

## Future Present (by Tausif Noor, 2018)

In a 1963 letter to Robert Kelly, the experimental filmmaker Stan Brakhage writes of the challenges he encountered during the production of his film *Mothlight* (1963). This difficulty was, in Brakhage's words, engendered by the creation of a whole new film *technique*, a new niche into which few of my previous *working* techniques will function adequately enough to leave me free to be myself, to be, myself, adequately functioning instrument for the film's simple passage thru me ... technical considerations, as conscious thoughts, making me be by myself, eventually *beside* myself, at every turn.

Brakhage initially attempted to follow the film's eponymous insects while they were alive, to little success. It was only after he noticed the detritus of moth wings across the flicker of lightbulbs that he thought to paste them – along with blades of grass and flower petals – that the impetus for animating the ephemera of life began. The resultant film, four minutes of flickering images, is shot through with this found foliage, light pouring across veins and cracks, illuminating the interstices of life. In their rapid succession, the images appear as abstractions, an array of colors patchworked across the screen. Time moves quickly and before we're able to structure in our minds the various fragments we've witnessed, the film is over.



Video still from "In See" (for Terry Riley's *In C*), approx. 70 minutes, 2017

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What is a painting? What can it do? How does a painting behave?

Nitin Mukul's video based work is a paen to painting's possibilities. Simultaneously, it is a reminder of its limits. Abstraction is both its underlying framework and the point of departure for new modalities of seeing. In these works, surface and screen are one and the same, guiding the eye toward depth and form. Vision becomes a mode of exercise, rather than a given sensation. We, as viewers, work toward the accumulation of color and light to create the image field. We pause, and take up the task again. We look, and we look longer. We train ourselves to look deeper.

This, of course, takes time, and what better than *time based media* for the flexing of an ocular muscle, the strain of visual contemplation? One could say: a painting. High modernism avowed the painting with an inimitable prestige, based on principles of phenomenology that privileged subjective consciousness and indexical mark making. (The market, in its own way, had long before done the same). In turn, these principles were based on the conditions of industrial modernity: the factory clock, the camera, the machine.

To look at a painting is to experience time in a particular way. To look *closely* at a painting is to experience time in an entirely different way. How does a painting structure time? In its stillness and material physicality, a painting is continuous: Luce Irigaray argues that unlike language, *painting makes time simultaneous* in its simultaneous presentation of various tenses. John Berger posits that paintings are "prophecies received from the past, prophecies about *what the spectator is seeing in front of the painting at that moment*." Paintings were lauded for their

symbolic timelessness – for depicting allegory, history, still lives, moments frozen in their narrative heft, impressing upon their viewers the weight of their didactic significance. With the advent of abstraction and expressionism and new modalities of painting and style, the timeless was replaced with the ephemeral: the drip, the stain, the splatter, each type of mark indexing *how the painting was made* with its reception.

The labor of painting is process of accumulation: the drips, the stains, the splatters, all build and coalesce, cohere and compose. A painting's completion is an arbitrary point on a shifting register. To cite Berger once more: "The long or short process of painting a picture is the process of constructing the future moments when it will be looked at. In reality, despite the painter's ideal, these moments cannot be entirely determined." While a video occupies a set period of elapsed time, painting extends ever toward the future. Nitin Mukul's works extend the practice of ambient video painting, furthering its form by looking back on the process of painting itself. If paintings tend toward an indeterminate future, Mukul's videos elucidate how the future is made possible: the present moment of watching a painting become undone.

The artist begins by layering paint in sheets of ice, freezing each layer of acrylic and oil so that they build in layers of color. Placing the frozen mass outside and allowing it to melt according to natural weather conditions, Mukul films the process with a tight zoom. The approach is processual and meticulous, but the resultant product is entropic, beyond the artist's control: as layers melt and disintegrate, they seep into one another. New layers are made visible, and colors and forms emerge in a continuously shifting plane. The distinction between foreground and background initially blurs, and then sharpens as layers disintegrate; this disintegration allows the viewers to ascertain shifts in light and fluctuations in the transparency of discrete surfaces.

In this meticulously crafted hybrid form between painting and video, *surface* and *depth* are freed from their conceptual restraints in traditional painting and situated along the same register. *Crater* (2013) invokes the craggy surfaces and rough texture of its titular object. Charcoal gray, deep violet, and dark blue crevices invoke extraterrestrial assemblages of rocks and dust and their crumbling disintegration over the video's duration approximates the forms of planets and astral bodies accessed primarily, if not solely, through images. Yet, if the work tends toward a teleology of disintegration, this thought is buoyed by the knowledge that its form is also endlessly reproducible, a knowledge that is relayed by the work itself. Mukul's processual format invokes the labor of painting by undoing its results, the slow accretion of material stripping down to the elemental forms of light, texture, color.

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In his painting practice, Mukul grounds himself among the architectural elements of the urban landscape. Cataloguing and interpreting the hybridity of Delhi's Islamic architecture in the series of works *I Woke Up Somewhere Else*, Mukul interprets edifices through a distinctly prismatic lens, refracting buildings through puddles and disco balls, resulting in a psychedelic urban



environment. His recent work applies this focus from the built environment to the natural one. During a 2016 residency at the Lehrer Architecture Studio, Mukul developed *Confluence*, a body of work examining the history of the Los Angeles River. Tracing the history of the river from its home to indigenous populations to its contemporary use by some of Los Angeles' homeless populations, Mukul considers the material dimensions of his own practice – ice and its flows, degradation and its effects – through the lens of the natural environment.



*Fifteen Views*, oil and acrylic on canvas, each panel 10" x 12", 2016

In *Fifteen Views*, a series of acrylic panels rendered in a variety of lurid pinks, blues, oranges, and yellows, the textures of the river emanate from murky, swirled backgrounds. In *Eddy and Swirl* (2016), Mukul balances line and form against the atmospheric, cloudy texture. Shapes appear and recede, resulting in a work that asks the viewer to consider the conditions of nature phenomenologically; in doing so, Mukul suggests that the fluxing, fluctuating elements of the environment are directly linked to external – human – effects. *Glacial Harmony* (2016) depicts these anthropological conceits more directly: cool blues and thick impastos of white are spotted with sections of black. These negative spaces, *horror vacui* of climate change, appear starkly flat against the textured mounts of white and light blue and index the rapid pace at which environmental degradation threatens ecosystems that have existed for millennia.

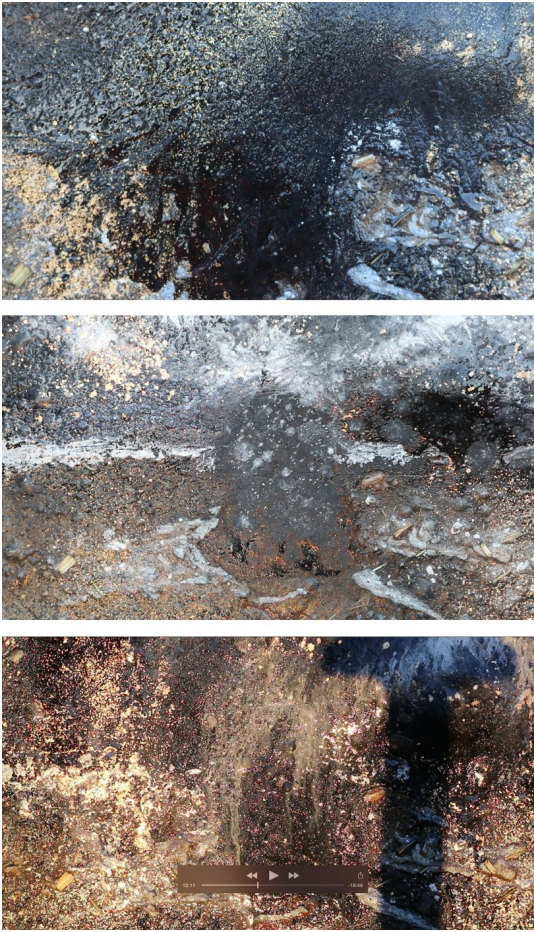


*Glacial Harmony*, oil and acrylic on canvas, 24" x 10", triptych, 2016

In an interview with P. Adams Sitney, Stan Brakhage recalls editing his film *Sirius Remembered* (1959), in which he documented the gradual decay of the family dog after its death. Brakhage struggled with depicting this decay on film. When his wife and collaborator Jane sees these sections, she is repulsed, and Brakhage realizes that her reaction relates directly to the experience of engagement, the first time that he recognized that he “wanted an enclosed form which would not engage people. That decay section should be edited so finely and structured so beautifully that one would not have to get rid of the dirt.”

In *Lux Inchoate* (2016) Mukul does not get rid of the dirt, choosing instead to consider it deeply, to think of its life cycles, to probe its material dimensions. Like his other video-painting hybrids, the work is durational, consisting of ice, acrylic paint, tea, charcoal, and metallic powder. Here, the artist has allowed for natural light and shadows to cascade over the shimmering surface of the ice, through which particles of silt and dirt move, at first slowly and incrementally, then picking up their pace, sliding across the surface. Sunlight allows the metallic particles to glimmer and shine, and in their luminescence, these particles are redolent, but not referential of Marilyn Minter’s slick, glittery, enamel paintings and Stephen Shore’s photographs of ephemera. It is ironic that Mukul’s deep focus on the natural can recall images entrenched in consumerist material culture – that a meditative, ambient video can bring to mind painted surfaces and photographs – but this is a testament to Mukul’s visual appetite and appreciation for contemporary culture.





Lux Inchoate, sequential stills, 2016

While Mukul's experimentation with the ambient video form informs much of his recent practice, his work is the result of a keen awareness of the material and its possibilities. *Lux Inchoate*, with its singular attention to dirt and grit, the slick, translucent surfaces of ice, recalls, in its animation of inert material, what philosopher Jane Bennett refers to as vibrant matter. Challenging the notion that lifeless matter is simply passive, Bennett posits that objects have their own agency and efficacy and are capable of "thing-power": the ability to behave, per Bruno Latour, as "actants". Bennett's proposition is both philosophical and political, as this conception of thing-power and vibrant materialism inflects not only the arrangement of our subjectivity, but the organization of social order. Our predilection with the destruction of earth is hubristic, writes Bennett, and only serves to hinder our understanding of non-human agents around us. Bennett's political project is to bear witness to vital materialities that flow through and around us. Though the movements and effectivity of stem cells, electricity, food, trash, and metals are crucial to political life (and human life per se), almost as soon as they appear in public (often at first by disrupting human projects or expectations), these activities and powers are represented

as human mood, action, meaning, agenda or ideology. This quick substitution sustains the fantasy that “we” are really in charge of all of those “its”

The thorough attention that Bennett devotes to these non-living actants is an act of expanding the possibilities of understanding life *as it is lived*. In attempting to imbue matter with an agency of its own, Bennett reorients the conception of the world around us to us *within it*.

Mukul’s slow, ambient consideration of the ecology of the Los Angeles riverbed in *Lux Inchoate*, replete with the natural effects of sunlight operates in a similar fashion: rather than animating inert material per se, Mukul manipulates the viewer’s attention – their conception of the image before them – to consider more deeply the ways in which matter animates itself. The absence of living matter sharpens the attention to the ways in which inert material pulses with life. Matter is at once both plastic and resilient; it is subject to change, and it changes that which surrounds it. Matter is both the product of time, and time is subject to the intricacies of matter. Mukul does not claim to animate this matter, but rather, allows matter to achieve its own agency. He bears witness to matter’s potential.

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What is a painting? What can it do? How does a painting behave?

We look at paintings to pass the time. In the process, we discover the shifts of time and space. We look, and we look again. We look deeper, and we look further.

Straddling the worlds of painting and video, Nitin Mukul smoothly evades the limitations of both, and breaks open the possibilities of these mediums to turn our attention to not only the images he has created and placed before us, but to the material of the world around us. We look inward to our present, and find ourselves leaning into the future.

Video link: <http://nitinmukul.com/artwork/4345944-Crater.html>