

A THESIS PRESENTED TO THE
PACIFIC NORTHWEST COLLEGE OF ART

CAN YOU DESCRIBE THIS RUCKUS?

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE MASTERS OF FINE ARTS DEGREE

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2012

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express sincere gratitude to my mentors Anne Johnson, Arnold Kemp, and Joe Thurston. Your encouragement and generous insight compelled me through two years of intense study. Thank you Arnold, Emily Ginsburg, MK Guth, and my MFA cohort for two years worth of stimulating critique and conversation. Thank you Chas Bowie for your guidance throughout the thesis writing process. Thank you to my family for endless encouragement. Lastly, thank you Stacey. Your support helped me through this entire endeavor.

PACIFIC NORTHWEST COLLEGE OF ART

THESIS ABSTRACT

CAN YOU DESCRIBE THIS RUCKUS?

Is contradiction valuable? The contemporary world is a heterogeneous mess of contradictory facts and disparate positions. Under this circumstance, lived experience is difficult. Can we find the “right way” to negotiate our conditions? How do we proceed toward understanding the complexity and dissonance that occurs in real life experience?

This paper examines how the tools of contrast and proliferation in artistic practice help to elaborate on this existential contradiction, and reveal its pervasiveness in both creative and lived experience. I discuss works of both literature and painting that reveal the conflicted nature of human experience. Along the way, I relate this discussion to my painting installation, *Can you describe this ruckus?*, a body of work that reference a disparate array styles, conventions, and conceptual positions on painting. I conclude by revealing my value for deliberate contradiction and my belief in the generative potential it creates.

Introduction

Mikhail Bakhtin, the Russian philosopher who elaborated on the creative potential of what he called *dialogism*, described the pitfall of ideological subscription to an idea:

The idea *lives* not in one person's *isolated* individual consciousness—if it remains there only, it degenerates and dies... [T]he idea wants to be heard, understood, and answered by other voices from other positions. Like the word, the idea is by nature dialogic, and monologue is merely the conventional compositional form of its expression, a form that emerged out of the ideological monologism of modern times.¹

Bakhtin is saying that idealizing an idea makes it creatively powerless. It neuters it. A neutered dog is no good at procreating. A powerless idea, like a neutered dog, is never as big and ornery as the other fertile ones. If it gets into a tussle with a powerful, discrepant idea, it's liable to get wrecked pretty quickly. An idea concretized by ideology becomes sacrosanct and monotopical. It is unavailable to open, inquisitive dialogue. The ideologue is unwilling to entertain contradiction, and his rigid stances are likely to lead him into crises. How troubling to ideology a dialogue of ideas can be.

This paper relates how the notion of dialogism applies to my work as a painter. I create large-scale painting installations using the tactics of proliferation and difference to explore both material and conceptual possibilities of painting. My practice is characterized by the mixing and mashing together of different painting conventions. I place a traditional portrait at the side of a geometrical abstract composition, in company with gestural abstraction, surrealist figuration, and process

¹ Mikhail Bakhtin, "The Dialogic Idea as Novelistic Image," in *The Bakhtin Reader*, ed. Pam Morris (London: E. Arnold, 1994), 98.

painting. Through a proliferation of different painting conventions, I investigate the function and value of contradiction and doubt in studio practice. The tactics of proliferation and difference develop the form, content, and subject of my painting.

1: Form

Contrast

Contrast is a key aspect to my work. My painting installation, *Can you describe this ruckus?*, displays a multiplicity of clashing conventions and concepts.

My intent is to produce a provocative composition.

Novelists have used contrast of distinct narrative voices to develop richly textured narrative structures. The novelist, according to literary critic David Lodge,

does this in various ways. At the simplest level there is the alternation of the narrator's voice with the voices of the characters, rendered in their own specific accents and idioms of class, region, occupation, gender, etc... 'For the prose artist the world is full of other people's words,' wrote Bakhtin.²

A good literary example of this is Mario Vargas Llosa's *The Green House* (1968). A complicated novel, the story tells the experiences of multiple characters through their distinct voices. Conflicting forces reveal themselves in the novel. The characters' distinctions of gender, class, race, and even generational prejudices are indicated by the simultaneous contrast of their voices and conditions. In one sub-narrative, Don Anselmo is an antagonist – he operates a brothel and is the source of strife and conflict in the Peruvian town of Pura. In another sub-narrative, told simultaneously but taking place decades later, his stature is reduced. He is an aging man, a much more benign character than in his alternate characterization. This second characterization makes him seem sympathetically gentle. The effect of this mixing of

² David Lodge, *Art of Fiction* (London: Penguin Books, 1992), 128.

narratives and characterizations reveals the complexity and dissonance that occurs in real life experience.³

When a novelist writes in multiple voices, particularly in voices distinct from one another, meaning is expressed not simply in the verbal content, but by how the voices relate to one another. This is a good analogy for the function of multiple, distinct forms in a work of visual art. Each visual form, like each distinct voice, may have its own specific accent and idioms. When several distinct forms are thrust into conversation in a single work, each may be subjected to challenge and contradiction. Complications occur. Ideas conflict. Styles fracture.

The canvases of Jonathan Lasker utilize this device of contrast. His employment of different techniques, references, and conventions (like the “voices” of the novel) creates very complex work, which relays the same sort of conflict Mario Vargas Llosa evokes in *The Green House*. Lasker writes,

At times my paintings will conflate such disparate visual elements as rational geometric form with the subjectivity of gestural painting, among other dialogues. I feel that such painting can approximate the conflicted nature of the human life experience.⁴

Painting for Lasker, like the novel for Vargas Llosa, is a method of expressing the inescapable experience of contradiction. My painting is informed by this same feeling of uncertainty and conflicting life experience.

My work thrusts together two distinct kinds of painting. Obliquely termed “Pictures” and “Catch-alls,” each harbors its own accents and idioms. The Pictures are made on 47” by 34” pieces of unstretched housepainter’s canvas dropcloth. On

³ Mario Vargas Llosa, *The Green House* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968).

⁴ Jonathan Lasker, “The Subjects of The Abstract,” in *Jonathan Lasker: Complete Essays 1984-1998* (New York: Edgewise Press, 1998), 53.

each piece of canvas is painted a rectangular 22.5” by 25” image. These images are painted in accordance with various standard techniques of modernist image painting. In this way, the Pictures display a range of typically conservative conventions of pictorial composition.



Figure 1. Patrick Driscoll, six “Pictures” from *Can you describe this ruckus?*, 2012, oil on unstretched canvas dropcloth, 47” x 34” each.

Their counterpart, the Catch-alls, are made from 9’ by 12’ pieces of canvas dropcloth. They are repositories of mess and indexes of process. They seem not to “contain” a composition as the Pictures do, but rather are open displays of procedural activity. They are composed with procedural marks, and are related to the Pictures in that they originally functioned as wall covering beneath the Pictures. They collected the drips, excess brush wipings, color swatches, and various notations—much of the

stuff that is byproduct to traditional image painting. Where the Pictures display rather conservative compositional conventions, the Catch-alls display a more liberal and equivocal definition of image and composition.

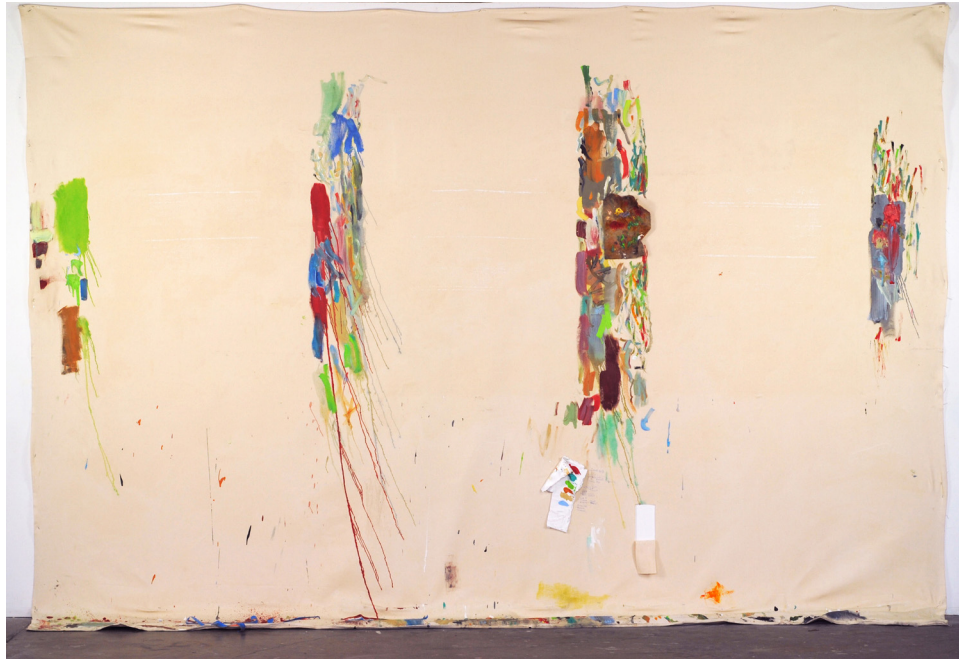


Figure 2. Patrick Driscoll, “Catch-all” from *Can you describe this ruckus?*, 2012, oil on unstretched canvas, 9’ x 12’.

By mixing and mashing them together, the components of my work reveal a complexity similar to that of the works of Vargas Llosa and Lasker. One might expect that an exhibition of painting by one artist would cohere, but this work instead displays incongruity and dislocation. There is something of a disharmony in the installation’s discrepant contents. Jonathan Lasker stated that his “objective was to find a way to make painting discursive, rather than monotopical.”⁵ I have a similar interest in making painting conversational in pictorial terms.

⁵ Jonathan Lasker, “After Abstraction,” in *Jonathan Lasker: Complete Essays 1984-1998* (New York: Edgewise Press, 1998), 20-21.

Dialogic Work

Mikhail Bakhtin wrote many essays pertaining to what he called *dialogism*. Dialogism operates especially clearly in works that juxtapose multiple voices, forms, or kinds of work. A dialogical work is one that presents multiple viewpoints.

Bakhtin was enthusiastic about what he called the “polyphonic” property of novelistic prose.⁶ Polyphony refers to stories told through multiple voices, particularly through voices that function as counterpoints. A polyphonic novel is conversational and dialogic. It is unlike expository prose, which uses “monologic” language.⁷ Mario Vargas Llosa’s *The Green House*, mentioned earlier, is a prime example. Bakhtin wrote, concerning the works of Fyodor Dostoevsky, that Dostoevsky’s ideas are “liberated from their monologic isolation and finalization. They become thoroughly dialogized and enter the great dialogue of the novel on *completely equal terms* with other idea-images.”⁸

When reading Bakhtin’s notes on dialogism, I can’t help but think of Robert Rauschenberg’s combine paintings and his invention of the “flatbed picture plane.”⁹ His combines were comprised of all manner of found objects that were combined with painting on a single picture plane. With them, Rauschenberg proposed a new type of painting composition that functioned as a gathering space for multiple cultural signs. He used this flatbed as not just a space for the language of painting, but also for

⁶ Lodge, 128.

⁷ Ibid., 128.

⁸ Bakhtin, 100-01.

⁹ Leo Steinberg, “Reflections on the State of Criticism,” in *Robert Rauschenberg*, ed. by Branden Joseph (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002), 7-37.

the various cultural languages imbedded in the objects he thrust into conversation with painting. These languages were thrust together on equal terms with one another, creating what might be called a “polytopical” image, unlike typical modernist painting, which might be described as “monotopical.”

Another quality of a dialogic work is its capacity to live outside itself. Such a work not only exhibits an internal dialogue, but also maintains dialogue with works external to it. A dialogic work informs and is informed by works of its own author and other authors, both past and present. When work such as Rauschenberg’s references a multiplicity of cultural signs,

It loses its monologic, abstractly theoretical finalized quality... it acquires the contradictory complexity and living multi-facedness of an idea-force, being born, living, and acting in the great dialogue of the epoch and calling back and forth to kindred ideas of other epochs.¹⁰

The work establishes itself within a context of real life. A dialogic work does not authoritatively answer questions. Rather, it poses questions. In an interview in 2008, Josh Smith generally characterized the attitude through which Rauschenberg and his circle produced work: “We don’t speak in declarative sentences... We speak in interrogative sentences... We want to learn from the world not teach the world.”¹¹

Can you describe this ruckus? sources a multiplicity of painting conventions and allusions. The Pictures display conventions as varied as traditional portraiture, geometrical abstraction, gestural abstraction, surrealist figuration, and process painting. The mixture of these conventions within one body is contradictory and

¹⁰ Bakhtin, 99.

¹¹ Josh Smith, *Hidden Darts Reader*, ed. Achim Hochdörfer (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2008), 48.

complex. The mix of components does not authoritatively declare anything. Rather, it asks questions.

2: Theme

A Heterogeneous Mess

The basic assumption underlying Bakhtin's work is that the natural state of the world is *mess*. Order is not given, it is posited; that is, it is set as a task to be accomplished through work and especially through creative activity.

– Deborah J. Haynes, *Bakhtin and the Visual Arts*

Modernist theory presented a totalizing vision of reality. It treated systems of knowledge, such as language or painting, like clean, orderly machines. It posited that there were essential functions to these systems and it proposed that the systems could be optimized through the purging of their non-essential components. The modernist project attempted to reduce complex systems to basic essences.

In the visual arts, this attitude is explicit in the writing of Clement Greenberg. Greenberg proposed that the integrity of any artistic medium was to be found by reducing it to its bare essence. He wrote that the Modernist project prescribed a “process of self-purification,” and that painting must naturally find its way to “being reduced to its viable essence.” He elaborated: “Painting has turned out to have a greater number of expendable conventions imbedded in it... the conventions not essential to the viability of a medium [must] be discarded as soon as they are recognized.”¹² Greenberg was participating in an endgame – the termination of which would present mankind with a vision of utopia.

¹² Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), 208-09.

Modernist theory, however, became tragically incapable of dealing with the growing uncertainty characteristic of the mid-twentieth century. The destruction brought on by World War II had laid bare the failures of mankind, and the dangers of utopian visions.

Beginning in the mid twentieth century, literature and visual art started abandoning the modernist prescription for essential forms. During the Cold War, there developed a skepticism toward the petrifying grand narratives of the prevailing modernist theory. In the arts, postmodernism sought out instabilities in the “essential” systems and structures of modernism. Indicators of anxiety, uncertainty, and instability of cultural security began to rise at the surface of the social psyche.

Postmodernism, Jean-François Lyotard wrote,

puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable.¹³

Works of prose influenced by Jean-Paul Sartre and Existentialist philosophy can be seen as the connective tissue between modernist and postmodernist thought. Writers like Albert Camus and Samuel Beckett seemed sensitive to the barrier that modernist paradigms wedged between art and lived experience. Beckett’s plays and novels, for instance, were characterized by ambiguity and uncertainty. They presented not utopian visions, but existential anxieties.

¹³ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 81.

Painting trailed not far behind. In the mid 1950s, Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, and Cy Twombly presented new maneuvers and topical additions that challenged the modernist convention of essential form. They saw a disconnect between painting and life, and sought to reconnect the two. Rauschenberg specifically delighted in connecting art to life with his combine paintings – surfaces on which he affixed objects found in the real world. His “flatbed picture planes” become coded arrangements and disarrangements of paint and found objects. Critic Douglas Crimp wrote,

One of the first applications of the term postmodernism to the visual arts occurs in Leo Steinberg’s ‘Other Criteria’ in the course of a discussion of Robert Rauschenberg’s transformation of the picture surface... This flatbed picture plane is an altogether new kind of picture surface, one that effects, according to Steinberg, ‘the most radical shift in the subject matter of art, the shift from nature to culture.’ That is to say, the flatbed is a surface that can receive a vast and heterogeneous array of cultural images and artifacts that had not been compatible with the pictorial field of either premodernist or modernist painting.¹⁴

Rauschenberg’s gesture of suffusing the topics of painting with topics of life beckoned a new conception of painting, one that perceived in art the messy debris of life.

¹⁴ Douglas Crimp, “On the Museums Ruins,” in *Robert Rauschenberg*, ed. Branden Joseph (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002), 58-9.



Figure 3, Robert Rauschenberg, *Winter Pool*, 1959, combine painting: oil paper, fabric, wood, metal, sandpaper, tape, printed paper, printed reproductions, handleld bellows, and found painting, on canvas, with latter, 90" x 59 ½" x 4".

Johns' work was also involved in muddling art with life, imposing not only conventions of painting and odd objects upon his canvases, but also peculiar language tactics. In *Device Circle*, Johns pulls non-painting tactics and means of communication into painting. The canvas implicates language, rhetorical device, thought process, expressive procedure, and the artist's own history. What is particularly apparent in *Device Circle* is John's interest in rhetorical devices. Modernist painting was intended to reveal truth. By contrast, the riddles imbedded in Johns' *Device Circle* are quite deceptive. Essayist Harry Cooper wrote, "Artistic

devices carry the suspicion of manipulation, even deceit. Johns' has both."¹⁵ The word play, the irony, the agitation of painting conventions and its quizzical assemblage with objects seems to deliver a message that life experience is deceptive.



Figure 4. Jasper Johns, *Device Circle*, 1959, encaustic and collage on canvas with object, 40" x 40".

Twombly enriched his canvases with allusions to literature and history, gestures that were contrary to Greenberg's command that painting shed such allusion. 1955's *Academy* references writing and literary process through the seemingly endless scrawl of almost-legible words and letters. Where passages approach legibility, they are quickly obfuscated by scrawling revisions. Implied in this gesture is the procedure of painting, a procedure that in its futility cannot possibly arrive at an essential, self-contained form. Also implicit is revision, translation, and degradation

¹⁵ Harry Cooper, "Speak, Painting: Word and Device in Early Johns," in *October*, no. 127 (Winter 2009), 49-76.

in literary procedure. Museum of Modern Art Chief Curator Anne Tempkin writes that in *Academy*,

one makes out a letter or two here and there and then watches them deteriorate... This is interrupted by a few moments of legibility, in a number of block print FUCKs that embed themselves as auditory jolts within the composition. *Fuck* is a word often employed to deface a surface not meant to be written on.¹⁶

Academy implicates language, history, and auditory sensation alongside the language of Abstract Expressionism and Color Field painting. In doing so, *Academy* presents a heterogeneous mess of painting and non-painting allusions.



Figure 5. Cy Twombly, *Academy*, 1955, oil-based house paint, lead pencil, colored pencil, and crayon on canvas, 75 1/4" x 94 7/8".

¹⁶ Ann Tempkin, "Out of School: Ann Tempkin on Cy Twombly's *Academy*, 1955" in *Artforum*, vol. 49, no. 10 (Summer 2011), 345.

The work of Rauschenberg, Johns, and Twombly exhibit the waning in the mid-twentieth century of modernist ideologies, and the presence of a postmodern condition of complexity, confusion, and uncertainty. They seem to thrust forth a feeling of confusion and uncertainty, of discontinuity with the modern epoch. They shared sentiments of absurdity, confusion, and ambiguity with literature of the 1950s.

The line of painting that Rauschenberg, Johns, and Twombly helped to define continues in the twenty-first century. In his 2009 essay, “Painting Beside Itself,” David Joselit coins the term “transitive painting,” which he defines as a type of work that has the “capacity to hold in suspension the passages internal to the canvas, and those external to it.”¹⁷ He is concerned with a type of painting whose meaning has a relational dependence upon a network of cultural practices outside of the painting medium. In defining “transitive painting,” Joselit recounts Jutta Koether’s exhibition, *Lux Interior*, which displayed a single painted canvas, mounted on a floating wall on a raised platform, titled *Hot Rod (After Poussin)*. To accompany the painting, the artist performed several lectures, during which she engaged with the physical canvas as though it were a participant actor on the platform stage. Her performances “sutured” the painting’s internal qualities to an external performance involving history and language. In its entirety, the exhibition presents a confusing mix of elements and allusions. Its message – whatever it may be – is mired in the complex mixture of painted canvas, performance, history, and language.¹⁸ Koether’s work illustrates the transitive quality that is characteristic of much of today’s painting – a

¹⁷ David Joselit, “Painting Beside Itself,” in *Painting*, ed. Terry Myers (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2011), 220.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 218-21.

quality that seems to arise out of skepticism toward or distaste for the pretension of mannered styles and masterpieces. In the closing of his essay, Joselit writes, “transitivity is a form of translation: when it enters into networks, the body of painting is submitted to infinite dislocations, fragmentations, and degradations.”¹⁹ Transitive painting deconstructs the preconceptions about what a painting should be, and opens painting to endless material and conceptual possibilities.

In another 2009 essay titled “Provisional Painting,” critic Raphael Rubinstein wrote of a growing number of younger artists who are making works that “look casual, dashed-off, tentative, unfinished or self-cancelling.”²⁰ He reported on the growing tendency of younger painters to work under a directive of quantity of work over quality of finish. These painters dash out paintings restlessly, while eschewing the idea of a durable, finished work. The feeling, as Rubinstein puts it, is that painting’s rich and definitive history has rendered the prospect of painting a genuinely new masterpiece impossible. The work of “provisional” painters like Michael Krebber and Richard Aldrich seem restless and anxious. It is as though these painters are fervently surveying the broad surface of painting in hopes of finding a stone or two unturned. The anxiety indicated by this type of work is a reverberation of that mid-century break with modernism. As paradoxical as it seems, the “impossibility” of the durable, finished master painting actually appears to be opening new possibilities in the pursuit of painting.

¹⁹ Ibid., 222.

²⁰ Raphael Rubinstein, “Provisional Painting,” *Art In America*, May 4, 2009, under “Provisional Painting,” <http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/features/provisional-painting-raphael-rubinstein/> (accessed March 20, 2012).

It was eerily serendipitous to read the following passage from Rubinstein's February 2012 follow up, "Provisional Painting Part 2":

Some painters have been rediscovering doubt as an aspect of their medium, reclaiming Cezanne as an ancestor and nominating as their tutelary spirit Samuel Beckett, a writer who favored paintings where he found "no trace of one-upmanship."²¹

I had already identified doubt and uncertainty as key topics of my work. What I found most validating, however, was that I had already considered Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable* to be a very serviceable reference in characterizing my own project in painting. Spooky.

The Unnamable is an absurd monologue, written stream-of-consciousness style, in which an anonymous protagonist hopelessly laments insoluble existential problems. The prose is complicated and confusing. There are few paragraph breaks, and there is odd punctuation. Sentences are fragmentary. Truncated clauses curiously stack upon each other, often contradictory in their content, and separated only by commas. The narration proceeds by continuous proposal and negation, where the contradictions seem to stack upon each other *ad infinitum*. It almost has no other purpose than to confound the reader. But the book is not so disheartening upon its conclusion. The brooding pessimism that much of the novel evokes is negated by the final lines: "you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on."²²

²¹ Raphael Rubinstein, "Provisional Painting Part 2: To Rest Lightly On Earth," *Art In America*, February 1, 2012, under "Failing Better," <http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/features/provisional-painting-part-2/> (accessed March 20, 2012).

²² Samuel Beckett, *The Unnamable* (New York: Grove Press Inc., 1970), 179.

A 1962 note written by Gerhard Richter articulates the unexpectedly optimistic spirit embodied in the final words of Beckett's monologue:

Strange though this may sound, not knowing where one is going – being lost, being a loser – reveals the greatest possible faith and optimism, as against collective security and collective significance. To believe, one must have lost God; to paint, one must have lost art.²³

Faith in being lost seems to be the *modus operandi* of Josh Smith, a painter known for his exorbitant production. His paintings are composed through quick, economic gestures. He builds abstract compositions out of simple compositional devices like his name. But his output of paintings doesn't seem to proceed in any perceivable direction. His output instead piles up on itself. This (figurative) pile of images references its own production, the efforts of its maker, and historical gestures wrenched from the past to serve a project of pure amalgamation. I see something affecting in his use of proliferation to turn traditional imagistic painting into a sign for painting. His prolific output signifies someone lost in the project of painting, and his repetitious use of quirky tactics like using his name as a compositional structure over and over seems to relieve the paintings of their image-ness in order to indicate that his procedure is of equal, if not of greater, aesthetic significance to his images.

My painting production utilizes similar tactics of proliferation and of subordinating image to procedure. In producing the pictures, I utilized tactics deployed by historical and contemporary painters. For instance, the color palettes of all the Pictures are gleaned from reproductions of paintings of artists I research.²⁴

²³ Gerhard Richter, "Notes, 1962," in *The Daily Practice of Painting*, ed. Hans-Ulrich Obrist. (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1995), 15.

²⁴ The Pictures display color and compositional references to such painters as the aforementioned Rauschenberg, Johns, and Twombly, as well as Joan Miro, Philip Guston, Gerhard

Additionally, compositional tactics are gleaned from a language of painting spanning from early abstraction through modern and contemporary abstraction and figuration. This produces an array of images that reference varied and often disparate painting conventions. The collection of images proceeds perhaps nowhere. But in proceeding in no particular direction, the body of work is open to endless possibilities.

Past and Present

In my work, the tactic of proliferating historical allusions, painting or otherwise, and tangling them upon the surface of the work, disrupts and disorders notions of past and present. The surface of *Can you describe this ruckus?* relays disparate manners of composing images, and it additionally trespasses the wall between a disclosed past and an open present.

In “The Problem Perspective,” Ann Goldstein discusses the aspect of historical trespassing in Martin Kippenberger’s work. Kippenberger is, she writes, “an artist who sought to disturb and destabilize the official histories,” citing his 1984 painting *With the Best Will in the World, I Can’t See a Swastika*.²⁵ The painting displays a tangled composition of sharply angled geometric forms, many of them just on the cusp of forming into a swastika. At that time in Germany, the swastika was a forbidden image. This was a state-ordered effort to alleviate the distress of the

Richter, Albert Oehlen, Martin Kippenberger, Dieter Roth, Karl Wirsum, Richard Hawkins, and Josh Smith, among others.

²⁵ Ann Goldstein, “The Problem Perspective,” in *Martin Kippenberger: The Problem Perspective*, ed. Ann Goldstein (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2008), 42.

German psyche, by disclosing the signs of its atrocities to the past. Kippenberger, writes artist Jutta Koether,

holds a mirror up to the official treatment of history, which tries to repress the signs of the past by prohibiting them. [He] calls into question the history lesson which makes the swastika taboo. He disentangles any certainty about the right way of dealing with the past.²⁶

Kippenberger's disruption of official history is a political statement about state control of history. But it is also a commentary on a modernist cultural position that wishes to extricate the past from the present, one that attempts to forget the past as part of the makeup of the present. This position is a denial of the historical complexities, disparities, and contradictory forces that make up the present. Kippenberger's work makes these complexities visible. In terms of the history of painting, Foucault wrote that painting now "unearth[s] an essential aspect of our culture: every painting now belongs within the massive surface of painting."²⁷

I am interested in Kippenberger's ability to wrest disclosed, historical facts into the open present. *Can you describe this ruckus?* is full of disparate ways of painting, many of which allude to painting conventions of the past. The work trespasses the boundary between past and present, and points out that every historical "fact" belongs to the massive surface of the present. In this way, I compare it to Vargas Llosa's *The Green House*, which tells parallel narratives that take place decades apart and suggests a perplexing and interwoven past and present. The present is full of discrepancies, indeed.

²⁶ Jutta Koether, "Under the Influence," *Flash Art*, no. 133 (April 1987): 47-48, quoted in Ann Goldstein, "The Problem Perspective," in *Martin Kippenberger: The Problem Perspective*, ed. Ann Goldstein (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2008), 45.

²⁷ Michel Foucault, "Fantasia of the Library," in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977): 92-93, quoted in Douglas Crimp, "On the Museums Ruins," in *Robert Rauschenberg*, ed. Branden Joseph (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002), 63.



Figure 6. Martin Kippenberger, *Ich kann beim besten Willen kein Hakenkreuz entdecken (With the Best Will in the World, I Can't See a Swastika)*, 1984, oil and plastic on canvas, 63" x 52 3/8".

Image and Object

With his palette paintings, Josh Smith explores the object/image dichotomy in painting. Smith literally utilized stretched canvases as palettes for mixing paints in the production of other paintings. In their original orientation, they were horizontal flatbeds on which he collected the procedures of painting. In their display, however, they are hung vertically on the wall. This ninety-degree shift from horizontal to vertical orientation is a direct riff on Rauschenberg's flatbed picture plane. Smith's

canvases, however, surprisingly retain the gestural quality of his other abstract works. Their *appearance* as formally composed images in the vein of Abstract Expressionism undermines their object quality, and yet their stability as images is undermined by the announcement of their original orientation and function as objects.

Smith's Palette Paintings dance the line between image and object. My Catchalls similarly flirt with this dichotomy. Their original functions were as wall coverings on which I wiped the remaining paint from my brushes. The extraneous drips, spills, and color studies were collected on this wall and partial floor covering. In this way, they originally functioned as objects, providing an index of my studio procedure. In displaying them, however, I stretch these 9' x 12' canvases over 8' x 11' stretcher frames, a gesture that references the traditional framing of imagistic painting. Their object-ness is undermined by this gesture of imagistic display. Yet at the same time, in their indexical quality and the evidence of their usage, they still reference the studio wall, and maintain some of their object quality. Are they images or are they objects? I am not sure.



Figure 7. Josh Smith, *Untitled*, 2006, oil on canvas, 20" x 16".

Proliferation

Michael Krebber, like Josh Smith, uses proliferation as a strategy. Yet his compositions have a quality dissimilar to Smith's in that the bulk of his paintings display such an economic use of material that they appear under-treated and largely unfinished. His canvases look like lost attempts. He appears to stop almost as soon as he starts, and then moves on to something else. "Krebber never stops stopping,

always repeats this,” wrote critic John Kelsey.²⁸ It’s obvious his painting is critical of the notion of stable masterpieces. All the stoppage in his oeuvre serves to “distance [him]self from any ideology of progress,” wrote Kelsey.²⁹ His work suspends productive norms. Like Josh Smith, he allows his works to pile rather than progress. His repetitive gesture of stopping is an act of negation. It is a refusal to find a path, to progress toward a specific goal. It contradicts a culture obsessed with progress. It disassociates painting from conventional notions of what painting should be, and opens an inquiry into what painting can be.

Aporia

He brought together ideas and worldviews, which in real life were absolutely estranged and deaf to one another, and forced them to quarrel.

—Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*

Painting today seems an impossible task, as though its essence were locked up in a bygone era, and there were nothing left to do today but scour the scene for uncovered bits that might once again open painting to new possibilities. The contradictory and irresolute aspect of some contemporary painting has the ability to induce confusion and utter loss in an audience. Artists Krebber and Beckett, for instance, each deliver an absurd and irretrievable impasse. Their works evoke what a literary author or a philosopher would call *aporia*.

²⁸ John Kelsey, “Stop Painting Painting,” in *Painting*, ed Terry Myers (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2011), 181.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 182.

Aporia, from the Greek *aporos*, literally, “impassible,” refers to being at a loss, being uncertain as to how to proceed. It is often evoked by authors in order to “arouse curiosity in their audience[s]” by raising seemingly insoluble problems.³⁰ The wayward mix of style and convention in *Can you describe this ruckus?* is meant to allow for a meditation on the material and conceptual possibilities of painting.

David Lodge describes aporia as “a favorite trope of deconstructionist critics, because it epitomizes the way in which all texts undermine their own claims to a determinate meaning.”³¹ In postmodern thought, truth will never be finally determined. As human experience perpetually changes, it does not proceed in specific directions, but rather grows in an entanglement of complicated contexts.

Aporia is the theme of *Can you describe this ruckus?* The conventions that have been set up for conversation are at such odds with one another that the conversation does not have any logical way to proceed toward any tenable resolution.

As Lodge wrote of aporia’s function in literature, “The discourse [in the work] accretes rather than proceeds, by a kind of self cancellation, one step forwards and one step back...”³² *Accrete* is a term familiar to botanists used to describe a type of growth that appears to accumulate in a directionless manner. Think of the “piles” of work of Smith or Krebber that I described earlier. To proceed would imply movement toward resolution. Thus a situation that evokes aporia does not proceed, but grows by accretion until it becomes complexly entangled in and upon itself. Authors who use aporia in their work appreciate complexity over the trappings of resolution.

³⁰ Lodge, 220.

³¹ Lodge, 222.

³² *Ibid.*, 221.

What is the worth of aporia? A look toward the Socratic dialogues will illuminate its value. To his interlocutors' reasonable theses, Socrates expressed contradictory, but equally reasonable antitheses. Through aporetic discourse, he showed that doubt is an attribute of the wise, and is especially useful in making sense of a heterogeneous and messy world. Socrates exhibits the wisdom of doubt:

I am wiser than this man; it is likely that neither of us knows anything worthwhile, but he thinks he knows something when he does not, whereas when I do not know, neither do I think I know; so I am likely to be wiser than he to this small extent, that I do not think I know what I do not know.³³

Aporia reveals that simple truths are fictions. It reveals an existential condition in which man must reckon with the multiplicity of contradictory qualities of his existence in society. Aporia reveals the futility of modernist ideologies. It reveals that there is no grand narrative. This is not tragic or pessimistic, however. Aporia can impel man to engage with the contradictory nature of his existence, helping him to see the significance of contradiction, and enabling him to be aware of his social situation, and therefore capable of effecting positive change. In *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Simone de Beauvoir wrote about the role of art in a contradictory and existentially ambiguous world:

As for art, we have already said that it should not attempt to set up idols... Art reveals the transitory as an absolute; and as the transitory existence is perpetuated through the centuries, art too, through the centuries must perpetuate this never-to-be-finished revelation.³⁴

Aporia reveals that difference and contradiction are the only undeniable truths of the world. Contradiction is manifested in the work of the artists surveyed in this essay,

³³ Plato, *Five Dialogues: Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Meno, Phaedo*, trans. G. M. A. Grube. (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co, 1981), 27.

³⁴ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (New York: Citadel Press, 2000), 80.

mine included. *Can you describe this ruckus?* displays a multiplicity of contradictory painting conventions. The negation of one traditional convention of painting with another is meant to lay painting bare, to uncover the problematics of painting as a visualization of the problematics of art, thought, and life.

3: The Value of Contradiction

My fascination with images open 24 hrs. is based on the complex interlocking of disparate visual facts heated pool that have no respect for grammar. The form then Denver 39 is second hand to nothing. The work then has a chance to electric service become its own cliché. This is the inevitable fate fair ground of any inanimate object freightways by this I mean anything that does not have inconsistency as a possibility built-in.

–Robert Rauschenberg, “Note on Painting (1963)”

The modernist thinker conceives of life in the order of nature. The postmodernist thinker conceives of life in the disorder of culture. The Rauschenberg heritage of painting, one that shifted from painting nature to culture, is a heritage that invites us to express in painting the disorderly quality of life. In one sense, the value of contradiction is the value of disorder and inconsistency. Jasper Johns expressed the value of an inconsistent focus in a 1964 interview:

In focusing your eye or your mind, if you focus in one way, your actions will tend to be of one nature; if you focus another way, they will be different. I prefer work that appears to come out of a changing focus – not just one relationship or even a number of them but constantly changing and shifting relationships to things in terms of focus.³⁵

Seeking Contradiction

In the same 1964 interview, Johns stated, “often... one is very single minded and pursues one particular point; often, one is blinded to the fact that there is another

³⁵ Jasper Johns, Interview with G. R. Swenson (1964), in *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art*, ed. Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 323.

way to see what is there.”³⁶ Some artists combat this blindness by displaying multiple positions of focus in their works. They seek contradiction. As discussed in the beginning of this essay, Mario Vargas Llosa and Jonathan Lasker are two artists who have displayed disparate positions in order to illuminate the contradictory nature of life experience. Their works reveal the shallowness of the single-minded position.

Richard Hawkin’s 2007 exhibition *Of Two Minds, Simultaneously* surveys a decade and a half of works that, in their mix of heterogeneous styles, mediums and subjects, display a sense of transiency and departure. In the exhibition catalogue, Ann Demeester uses the words “ambiguity,” “duplicity,” and “bastardization,” to characterize the ways in which Hawkins produces such a heterogeneous mix of work. She writes,

He is interested in fluid borders... mixing totally diverse and sometimes contrasting elements. With Hawkins, nothing – whether it be gender or sexual identity or the supposed opposition between profundity and frivolity – is “pure A” or “pure B.”³⁷

Can you describe this ruckus? is intended to display a multi-focused studio practice, and the contradictions such a practice sustains. The equivocal display of two contradictory kinds of work – the Pictures and the Catch-alls – provides absolutely no resolution to the discrepant viewpoints that the project describes. In providing no resolution, the project evades stagnation.

Painters like Kippenberger, Smith, Krebber, and Hawkins appreciate contradictory maneuvers. They see generative potential in contradiction. It’s as though if they were to settle on one manner or idea, they would feel stagnant.

³⁶ Ibid., 323-24.

³⁷ Ann Demeester, Introduction to *Richard Hawkins: Of Two Minds, Simultaneously*, ed. Christopher Muller (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2009), 2.

Working in multiple ways has the potential to produce problems, and those problems create new possibilities that adherence to a stagnant paradigm could never open.

Contradiction: A Boon

Being multi-minded has its benefits. Keith Johnstone, author of the seminal improv theatre text *Impro*, wrote of the creative benefits of being open to multiple ideas:

Regarded in isolation, an idea may be quite insignificant, and venturesome in the extreme, but it may acquire importance from an idea that follows it; perhaps in collation with other ideas which seem equally absurd, it may be capable of furnishing a very serviceable link.³⁸

The problems and contradictions present in the mind of a multi-focused individual are not flaws. Rather, they foster an awareness of one's situation and promote possibilities for alternative action. This sort of multi-focus can be observed in improvisational theatre. Improv trains actors to be compelled by problematic situations. Its main tenets include promoting acceptance of the problems that arise from an unscripted cooperation of multiple minds, using those problems to generate a story, and subsequently posing more problems to keep the story vital and suspenseful.³⁹

These generative, problem-oriented tactics of improvisational theatre are also effective for social progress. Inspired by the work of radical educator Paulo Freire,

³⁸ Keith Johnstone, *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre* (New York: Routledge, 1987), 79.

³⁹ This is based on my excursion into improv theatre in 2011-2012. I took improv classes over the course of several months, learning the tactics and tenets of improvisational theatre. I found these tactics very serviceable in analyzing the value of contradiction in my own studio practice.

Augusto Boal reveals, in his book *Theatre of the Oppressed*, the oppressive tactics in traditional theatre and how they relate to the reality of oppressive social circumstances. He proposes the use of improvisational tactics in order to turn the theatre into what one might call a radical classroom, where audience and the actors alike are agents of positive and generative change in social situations. Boal comments on the necessity of contradiction in theatre and society alike:

Plays that are too narrowly directed toward a single purpose run the risk of contradicting a fundamental principle of theater, which is conflict, contradiction, or some type of clash or combat... Objects of determined social functions, by coming into contradiction, develop a system of forces that directs the movement of dramatic action.⁴⁰

Contradiction is a boon for generative progress, not a flaw in our systems of knowledge. My prior discussion of aporia pointed out that aporia makes visible the contradictory conditions of man's existence. It can foster in man a greater awareness of his social situation. Artists and social activists alike should recognize in contradiction its capacity to generate a greater understanding of the dynamics of a pluralistic world, and they should use that understanding to envision new possibilities.

Posing Problems

The role of art in a contradictory and morally ambiguous world is to reveal the multiplicity, the disparity, and the relativity of our positions. Art should inform the world not by providing answers, but instead by revealing problems and asking

⁴⁰ Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, trans. Charles A McBride and Maria-Odilia McBride (New York: Theatre Communications Group, Inc., 1979), 58, 79.

questions. Modernist ideology has proven to be insufficient in determining the “right way.” The only tenable tactics we have for understanding our complicated, multi-faceted world are our ability to constantly shift our perceptual foci, and our willingness to perpetually pose problems.

These are tactics of social progress. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire proposed a radical “problem posing” education in which

people develop their power to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world *with which* and *in which* they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation... Problem posing education involves a constant unveiling of reality... and bases itself on creativity and stimulates true reflection and action upon reality, thereby responding to the vocation of persons as beings who are authentic only when engaged in inquiry and creative transformation.⁴¹

Problems are vital. Contradiction is indispensable. These are aspects of art and education that open questions, foster possibilities, and fight repressive, ideological truths. When Josh Smith states, “we want to learn from the world, not teach the world,” he speaks from the perspective of the artist, teacher, and student alike. Artists and educators should not provide answers, rather they should facilitate the questions that reveal the transitory as absolute, and render visible the equal intelligence of all. Contradiction is truth.

⁴¹ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 2000), 81-84.

LIST OF WORKS INCLUDED IN THE THESIS EXHIBITION

- A. Patrick Driscoll, *Can you describe this ruckus?*, painting installation (three 8' x 11' oil paintings on stretched canvas; twenty-seven 47" x 34" oil paintings on unstretched housepainter's canvas dropcloth; pen; staples; supporting wall), 9' x 40' x 8' overall, 2012.

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