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*We Three (My echo, my shadow and me)*

THESIS

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements

for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in Art

by

Valerie Veator

Thesis Committee:  
Professor Monica Majoli, Chair  
Professor Daniel Joseph Martinez  
Professor Juli Carson  
Professor Litia Perta

2015



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# ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

*We Three (My echo, my shadow and me)*

by

Valerie Veator

Master of Fine Arts in Art

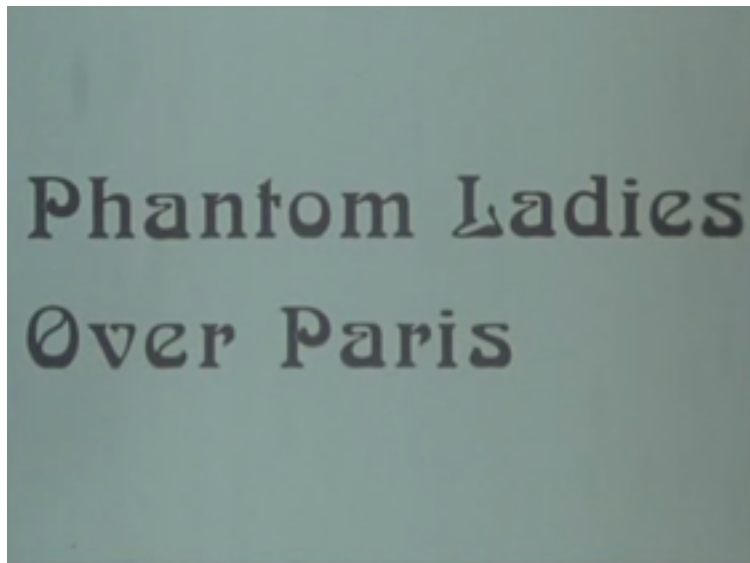
University of California, Irvine, 2015

Professor Monica Majoli, Chair

*We Three (My echo, my shadow and me)* presents a tripartite work that exercises forms of tracing, imbedding, concealing and revealing across painting, video, and installation. Inspired by Jacques Rivette's 1974 film *Celine and Julie Go Boating*, *We Three* examines perception and subjectivity in today's screenic culture. *We Three* draws out modes transference in the form of an echoed, displaced transmission as it exists within and between specific artworks. The three parts are installed as echoes of one another: the first part is comprised of nine small watercolors made after day-long meanderings around Paris. Shown opposite of the watercolors are three digital paintings printed on silk, each faintly backlit, resembling a monitor. Brightly stained gestures become immersed within a pixelated, translucent field, and are further distorted through the process of stretching, revealing snippets of the frames underneath. The triad is completed with *Drawing Near* (2015), a two-channel projection on opposing walls. Each projection depicts the same scene filmed at different times; one shot in HD digital video the other in B&W Super 8 film. The characters in each film (both acted out by the artist) occupy kindred positions, each mirroring the actions of the other in a hopeless attempt to

attain what is always already just beyond their reach. The game is played out within each video and between the two simultaneously. The installation on the whole vacillates between synchronicity and divergence, here and now, there and then.

My thesis exhibition *We Three (my echo, my shadow and me)* investigates an intersubjective space where practices in abstract painting and narrative filmmaking vacillate between traditional and contemporary forms and address issues of seeing and being seen at a time where most of what Western culture encounters is mediated by a screen. A tripartite work, *We Three* exercises various forms of tracing, embedding, concealing and revealing through nine openly framed watercolors, three digital paintings on silk, and one two-channel video. Each body of work is installed separate from one another, establishing an oppositional relationship to the work hanging across it; the digital paintings opposite the watercolors; and a channel of black and white Super 8 film opposite a channel of high-definition digital video. Each occupying a space of its own, yet resistant to a purely solipsistic experience, they swivel between being discrete objects and participants in an installation. The center of the installation is left open, enveloped and defined by three distinct voices, as in an Ancient Greek chorus, and allows sight-lines between works to remain uninterrupted except by that of an entering viewer. Critically aimed at the way we see and consume images, *We Three* attempts to reveal our screenic culture's embodied relations to media while echoing tropes within the history of painterly abstraction and narrative film as its foundation.



*English title card for "Celine et Julie Vont a Bateau" (Dir. Jacques Rivette, 1974)*

I was led to this place when I became aware that my otherwise “analog” painting practice was, at nearly every step, inextricably tied to the media I was consuming daily. Like a specter is tied to the house it haunts. As a first year graduate student, I was making traditionally rooted, intuitively driven abstract oil paintings that were formally constructed pictorial reactions and haptic interpretations of my environment and emotions. Previously, I’d lived and worked in Brooklyn, sharing a space with at least four other people at any given time. Feeling like a caged animal, I was desperate to regain some semblance of a private, personal space, or perhaps simply to have more control over my environment. While I worked that first year, I would play films, television, books on tape, and music on repeat in an attempt to substitute human interactions; a constant virtual companion. As a result, I felt as though my life and work had become a conundrum: I wanted my own space in which to work yet the subsequent loneliness created a pervasive anxiety within (which eventually evolved as the subject of future paintings) and was too



much to bear. I had made a habit of binge-watching much earlier in my life however, and pathologically returned to it as one returns to a security blanket in times of need. Between 2011 and 2014, I watched the French New Wave film *Celine and Julie Go Boating* (Dir. Jacques Rivette, 1974) over 300 times and became completely infatuated with the characters, the scene of Paris in the 70s, and the idea that a narrative film could be initially reticent to reveal its own subject. It was specifically the first 15 minutes that I had become fixated on, in which the story unfolds through a speechless, vaguely vaudevillian chase scene between the two female protagonists.



*Disappearing Act*, 2014. Oil on wood.

After watching it so many times, I felt that I was oddly a part of this film, or rather that I'd allowed it to absorb some part of me. Like in a symbiotic relationship, I soon realized I was unable to distinguish myself from the characters and the games they played; if I wasn't watching it, I was thinking about it, even dreaming about it. At this time, about midway through the program, I was also feeling stuck in a rut with the paintings I'd been making. What had started as abstract images harkening back to the hey-day of Abstract Expressionism, the paintings began to take on new forms, specifically into large-scale, cartoony, and grimacing self-portraiture (see: *Disappearing Act*, 2014), faintly reminiscent of the late figures of Philip Guston. I was especially drawn to Guston because of his own vacillation between abstraction and representation. Where abstraction for me had been a highly private and emotive language, the turn to self-portraiture was an act of laying myself bare for all to see. Trying desperately to find myself in my work and ultimately putting into question what abstraction really meant to me. In an act of self-censorship however- I turned the portraits on their side, instead revealing a landscape that was both fantastical and macabre, and whose figure/ground relationships were determined by differing representations of my facial features. Upset that I couldn't face up to making self-portraits, and admitting that something was still missing, I began to seek out alternative methods of expression, and began to wonder if a practice firmly rooted in painting only, which was pleasurable at the very least, was actually limiting what I was attempting to convey. Using my iPhone as a convenient way to experiment, I started to make photos, collages, paintings and videos, but I didn't yet know how to take them beyond "tests."



Philip Guston's *Aggressor*, 1978.

In early French, the word *obsession* means “the action of besieging” and comes from the Latin, *obsidere*, “to besiege”; however by the 1600s the term came to mean the “action of anything which engrosses the mind.” Feeling obsessed in this sense of the word, and even almost *possessed*, I felt that a fitting approach to the frustrations and lack of clarity I was experiencing in my work up until this point could be further explored by literally besieging some part of *Celine and Julie*. As if I could take back that part it took from me. After having done some experimentation with different types of media, I decided to film myself as both characters, recreating the scene that had captivated me most: the chase. Not only could I expand my thinking through other mediums, but I could also have the opportunity to make something, which previously existed as strictly fantasy, into reality. After hearing a rumor that Robert Rauschenberg had purportedly landed a walk-on

role on his favorite soap opera, it later became apparent that this obsession with pop culture not only has a relatively under-explored lineage within art production, but that by engaging it I could launch myself into a new phase of working that was not only meaningful, but also inevitable. Through painting, the work I produced was essentially a document or an index of a chase that was taking place within myself, but what I was chasing continued to elude me. By making a film whose subject is an actual chase, in which I watched me as I tried repeatedly- and unsuccessfully- to catch up with myself, I could collapse my interests and relationships to painting and film the same way I'd allowed the film to collapse itself into my every day life.



*Drawing Near*, 2015. Composite film still.

The chase is not only a game of seeking, but one of hiding as well. In both the original and the recreation, Celine, the character being chased, frequently breaks without warning, either to adjust a loose shoe strap, or to reapply her lipstick, like a cat pausing playtime to groom himself. In these instances she shows seemingly little regard for her

playmate, Julie, or the game that they're playing, as if she were both inside and outside of it. Julie, the pursuer, did not however take advantage of these pauses, but seemed almost privy to them; playing along with Celine and even pretending to hide, however haphazardly and conspicuously. Before the game would resume, an object was left behind, a residue of the chase, or a trace, that was transferred to her counterpart. Items like a pair of sunglasses, a scarf and a baby doll all emerged from a mysterious bag of tricks toted by Celine, and are treated as if their only purpose is to be left behind by one to be picked up by another. The transmission of these character-defining props lead me to ask, "If these once belonged to and defined Celine, and now belong to and define Julie, how now do I discern which character is which, if they, as fictitious characters, are to be defined without language or naming and now not by their costumes or props?"



*Drawing Near*, 2015. Film still.

In addition to calling into question originality and identity through the use of language and props, this reversal provided another access point: it immediately conjured specific, formative memories from my childhood. The earliest being caught applying (messily) some of my mother's lipstick to my brother and I as we sat on the sink and gazed into the mirror. The moment resonates as a kind of early coup d'états schemed and implemented by toddlers, and as an act of mimicry, was only too appropriate as a stand-in for a similar moment that occurred in the original film. By re-making a fictive narrative using reenactments of my actual memories, I could use my own memories as a prop, effectively diffusing and abstracting their meaning by dropping them into the diegetic space of the chase.

As it relates to my experiences in painting and the utilization of an abstract language, I found that these moments pinpointed something that I had yet been unable to articulate. The idea being that screen memories play an important role in what I produce, but by definition are always recalled incorrectly, as a protection against remembering something more traumatic. The truth or meaning behind the ordinary memory is altered, blurred and manipulated by the unconscious mind. For my work, it meant that memories could be accessible not only as signifiers of some kind of truth, but as material that can be abstracted, picked apart and stitched back together, echoing my use of abstract and gestural language within painting and reiterating it as a language that kept me "safe." Partial-

ly because of my long history with the medium, and because I found it increasingly difficult to ascertain critical distance from it, painting only with oils on canvas in the traditional methods no longer made sense in order to execute my desires. Instead, I focused my attention on making watercolors, digital paintings and videos.

Over the summer of 2014, I approached the production of the video by making several “test” versions, all shot in Aldrich Park, at the center of UC Irvine. One was shot in Super 8 color film, one in 35mm color slides, one used my iPhone camera to shoot only my shadows. All attempts were materially satisfying, but I couldn’t settle on any of them as finished pieces. Through the trials however, I made the decision to shoot the final version twice, and as an answer to my material indecision, I would shoot one version in black and white Super 8 film stock, and the other with a high-definition digital video camera. The ability to use both types of media allowed me an entry into a temporal space which I had never been able to enter between past and present. Super 8, an outdated method for shooting home videos, possesses a granular, shaky and culturally nostalgic effect that points backwards in time. High definition video, however, is the opposite: it possesses an exacting clarity that works to deflate the imagination, and tends to reveal texture and color more than affect or emotion. HD, now a common household acronym especially associated with television screens, is the contemporary answer to what was once dominated by an entirely different material. The split leaves much between the two types of cinema formally, historically, and experientially. HD video, shot in color, shown



opposite Super 8, shot in black and white, simultaneously brings a viewer backwards and forwards in time, and provides yet another moment in which a collapse occurs.

Continuing along this thread, I decided that the game in which I would be playing with myself as I recreated Celine and Julie would be split as well; I wanted it to occur within each set of film footage but also between the two types of footage as they played simultaneously on opposing walls. This would allow for an actual dialogue to emerge between the two, as well as negation of the narrative through the function of looping and repetition.



*We Three (My echo, my shadow and me)*, 2015. Installation view.



As I began theorizing the relationship between me and my work, painting and digital media, and film and video, it became clear that the installation on the whole needed to be comprised of all the elements between which I was aiming to establish and collapse relationships, which had also collapsed themselves into me. As in painting, abstraction was one of these elements, and a method for pulling out evidence (albeit falsified by my unconscious), residue, or trace of a memory in a way that could be understood with color, line, form, and gesture. Having also made several digital paintings, but never knowing what to do with them, the solution became more clear as I started to envision material oppositions stemming from the film. Since the digital paintings were both made and viewed on a screen, I wanted to somehow take them out of the virtual and into the physical, but in a way that I could uphold the screenic format. I chose a mid-density Habotai silk that was thin enough to maintain translucency and strong enough to withhold the process of stretching. Aside from its abilities to withstand a use within a painting practice, the touch and appearance of silk has an allure that other fabrics do not. It's tight weave of exceptionally fine fibers produces a shimmery effect that connotes to lingerie and even further points to that which potentially lingers underneath. The digital paintings, once printed, all of a sudden went from a hand-held image to large, arm-length gestures in the form of stains. As screen memories are often magnified, inflated versions of the original moment, these prints became magnified, inflated versions of a gesture the size of my index finger.



*Tongue-tied*, 2015. Archival pigment print on silk.

In an effort to remain elusive and resist strict classification, and call attention to standard conventions of naming and its association with identity, I call the silk prints by several different names: silk screens, silk paintings, silk prints, and pochades, to name a few. Not only does using several names for one existing body of work keep that body open to slight shifts in material and approach, but it calls attention to their difficulty in placing, in naming. To further the material and visual conflation, these works are made up of images that are imbedded into the fabric of their support and made vulnerable to the process of stretching. The silks also provide a reversal to traditional painting in that in

traditional methods, stretching a canvas marks the beginning of an artwork, and here it marks its completion. Completion in this case is evident when the image becomes displaced, even marginalized, and the white of the unprinted fabric reveals its thin wooden armature and its own closeness in value and proximity to the wall that it rests on. The gesture of pictorial and material abstraction works to call into question the complacent viewing structure that is associated with the ease of looking at screens, and furthermore the relationship we develop with our screens as something that's there but whose presence itself is rarely acknowledged.



*Pic/pocket*, 2015. Archival pigment print on silk.



Helen Frankenthaler's *Mountains and Sea*, 1952.

Color, as was taught to me in the Josef Albers' tradition, also plays an important role in all aspects of my approaches to making artwork. With the silk prints, I create an illusionistic pictorial space with swathes of pixelated, overlapping colors whose lines, shapes and temperatures compete with one another, and function to push and pull elements in and out of the picture plane. Trace of gesture and removal of the hand perform a flattening of figure and ground, down to its material core, while the anti-heroic scale keeps it to that of my own body; from that of finger to arm, arm to body. This work is underscored by the work of Helen Frankenthaler, specifically in reference to her large stained canvases, most notably *Mountains and Sea* made in the fall of 1952, made in re-

sponse to a trip she took to Nova Scotia. Repeated and scrupulous studying of her monumental works of that time, in addition to her woodcut prints, provided me with the tools to analyze my own efforts at capturing a memory of a specific site or location, while highlighting the aura and afterimage of a tandem process of mark-making and erasure and the collapse of figure and ground. The silk prints seek to further complicate the viewing space carved out by artists like Frankenthaler, and viewing in general, because of the fact that they are translucent. As light passes through the stretched prints, it bounces back from the wall and the works become backlit, simultaneously referencing their original form and casting a shadow on the history of painting itself.



*We Three (My echo, my shadow and me)*, 2015. Installation view.

The third element of *We Three* embodies a type of practice that has also been influenced by seeing the work in Joan Mitchell's solo exhibition at Hauser & Wirth, *Leaving America* (2007.) Through traveling, both Mitchell and Frankenthaler expanded each of their practices, and subsequently set the stage for a new subjectivity through painting. They went through significant formal and conceptual shifts that ultimately brought their vision and perception more clearly into the forefront of their work. My own subjectivity was also developed through traveling, and has been recorded in watercolor and oil pastel over several composition notebooks. Each page, lined and intended for writing, uses only one side for painting, and the back is always left blank. Because of the thinness of the paper, the painting on the front bleeds into the back, creating a mirror image of the original. When I traveled to Paris to re-create *Celine and Julie*, I decided instead to use a higher quality paper meant for wet media, with the intention of presenting them in a way that was open and accessible the way that book pages are, but by lifting them out of the binding format, or rather, so that more than one can be viewed at a time. Allowing each watercolor to then be its own discrete object, I chose to install them in a format that was reminiscent of a filmstrip; hung in frames that had no glass, and therefore no barrier between work and viewer. Removing the barrier of glass in a frame also meant that the viewer had more access to the most direct of all the works in the show; ones that were actually painted and whose marks and gestures are one-to-one with the body of the artist.



Joan Mitchell's *Untitled*, 1965.

The abstracted imagery for these works on paper were culled together after spending hours meandering around Paris and seeking out the locations where the original *Celine and Julie* was filmed, and people-watching Parisians as I sat in their outdoor cafes. While wandering, I would often get lost, and not speaking the language, would defer to Montmartre landmarks such as the funicular, the cemetery, a sign scribed in white paint on a cobblestone wall warning travelers of pick-pockets, or one shop in particular named Galerie Valerie Valentini. Without language, I was forced to focus my attention on colors in the parks and in fashion; the shapes and trajectory of oddly twisting and often dead-



end streets that I ambled down; I noticed and befriended the innumerable stray (but well-fed) cats. I felt as though the conundrum between feeling free and feeling lonely was present again, but that this time it was my fuel, my material. I set up a makeshift studio in the tiny apartment I rented and would make these watercolors while I drank wine and re-watched *Celine and Julie*. For the exhibition these works represent an important, more indexical part of my practice. They function as an open invitation to the most direct and intimate marks, like a pictorial diary or memoir written only in a visual language.



*Untitled (frame 5)*, 2014. Watercolor and oil pastel on paper.



The title of the show is borrowed from the 1940 crooner hit made popular by The Ink Spots (and covered by many more pop singers since) and was on heavy rotation while I ruminated over the ideas and concepts that went into putting together my thesis work. The song exemplifies a feeling of longing and the melancholic, and sang by three different members of the group, each with significantly varied intonations and pitches, expresses love-stricken grief with an oddly optimistic twist. It brings an acute attention to multiplicitous nature of the kind of artwork that I believe holds the most value; those that are interested in the otherwise unnoticed or unarticulated (flattened, even) spaces that exist between people, places, things emotions and behaviors. In line with the thinking of artists like Wade Guyton, who managed to successfully amend the process of painting by replacing his brushes and paint with a large format printer and ink, I would argue that painting itself is its own form of subjectivity. As Maurice Denis put it, it is a way of seeing a painted (or otherwise two-dimensional) artwork for what it is: *broad planes of color and lines organized on a flat surface.*

Through the work I've developed since entering graduate school, my goal is to turn the mirror, or the camera, on to itself, onto painting, as a way to self-reflexively reveal its infinite digressions, displacements, and transmissions. Questioning not only the role of subjectivity, but what exactly that subjectivity has become. Traditional painting represents its own history in the process of its making and its ability to adapt to methods

which maintain its relevance in the present. As a genre it has also managed to tear open a space, allowing itself to split like a cell, for works that continue to evolve the methods and values that ensure the future of the practice beyond what we can even envision. In the digital age, an era obsessed with time over space, with what fits within the frame of a screen, and with what exceeds it, a practice in rooted in painting, and one that utilizes the tool of abstraction, has the ability to perforate how culture understands and engages with images, and encourages an analytical perspective towards that which is not always visible.

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