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INTERRUPTED CONFIGURATIONS

A Thesis in

Painting

by

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ABSTRACT

Interrupted Configurations: An Inquiry Into Domestic Space

By Robert Abele III

The American home is a rich source of visual imagery and offers a critique of American domestic life. My paintings are about our domestic spaces, which are often over-furnished with non-essential products that are piled high and tucked away into corners and cabinets. Just as our objects serve as a representation of consumer excess, a home's organization can be the reflection of the function or dysfunction of the family. These orchestrated chaotic systems of domestic order (or disorder) act as the focal point of my work. I search in the congestion and migration of the material objects in my home to find a form of visual meaning. A distillation of time is compounded in my tightly composed, brightly colored, and lushly painted domestic interiors. I investigate the objects in my home because they remind me of my family and their presence. My home life is an ever-changing whirlwind of activity and visual stimulation; this series of paintings, which I call *Interrupted Configurations*, is my attempt to bring into focus and calm the never-ending storm before me.

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Introduction

My paintings are about our domestic spaces. Often over-furnished with non-essential products that are piled high and tucked away into corners and cabinets, the American home is a rich source of visual imagery and offers a critique of American domestic life. We are influenced by the idea of what it means to create a home based on an archetype provided to us by corporate companies like IKEA and their homogenized formulation of domestic life. I started to analyze these ideas by making paintings of my tiny kitchen and was inspired by the perverse organization of the space. I made a painting of my utensil drawer and all the knives, forks, and other miscellaneous items; the drawer became for me a new world of discoveries about everyday objects that are entwined and massed together. I became obsessed with painting and decoding the abstract patterns and colors that the drawer contained. This first exploration of the kitchen soon expanded to the living room, dining room, bedroom, and beyond. From the basement to the attic, analyzing the organization peculiar to each space enabled me to chart my familiar environment through a fresh, yet critical, lens.

The home I live in is an orchestrated symphony of chaos. It is a traditional two-story New England cottage; on the second floor is an apartment identical to the one in which I live. The apartment recently became vacant and before our search for a tenant began, my wife suggested using the empty rooms as subjects related to the chaos of our rooms. The idea was to contrast the open space of the empty dwelling with the congested chaotic space of my home. Moving into the empty apartment as an area of inquiry led me to think of the whole house—from the basement to the attic—as a subject; this created many new possibilities for a more complete investigation of my domestic space.

Artists such as Andrew Wyeth and Johannes Vermeer spent their lives investigating their inhabited interior space. Giorgio Morandi chose simple household forms, arranged them into different compositions, transcended their modest nature, and painted them throughout his entire life. The writings of Gaston Bachelard in *The Poetics of Space* inform my artistic process. Bachelard sees the house as a sort of initial universe, asserting that “all really inhabited space bears the essence of the notion of home” (Bachelard 5). At times, my home feels as vast as the universe and it takes everything I have in me to control it. Bachelard went on to say, “A being who does not want to melt away, and who, even in the past, wants time to ‘suspend’ its flight. In its countless alveoli space contains compressed time. That is what space is for” (Bachelard 8). My home reveals much of this, which I call distilled time. I investigate the objects in my home because they remind me of my family and their presence.

The organization of a home can reflect the function or dysfunction of a family. Clutter and messiness in a home can surprisingly reveal a sense of security. In an immaculately organized home, everything has its place and is kept spotless. The value of objects becomes paramount in such a highly-controlled environment. This control can often veil domestic abuse and substance abuse, hiding dysfunctional behavior and damaged relationships within families.

Ironically, unorganized homes are often the most functional, both physically and emotionally. The day-to-day operations of cooking, laundry, childrearing, and play reveal a well-worn home. A floor covered in mud by dirty sneakers, worn furniture, a mountain

of dishes in the sink reveals that life just moves on and messes migrate through the house. A messy home has nothing to hide; it wears its identity on its sleeve and reflects the love of the caregiver who inhabits that space. These paintings of my chaotic domestic space are not just about the physical objects, but also what the history of their daily use leaves behind: a loving home.

Sources

Edouard Vuillard has been an influence on my paintings since I was an undergraduate twenty-five years ago. I was drawn to his domestic interiors and how he used bold patterns to convey a space of intimate settings. Vuillard's interior paintings almost always include a figure, but I felt he gives the figure no more importance than any other object in the work. The occupants are woven into the painting, never dominating the composition; in some of his work, they are hard to see. Vuillard's color at first glance is not loud or evasive; it seeps out slowly and wraps around you. I find it intoxicating. Vuillard's palette is sophisticated, and I am moved by the gentle values he uses. Vuillard controls the value by keeping it mid-range and using the higher key very sparsely. His paintings are never heavy and when he does use darker values, they always seem to retain a depth. His use of values has informed my own work.



Fig. 1. Edouard Vuillard, *Large Interior with Six Figures*, 1897

Large Interior with Six Figures (Fig. 1) is a large, horizontal composition with elaborately decorated carpets in the foreground. As one's gaze pulls back slowly into the space, you are drawn to a woman at a door, confronting the viewer directly. The predominantly warm values are keyed high but retain a sense of space. Vuillard is orchestrating the composition in this image by using patterning and value in a very effective way. The objects in the interior are piled on top of themselves and compacted and pushed into themselves.

Fairfield Porter's interiors and landscapes teach me restraint. Porter's work shows a sophistication with color relationships and composition and appears as though he is holding back from making his work pretentious and leaving in the painting only what is essential. The paintings of Edouard Vuillard influenced Porter after he attended an exhibition of his work at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1938. Hereafter, color relationships played a significant role in Porter's paintings (Kissick). I question during my painting process whether I should include or exclude an element; I call this visual shorthand or editing. When I look at a Fairfield Porter painting, I see an artist who

chooses the essential elements of a subject, just holding back enough to create that space between viewer and painter.



Fig. 2. *Fairfield Porter, October Interior, 1963, Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art*

In *October Interior* (Fig. 2), Porter arranges a complicated interior space, giving the painting a sense of order without losing the feeling of intimacy of this domestic environment. The large windows in the background create a barrier between the outside world and the inside as the shadows force their way through, penetrating the space. Porter organizes the shadow and light structure so that no more attention is given to the occupant of the space than to the chairs or the table. The viewer is directed to the dark chair in the foreground flanked by the brightest element in the room, which is the rocking

horse. The chair in this scene is the mystery to me, an invitation to sit but with my back to the view. This is what makes Fairfield Porter's work so strong: by the time we see the subject, he entices us with an experience of the space. The chairs and rocking horse in *October Interior* work in a surprisingly comparable way to the chair in Edouard Vuillard's *Large Interior with Six Figures*. The chairs are an invitation to participate in the environment to form a more intimate relationship with the work. Vuillard's influence on Porter is subtle, but highly effective.

The work of Gideon Bok is also an influence on my paintings. His explorations of his studio environment and the recording of passing time in the space are very compelling. Bok believes that the painting is a single static image (or depicted moment of consciousness) that is made up of thousands of moments of consciousness or thoughts, each represented by a gesture, mark, or impulse on the surface. In this way, painting collapses time in a specific manner (Larry). He introduces into these works personal clues about his love of music and memories of playing in a band by painting record album covers scattered around the environment and musical equipment propped up against the studio walls. I also like the skewed angles of his compositions. I feel disoriented in the space he creates; being made aware of my peripheral view causes me to experience the work differently. Like Vuillard, Bok gives no real hierarchy to anything. In my interiors, I strive to keep this sense of ambiguity. In Bok's painting, *Highway to Hegel* (Fig. 3), the room is strewn with fragments of the artist's belongings on the floor or piled up on surfaces. The furniture in the room has a certain functional style that looks antique. Throughout his paintings, there is a resonance of the influence that objects have on us and our lives.

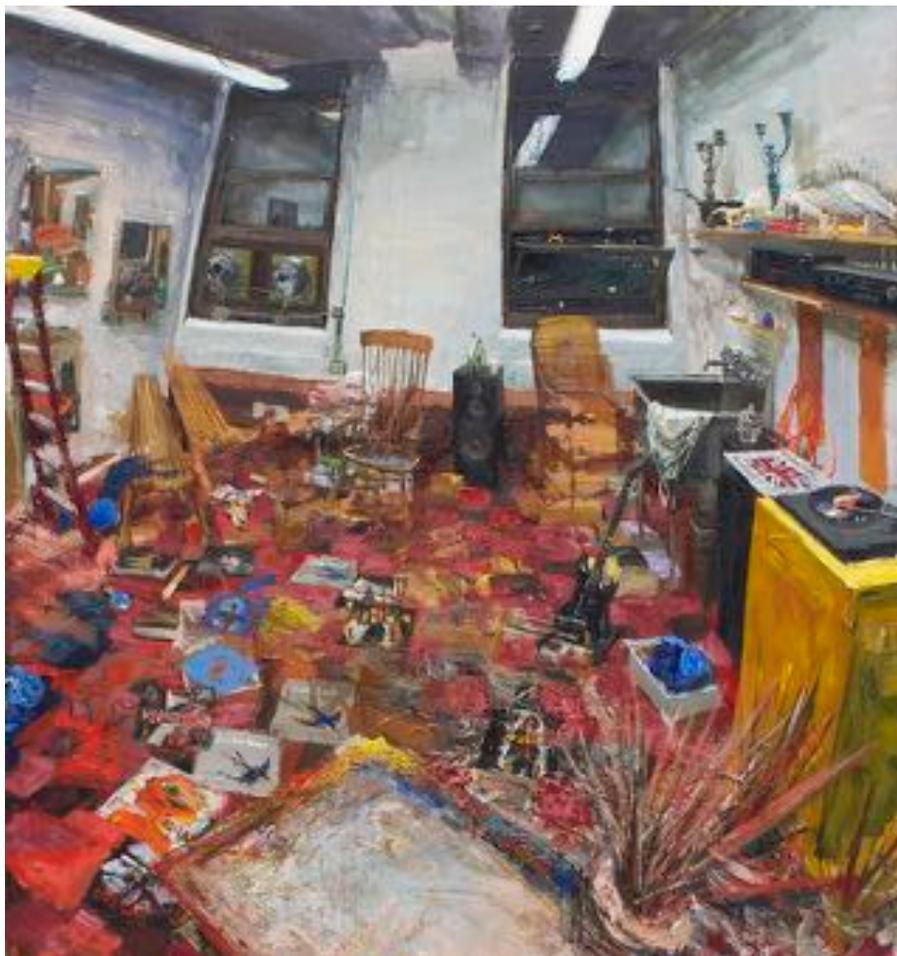


Fig. 3. *Gideon Bok*, *Highway to Hegel*, 2013

Josephine Halvorson's paintings are done on-site and usually in one sitting, a trait that my works share with hers. This type of painting displays an immediacy in the finished work that can only be achieved by working from life. I try to not overwork a painting but also do not want my finished work to feel incomplete. When I am making a painting of an environment, I want to be fully engaged and immersed in the scene. Halvorson's on-site paintings force the image to remain uncontaminated with excess information.



Fig. 4. Josephine Halvorson, *Heat 2*, 2014

Halvorson engages her subjects on an intimate level by investigating the texture and surface of the object. Halvorson's micro viewpoint explores an environment, thus creating an invitation to see an object and interact with it in a completely unique way. In my own work, the objects in my environments need an identity; sometimes this is hard for me to obtain. I may become involved in aspects of a painting that deter me from giving importance to an element of the work, leaving a void that I later may identify as crucial to the narrative. Halvorson's work gives an identity to her subject and that is also a crucial step in my own process.

When I began to interrupt the imagery in my work, I was not thinking about Cubism. The cubist adventure, especially in its analytic phase, proceeds towards a sort of deconstruction. Little by little, the object crumbles, breaks up into many solid pieces, nearly becoming unrecognizable; a pure abstraction (Benvenuto 7). I never intended to deconstruct the subject before me but rather to rearrange the elements to reveal a new way of looking at the scene. Cezanne was reconstructing the world before him, as opposed to dismantling it like the Cubists who followed him. My paintings reveal to the viewer the unique truth of how I interact with an environment by choreographing all at once the elements and design that will become the painting. Cezanne renounces the shortcut: he wants the thing to dictate its name without being asked (Benvenuto 7). My paintings meet the viewer half way but allow them time to pause and reflect on them, creating the feeling of seeing something in an abstract way without a struggle involved in trying to unravel a mystery. In Cezanne's view of nature, things in the human world, of domestic life, man's natural environment, and indeed, man himself, are all interrelated and made of the same essential existential substance. These relationships point to divine harmony and a higher order of everlasting laws, which guarantee the continuation of existence: "The task of the genius is to reveal the amity all these things in the infinite air, alike in their upsurge and ambition" (Duchting 216).

The strongest urge driving me in my work is to control, organize, and simplify the imagery to reveal a distillation of intimate time and space. My home life is an ever-changing whirlwind of activity and visual stimulation. This series of paintings, which I call *Interrupted Configurations*, is my attempt to bring into focus and calm the never-ending storm before me.

Aesthetics

I begin my work with a dominant theme or idea that I cannot stop thinking about, such as my looming two-story house. This becomes the epicenter of a great storm that begins to turn and gain momentum, sometimes moving towards an end that is unclear at the time of its creation. I look for the most vital way to embody my idea and paint it with as little information as possible. I leave out all non-essential elements that lack an importance to the overall work itself. Compositional movement is paramount to conveying different systems of organization in my work. Objects that disturb such movement must be challenged in terms of their necessity staying in the image.

My phone camera is always accessible; while in the kitchen making dinner or in the basement I shoot a few photos, if I see an unusual arrangement of shapes. I am searching in the congestion and migration of the material objects in my home to find a form of visual meaning. I look for piles of objects that trigger inspiration. They become narratives scattered across my domestic interior. The story is born from my imagination, truth is not what I am seeking. The fictional story remains as an inner dialogue that speaks to me during the painting process. My attempts over the past two years to develop a visual language to describe what I am seeking in my interior paintings failed when I literally copied what was before me; when I mention truth, this is to what I refer. I was searching for more depth in representation and found it by the act of rearranging the space before me. The problem was how to do this in a way that felt natural and not obligatory. A space that is interrupted allows me the liberty to examine and play with elements in the picture plane and fulfills my desire to be in control of what I am seeing.

Color is the most important formal element in my thesis work. Color can be intoxicating and a veil that disrupts the hierarchy of focus I am creating in my paintings. Initially, in this body of work, I used a very limited palette consisting of two or three major colors. These paintings, although harmonious, left me dissatisfied and wanting to express my ideas further through color, to more deeply explore systems of organization, and experiment with how light permeates space. I discovered a need for a deeper investigation of color and value in my work. A more complex analysis of the way in which I was separating my light and dark values revealed that my paintings were exposing too much of a contrast in the darker areas of my work, creating a flat, ambiguous void. My paintings depend on an underlying foundation of value that supports the color hovering above. I have discovered that a monochromatic color scheme allows me to paint without too much hierarchy in the colors, balancing the work with the value and the drawing with the composition.

An example of this in my work is the painting *Pink Morning* (Fig. 5).



Fig. 5. Robert Abele III, *Pink Morning*, oil on canvas, 24x18 inches

I never planned for the painting to begin with a predominantly pink palette. Looking at all the migrating objects massed together on the floor of my daughter's bedroom, the color pink began to be noticeable. A sweet taste began to arise in my mouth, so I started to think about candy: how much my daughter likes candy, how I grew up in a candy store, and how much I like candy. This thought of candy started flooding me with bright luscious colors of the kind with which they used to wrap and market candy.

Once I determine a taste for the color, the next sensation I seek is the temperature; are these colors that I am sensing warm or cool? This is a very crucial element to the sensual understanding of color. I analyze my passages of paint and fluctuate the temperature throughout the work, developing contrast. I transition areas of warm light into cool shadow; attending to this helps the value structure remain strong. It is imperative for me to maintain the value structure, as it is the glue that holds this mosaic of my process together. I pay close attention to how fat or lean the paint is. I have learned over time that abandoning linseed oil and turpentine allows me to maintain control of these color mixtures before applying them to the surface. I try not to reproduce the color I am seeing directly from the source of my paintings; what I am seeking is a more visceral observation.

For over 25 years, I have collected easels, drafting tables, and all sorts of antique art supplies that I use in my studio practice. I often work on site and I have two original Julien full box easels dating back to the 1940s. Throughout my life, the materials I use to create my work support and inform my process. These objects serve as tools and are essential to my creative process. I have art supplies that are 25 years old, reminding me of my commitment to my art practice.

During my painting process, I am constantly disrupting and contradicting myself; painting is a game of manipulating chance. This game often takes me in a new direction that I search until it becomes redundant or I lose interest. If a problem in a painting is becoming unsolvable, before I abandon the project, I investigate my formal approach. I change my paint brush size and shape. I have become accustomed to using a round brush for applying my paint to canvas; if my process is not moving quickly enough, then the

surface will become repetitive, especially when I start thinking about it. By using a different brush and size, this usually changes the composition just enough to take the painting in a new direction. I use my fingers, or an old rag loaded with paint that I scraped directly off of my palette. By applying paint to the surface with a rag, it makes my marks look clumsy and less calculated.

I paint in a direct *alla prima* style, as my mark making is intended to be part of the final statement of the work. John Singer Sargent, a proponent of *alla prima* painting, would blend all his colors wet into wet all at once to produce his design, working with “slow haste” squeezing out a large quantity of paint on the palette before beginning his work (Mayer 177). *Slow haste* is a very important step when working *alla prima*; the process involves not only slapping paint on the canvas, but also training yourself to think a few steps ahead because the probability of failure is high due to this method of application. When mistakes arise, the errors are woven into my process and dealt with on a one-to-one basis. Some of these mistakes are welcomed and become part of the final image, while others must be removed and rethought.

When I come to an area of the canvas that is challenging me or becoming a “trouble spot,” I move away and work somewhere else for a while. I never stop thinking about the problem area while I am working, and I usually come up with a solution to address the unfinished section quickly. When this does not work, it may mean that I need to do more inquiry into the space for shapes that are escaping me. In my painting, I strive to maintain a rhythm throughout the process. This is a challenge in *alla prima* painting because all areas of the process must be dealt with simultaneously. This method’s main

component is working the paint wet into wet, so I must resolve all issues at least within an area of a painting before walking away from it.

My paint must maintain consistency, as must my values and color temperature. This method of direct painting is very challenging when mistakes arise they cannot be left for very long. I use the alla prima method of painting because I am a fast painter and my work is done on location. I usually finish a painting in one session and very rarely go back and adjust it once it is done.

Description of Work



Fig. 6. Robert Abele III, *Double Decker*, oil on canvas, 48x48 inches

The viewer is standing at a point in the landscape that allows for the inspection of two plunging perspectives: the first ascends upward to the right and the second transcends the plane from foreground to background. This perspective allows for an investigation of the environment with the experience of a slight disruption of reality. The paint is applied directly in the alla prima method. Areas of the painting are interrupted causing the elements not to line up. I call these places apexes and they usually contain

three spaces: a horizontal, vertical, and diagonal. I search for these places in a composition and they are key elements of the work. The apexes direct the eye of my viewer throughout the image and acting as signposts within the underlying design. The light in the painting is natural and describes the form with warmth in direct sun and coolness in the shadow. The home is the container in which my family lives, providing shelter and security, but it is also the chief subject for my interior paintings of domestic life. Areas of negative space surround the image and act as an adhesive to hold the interrupted space together. I chose the bright orange based on a childhood memory of a candy bar wrapper.



Fig. 7. Robert Abele III, *Spice Rack*, oil on canvas, 36x48 inches

Two years ago, my paintings began in my small, cramped kitchen. In the kitchen, the two dominant stations are the sink and the stove. In the painting, *Spice Rack*, I explore this space from a fixed position. I can control many elements of the kitchen. Standing in this space, the spice rack above the stove becomes an instrument panel; instead of gauges, I have flavors and ingredients. A glass full of rum in the foreground hints at a habit worth inhibiting. Elements of the composition are unfinished revealing the surface of the raw canvas and a window into my process. The light is artificial, emanating from the exhaust fan out of view and creates a stark illumination of the space and objects. I used primary colors surrounding the painting in large blocks, informing the subject matter as a clue to their utilitarian function.



Fig. 8. Robert Abele III, *Stove Top*, oil on canvas, 24x36 inches

Stove Top is designed with a pyramid composition that pierces the picture plane and divides the space while creating a bird's-eye view perspective of the stove and sink. The right side of the composition reveals a distorted view of the stove top while the

foreground is at the opposite angle. I purposely push the viewer in a way that creates confusion and an uneasy feeling. One is confronted with this distortion before beginning to identify the space encountered. The objects of the kitchen transform into colors and shapes that no longer resemble their identity but become elements of a “higher order.” The shapes migrate to the upper left of the composition and pull the viewer into the space. I used an underlying design in the shape of an “X” to frame the composition. The cramped space and my kitchen was the inspiration for this painting and the often-congested cluttered countertop. Order must be utilized while working in this tiny environment, adhering to the strict organization of space. This was the first image I made utilizing interrupted design and I was conservative with the abstract space surrounding the composition. The colors I used were muted; they draw less attention to the forms.



Fig. 9. Robert Abele III, *Living Room*, oil on canvas, 36x48 inches

I decided to paint *Living Room* after observing my family lost in their tablets while we were all occupying the same interior space. My legs in the foreground act not only as an observer of the interior but also as a participant in it. The gaze of the occupants is fixed to their devices making them oblivious to their surroundings. The television occupies the center of the composition surrounded by an extensive collection of books. The books represent a historic example of how information was stored and shared before the invention of the tablet and iPhone. The contemporary home has been greatly affected by how information is used, causing a rift in familial dialogue. Everybody is lost in the stream of the content coming from their device. In this painting, I addressed the negative

shapes in the surrounding space differently. In the bottom half of the image, the shapes are solid and incorporated into the painting, creating a triangulated composition; this guides you to the painting's center, holding the viewer in the space and creating tension. The vertical drips in the upper section of the painting were intended to guide the viewer out of the composition, or what I felt was more of an evaporation of color and form, revealing to me a visual example of the energy in the room being drawn out. This image was my first attempt to incorporate the abstracted negative space surrounding the edges into the image by blending the color and treating the edges more tonally. This gave the painting a vibration between the forms that I was seeking, an avenue I will continue to explore.



Fig. 10. Robert Abele III, *Attic*, oil on canvas, 48x36 inches

The attic is a storage space for possessions and it requires some planning to retrieve them. A trip to the attic reveals memories of my childhood and family such as my father's old leather jacket and a sketchbook full of graffiti drawings, which stimulate my subconscious and for a moment comfort my thoughts about days gone by. A single electric light illuminates the slanted ceiling, giving one the feeling of being swallowed by a whale, and the exposed beams that resemble a ribcage; everything in the space is in disarray as if strewn sloppily across the wooden planked floor. I do not wish to confront

everything here in this place, but the confinement of the attic demands it, trapping you in a world of stored away memories. The space in the attic is deep and it is a challenge for me to depict its depth from the foreground to the background. I rejected being too literal and painted the contents as masses that assume unrecognizable forms collapsing into themselves. My paint is applied *alla prima* and fast, wet into wet; the murkiness of the light in the far corners of the attic seeps out until it is halted by the illuminating the artificial single light hanging from the attic ceiling. The wooden planks on the upper right of the painting are given an unnatural color that descends to the window in the background; this is my way of guiding you out of the foreground to the back of the painting and the exit; you will not be leaving the way you entered.

Conclusion

I decided at the beginning of my graduate studies to focus on my family and home environment for the subject of my thesis. This personal connection challenged me to interpret my surroundings in a new visual language. My findings have led me to develop a new way of seeing, rearranging the environment by deconstructing and then reconstructing it in an entirely new way. My mission has been to expand my work with a greater knowledge based on both theory and peer critique; new questions have opened in my work that I look forward to continuing to answer beyond my graduate studies.

Aesthetics of color and space to condense a depiction of time is something that will carry me into future work. My inquiry into the domestic home and its often-untidy environment was a rich inspiration for me. Gaston Bachelard said, “the house shelters day-dreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace.” The shelter of

my home protects me, allowing a metamorphosis to occur both in me and my work. Now
I can dream in peace.

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