

Barbara Campbell Thomas, 2021 Artist Statement

My paintings harness geometric abstraction and a materially diverse surface of paint, collage and sewn fabric to explore how the everyday experience of living and being is an arena for spiritual perception. In her essay *Contemplating Forms*, Jennie Carlisle, Director of Appalachian State University's Smith Gallery wrote that I use abstraction "not as a way to empty a composition of content, but to understand and picture phenomena that are not perceivable by the senses under ordinary conditions." My paintings meditate on physicality as a way into questions of ontology, questions of being. By making paintings—by moving paint around year after year until I start to grasp some of what paint is and how it functions—I have come to see painting as a practice which allows me incremental knowledge of what it is to inhabit a living, breathing human body. As my understanding of what paint is continues to unfold, through the movement and experience of my body, I see that comprehension of painting is analogous to comprehension of being. I see painting as analogous to being. Pathways to comprehension of painting and being are similarly life long, and in both instances, one is engaging with an experience that is simultaneously material and immaterial, with an experience in which the corporeal (paint and the body) is a gateway into the metaphysical. Thus, my paintings are incarnational.

Incarnation gives body to spirit, and indeed, my abstract paintings are rooted in materiality. Over the last nine years I have carefully evolved a highly particular engagement with my materials, and it is through the systematic uncovering of each of the necessary components of my painting that I have discerned what my paintings are. Some key moments of this evolution: In 2012, I made a series of fifteen small collages. Made of my studio's gradual accumulation of painted paper remnants from sketchbook work, this 2012 series revealed a staccato visual rhythm that I have continued to refine with each passing year. The series also cemented the importance of collage to my visual thinking, and unsurprisingly I brought collage permanently into my paintings in 2013, via the addition of collaged fabric and my own cut up "failed" paintings. The 2013 paintings were the first to initiate dialogue between paint and fabric. The 2013 paintings were also the first to use fabric from my domestic sphere (my sons' outgrown clothing, worn out dinner napkins) as well as draw direct visual inspiration from my own abundant sketchbook collages made of cardboard cereal boxes and other paper-based household ephemera. This commitment to deriving abstraction from my home continues in the studio, and it is an important way I counter the notion that abstraction is divorced from everyday experience. Even my use of geometry is linked to a subtle understanding of my own body's symmetry and asymmetry through personal yoga study and training.

In 2014, my mother taught me how to make a quilt, and while quilting did not integrate with my painting until 2017, I quickly perceived the importance of this knowledge. I believed quilting was the flipside to painting for me and I set out to uncover its place in my studio. Since then, I have honed my method of painting. Specifically, for each painting I create an expanse of fabric which is made just as the top layer of a quilt is made; I cut and arrange shapes of fabric, and I sew them together. This technique is a standard quilting technique called piecing. Once piecing is complete, the field of fabric is stretched over stretcher bars, allowing the geometry of the surface to soften or breathe. The ground of all my paintings is essentially the same as the uppermost layer of a quilt. When the stretched ground is complete, I begin to add paint and collage.

I continue to refine and add to my recipe of surface materiality. In 2019 I began dyeing sections of canvas before piecing—my lo-tech dyeing method yielded a surprisingly complex prismatic surface pattern that adds to the painting's spatial dynamism.

.....

I have been fascinated with abstraction for most of my life. As a child, I frequently asked my father to clarify the physical boundaries of our cosmos. The degree to which, as a young girl, I was utterly fascinated by the way my father and I could not comprehend the limits of our universe was surely a predictor of my work as a painter. And indeed, for the last 20 years my studio work has centered on a belief that painting exists as a space of thinking and of contemplation, where a conception of reality outside of conventional notions of time and space can exist. Through painting, I inquire into what it means to be who I am. What is it to breathe and inhabit a body? When does a body end and a painting begin? And finally, who are we amidst this endless universe we inhabit?