

Towards Biocentrism through Abstraction

A Master's Thesis Statement by Annabelle Mona

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Abstract:

This paper relates my painting process to my research into the relationship between humans and nature. I discuss my role as an artist whose content is inspired by biological, atmospheric and geological forms through the lens of contemporary criticism of anthropocentrism. Through this lens, I examine my relationship to control in the process of the development of my images. Like contemporary painters, Carrie Moyer and Thomas Nozkowski, I set specific constraints in order to work intuitively. I focus on my comparison of marks made with brush, drawing, and printed marks as a method for inverting viewer expectations about the timeline of fabrication. Playing with color principles of atmospheric perspective, which are traditionally tools for creating representational landscape painting, my paintings explore methods of breaking the pictorial plane by inverting subject and object. This inversion is likened to a metaphor in French philosopher, Bruno Latour's discussion of the role reversal between humans and nature in an attempt to understand the climate crisis.

In June of 2023, the summer between my two years of graduate school I wrote this into my journal:

In many ways our kinship with animals is a manifestation of deep existential loneliness. An uneasiness that roots itself and increases with capitalist and anthropocentric modes of relating to the Earth. Although our identities as consumers, users, colonizers predisposes us to interacting with life's rich abundance of animal and plant life as managerial, we feel adrift and awash in anomie, displeasure with ourselves and loneliness. As if the vast universe calls us to reckon with our solitude. Our relationship to the natural world is a quest for the type of knowledge that lies firmly outside of the type of scientific knowledge production humans are able to measure. But no relationship is perfect. We are constantly realizing our own negligence and forgetting lessons we supposedly already learned from the past. There is nothing inherently wrong with who we are as a species and there is nothing inherently great about us either. We are not exceptional. Artmaking is a way of addressing this deep vulnerability in the human condition.

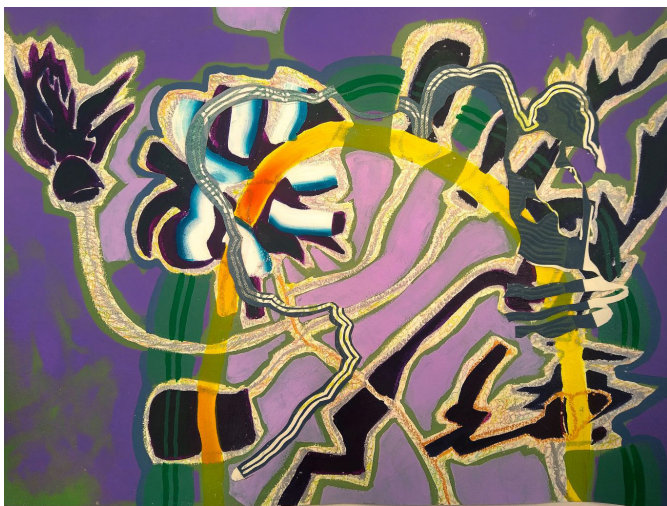
The purpose of this paper is to relate the formal aspects of my painting research to a broader metaphor about inversion of subject and object. This inversion of a subject and an object is likened to contemporary philosophical texts which theorize against the notion of anthropocentrism; that human history is background, not foreground, to natural history.

During a lecture I attended at the Tang Teaching Museum, Paula Wilson stated that the best art has “the ability to deliver unintentional resonances in the work beyond what is rational”. I find these resonances in abstract or semi-abstract paintings which conceal the timeline of fabrication. I am interested in questions about perception of distance both implied through compositional choices on the flat surface of a rectilinear canvas, and explicitly through scale in a large site-specific installation. These radical shifts in scale in my thesis show are meant to engage with the museum architecture in a symbiotic relationship to the way I make my work.

I. Process

My process is shaped by setting specific artistic constraints that inform a series of intuitive, quick, reactive decisions. Setting these constraints ahead of time allows my intuitive decisions to be loose, and to follow the internal logic of the structure. I chose to work this way because I became interested in paintings by Carrie Moyer, Thomas Nozkowski, and Chris Martin. These artists (amongst others) inspired me to experiment with medium, composition and color in an abstract, or semi-abstract pictorial language.¹²

I am attracted to compositions that appear idiosyncratic and yet succeed in creating a boldness and subliminal intimacy with the viewer. Something about the slightly odd-ball color relationships and the way that formal elements are arranged haphazardly belies a casual familiarity. Most importantly, it looks like the artist inverted time, making their deliberate moves appear unplanned.



Annabelle Mona
Violet Weed Collage, 2023
Acrylic and Linocut Collage on Paper
18 x 24 in

¹ I found that working on a specific size of paper, 18" by 24" watercolor paper allowed me to release inhibitions about whether the painting would be "good" or not and freely work on multiple paintings at a time. I explore multiple iterations of the same composition and variations on a theme, which is a process that I borrowed from printmaking.

² "Violet Weed Collage" and "Burgundy and Green Weed Collage" are two paintings which explore the same composition.

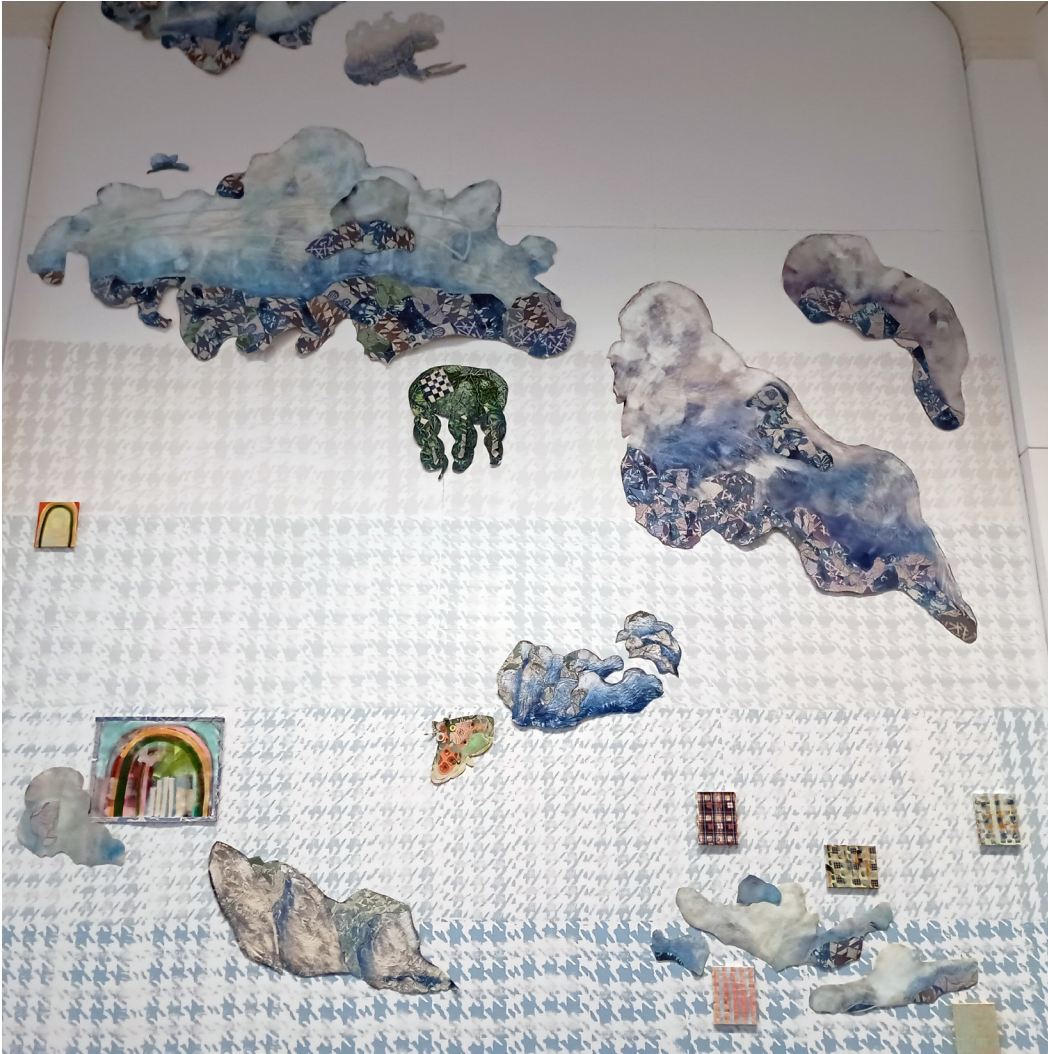
In "Violet Weed Collage" I made a contour drawing of the top of a weed in my backyard while sitting on the porch with my dog. This drawing is repeated in "Burgundy and Green Weed Collage". I made a series of intuitive decisions based on the interaction of each color as I built the layers.³

As the painting sat on the floor of my studio, I worked on other collage projects. One morning, I came into my studio and noticed that I had inadvertently dropped a piece of cut-up linocut print onto the the surface and I glued this piece into place. When I look at this painting, my eyes trace across the arch in the image, the lino appears to seep into the background in some places and push itself forward in others. This addition of a reductive mark allows me to play with the timeline in which the piece unfolds to the viewer, and obfuscates the origins as a primary or finishing mark.



Annabelle Mona
Burgundy and Green Weed, 2023
Acrylic and Linocut Collage on Paper
18 x 24 in

³ Although my color decisions are intuitive in the process of making a painting, they are informed by my observations of the psychological effects of certain relationships. I make studies which are described in David Hornung's *Color: a Workshop for Artists and Designers* and Josef Albers' *Interaction of Color*. These studies are mini challenges such as "make the same color appear as two different colors", or "create a palette of four colors that vary in hue, value and saturation and explore them in different arrangements in the same composition". I imagine this is similar to the way an improvisational musician may study scales in order to sharpen their technique and summon their intuition during performance.



Annabelle Mona
Installation View of *Tempus Fugit*, 2024
Latex paint on drywall
Acrylic, collaged pieces of linocut printed canvas,
buttons and oil pastel on canvas

The pattern painted background employed in my installation, “Tempus Fugit” is a repeated gesture made with a classic latex paint roller which I modified to create a houndstooth pattern. In order to install the pattern, a painter makes a repeated gesture down the wall once without rolling over the same area again.

The complete visual field created by the summation of each roll next to each other is an experimentation on using the “lost” information in the print as part of the pattern. The “clouds” were developed from photos and drawings I made of cloud patterns. The size and scale of

each cloud, and the proximity and placement of each element, are meant to engage with the perceptual illusion of distance.⁴

⁴ Tempus Fugit is from the Latin term for “time is fleeting”. It refers to my perception of the brevity of time during graduate school. The installation itself was conceived during a visit to the campus before I enrolled. I remember how I reacted to the swooping high arched ceilings and wanted to make this installation to emphasize the opportunistic feeling I had during my time in graduate school which was (in a sense) constantly framed by these large arches which are repeated in the architecture of the University of Albany campus.

II. Development of Imagery and Content

My work walks the line between representation and abstraction. Many of my works resemble atmospheric phenomena such as rainbows and clouds, vegetal, floral, grass, or biomorphic entities subsumed by grid-like patterns. While drawing in my backyard, staring at grass, trees and clouds I contemplate my relationship with these entities. As a human, I think that I bring structure to chaos, but in actuality these things exist outside and independently of me. I am not a requirement to their design. They follow an internal logic which simply exists and survives despite constant interruption and intervention by an esurient species.

In her book, *Abundant Earth*, Eileen Crist posits the argument that anthropocentrism is embedded into culture in the way language denotes and categorizes non-humans and nature as the objective, neutral subject matter, the background to which humanity's foreground exists. For example the terms "livestock", "wilderness", or even "landscape":

The concept of resources not only foregrounds instrumentalism-the lens of viewing things as useful and profitable- but being general, contentless, and spiritless, it enables instrumentalism to engulf the entire reality field. Resources is a label that can be foisted on anything: soil, water, animals, minerals, rivers, forests, grasslands, and even extraterrestrial territories like the moon and other planetary bodies. It casts a blanket of inertness or gross materiality over the substance of the world, whose aliveness and self-integrity are denied or shunted into irrelevancy.

Crist's writing makes clear that animism, the concept that plants, animals and the inorganic all have the concept of soul or spirit is actually the precondition for life on Earth. It is humanity's self centeredness evidenced through linguistic terms which presupposes that these things do not. We can only reach this state of understanding through empathy by suspending our belief that we are supremely intelligent beings.

The heaviness of these proclamations underpins my interest in contemplation of natural phenomena. The Climate Crisis is an event that is taking place on such a massive scale it is hard for me to rationalize my own actions as an individual. I seek solace in accepting a lack of control and celebrating the creative act because it unites us with the activities of other animals.¹

Meditating on my own creative act inspired me to focus on moments of serendipity in my studio which are seemingly out of my own control, such as the linocut piece falling on top of my weed painting. My meditation on this moment led me to develop imagery that extols serendipity symbolically: such as rainbows, intensely white thunderheads, snow, sunbeams, wildflowers and beautifully patterned moths.



Annabelle Mona
Picnic Tablecloth Flowers, 2023
Acrylic and oil pastel on paper
18 x 24 inches

¹ I am thinking of Gaston Bachelard's discussion of building nests and collecting shells in "The Poetics of Space".



Annabelle Mona
Four Lifer, 2023
 Acrylic on paper
 18 x 24 in

In “Four Lifer”, a composition based on the chance acquisition of a four-leaf clover, the composition is an exploration not of painting an object but of painting through an object. I mean that the perceived background, the very light muted green appears to be the neutral context while the white of the paper, which is still visible between the blue pastel gridding, becomes foregrounded.



Thomas Nozkowski
Untitled. 1990
 Oil on Canvas

Similarly, in “Untitled”, Thomas Nozkowski paints around the very light, muted yellow with a darker brown and more saturated green. Nozkowski rarely titled a work, relying heavily on the viewer to bring their own associations to his biomorphic shapes. I relate to his subject matter as both of us are (in his case were) avid hikers that are inspired by the interaction between organic growing forms and rectilinear, constructed ones.²



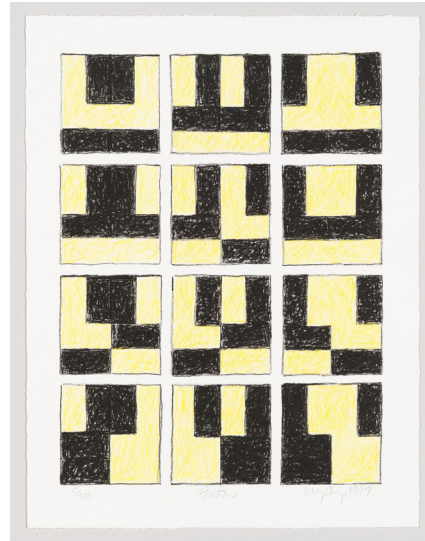
Carrie Moyer
Cloud Comb For Georgia, 2015
 Acrylic, Flashe on canvas
 72 x 60 in

In Carrie Moyer’s painting, “Cloud Comb for Georgia”, Moyer employs color mechanics, compositional framing, and surface treatment to invert foreground and background. The flat, muted blue background at first glance feels as though it is behind all of the other elements. On the lower right side of the composition, the blue is seemingly on top of the fluid crimson glaze. The glaze dried on the surface of the blue which she also painted previous to the glaze. The redundancy in that sentence is intentional. It is to make you contemplate

² In both “Four Lifer” and “Untitled”, the background shape, a lighter, less saturated tone which is perceived as the background becomes foreground as a recognizable shape. The mechanics of this reversal depend on two things: first, the viewer’s recognition of a subject in the contextualized object of the space around it; and second, the way that hue, value and saturation affect our perception of that object. Warmer, more saturated colors tend to progress towards the viewer, presenting themselves more readily than lighter, less saturated colors. It also depends on the psychological recognition of a subject on the rectilinear object of the painting itself.

her vision for the completed work before it gets completed. In its simplest form, it is a matter of planning and masking but it also has to do with Moyer's sense of the viewer's perception of the background and her understanding of the visual effect of transparent medium over flat medium; as it has the ability to allude to the viewer looking through or between something.

I employ this ambiguous, potentially reversed figure/ground relationship in my painting, "Desire Paths". The "figure", the gesture made with graphite, is encased in layers of outlining. Graphite, a traditionally preparatory medium is outlined as if it is a finished mark. The "ground", a vibrant orange, muscles its way into the foreground, competing for attention for the reading as "subject matter". The negative and positive space become ambiguous.³



Mary Mclean Obering
Positions, 1997
Lithograph with wax crayon
13 x 10 in



Annabelle Mona
Desire Paths, 2024
Acrylic on paper
48 x 60 in

³ "Desire paths" are informal paths made by creatures which are created by a repeated trampling along the same route towards a goal.

III. Anthropocentrism

In thinking about role reversal, my research into anthropocentrism began to coalesce with my thoughts about inversion of foreground and background. In a paper written in reaction to a news headline in *Le Monde* which appeared in 2013: “The amount of CO2 in the air is the highest it has been for more than 2.5 million years”, Bruno Latour wrote about the climate crisis through the lens of subject and object. He suggests that our techno-managerial attempts to control the crisis reveals our flawed perception of ourselves as the subject and nature as the object.

Through a complete reversal of Western philosophy’s most cherished trope, human societies have resigned themselves to playing the role of the dumb object, while nature has unexpectedly taken on that of the active subject! Such is the frightening meaning of ‘global warming’: through a surprising inversion of the background and foreground, it is human history that has become frozen and natural history that is taking on a frenetic pace.

In an artist talk given during the visiting artist lecture series at State University of New York (SUNY) Albany, Andrew Woolbright mused on the idea that learning to be an artist is also learning to be okay in a state of vulnerability, that making art is akin to people watching you publicly dream.

Painting is a visual manifestation of the artist’s internal notions; things the artist wouldn’t necessarily talk about out loud because they may sound too silly, too illogical, too mundane, too heavy, too weird or (for the most part) too difficult to describe with words and better to be explained visually. Perhaps it is learning to embrace this state of vulnerability with confidence that places artists in a unique position to contemplate our vulnerability as a species on the whole.

From an epistemological perspective, climatology is a realm of study dominated by hard scientists who are charged with a method of producing information free of internal bias. Ironically, as a species, we care about climate change in a deeply selfish way. We want our species to survive.



Chris Martin
Double Frog Afternoon. 2017
Oil, acrylic, collage and glitter on canvas
135 x 118 inches

Artmaking is a self-reflexive practice which heightens awareness of our surroundings in a way that looking at a graph can not.

By making paintings that explicitly question formal image hierarchies, I add to a discourse that uses abstraction to imply a reordering of relationships.

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