that followed, and I feel it is pertinent to discuss some of the processes involved in their creation.

The first painting combines my domestic space with the experience of being in the painting studio by integrating a sketch of the view from my loft with the high bank of windows that are my favorite part of the painting room. Like much of the work that follows, the piece contends with the challenge of presenting conceptual content effectively and in an aesthetically pleasing way – a balance between form and meaning. The abstracted foliage was visually interesting, and the register of the studio wasn't occupying enough of the canvas (both spatially and conceptually). Fracturing the trees into a second sliver, mirroring the row of windows at the top of the canvas, presented an opportunity to loosen the logic of the painting and balance both composition and meaning. The register of the studio required greater visual and conceptual representation than a wholly realistic depiction could offer. The sheets in



Roxanne McKee, *Iteration 1*, 2013. Oil on canvas board, 2' x 1'6".

the foreground constitute another leap of abstraction, but as abstract embellishment for its own sake, not grounded in expressing an idea or experience.

The second iteration applies itself to the task of communicating the same dual experiences without the mundane elements that felt obligatory in the first. The impressionistic foliage reappears as the fractured windows expand and the leafy forms grow increasingly abstract. Rational space and depth is largely abandoned, doing away with white apartment walls. Since the foreground of the first painting proved problematic and uninteresting, I excised the majority of the domestic space from the second painting. I did preserve some of my favorite snippets to maintain a degree of lineage: I liked the slightly rough handling of the rightmost blinds, so the window reappeared, floating in the same general area. The plate and spoon also warranted a repeat performance, yet while so charming in miniature, they became less effective when enlarged and flattened. I revived the core notion of simultaneous experience with a revision of the foreground bed sheets, intended to represent both the bedding from my room and my palette in the studio, but the result seemed too much an approximation of a palette, lacking the physicality of an actual paint-laden surface.

The third iteration encounters the same challenges of expressing conceptual content (simultaneity of experience and existence) beyond representational spaces, with the additional pressure to arrive at new and unexpected solutions. I reorganized the composition by reversing the positions of the foliate windows and the bed sheet/palette. However, this abstracting intention caused the imagery to unexpectedly



Roxanne McKee, *Iteration 2*, 2013. Oil on canvas, 2'4" x 1'10".

realign with representation. The trees along the bottom now read as a landscape, causing the exposed blue underpainting to resemble sky. This third incarnation of the plate seems to be flying through the night sky like a stoneware UFO, which is definitely an unintended association. This is the most successful translation of the palette, though, featuring thickly applied paint, akin to the appearance of paint on an actual palette. As for the remaining lineage, the slats of the window blinds scatter around the plate and across the middle of the painting, and the glowing fleshy orb makes it through all three paintings intact. I originally intended the orb as an abstract nod toward a human presence in the simultaneous spaces, but it survived primarily because it is a form to which I am attracted.





Roxanne McKee, *Iteration 3*, 2013. Oil on canvas, 2'4" x 1'10".

## NEURONS

The largest painting in the collection, *Neurons*, also grew out of an assignment. The directive was to visually interpret some kind of system – I chose neurons in the brain – without being illustrative or diagrammatic. This painting presented a challenge both conceptually and practically. At four feet by six feet, this was the largest canvas I had ever worked on. Unsure of what to do with all that space, I began by splattering warm and cool yellows, envisioning a vast network of electrical signals in the brain.

Desaturated purple, the complement of bright yellow, blue-grey and a bit of pink round out the color scheme.

The field of splatters builds into a satisfying density with a unique speckled texture. In certain areas the yellow interacts optically with the purple and grey to create a lively, crackling energy that suits the subject matter. I reinterpreted the speckled surface by muting the pattern in some places and emphasizing it in others to create more variation. Submerging portions beneath a soupy grey wash produced depth and movement. Parts of the pattern push to the foreground, some unravel into cascading veiny squiggles that incorporate greater variation of shape and massing. This negotiation of the space of the canvas coincides with successful interpretation of subject matter. The rippling, atmospheric effect of the combined compositional elements serves both the visual and conceptual needs of the painting. The speckling evokes the multiplicity of neurons, and the overall composition has the cohesion necessary to portraying a system. Rounded forms, squiggly lines, and pooling liquid act as representational nods to things in the body – cells, veins, cerebrospinal fluid – but they exist freed from representational

context. The final product abstractly, rather than literally, conveys an intricate web of neurons firing to one another.

*Neurons'* abstract interpretation of real world subject matter gives it a certain kinship with some of Mary Heilmann's work. Many of Heilmann's paintings showcase a similar approach of observing the real, then creating an abstract work. This method necessitates contemplating the importance of form and concept. In *Neurons'* infancy I wasn't sure whether the idea or the shape of the neurons was more significant to the piece. I collected a substantial amount of source material, from diagrams and computer-generated imagery to informative texts on the central nervous system. The abundance of reference material proved overwhelming and required a lot of filtering to prioritize what I wanted to communicate in the piece. As the painting progressed, the focus shifted from the physical appearance of neurons (as they are diagrammed in scientific texts, for instance) to the idea of a neural network. This development alleviated the pressure of representing the minutiae of my source material and enabled a more interesting, evocative, and aesthetically pleasing interpretation.

As with Heilmann's work, *Neurons'* strength lies in the non-literal relationship between the final product and the material that inspired it. While rooted in the real, the painting doesn't depict its subject matter representationally. Instead it communicates abstractly the ebb and flow of electrical signals in a system of neurons. *Neurons* exemplifies a successful marriage of form and concept, of the abstract and the representational.



Roxanne McKee, *Neurons*, 2013. Oil on canvas, 4' x 6'.

## JUST KIDS

The final assignment-driven painting, *Just Kids*, takes on the challenge of interpreting a text into a cohesive painting. Like *Neurons*, the painting strives to translate its source material, Patti Smith's memoir of the same title, without being solely illustrative.

Illustration typically operates on a representational level, and communicates a fixed scene, which makes it limited when trying to convey multiple facets of a broad text. By incorporating both abstract and representational tactics *Just Kids* expands what it is able to express, encapsulating both broad themes and concrete details from the original text.

*Just Kids*, the book, contains a treasure trove of Patti Smith and Robert Mapplethorpe's artwork, and *Just Kids*, the painting, cannibalizes several visual elements from those works. The foundational composition, which produces the painting's strange octopod shape, is based on one of Mapplethorpe's sketches (41). The two sets of hands are lifted from two different photographs of Smith (82, 259). I reproduced the posture and placement of the hands, appropriating both the scissors and the feather from the original photos. The hands had to be detached from body, especially a face, to prevent the representational from taking over the painting. Faces tend to dominate as the most important piece of visual information, so excluding them enabled the representational hands to better blend with the abstract components of the composition.

Emulating Amy Sillman, I simplified the hands in addition to severing them. In Sillman's work representational elements meld successfully with abstraction through how she stylizes the recognizable, rather than rendering it realistically. Abstracting the

hands to basic brushstrokes allowed them to correspond with the rest of the painting while still keeping them recognizable as hands. Expressing both the abstract and the representational components of the painting in the same visual language helps the piece read as a single cohesive text. *Just Kids* aims for coalescence, not juxtaposition.

*Just Kids* borrows themes from the book in addition to visual motifs. One of the main concepts to come forward was the relationship with Catholicism that Smith and Mapplethorpe explored in their work. Both appropriated Catholic symbols, colors, and ideology into their artistic practices: the tie rack made from a picture of the Virgin Mary (132), the altarpieces (176), collages and arrangements of found objects (62).

Following their lead, I adopted a Catholic-inspired color palette of reds and blues. The hands possess a deliberate, ritualistic quality, hinting at the gestures seen in religious iconic art and perpetuating the theme of Catholic appropriation. Additionally, I placed the hands on two points of the cross, aiming to suggest the crucifix in the composition and to the viewer.

Aesthetically, I emulated the sketchiness of Mapplethorpe's source drawing, setting the painting's visual tone of roughly rendered lines and visible brushstrokes. The piece has very definite layering and stages of color, a decision inspired by Heilmann.



Roxanne McKee, *Just Kids*, 2013. Oil on canvas, 3'8" x 3'.

The appearance of some of Heilmann's paintings speaks to the methods of their creation, and I was interested in creating a similar experience for my viewer. Making plain the layers of the painting presents the narrative of the piece's development, which, in *Just Kids*, parallels the narrative of the text it represents. In the piece, the blue sketch lies on the bottom, the red layers in the middle, and the greenish circular patterning grows on top of everything like barnacles. The patterning was largely an aesthetic consideration used to unify the painting and add interest, although it was (nonspecifically) inspired by the mention of different textiles and fabrics in the source text. *Just Kids* transforms concrete source material into a painting that balances representational and abstract elements to translate a broad text into a cohesive non-illustrative image.

#### PATTI AND ROBERT

*Patti and Robert* is the sequel to *Just Kids*, taking a new approach to the themes established in the previous painting. Whereas *Just Kids* incorporates some of the visual elements of Smith and Mapplethorpe's art in addition to abstract depictions of the text, this sequel painting operates almost solely in an abstract conceptual realm. The painting does, however, revisit the theme of Smith and Mapplethorpe negotiating their Catholic upbringings through art. Continuing the appropriation of Christian religious art, I drew from the floating, distorted forms and compositional arrangements of mannerist works such as Jacopo Pontormo's *Deposition* (1525-1528) and Titian's *Assumption of the Virgin* (1516-1518). Although mannerism focuses on human subjects, it is also characterized by impossible contortions and exaggerated forms.



*Deposition* features twisting bodies as well as surreal, floating people and garments. *Patti and Robert* exhibits the weightless atmosphere and strange curving forms of mannerism.

The color palette in *Patti and Robert* breaks from the Catholic color scheme of *Just Kids* to avoid being too repetitive and direct. The combination of gray, putty, purple, and navy is unusual but it does tie the piece to some representational reference points. The grays resolve into areas of cloud-like formations. The fleshy colors lend bodily associations to forms that might otherwise appear wholly abstract. Anchoring the abstract appearance of the piece to something concrete was necessary in making its meaning accessible. Heilmann often pairs abstract compositions with suggestive titles, as with *Save the Last Dance for Me* or *The Thief of Baghdad*, to name a few. In such instances, the title entirely alters the way the painting can be apprehended.

Representational meaning exists in the space between the abstract image and the concrete, referential title. Much of Heilmann's work boasts an obscure lineage from source material to final product; in *Lola*, for instance, the title speaks to human subject matter, but the abstract execution does not concern human form. Similarly, *Patti and Robert* conceals its origins to a greater extent than *Just Kids* due to a greater use of abstraction.

Despite abstract predominance, the form of *Patti and Robert* still seeks to communicate something of the text that inspired it. As in *Just Kids*, *Robert and Patti* begins with a similarly composed drawing and uses gestural brushwork to reference



Roxanne McKee, *Patti and Robert*, 2013. Oil on canvas, 3' x 2'.

the source sketch. The unraveling navy line that winds its way across the canvas speaks to the unfolding timeline of Smith and Mapplethorpe's relationship, coming together, separating, rejoining, much like the pair do in the book. The piece also features a distinct horizontal division, almost like a horizon line, slicing the field into top and bottom halves, a landscape and a sky. This bisection speaks to several dualities in the text: Smith and Mapplethorpe, divisions of gender and sexuality, as well as Catholic binaries, like heaven and hell. In *Patti and Robert* abstract forms communicate concrete concepts about the titular figures' relationships with each other and their religion. The final piece, while more abstracted than its predecessor, perhaps enjoys greater flexibility in meaning by virtue of its abstraction.

## TAILLIGHTS

Perhaps the most restrained piece in the collection, *Taillights* strikes a much-needed note of simplicity. Following the conceptual-verging-on-convoluted nature of *Patti and Robert*, *Taillights* marks a minimalist treatment of a concrete subject matter. As the title suggests, glowing red taillights, specifically in fog, inspired the piece. Taking a minimalist approach gave me the opportunity to extensively implement the alla prima technique with thickly applied paint. I utilized the jewel-like tones of pure, fresh-from-the-tube reds (five in total). I don't typically use a lot of unadulterated red, and I found it an interesting exercise to become acquainted with these hues by way of their application in a minimalist context. The simple composition and color scheme, with bursts of red couched in a field of blue-gray, allowed attention to fall on the subtle differences of warm and cool between the reds.

Because I produced this painting using the alla prima method, the reds and mottled blue-grays blended interestingly when wet encountered wet. Red bled into grey, forming a snapshot of the paint's union even after drying. The resulting juiciness features extensive wet-into-wet qualities. I enjoy this aesthetic because it indicates the processes involved in creating the painting. The blending of the colors, the marks left by the brush in the wet paint are preserved.

In conceptualizing the piece, I considered how taillights warp and multiply when lensed through a raindrop on a windshield. Rather than striving for depth and realism, the painting took a Greenbergian turn, "orienting itself to flatness" ("Modernist Painting" 195). In part, this flattening was achieved through careful editing, reducing the image to only its most vital parts. The minimalist treatment of subject matter in *Taillights* makes it the most Heilmann-like piece in the collection. The source material has been distilled into pure, floating reds in a foggy haze. With Heilmann, title often indicates source, but the lineage between inspiration and painting is at times clear and direct, and at others more obscure. Although abstracted, *Taillights* demonstrates a relatively straightforward trajectory from source to image. It is less obliquely referential than works such as Heilmann's *Lola* or *Save the Last Dance*, or, of my own set, *Patti and Robert*. Once the image is paired with its title, representational understanding snaps into place.



Roxanne McKee, *Taillights*, 2013. Oil on canvas, 2' x 1' 6".

In line with its minimalist aspirations, *Taillights* forgoes creating a realistic glow effect, instead relying on the paint's innate luminosity. I tried to capture the electric shine of the lights using unaltered reds, at their most saturated. A carefully manipulated color scheme also contributed to the success of the illusion. Pairing pure reds with desaturated blue-grays intensified the reds' appearance. The mixing of the colors as a result of my alla prima approach further enhanced the glow effect; slivers of red swirl into the surrounding gray like light diffuses into fog. This translation of the real into the paint, substituting real light for the light of saturated color, constitutes the painting's most significant achievement. *Taillights* represents glowing lights while also abstracting them, through attention paid to both subject matter and materials (the handling of the paint and the surface of the canvas). While I found it surprisingly challenging to work on such a restrained level, and with such minimalist elements of form and color, this simplification permitted valuable exploration and discovery.

## PALETTE

My final painting for the collection, *Palette*, is the most concretely representational in lineage and execution. My other pieces fuse abstract and representational elements or execute a concrete concept abstractly. *Palette*, however, is a relatively straightforward portrait of my palette, just as the title indicates. To create visual interest and ambiguity I experimented with strategic cropping inspired by photographer Edward Weston's nudes (1925). Weston carefully framed and composed his photographs of the body, abstracting the human form and instead drawing attention to the individual shapes that comprise it. Unlike Weston, I began with a subject matter that is already abstract in

appearance. A palette is far less recognizable than the human body, especially when severed from context, so it seemed unnecessary to include additional elements of abstraction to the composition.

The concept for a palette portrait arose in my trio of iteration paintings. The second iteration integrated the palette into the image, and the third started to access the idea of using paint to represent paint. The idea intrigued me at the time, so I shelved it for later. Several photographs of my actual palette contributed to the creation of the painting, but relying too much on a source picture stiffened and stifled both the composition and my brushwork. Instead I shifted toward using the space of the canvas to experiment with cropping and placement in the interest of keeping the piece open and gestural. Loosening the constraints on the painting was also conducive to a gratifying exploration of the intrinsically abstract qualities of paint blobs on a palette. Dana Schutz' work was important to this piece both in how she treats the texture of her surfaces, as well as how she handles her representational elements. She does paint characters, objects, and locations, but with an abstracting touch, which is an approach I implemented. My interpretation of Schutz's method was to use the paint to render my subject, while also applying the paint as paint, so that it functions as a mark on the canvas as well as a tool of representation.

Drawn out over the summer, rather than condensed into a few weeks out of a term, *Palette* enabled me to utilize the glazing and layering methods to a much greater



Roxanne McKee, *Palette*, 2013. Oil on canvas, 3' x 4'.



extent than logistically possible in an academic timeline. With sufficient drying time, I was able to begin with washes of color and gradually build my layers in increasing thickness. I utilized alla prima as well, giving particular attention to the places where wet edges overlapped and tried to negotiate these areas with care, yet without overworking them. Compositionally, the piece has a dark and a light side, true to the appearance of the source. Darker hues weigh down the left side of the canvas, balanced by brighter, more saturated color on the right. Shape and line directionality unify the composition, guiding the eye around and into the canvas in a wide spiral, rescuing the piece from reading as disconnected units of color.

As with the other paintings in the collection, *Palette* involves negotiating form and concept; balancing how it looks and what it represents. In *Neurons*, the final product is more concerned with the idea of neurons rather than their appearance. By contrast, *Palette* ended up more invested in the appearance of these patches of overlapping color than the concept of a palette portrait (despite my original interest in representing paint with paint). Each blob and swath of paint on the original palette had different directionality and texture, and I tried to honor that through a painterly translation. With varied application of paint, the original features of each area of color were warped and magnified and abstracted. The original source is still discernable, but select aspects of it were prioritized as the aesthetic needs of the painting took over.

Although the piece depicts representational subject matter, its abstract appearance fostered various unrelated associations. For a while the piece became unexpectedly

map-like, reminiscent of a slightly abstract aerial terrain. Ultimately I pulled away from these map-like connotations when they dominated to the point of obfuscating the painting's ambiguities. I found ambiguity to be one of *Palette*'s strengths, particularly as a generator of viewer interest. I've noticed that the defined yet unidentifiable forms of the painting invite diverse viewer interpretation. A friend saw birds and dinosaurs, my sister (a dancer) saw dancing figures, my father saw faces, my mother saw a tide pool of corals and seaweed. The title does eliminate some ambiguity, but points out the mundane source of this colorful, outlandish image.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Undertaking this portfolio thesis enabled me to better understand the history and climate of my chosen field of study, and gave me the opportunity to consider new possibilities in my own work. I found it challenging to marry my studio practices to the academic rigors of a thesis, and it was difficult to tailor the creative process to a fixed research question. I struggled to maintain a balance between the academic paper and the creative work. Ultimately, though, it was rewarding to pursue a topic from inception to completion through a disciplined studio practice over the course of a year, and I think my growth as a painter is evident in the work I've produced. For the first time I see distinct and recurring style elements emerging in my work without deliberately incorporating them. Furthermore, I think the discipline gained by executing a collection of paintings will aid me in the maintenance of an independent painting practice beyond my academic career.

Creating this collection of paintings (and, to a lesser degree, completing this project), has definitely recalibrated my understanding of abstraction and representation. At the outset, I thought of them as occupying opposing ends of a spectrum, with a definite, if permeable, dividing barrier. I now realize how much real estate abstraction and representation share. A significant ideological shift partway through the project prompted the title to be changed from “negotiating abstraction and representation” to “investigating the intersection” between them. This subtle shift in language dramatically recasts the relationship between the two. The old title cast them as two

opposing forces to be wrestled and reconciled, which was certainly how I treated them in my work; the new title acknowledges their overlapping.

I've come to realize the huge role perception plays in the abstract-representational relationship. The real can be cropped and composed to the point of abstraction. The abstract can be perceived representationally. The two coexist and adjoin in a single work. It's as much about ways of seeing as it is intent.

Through their excessive and self-conscious implementation, I reconsidered abstraction and representation as tools, much like line, shape, color, and even medium. One chooses the best application of the tools at her disposal to execute her vision. The paintings in my collection are about abstraction and representation to the extent that the whole project investigates questions concerning them, but each painting is also invested in other ideas: books, neurons, religious appropriation, and so on. Abstraction and representation are used and fused to best express the meaning of the work. In my experience, a successful painting does not simply employ abstraction or representation for its own sake, but rather applies it in a careful, considered way to create, alter and convey meaning. I find myself in increasing agreement with Bob Nickas in "The Persistence of Abstraction": "dispensing with historically laden terms such as Abstraction with a capital A or Representation with a capital R is the first step toward admitting that these terms lead nowhere particularly useful, that they shouldn't be accepted at face value, and that the kinds of hybridized, self-aware, and conceptual paintings we routinely encounter today demand to be discussed on their own terms" (5).

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