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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
RIVERSIDE

Structure and Surface

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Visual Art

by

Ashely May

June 2017

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2017

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¹ Where no artist is attributed, the work is that of the author

Introduction

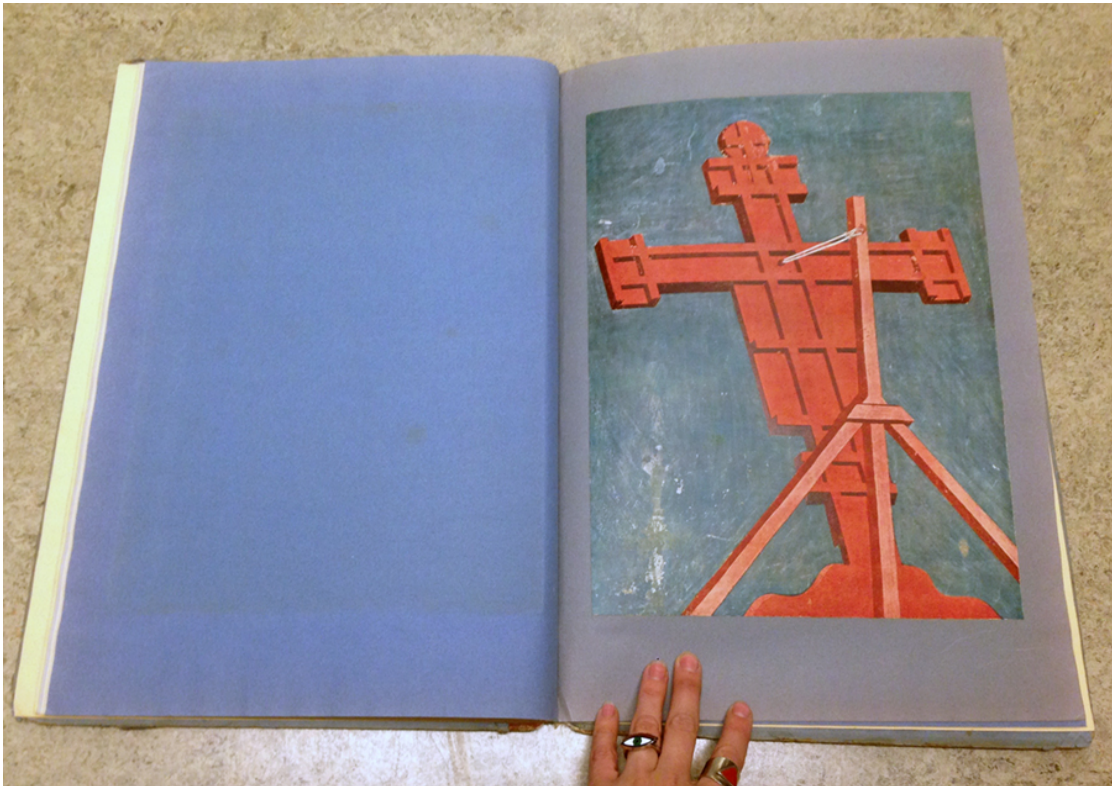


Illustration 1. Giotto, circa 1300's

In this detail of a fresco from the *Basilica of Saint Francis* in Assisi, Italy (circa 1300's) Giotto shows us how the myth gets made. We see the cross from behind, the ropes and braces that suspend it above the chapel entrance. If you reveal the structure of something, can it still convey mystery?

It is only shallow people who don't judge by appearances. The mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible.

- Oscar Wilde (quoted by Susan Sontag in Against Interpretation)

My work for the University of California, Riverside 2017 MFA Thesis Exhibition is a series of flat Hydrocal and powdered-pigment sculptures hung on the wall or from the ceiling. I construct these pieces flat on the floor or on a table. I sift powdered pigment onto Plexiglas, which sometimes has sculpted pieces of oil-based modeling clay adhered to the face. I tilt the Plexiglas up and pour water through the powder. I lower the Plexiglas and pour liquid plaster onto it. These materials and actions are open to and shaped by the vertical force of gravity. This choreography occurs in “real” space. If I step forward, I step in it. Once solidified in plaster, the powder hung on the wall still bears the impressions of its life in real space. But set vertically, it defies gravity and enters what Rosalind Krauss, in Passages in Modern Sculpture, calls “virtual space”. Discussing the use of relief in Auguste Rodin’s *Gates of Hell* (1880-1917), Krauss writes: “Since this ground behaves like the illusionistic background of a painting, it opens up a virtual space through which the figures can appear to move,” (Krauss, 12). Virtual space exists purely in the mind. Try and step forward into the picture and you poke your eye.

I make objects in space that contain illusions. Conventionally, painting takes the support for granted. Viewers are not meant to look at the structure but what is on the surface. In making a wall work from front to back out of plaster, where the pigment is embedded in the plaster, structure and surface are one.

Actual and Virtual

Donald Judd interrogates the binary of /actual/virtual/ in his essay Specific Objects, “Actual space is intrinsically more powerful and specific than paint on a flat

surface” (Judd, 6). Judd’s unlikely development of small-town Marfa, Texas into an arts center demonstrates his commitment to “actual space”. In Judd’s permanent Marfa installation, *100 Untitled Works in Mill Aluminum* (1982-86) – reflective aluminum boxes that cover the floor of former military barracks – work and site are transformed and elevated reflexively. Robert Smithson searched the Great Salt Lake in Utah for the precise placement of his *Spiral Jetty*. He wrote about the experience of finding it:

This site was a rotary that enclosed itself in an immense roundness... No ideas, no concepts, no systems, no structures, no abstractions could hold themselves together in the actuality of that evidence. My dialectics of site and nonsite whirled into an indeterminate state, where solid and liquid lost themselves in each other... no sense wondering about classifications and categories, there were none. (Smithson, 146)

For Smithson, being present at the *Spiral Jetty* is being lost in one’s experience there. I am interested in creating artworks that “whirl into an indeterminate state” – flickering between object and image, stimulating both bodily actual space *and* cerebral virtual space simultaneously.

In the fall of 2015, I spent time in Marfa and at the *Spiral Jetty*, as well as other locations traveling with “Land Arts of the American West”, a program with the mission: “to experience major land art monuments... while also visiting sites to expand our understanding of what land art might be”. Along with historical pieces of Land Art, we visited National Parks, American Indian reservations, military bases, mines and more. Our group of nine included three architects, three visual artists, a writer, a dancer and a geologist. Going into the desert for two months, camping and living outdoors through an El Niño season in previously drought-baked land, I experienced the power and specificity of “actual space” through the systems of weather and climate repeatedly. This essay

contains quotes from my trip journal. The entries are indicated by place and date written as well as by my initials, “A.M.”.

The trip expanded my art experience out of the proverbial “white cube”. Matt Coolidge, director of the Center for Land Use Interpretation, told our group during a tour of the CLUI grounds in Wendover, Utah, “Every particle is latent with art, it just depends on your perspective”. We examined how land, its natural (and unnatural) resources and the people that live and work there can create the context for art. Wendover, Utah is also the home of the Enola Gay hangar, where the Boeing B-29 bomber that dropped the atomic bomb on Japan in 1945 was outfitted. On the Wendover Army Airfield grounds, we saw special pits in the ground for the heavy bomb to be attached to the lowest point on the underside of the plane. These minimalist negative spaces, engineered so that the most matter and lives could be destroyed by the smallest possible package, reminded me of *Socle du Monde (Base of the World)* (1961) by Piero Manzoni.



2. *Bomb Pit*, Wendover Airfield, Utah



3. *Socle du Monde*, Piero Manzoni (1961)

In an opposite, generative act, the small package of Manzoni's cube signs all of the "latent particles" on the face of the earth as a living, single work of art, fitting Matt Coolidge's injunction.

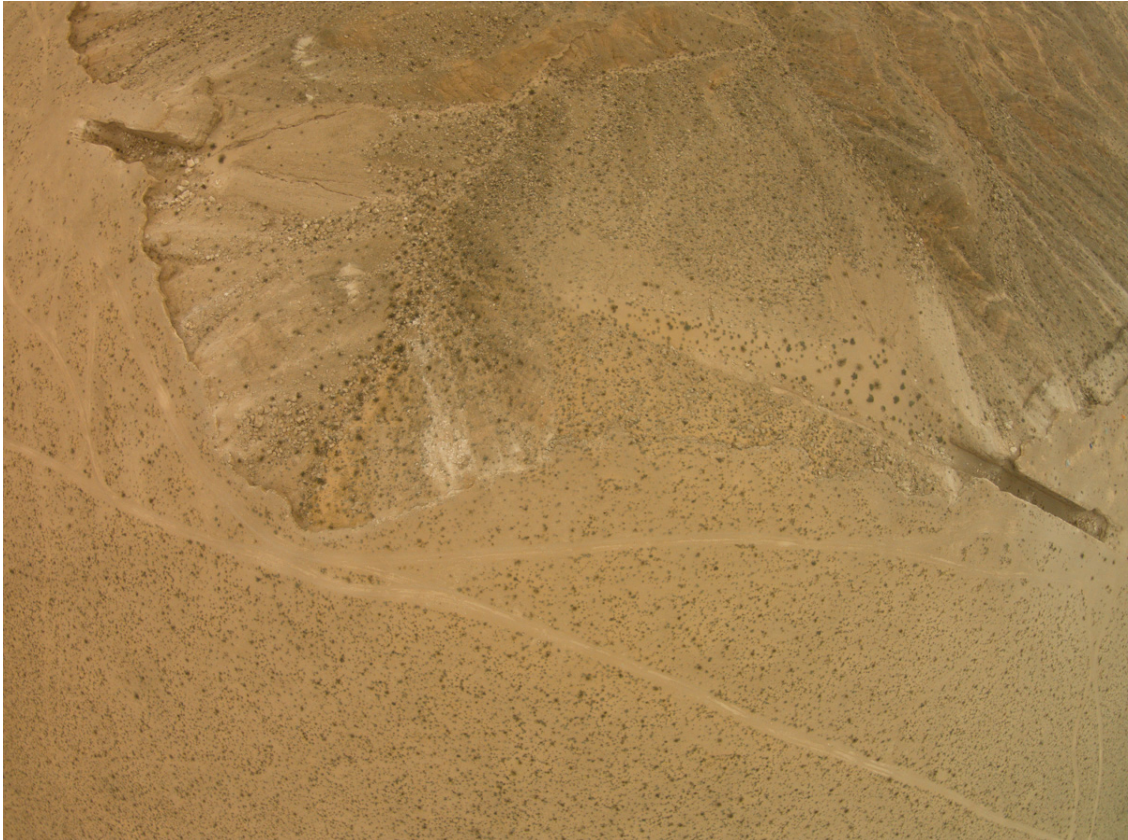
Touring various types of actual space, we saw examples of its collision with the virtual. In October 2015, we visited the Laguna Pueblo in New Mexico. The Laguna tribe has maintained its territory for 8,000 years – the longest continuous inhabitation in the current United States. From the 1950's to the 1980's, a U.S.-owned mining company worked an open-pit uranium mine there. Seeing that decommissioned mine was real. The cancerous tumors that filled the bodies of the Laguna people and the bodies of their livestock were real. The dream that the mining company sold the Laguna people, the momentary wealth it brought, was virtual. Paradoxically, if the Laguna remain in place, it will ensure their destruction.

Ian Buchanan writes in Deleuze and Space:

Imagine a world without place. It is impossible to do... We can scarcely think of anything more terrible... than the absence of place. 'Our lives are so place-oriented and place-saturated that we cannot begin to comprehend, much less face up to, what sheer placelessness would be like' ... Doubtless this is because we intuit that *we* could not be, indeed would not be, if *we* did not have a place. (Buchanan and Lambert, 1)

One cannot really imagine oneself outside of space. Even computer files are stored on a server. Cyberspace encourages us to forget the real space in which we sit, stand or shit while we navigate it. But the needs of the body are real, and interconnectivity is bound up with the body. In the #Accelerate Manifesto, Alex Williams and Nick Srnicek emphasize the point that "technology and the social are bound together". Someone without the protection of U.S. OSHA standards most likely mines the copper circuiting our iPhones.

GPS helps us drive in a new city, but it can also strand us with a dead battery. Satellites monitor drought conditions, but they also provide clandestine government surveillance.



4. *Double Negative*, Drone photograph, September 2015

Orientation

In his book Open Sky, Paul Virilio writes about a shift in the contemporary experience of space. We are moving away from Renaissance one-point perspective (looking out) and towards an up-down experience ushered in by satellites and the Internet, “our vision is actually determined by our weight and oriented by the pull of earth’s gravity ... *The rope doesn’t hang, the Earth pulls,*” (Virilio, 2). Normally, we experience space by looking *out*. It is a bipedal ocular experience. Traveling around the

American West shifted my orientation in a few ways. This was aided partially by flying a drone quadcopter camera wherever we camped.

From above, looking through the eye of my drone camera, gravity appears like magnetism. From above, it is clear how bound we are to the surface of the planet. Of earth and magnetized to the earth.
- Wendover, Utah 9/8/15, A.M.

I saw my position as a particle magnetized to the surface of the earth, scratching around in it. Looking from above, as with a drone, the surface of the earth is factual, without atmosphere. There are no sunset colors and the ocean water is dark. Pouring straight down in the same direction as the gaze of this hovering eye, plaster records the facts of the surface.



5. *Stone Transcription*, Jean Dubuffet, 1958

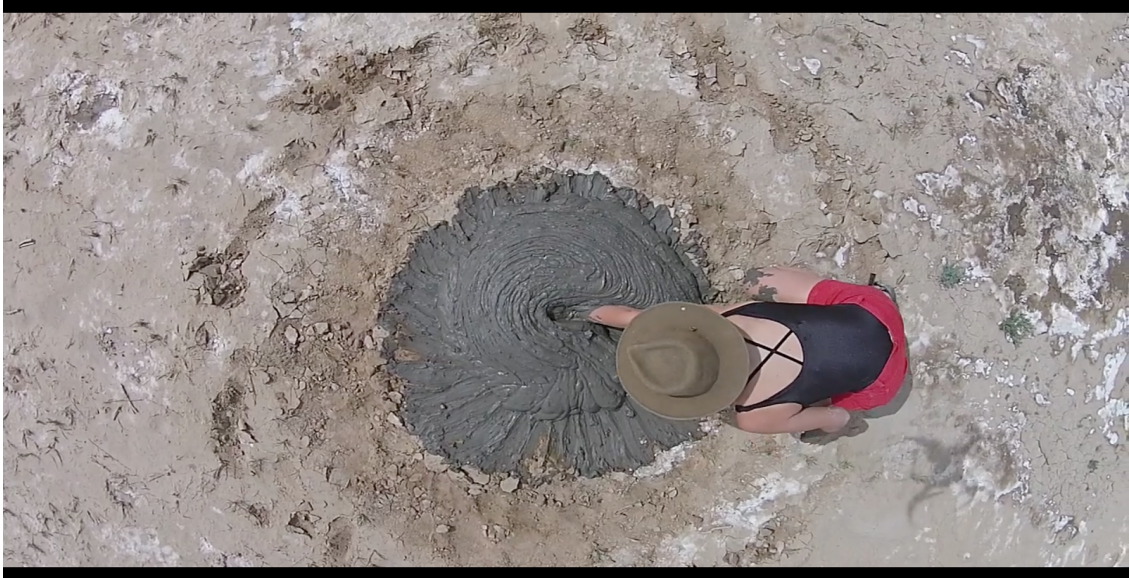
This recalls Jean Dubuffet's *Texturologies* – “allover compositions devoid of any sense of orientation”. Formless: A User's Guide quotes Dubuffet: “These works are to be read as earth seen from above” as if Dubuffet had the point-of-view of a satellite, “whence the innumerable relations drawn at the time between *informel* painting and macro- or microphotography,” (Bois and Krauss, 142). With intricate, worked textures from ink-dots to layered butterfly wings, the *Texturologies* have strong object-ness. The inclusion of simplified human forms creates a simultaneous, strong image-ness; it snaps a sense of scale into the textured field, giving a sense that the material world surrounding the viewer is equally as textured.

Piero Manzoni worked with gravity and with an up-down orientation (rather than an authored, Renaissance looking-out) in his kaolin [fine white liquid clay] *Achromes*. Rosalind Krauss defines the *Achromes* in Formless, “Manzoni's version of the monochrome painting carried out by taking the world's materials – pleated cloth, pebbles, bread rolls – and covering them over with a uniform coating of kaolin... equating matter (and its proliferation) with *mater* (or earth, and its fecundity),” (Krauss and Bois, 223). In a process similar to my own, Manzoni laid canvas soaked in kaolin on a flat surface, allowing the fabric to fold and harden.



6. Piero Manzoni,
Achrome, 1958

Germano Celant writes in his 1991 monograph on Manzoni, “The struggle to be passes through the Achromes, which expectorate all figures and ‘fold in’ upon themselves. Thus Manzoni transforms Fontana’s open and sensual lips, which rend or rummage over the surface, into ‘folds’ or ‘creases’, into a movement of the canvas over itself,” (Celant, 15). To Manzoni, the *Achromes* do not *represent* anything; they only exist, like isolated bodies in space. He wrote: “‘there is nothing to be said. There is only to be, there is only to live’” (Celant, 20).



7. *Pushing Clay Back into the Earth*, Still from a drone video, 6 mins. Utah 2015

My work takes the fullness of Manzoni's *Achromes* and carves into it, physically and with pigment, injecting imagery into the bodies; leaving traces of human activity on the material activity.

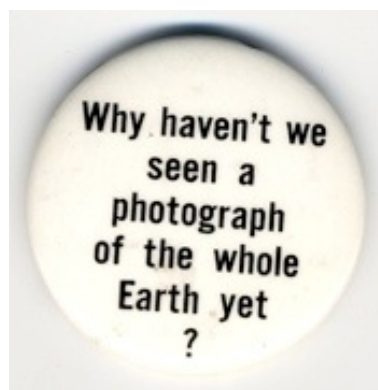
In a culture without authoritative institutions, like a single God, or one central newspaper or television channel, we have acclimatized to the idea that there is no objective point of view, no un-authored "truth". Someone has authored everything. So we turn to math and science for truth, but even these institutions have cracks. For example, we cannot even say whether math is a discovery or a sophisticated invention.

The tangible surface of the human body as the boundary for sensation (and thus for perceiving artworks) cannot be denied. My plaster sculptures are like topographical maps of my activity in the studio. A topographical map has an all-over point-of-view. In War and Peace in the Global Village, Marshall McLuhan writes that until now, the

overall action of human language has been contraction, to move towards concision. The prized real estate of the printed page or the impatient ear of a listener has demanded it. In the telecommunication age, for the first time in human history, language has expanded. The real estate of cyberspace is unlimited. The ear of cyberspace is always listening. This lack of linguistic resistance drives us even more strongly towards tangible facts. But with the growing cultural acceptance of trans* identities, even bodies are subject to the contemporary expansion of language.

Whole Earth

Stewart Brand, founder of the Whole Earth Catalog and the Long Now Foundation, describes the perspective of the world at the beginning of the United States' space program. He protested the photography NASA released to the public; it always depicted deep space looking *out* from the point of view of the earth, and never looking back *at* the Earth. He fabricated buttons that read, "Why haven't we seen a picture of the whole earth yet?"



8. Stewart Brand, 1968

In 1968, NASA released the famous *Blue Marble* picture of the Earth. Bernd Scherer describes this moment in The Whole Earth: California and the Disappearance of the Outside: “The Earth could be viewed as a whole for the first time, it looked fragile, vulnerable and above all, beautiful... the image gave rise to a consciousness of the age of the Anthropocene” (Diederichsen/Franke, 6). Seeing the Earth floating like any other object in space, a self-contained system, inspired the beginnings of environmental awareness. The Earth is a finite system. The question of individual impact on that system endures today.

Understanding the world as a rhizomatic system containing other smaller rhizomes has been a productive concept for me artistically. As defined by Gilles Deleuze, the rhizome is “composed not of units but of dimensions, or rather directions in motion. It has neither beginning nor end, but always a middle [*milieu*] from which it grows and which it overflows,” (Boundas, 36). In this way, I understand individual perspectives (and artworks) as nodes on continuously metamorphosing rhizomatic structures.

Living outdoors for two months with only a tent for shelter, I was able to closely observe and experience larger planetary systems. In early October, our group camped at architect Simone Swan’s *Adobe Alliance*, a training site for the construction of traditional, wood-free adobe structures. The buildings on this desert property bordering Mexico have stood for decades, but recent climate change has brought moisture into the environment, and the beautiful domes and vaulted ceilings have begun to collapse:

Heavy rain washed away the floor of the cook tent. We dug channels to protect our possessions and the mud foundation of the adobe house.
- *Adobe Alliance, Presidio, TX 10/4/15, A.M.*



9. *Land Arts Van and Rain*, Chaco Canyon, New Mexico August 2015

Watching rain traverse and carve the baked-clay ground over and over again continuously informs my studio practice. The Grand Canyon was carved by a similar flow of water over millennia. Learning that, however, did not diminish our awe once we arrived there. Knowledge of structure and mystery of experience were not mutually exclusive.

The best sculpture I've ever seen. In revealing depth, the canyon teaches about surfaces.

- Grand Canyon 9/9/15, A.M

Part of the magic of the Grand Canyon is that you see the surfaces of previous times collapsed and stacked on top of each other. Entire worlds are compressed into slices of rock, all the way down. Whatever surface we traverse is the surface of our time;

this cannot be violated. Even if we dig down, whatever past time we expose will bear the traces of our present on into the future.

What does it mean to be on the surface of the earth? We push piles of matter around into different configurations. One day you push another earth-mover out of yourself. You've got to find pleasure in moving material around in some way.
- Spiral Jetty 9/6/15, A.M.

I am interested in the behavior of matter and teasing out the qualities of that behavior. I like to see the index of structures and history of actions impressed on matter and revealed through it. Deleuze writes about this recursive complexity:

The unit of matter, the smallest element of the labyrinth is the fold ... That is why the parts of matter are masses or aggregates, as corollary to the compressive elastic force. Folds of the winds, of fire and the earth, and the subterranean folds of lodes in the mine. The solid creases of 'natural geography' can be attributed to the initial action of fire, followed by that of the winds and waters on the earth in a system of complex interactions. (Deleuze, 231)

Material carries history and is read as well as experienced. To quote Celant on Manzoni again, "the artist collects the 'relics' of his passage... Manzoni wished to give value to the present, to its fragments or its residues," (Celant, 20). Our relationship to "residue" today is more troubled than in Manzoni's time: there is no residue of our activity in cyberspace itself. There are only the effects of cyber actions in actual space – a family bombed by a drone strike in Pakistan, for example or an Amazon box arriving at your door. There is even an operation in web browsers "Clear Your History". We read the past in the material it leaves. What does this mean for our understanding of the history we are making today or the consequence of our individual actions on future generations?

The world doesn't just "exist" as Manzoni describes it, we also affect it.



10. *Not a Bug Splat*, Pakistanian Art Collective, One-point perspective photograph of a young victim of a U.S. drone strike visible from the aerial perspective, Pakistan 2014

History of the Medium

In Specific Objects, Judd describes the “main thing wrong with painting” - “it is a rectangular plane placed flat against a wall” (Judd, 5). Though my work for the UCR MFA Thesis Exhibition consists of a group of mostly rectangular planes placed flat against a wall, I consider them two-dimensional sculptures, not paintings. My hand shapes the rectangles; they erode, bulge, twist and wobble at the edges. Where pigment powder piles up on the Plexiglas or where I place a piece of oil-based modeling clay, there is concavity. The plaster holds the impression of my actions but the actions themselves are not visible. These two-dimensional sculptures are *casts*. What could be identified as a painting (the initial arrangement of pigment on the flat surface of the Plexiglas) gets washed away.

In my first year at UCR, dissatisfied with the feeling of space I could achieve through *depicting* it in my paintings, I cut holes in the painted canvas and paper, literally integrating space. The shadow cast by the cut hole felt deep and almost digital in its smoothness next to my shaky painted lines. I was fascinated and set my course on figuring how best to punch through the surface of my pieces. I wanted to integrate actual space into represented space.

I began pouring plaster onto the flat ground, which nicely mirrors the flat picture plane. Plaster poured outdoors creates a greater index of actual space than the studio floor. I made *Cast* (2015) outdoors in the dirt yard behind the studio building on Citrus Street in Riverside (see illustration on the following page). I continued the practice of making casts of the ground throughout my Land Arts trip, digging in the dirt and pouring plaster into it. Through this process, voids become protuberances; negative space becomes positive. Holes become objects. I am interested in this dichotomy of presence and absence. However, after a while, the indexicality of the pieces made outdoors felt too fixed. I returned to the studio and turned to the more non-indexical media of tempera powder and dry pigments.



11. *Cast*, Plaster, wood, dirt, acrylic paint, 2015 (recto and verso)



12. *Casting the River*, Gila Wilderness, Arizona 2015



13. *Clock Excavation*
Plaster, dirt
Gila Wilderness, Arizona
2015

The pieces in my thesis show are sculptural, but they do not forsake the conventions of painting – color, composition, gesture and the two-dimensional picture plane. They are sculptures that remember painting. Rosalind Krauss addresses the subject of memory in her 2013 book Under Blue Cup. In an interview about this book with Yves Alain-Bois in the *Brooklyn Rail*, Krauss says:

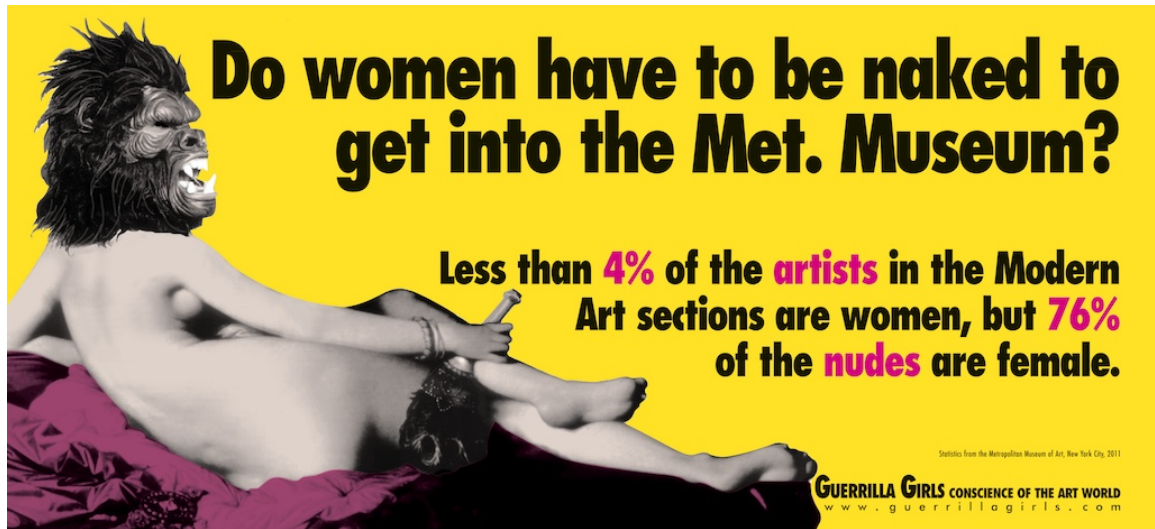
Krauss: Duchamp in fact ... says that he wanted to get away from the smell of turpentine. That sense of rejecting painting or oil painting ... leads him then to the deskilling in the form of the readymade, and that would be in a sense the central example of deskilling.

Alain-Bois: But in wanting to forget or declaring that you're forgetting, would not you immediately be producing the reverse? Wittgenstein said ... that you can't forget at will. Which of course anybody who has been very unhappy in love, for example, would like to do. But you can't. So one thing you can't do at will is forgetting. By saying, "I forget" or "I want to forget" the smell of turpentine, isn't that in a way reaffirming the existence of this thing that you want to forget?

In Alain-Bois' terms, by intentionally eliminating the original "painting," I am reaffirming its existence. Sometimes the trace of something can feel more real than a hyper-delineation. This is apparent in Gerhard Richter's use of blurring in paintings like *Woman Descending the Staircase* (1965). Smudging, dislocating the paint strokes, somehow makes the painting feel more accurate. We are precluded from a precise rendering and are thus engaged to fill in the gaps with our own psychology, making us more present in the viewing experience.

I am compelled to remember the history of painting. Specifically how it has manifested through the bodies of women. As the Guerilla Girls cite in their 2012 piece, less than 4% of the artists in the Modern Art section of the Met are women, but 76% of the nudes are female (the statistics in the original version of this piece from 1985 were

5% and 85% respectively). Historically, women's bodies are the armatures of painting, not the agents of its creation.



14. Guerilla Girls, 2012

I began painting when I was in third grade; it was my introduction to art. Later, I knew Elizabeth Murray, and she embodied a living artist for me. My personal hero is Georgia O’Keeffe for her independence, singularity and close relationship with the land. However, for me, applying pigment to canvas calls to mind, as Krauss puts it, “the artisanal basis of the work of the guild,” and I do not feel comfortable uncritically attaching my caboose to that train. I enjoy my current work because the painting I make disappears and only the cast or the sculpture remains. The image is a trace, it transforms into an object.

Georgia O’Keeffe and Elizabeth Murray are two rare historical examples of successful female artists. It is an understatement to say that not all spaces have been historically available to women. The evolution of subjectivity and freedom to express that subjectivity for me bears the traces of structures of exclusion. I cannot forget that the

spaces historically granted to women are horizontal – the bed, the floor, etc. The space between the painting and your feet. So this is the space I occupy. The negative space of painting. As Alain-Bois says, one “cannot forget by willing it”. I cannot forget exclusionary structures while I work.

In Under Blue Cup, Krauss wonders, “What if medium were not a material support ... but the very foundation of representation? ... What if it were a logic rather than a form of matter?” (Krauss, 17) Plaster has a very specific “logic”. It starts out liquid/pliable and then becomes solid/rigid. It is about fragility, gravity, capturing time and place. It allows for impressions, indexes, and inversions. It grabs things and embeds them and lets other things slip through. It contains nostalgia for something that no longer exists. When it absorbs tempera powder or paint, it becomes a fresco. Plaster breaks and requires delicacy and patience.

Krauss looks at a group of artists who defend, as she calls it, “the absolute necessity of prolonging the specific medium as the ground for aesthetic coherence” (Krauss, 19). I am looking for aesthetic coherence in my work -- for form and content to merge. Krauss lists a group of artists and their “supports” including William Kentridge (animation through erasure), Ed Ruscha (the use of the automobile), and Bruce Nauman (the architectural promenade), among others - “Each of these supports allows the artist to discover its ‘rules,’ which will in turn become the basis for that recursive self-evidence of a medium’s specificity. If such artists are ‘inventing’ their medium, they are resisting contemporary art’s forgetting of how the medium undergirds the very possibilities of art,” (Krauss, 19). In my thesis work, I am looking “to grasp forms of matter as ontological

conditions,” (Formless, 238) in order to discover the rules of the technical support I have created.

The Gutai group also believes in the primacy of the medium. Jiro Yoshihara describes the medium as an equal partner in expressing a work of art in the Gutai manifesto from 1956:

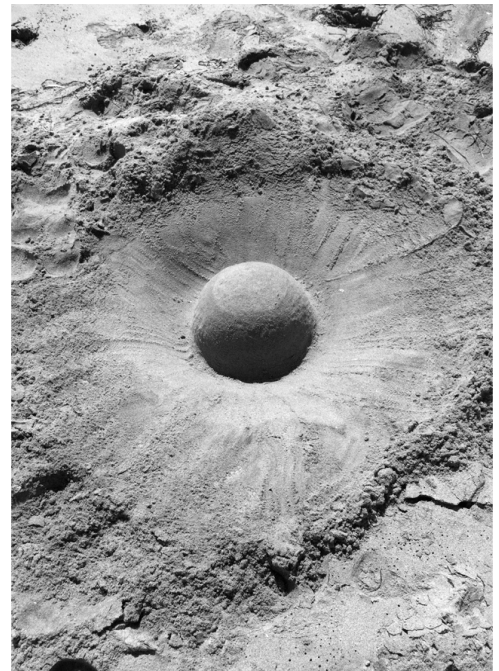
In Gutai art the human spirit and the material shake hands with each other but keep their distance. The material never compromises itself with the spirit: the spirit never dominates the material... the material starts telling a story and even cries out... We believe that by merging human qualities and the material’s properties we can concretely apprehend the abstract space. (Yoshihara, 202)

The work of art then has three components that keep their distance:

Human/Material/Abstract Space. This Gutai “crying-out” of the material has resonances in Surrealism as well.

Object-Image

In the dialectic of actual/virtual, sometimes the two exist simultaneously. Salvador Dalí defined the “paranoiac-critical” method: “It is by a frankly paranoiac process that it has been possible to obtain a double image: that is to say the representation of one object which, without the least figuration or anatomical distortion is at the same time the representation of a totally different object” (Dalí, 78).



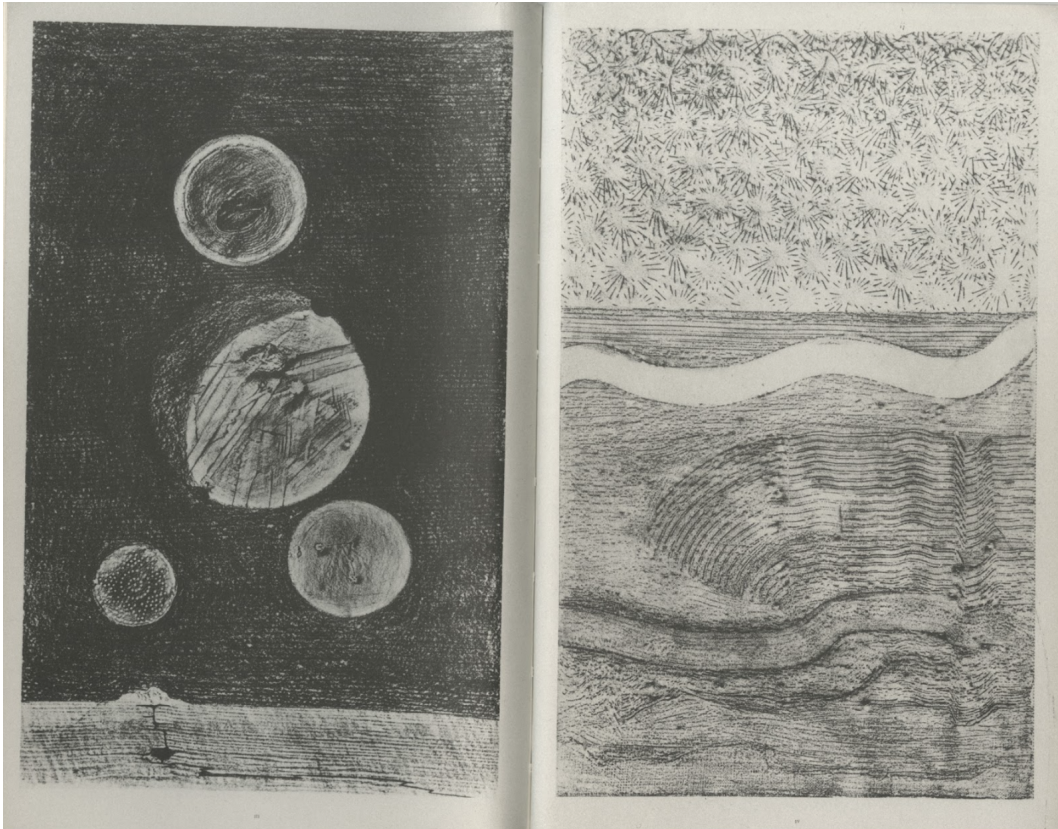
15. *Crater*, Photograph, 2016

This is psychedelic (hallucination), pareidolia (seeing human faces where they don't exist), Rorschach-ian (projecting interior imagery onto a controlled exterior situation). The observed must hover somewhere between object and image, between nothing and something, in order for the observer to see the action of resolution.



16. *Pareidolia*, Plaster, acrylic paint, 2016

In developing the Surrealist practice of *frottage* or rubbing, Max Ernst created artworks that hover between object and resolved image. *Natural History* from 1926 is a good example. Multiple images at multiple registers are visible within the same configuration:



17. *Natural History*, Max Ernst, 1926

In Compulsive Beauty, Hal Foster addresses the Surrealist relationship to materials, “The role of the painter is to project that which sees itself in him... the artist as both active creator (of his aesthetic identity) and passive receiver (of his automatist work) as both participant inside and voyeur outside the scene of his art” (Foster, 79). Foster frames the Surrealist artist as hovering between active and passive. Someone who orchestrates a situation for materials to behave and subsequently observes and responds to their behavior. This openness was called “disponibilité” - or “availability”. In my process, there is a built-in opportunity for shock. After pouring the wet plaster over the dry powder and letting it cure, I pick it up and am inevitably surprised by what it reveals. In this way, the viewer and I are equally “voyeurs”.

Openness

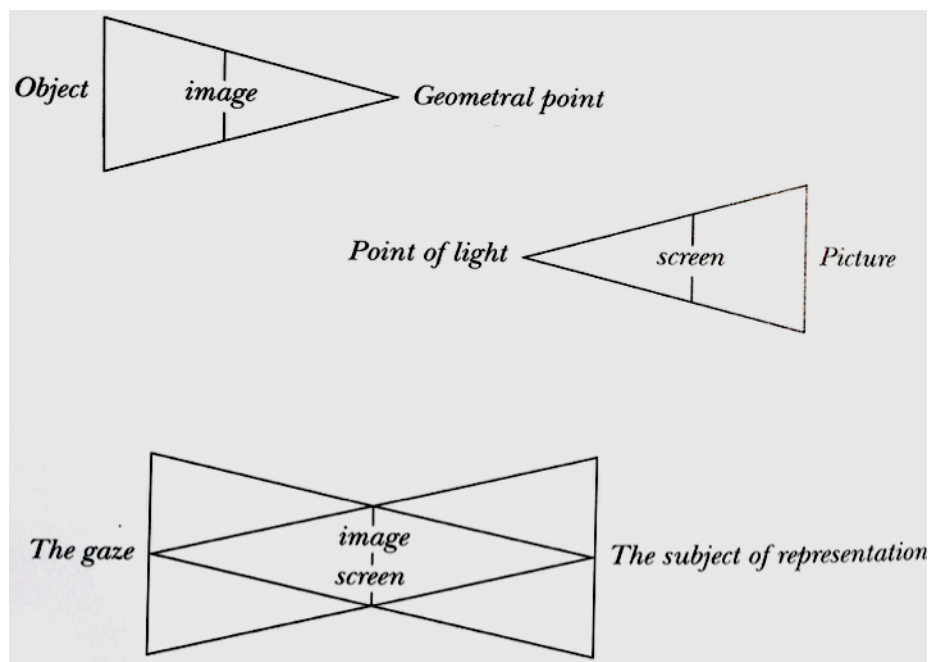
In his 1922 textbook of psychology Psychodiagnostics: A Diagnostic Test Based on Perception, Dr. Hermann Rorschach described a “normal” response to an inkblot as amounting to twenty to thirty readings. Rorschach also includes very specific instructions on how a psychologist should construct an inkblot, down to the correct type of paper and how many inches from the face of the patient it should be held (Rorschach, 16), calling to mind something closer to art instruction than psychology (young Rorschach was close with and inspired by polymath artist and scientist Ernst Haeckel).

He called patient responses “perceptions” rather than “interpretations”: “The interpretation of the chance forms falls in the field of perception and apperception rather than imagination... perceptions arise from the fact that sensations ecphorize memory pictures of former groups of sensations within us” (Rorschach, 16). When I arrange pigment on Plexiglas, I do not aim to create an image with one precisely controlled read, but to create a situation that stimulates perception (pouring plaster on top of the pigment would thwart any attempt at exact imagery anyway). Along with openness to material behavior in the act of making the work, I invite openness in the reception of it. My work presents viewers with a factual-seeming experience that actually invites interiority. I am interested in surfaces revealing depths.

As Susan Sontag describes in Against Interpretation, interpretation creates a “shadow world of ‘meanings’” (Sontag, 7). The imaginary is created when something crosses the threshold of the body into the mind. But all art must be experienced through the body. As Sontag mandates: “we need an erotics of art” (Sontag, 14). The ink on the

paper hits the surface of the eye before sinking into the world of meaning. However, the mind also rushes forward to the surface of the eye to meet the image, altering our perception. This is the site that Rorschach mines for psychological information, it is evidence of interiority. Bois quotes Sartre: “Even an abstract picture is not perceived as a *real object*: aesthetically, only the ‘unreal objects’ that the ‘imaginative consciousness’ projects onto it exist” (Bois and Krauss, 143).

In this diagram from his article “Obscene, Abject, Traumatic” from October 78, Hal Foster illustrates vision and perception as described by Jacques Lacan.



18. Hal Foster, 1996

Lacan superimposes, “on the usual cone of vision that emanates from the subject another cone that emanates from the object, at the point of light” (October, 108). Perception exists in the mind of the viewer, but Lacan imbues the object with a gaze as well. Recalling Dalí’s use of the term “paranoia”, Foster writes, “the gaze is given a

strange agency here, and the subject is positioned in a paranoid way” (October, 109). In our normal understanding of perception, meaning bounces off of the artwork and is absorbed by the body of the viewer. Following Sontag, it privileges the human body as the threshold for sensory experience. But Foster supports Lacan’s argument that meaning also bounces off the body of the viewer and is absorbed by the artwork. Reality hovers somewhere between observer and the observed.

To survive in a patriarchal society, women have to understand that the body both absorbs and produces meaning. To exist in your body is to live simultaneously with the image-object-ness your body projects. As Jonathan Crary writes in Techniques of the Observer, “Problems of vision then, as now, were fundamentally questions about the body and the operation of social power” (Crary, 3). Vision is bound up in visibility.

In Compulsive Beauty, Foster describes the role of women in Surrealism. While the myth of the woman was common subject matter (looking again to Max Ernst, the *Hundred Headless Woman* is a good example), there were few practicing women Surrealists. “Woman” - framed by Freud as “hysterical” - was a *symbol* that allowed male artists to imply the subject of repression/release in their work, “Precisely because it is celebrated, the feminine, the female body remains the silenced ground of this art,” (Foster, 53). Desire is fraught for women. “Ladies” rebuff desire. Express desire too strongly and risk being labeled “aggressive”. To be open to the universe, to be available to it, is to trust it. In this way, it is a privileged position that has only recently – and tentatively – admitted women.

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