

Trauma and Recovery



Left: *What Did I Do To Deserve A Head Massage Today?* Oil pastel, Charcoal, Graphite, and Fixative on Paper 2016. Center: *Nameless 1 and 2*. Low Fired Ceramic, Dye and wax 2016. Right: *Tracing the Scar*. Acrylic, Enamel, and Pigmented Wax on Panel 2017.

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Master of Fine Arts Thesis 2017

Abstract

Trauma and Recovery is an investigation into the contextual, conceptual, and theoretical framework concerning Tom Drakulich's art practice. His art practice is deeply rooted in an active process of abstraction where intuitive, spontaneous, and compulsive action is the methodological foreground for the distillation of the human figure according to a process of figurative abstraction. Ultimately, this paper seeks to position Tom Drakulich's art practice contextually in the contemporary, postmodern framework through an active exploration into the history of abstraction while navigating the contemporary conceptual and theoretical constructs that revolve around process based and figurative abstraction.

Introduction

Since the induction of abstraction into the art lexicon it has been assembled, destroyed, picked apart, and scraped clean many times over. It was a thread from which modernity came to fruition and from which postmodernity flourishes. As Kirk Varnedoe points out, “Abstraction is a remarkable system of productive reductions and destructions that expands our potential for expression and communication.”¹ Abstraction is a dynamic and powerful mode for communication through visual language, but in one and the same breath, abstraction continues to be reveled and reviled. This resulting paradox comes from the inescapable tension between the ideological pretense of its fundamental pursuit for purity in the visual arts, the *art for art’s sake* mentality, alongside the fact that the very nature of abstraction is unique, inarticulable, and it lives in a state of permanent flux.

The nature of abstraction is loaded with expressive and communicative potential, and in its infinite variations we are permitted to run with an uncouth course along the borderland of the absurd. I approach art through directed compulsion and physicality. My art practice is intuitive, compulsive, and active. The force of spontaneity is the foreground, infinite variation is the framework, direct physicality is the mode of operation, and the distillation the human figure is the goal. The resulting art object stands as a testament to a process of action and response, wherein, dealing with the unfamiliar acts in service of the expansion of cognitive thought and visceral consciousness relayed through the art making event itself. In my art practice, interacting with the unfamiliar becomes a foundation for dealing directly with personal intimacy, and figurative abstraction serves as an open ground to trigger and invite visceral and cognitive interactions concerning issues in the human experience like longing, desire, and intimacy.

¹ (Varnedoe; Abstraction 2013, 62)

Post-Modernist Abstraction: Searching for Something More Than Pure

I have always been interested in pursuing an art practice where the body leads the mind; where intuition and action are the foundations for creating earnest objects that engage perception and cognition through direct physicality for the sake of a sensuous experience. In this, I am never interested in pure form, and the absolute is a rather boring and impossible trope. For me formal abstraction is not the ultimate pursuit; rather, the process of abstraction serves as a teleological tool, or vehicle for relating and presenting modes for dealing cognitively with my present moment.

The important question is not why abstraction, but why abstraction now. How does my art practice fit into the contemporary, postmodern framework? As Maria Lind points out, “It [abstraction] can easily seem an obsolete phenomenon or redundant artistic strategy, but there are now a number of reasons for returning to abstraction, as it reinvents itself in relation to a diversity of twenty-first-century concerns.”² The precarious position of being a contemporary abstractionist is that we are responding to sets of originary languages, that is: past languages set to specific goals, mentalities, and time periods which originated according to the specific needs of that time. Thus, to work in abstraction, the practitioner is bound to be working in some sense of response and return to an older order of art practice, which ultimately plays into a larger structure in the postmodern framework.

Postmodernity a complex circumstance of reaction and response, rupture and return, which relates the present moment directly though critical engagement with history. In postmodernity one movement does not begin as another ends, and one operation is not wholly separate from the next. Hal Foster describes the modern to postmodern paradigm as working *in parallax*, “I believe modernism and postmodernism are constituted in an analogous way, in

² (Lind; Abstraction 2013, 10)

deferred action, as a continual process of anticipated futures and reconstructed pasts.”³ To consider this paradigm shift in a relatively facile way: modernity is future looking and postmodernity is looking at the past to reconcile the prospect of modernity’s proposals for the future. If modernity was a drive into the unknown, than postmodernism is a push beyond those borderlands. In this, the postmodern artist is responding directly and reactively to historical narratives with respect to their specific moment in the present.

The history of abstraction itself is a narrative wrought with rapture and response, advance, and opposition. The founding premise of abstraction is a quality of self-realization, or the purification, of art as a visual language according to the pursuit of pushing the visual arts into a self sustained mode of experiential engagement, as Clement Greenberg describes as, “a common effort in each of the arts to expand the expressive resources of the medium, not in order to express ideas and notions, but to express with greater immediacy sensations, the irreducible elements of experience.”⁴ The goal here was not to strip the visual arts of any outside literary influences to position art as a pure visual language without the obfuscation of the “ideological struggles of society.”⁵

Early abstractionists looking toward pure, or universal, forms from the European tradition like Wassily Kandinsky, Hans Hoffman, and Piet Mondrian were foundational in the pursuit of abstraction as an immediate, universal, and spiritual language. Hoffman and Mondrian were interested in the formal nature of abstraction as having the potential to be a universal language, and Kandinsky pioneered the practice and philosophy of ‘pure painting’ as “the combination of pure color and abstract form.”⁶ Works like, *Composition VIII*, 1923⁷ typify his pursuit to “key it

³ (Foster 1996, 207)

⁴ (Greenberg, *Towards a Newer Laocoon* 1940)

⁵ (Greenberg, *Towards a Newer Laocoon* 1940)

⁶ (Kandinsky 1977, 47)

up,”⁸ in expressing inner truths over external forms in the visual experience through the purity of color and form. Color and pure form drive the viewer’s physical and emotional response in visual art—much the way that music engages the listener directly, through a language of its own.

Kandinsky’s practice laid the groundwork for Greenbergian formalist aesthetics and introduced the possibility of abstraction as a direct and personal pursuit into the psychological immediacy of the creative act itself, which the American Abstract Expressionists took a step further. They began to treat the creative act not as a means to an end, but as the foundation of the practice and began to focus on the physical reality of the art making event through process rather than to focus on the aesthetic outcome solely. “the genesis of the ‘abstract.’ In turning his attention away from subject matter of common experience, the poet or artist turns it in upon the medium of his own craft.”⁹ Artists like Jackson Pollock, Helen Frankenthaler, and Mark Rothko set a practical framework where the work of art is created through intuitive action and psychological immediacy. The resulting image becomes a record of that creative event.

Considering first, Pollock then Frankenthaler, two artists that typify the goals laid out according to Greenbergian aesthetics and High Modernist formalism. Either artist stripped their practice of all outside literary influence and objective reality, and engaged directly with pure color relationships and an emphasis of the flat picture plane. Furthermore they worked directly in a present moment of creative action. Pollock’s *One, Number 31, 1950*¹⁰ for example is an all over, gestural abstraction iconic of the artists practice—*pour paintings*. In these works, Pollock lays the un-stretched canvass out on the ground, and pours various viscous paints upon the

⁷ Fig. 1; Kandisky, Wassily 1923

⁸ (Kandinsky 1977, 2)

⁹ (Greenberg, *Avant-Garde and Kitsch* 1939)

¹⁰ Fig. 2; Pollock, Jackson 1950

canvas using brushes, sticks, or straight from the can; thus the artist's body and physical action are foundational in encoding the creative event.

Helen Frankenthaler's *The Bay* from 1963¹¹, on the other hand, is a color field painting created by using diluted acrylic paint to stain and dye the raw canvas through liquid application. The applied pigment is given form, dimensionality, and presence by way of Frankenthaler physically shifting the canvas in space allowing gravity to carry the pigment around the surface of the painting. Once, again it is not the direct application of pigment from brush to surface that develops the composition; it is the artist's direct physical engagement with the art object.

In both, Pollock and Frankenthaler's practices, every action in the creative act comes to serve a significant component in the compositions structure, and every action was served by the directed physicality of the artist. In many respects the action itself is the distillation of abstraction in terms of the purification of the medium of painting. In similar terms both practices come to typify Greenbergian aesthetics, and as Kirk Varnedo points out, "...had advanced the line of abstraction's logical progress toward its supposedly destined goal of expressing the essential visual qualities of painting without any extraneous literary content."¹² The Abstract expressionists carried many of the initial, philosophical concerns for abstraction into a broader fruition, and in doing so the doors for abstraction have been kicked open, and a particular dichotomy has carried forward: to pursue formal abstraction as an internal inquiry, or to use abstraction as a set of teleological tools for the pursuit of a particular agenda.

Contemporary process based abstraction walks a precarious border between the arbitrary and the intentional; between work that simply agrees with conventions and work that seeks to expand the dialectic. To follow Greenbergian aesthetics blindly and for its own pursuit in

¹¹ Fig. 3; Frankenthaler, Helen 1963

¹² (Varnedoe 2013, 49)

contemporary art can result in arbitrary, agreeable, and generally facile abstraction. Consider *Zombie Formalism*, the epithet Jerry Saltz and Walter Robison's 2014 proposed in their discourse concerning abstractionists working in direct return to Greenbergian aesthetics. "One thing I'm hearing these days, loud and clear, is the hum of an art style that I like to call Zombie Formalism. 'Formalism because this art involves a straightforward, reductive, essentialist method of making a painting... and 'Zombie' because it brings back to life the discarded aesthetics of Clement Greenberg."¹³ Artists like Lucien Smith¹⁴ and Jacob Kassay,¹⁵ exemplify this mode of abstraction; in that, Smith shoots pigment onto the canvas with a fire extinguisher, and Kassay's paintings are made from chemical interactions caused by silver nitrate.

This process based peculiarity in the work alludes to the sense of some considered postmodern art event; however, the work exists as a mere *simulacrum of originality*¹⁶ which begins and ends in arbitrary action. "It feels 'cerebral' and looks hip in ways that flatter collectors even as it offers no insight into anything at all... it's visual Muzak, blending in."¹⁷ The difficulty here is that because the composition is developed almost entirely by chance there can be no considered integrity to the image outside of arbitrary chance. Now of course, we can position this work in a mode of art's self critique, but even applying this status to the work can only carry it into a higher mode of decorator friendly. In the 1950's Harold Rosenberg warned of this specific sort of art calling it *Apocalyptic Wallpaper*.¹⁸ In this case, to drive abstraction further into the realm of pure form through arbitrary processes becomes an active negation of abstractions pursuit, and what results is a perpetuation of abstraction as mere decoration. Now, I

¹³ (Robinson 2014)

¹⁴ Fig. 4; Smith, Lucien 2012

¹⁵ Fig 5; Kasey, Jacob 2009

¹⁶ (Robinson 2014)

¹⁷ (Saltz 2014)

¹⁸ (Rosenberg 1952, 48)

am in no way pointing to a disavowal of Greenbergian aesthetics, or formal abstraction in general; rather, I am interested in artists who use abstraction as a foundational pursuit into a greater agenda.

What the Abstract Expressionists came to develop was an art practice that got to the very root and essence of an experiential, sensuous art phenomenon, wherein, the painting or sculpture is an experiential phenomenon for the creator and viewer alike. I trace and relate to the relational development both internally with Abstract Expressionism through Mark Rothko's art practice, as well as with post Abstract Expressionist artists like Donald Judd, Lynda Benglis, and in a more contemporary context with David Reed. In each of these artists' practices, abstraction is the foundation from which they expand the experiential nature of abstraction well beyond the image its self.

Consider now, Mark Rothko, an Abstract Expressionist working alongside Pollock, using some similar methodologies, but pursuing significantly different ends. Abstraction for Rothko was a pursuit of the relative symbolic logic of the human drama. His practice was an active process deeply rooted in an investigation of the many objective realities that prior art practices had not pursued. Rothko was "not interested in the push-pull of space and color for its own sake. The drama consisting of a battle of forms contained by a momentary stasis presented, in purely abstract form... In his classic paintings, space influences the experience of color and light, making it into a palpable object or thing that acts through its own violation in relation to the viewer."¹⁹

Rothko arrived at his iconic style early in the 1950's, and Paintings like *No. 14. 1960*,²⁰ came to serve a greater engagement of expressing, in unfamiliar terms and though unfamiliar

¹⁹ (Clearwater 2006, 169)

²⁰ Fig. 6; Rothko, Mark 1960

symbols, the reality of abstractions connection to the material world—both direct and indirect connections. “Rothko’s paintings reveal the fallacy of our vision—the conflict between what is seen and what is felt.”²¹ His forms are formless, floating in flux, and vibrating through the plastic atmosphere of his creative action. Every application of paint comes to exist and inform the creative act, so that it may serve the life of the painting as an entity in its own right. As Bonnie Clearwater points out, “Pollock’s paintings capture a moment of flux. However, his lines are a permanent record of the artist’s action, whereas Rothko’s multiforms, instead of representing the artist’s gesture, seem able to move and breathe on their own.”²² The interesting thing that Rothko presents for me is that he is directly connected to acknowledging that material objectivity serves to enhance abstraction. “Rothko aimed to produce a pictorial space that took into account the fact that air is an actual substance, with a pressure of fifteen pounds per square inch.”²³ One of the fundamental elements of his work is the creation of a living atmosphere for his color blocks to live, breath, and interact in their own unique circumstance; thus, each differing value, shade, or weight shift comes to exist as a stand in for human interaction and the human drama.

Now, what Rothko and the Abstract Expressionists came to provide, and what Harold Rosenberg later describe about in *The American Action Painters*, was that: first, for the abstract expressionists, the picture can be an event captured; second, such paintings are inherently tied to the biography and psychology of the artist as having come to exist according to the psychology of creation; and lastly, the work does not produce nature, it becomes a relative nature of its own.²⁴ Abstract Expressionist work presented an entirely different set of circumstances. The work is no longer to be read, or understood through interpretation and guide, but to be

²¹ (Clearwater 2006, 104)

²² (Clearwater 2006, 72)

²³ (Clearwater 2006, 86)

²⁴ (Rosenberg 1952, 22,23,48)

experienced on its own terms. That is, having brought the visual arts into the realm of the pure experience of perception in a completely self realized state.

Abstract expressionist painters were specifically engaged with the flat picture plane, but as Donald Judd points out, they missed some serious potential in abstraction as well as the art experience in general. Judd, on the other hand, worked in direct opposition to Greenbergian aesthetics. In his wall works like, *Large Stack*²⁵ from 1968, Judd created an arrangement of multiple cubes which are stacked vertically and connected directly to the wall. The exposed side of each cube is skinned with brushed, reflective aluminum, and the tops and bottoms are capped with stained glass. The aluminum is reflective, thus casting its own light, and implicating the entirety of the space in its object-hood. The stained glass emits an eerie orange hue activating both the internal space of each structure as well as the surrounding spaces. The sculpture seems to be a complete and literal simplification/reduction of a cube in space; however, the experience is an extraordinarily expressive and creative activation of implication engaging a particular psychological experience. He does this not through direct physical engagement with the creative act but with a direct cognitive and psychological engagement with the objects through reduction and viewership.

As Judd points out about his departure from older modes of painting and sculpture, “The rectangular plane is given a life span.”²⁶ The reality of the canvas is that it is a formal structure to contain; thus becoming a limitation. Three dimensional spaces have force, presence, and a greater physical/literal power than illustrative space; thus in turning away from painting, he can create a further encompassing art experience. As Michael Freid points out, “Everything counts—not as part of the object, but as part of the situation in which its objecthood is established and on

²⁵ Fig. 7 Judd, Donald 1968

²⁶ (Judd, *Specific Objects* 1965)

which that objecthood at least partly depends.”²⁷ Judd and the Minimalists pushed their art practices into deeper realms of space, time, and materiality through an understanding of the totality of the art experience. The internal, external, and relational space becomes imperative to the way that the viewer will engage with the work.

Minimalism is in its root phenomenological. Light and Space presented as a moment in time are direct phenomenon’s, loaded with thought and perception. For Judd, what served to enhance the totality of the experience was a break from the limitations of formal modes of presentation in art; thus, he removed the canvas, and the pedestal. He chose instead to work directly with the surface of the wall, thus activating space the arts external space. His interest here was to distill, and revamp the modes of operation into a seamless perceptive experience. Knowing that to emphasize real space the objects must be directly linked to the surface—remove the flat picture plane, and new materials must be used. For color, form, and material are inherently linked to the way a space can be shaped, and an engagement may be made. “A beam thrusts, a piece of iron follows a gesture; together they form a naturalistic and anthropomorphic image. The space corresponds.”²⁸In similar terms, Lynda Benglis’s *Fallen Paintings* and encaustic paintings of the 1970s, developed a practice that took abstraction as a foundation and shifted into a dynamic presentation of human experience and activity. Benglis does this in a rather different way. The process itself becomes figurative.

Pointing directly at Jackson Pollock’s pour paintings, Benglis kicked her art practice off with a heave of latex paint. In the fallen paintings, she would simply pour wet paint from the ground onto the floor, allowing the fluid paint to ultimately dry in position. Each layer would sit atop the last until it became a fluid moment of pure multicolored undulation. The process of

²⁷ (Freid 1967, 4)

²⁸ (Judd, *Specific Objects* 1965)

pouring paint became inherently figurative in the way that it becomes impossible to disconnect the object from its creation. Envisioning Benglis in the act of pouring the latex paint presents a direct figurative circumstance.

This idea becomes paramount in her later *two-brushstroke*²⁹ encaustic paintings, such as *Embryo I*, 1967-76³⁰ with relate directly to “flesh and physicality.”³¹ Just as in the fallen paintings, her encaustic works were a collective engagement with geography, the body, and things buried in dimension. Each painting is a lozenge shaped oval around the length of one of her arms. The object undergoes a long additive process of Benglis applying layer after layer of encaustic paint upon the panel, which is perched precariously upon unstable saw horses, until the wax becomes built up like a geologic formation. The panel sways with her every move, and in every gesture a new substrate has been created to be covered. The dimensionality of the objects relates directly to the accumulation and sealing of memories, as well as, the visceral reaction to the work in objective inference and physical attraction to the object as a body. The implications can be read equally in terms of nature, of the human body, and of the artistic process.

Benglis’s direct physical practice concerns the ways in which she can physically act upon a material to create a psychologically responsive circumstance. Scale, concept, and physicality play significant roles in the ways that her art experience takes abstraction as a standpoint and pushes it to its absurd limits. Now, David Reed on the other hand takes a very static, scientific, and logical approach to abstraction; however, his return to Abstract Expressionist mentalities is tied to a deep concern for relating the conceptual experience of human activity through abstraction.

²⁹ (Richmond 2013)

³⁰ Fig. 8; Benglis, Lynda 1967-76

³¹ (Richmond 2013, 49)

David Reed is devoted to the gesture of the brushstroke. Paintings like, #625, 2011–2102³² look like one single, fluid brushstroke permeating the surface of the canvas in a repeated mopping back and forth motion. The image is broken several times, wherein; once a single drippy brush stroke is splayed out in a rectangular box sitting atop a lower transparent break in the dominant bright-green brushstroke. Each brushstroke relates directly to Abstract Expressionist immediacy and eccentricity; however, every element in Reed's work is meticulously planned, sketched, and refigured until the final painting is ready to be created. Now of course, this sounds like a pure formal enterprise akin to Greenbergian aesthetics, concrete art, and even Zombie Formalism, but his work combines the best of formal abstraction with a conceptual engagement with contemporary life and culture. Aspect ratio and surface structure conceptually relate to the encoding of information on film strips. In a roundabout way Reed gets to an investigation of creative development coupled with an acknowledgment of the history of abstraction, under the conceptual umbrella of human intelligence, activity, and interaction.

The ruptures and revelations made in modernism afford contemporary artists with an immeasurable capacity for sites of work with which to explore new, unique visual languages and methodological operations. In each of these prior art practices, abstraction is a foundation, where the practitioner is returning to one or more sites of historical abstraction so that they can develop an art practice which temporally relates history with their present moment. For Judd and Benglis, materiality and physicality relate their practice to an expansion of what the art object can do in space, while also describing some specific material relationships particular to their time. Reed, on the other hand, uses contemporary modes of communication to describe his moment. Relating new modalities in the contemporary circumstance directly through critical engagement with

³² Fig. 9; Reed, David 2012

history and the present moment, looking to the past serves a means for predicating and refreshing the ways we can understand our present.

In *The Return of the Real*, Hal Foster considers the nature of returning to old sites of work as a crux in his pursuit to explore some of the fundamental shifts and paradigmatic structures in postmodernism. The root of his investigation is rather simple, “How do we tell the difference between a return to an archaic form of art that bolsters conservative tendencies in the present and a return to a lost model of art made to displace customary ways of working... I will focus on returns that aspire to a critical consciousness of both artistic conventions and historical conventions.”³³ The point herein is to look to old sites of work not to relive old ruptures, but to retool them with a critical consciousness of the present. The nature of a return is a directed response, as Foster points out, and this becomes important for the ways in which both critical distance and the nature of the return exist to inform the art practice in its present moment.

I respond directly to Abstract Expressionism, in my art practice, not for its formal and internal pursuits concerning the philosophical nature of art, but because the physicality of process based abstraction suits my sensibilities and informs the implications of my conceptual premise. I am interested in a process where the immediacy of action becomes an earnest approach to composition. This is the naïve reality of my fundamental practice, as Amy Sillman describes:

“AbEx was simply one technique of the body for those dedicated to the handmade, a way to throw shit down, mess shit up, and perform aggressive erasures and dialectical interrogations. If you want to make something with your hands, if you want the body to lead the mind and not the other way around... And it’s not that you’re going to be working ‘like’ an AbExer, but that the tools

³³ (Foster 1996, 1)

themselves will mandate a certain phenomenology of making that emanates from shapes, stains, spills, and smudges.”³⁴

In responding to historic modes of abstraction I have sought out a mode of art production from which I can use my intuitive physicality in the moment through the force of spontaneity to evaluate the ways in which I can explore human activity in a lived moment. I do not return to modernist abstract methodologies for the purpose of *pastiche*, nor out of a sense of *nostalgia*: *pastiche* being a neutral imitation, and *nostalgia* being a longing to relive or to re-experience a particular past.³⁵ I am deeply influenced by the history of abstraction in general, and Post War American abstraction in particular—Abstract Expressionism (AbEx), or more adequately explained by Harold Rosenberg as *American Action Painting*.³⁶ I am interested in the very human nature that the art event as a phenomenon presents: the brutality and tenderness, the chaos and calm, and the certainty, uncertainty, and the doubt. But most importantly the immediacy and directness that only working in the moment can present. I direct the creative event specifically into modes that play upon abstraction and representation through an action based, dialectic interrogation of transformation. The result of which is the reconciliation of action and the object with a direct concern for the human body as an object.

Action and Response: Trauma and Recovery

In my practice, the creative act itself becomes a living moment and the resulting art becomes a record of that moment. Harold Rosenberg describes that, “With traditional aesthetic references discarded as irrelevant, what gives the canvass its meaning is not psychological data but *role*, the way the artist organizes his emotional and intellectual energy as if he were in a

³⁴ (Sillman 2011)

³⁵ (Jameson 1998, 4-8)

³⁶ (Rosenberg 1952)

living situation.”³⁷ I direct my process in terms of an action and response, or a trauma and recovery, mentality. The result of my process is the reconciliation of action and the object with a direct concern for the human figure as an object of reference and dissolution. Ceramics, charcoal, and encaustic wax are ideal materials for me in creating circumstances where the action and the response can be applied physically in the work, and where each action and response can be left as an obvious artifact in the life and process of the objects creation.

My work begins with a set of guides and specific points of departure, each rooted in some level of material reality relating directly to the human figure and experience. In my ceramic sculpture, traditions in the bust and urn serve as contextual circumstances from where my practice can proceed. I am interested in taking traditions in the vessel in terms of considering the analogy between the human body and the vessel as a literal transformative standpoint to develop each sculpture in relationship to figurative abstraction. In my wax painting and charcoal drawing human circumstances, like particular intimate moments or a synthesis of the body and land, serve the same foundation. These guides are the foundation and initiation of my creative action, and are never discarded entirely.

Artifacts of the process become aesthetic points of interest. Each action violates the surface, or body of the object thus traumatizing its particular state, but each action is never left without critical response and consideration; rather, each action poses a set of questions and circumstances to be relayed into a response, or recovery to which I must further respond to. The resulting object then becomes a synthesis of immediate in the moment thought, feeling, and physicality: a record of my encounter with the art making experience and transformation. The initial point of departure serves the initiation and greater whole of the creative circumstance.

³⁷ (Rosenberg 1952, 23)

My working mentality and art philosophy relate directly to Peter Voulkos, in that, I am interested in the drama, challenge, and the physical, intellectual, and emotional demands that process based abstraction presents. “The quicker I work, the better I work. If I start thinking and planning, I start contriving and designing. I work mostly by gut feeling.”³⁸ Now, I work directly from intuition and the force of spontaneity, under the guise of infinite variation, but I always do so with critical response. Herein, infinite variation plays a key role in the perpetuation of the work: each move serves and is served by its last move, each object serves and is served by its predecessor, and every action and object must come to be unique and stand on its own terms. My employ of infinite variation differs significantly from Voulkos, in that, I am not interested in using a set of simple geometry, like the dome, cylinder, triangle, and so on, to organize and reorganize forms in space. Infinite variation in my practice revolves around gesture, pure scrawl, and transformation according to the human body as an object.

In my practice as well as Voulkos’ it is necessary to act and then to respond to those actions after a period of consideration. I become a connoisseur, of sorts, of the differences between the spontaneous, the automatic, and what is evoked by that circumstance. Each response creates a new dimension, while also reconciling its previous action. Thus, every action and response serves to play a role in the revelations of the creative event as developing in terms of an internal “psychology of creation.”³⁹

For me, the creative process comes to serve as a recovery, or uncovering of the lost, fragmented, and fossilized experiences through a process of transformation. As David Lichtenstein points out, “all creative acts are recreations of a lost object with no independent

³⁸ (Slivka and Tsujimoto 1995, 57)

³⁹ (Rosenberg 1952, 23)

being outside of that re-creation.”⁴⁰ Essentially, every creative act comes from a concern for capturing a lost objective reality or sentiment, and in the act, there comes a recreation according to the sensibility of that which has been lost—a desire and longing for reconnecting with the absent. Desire is understood in terms of lacking and the absent, as a relationship of feeling the need to reconnect with the particular sense, experience, or object of desire. Now, where Lichtenstein is incorrect, is that the recreation gives a new being to the lost object, or particular fleeting moment. For me, there is an independent being both in the work and in the response to the work, which relates directly to a cognitive uncovering of fossilized knowledge. Just because a moment passes does not mean that it ceases to exist; rather, it is carried forward in knowledge and cognition.

Cognition is the mental faculty with which we make sense of the world around us and our present circumstance through the process of navigating acquired knowledge through thought, experience, and sensation. The difference between cognition and memory is that memory is the stored information used to inform cognition—one is responsive to the other and either inform our interactions. As Donald Judd points out, “All experience is knowledge: subjective experience is knowledge; objective experience, which is science, is obviously knowledge. Color is knowledge.”⁴¹ Consider that everything in human knowledge is a product of the phenomenon of experience; thus, present moments fade in time but are acquired in cognition. Because experience is a temporal phenomenon which encodes as knowledge, then cognition becomes a relative negative space between each experience and the knowledge of each experience. “If two objects are close together they define the space in between. These definitions are infinite until the two objects are until the two objects are so far apart that the distance between is no longer space.

⁴⁰ (Lichtenstein n.d.)

⁴¹ (Judd, *Some Aspects of Color in General and Red and Black in Particular* 1991)

But then the passerby remembers that one was there and another there.”⁴² What then defines the negative space between the distanced objects is the viewers’ cognitive awareness through the experience of each object in space. Cognition helps us to deal with objects in our space and the immediacy of how we experience them, but it else serves to relate that information back into a process of encoding our present.

In the minimalist system of reduction, perception and cognition serve the greater experience of the totality of the way that we directly experience objects in space. Consider Robert Smithson’s *Entropy and the New Monuments*. “Instead of causing us to remember the past like the old monuments, the new monuments seem to cause us to forget the future... they are involved in a systematic reduction of time down to fractions of seconds, rather than representing the long spaces of centuries. Both past and future are placed into an objective present.”⁴³ As Smithson points out, the minimalists work vanishes into a succession of motionless intervals that are an order of particular solids, or objects seeming to be solid. The engagement between the viewer and the object is immediate, and is intensified by the objects connection to the viewer’s space directly. I am interested a particularly expressive process which accomplishes a similar goal—to reduce monumental action into a present object. I do this through an active process coupled with a reductive surface value.

I work directly with surfaces that are both active and reductive. My interest herein is twofold. First, I seek to develop dimensionality through a process of building up and transformation rather than through the constraints of traditional perspective. Secondly, my process is active and emotive; thus, to reduce the surface, or frontal, aspect of the work down to a single shade emphasizes every action through the process of psychological navigation.“It is

⁴² (Judd, *Some Aspects of Color in General and Red and Black in Particular* 1991)

⁴³ (Smithson 1966)

brought into focus by a strict condition of perception... As action decreases, the clarity of such surface-structures increases.”⁴⁴ Action in its own right can easily be lost in the moment. Thus, it becomes necessary to create a circumstance where action and pause mutilation and clarity are balanced in a way that allows each action to be considerable within the total objectification of the image. Thus, the homogenous surface comes to enforce the products of my action by simplifying the surface structure to one, dominant value.

We situate ourselves according to our knowledge of the things we are looking at. “It is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain that world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it. The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled.”⁴⁵ The ways we see things is shaped and informed by what we know, believe, and understand. Furthermore, Perception affects all of the senses, and it does so through desire. Considering Berger’s analysis of Holbein’s painting *The Ambassadors*, 1533. “Every square inch of the surface of this painting, whilst remaining purely visual, appeals to importunes, the sense of touch... what the eye perceives is already translated, within the painting itself, into the language of tactile sensation.”⁴⁶ An image is the appearance of something absent, or a simulation of reality, thus in its absence our desire plays up the senses according to the present simulation. Perception is inherently tied to desire because everything we see and perceive is related directly to how we direct our bodies and actions in space.

The space of my art object then becomes a space with which the viewer must objectively navigate thought at a cognitive level of fragmentation and dismembering contained in one body. Just as we cognitively engage with two separate objects in real space, we also cognitively map two objects, or surfaces, laid upon one another. “Anything on a surface has space behind it. Two

⁴⁴ (Smithson 1966)

⁴⁵ (Berger 1972, 7)

⁴⁶ (Berger 1972, 90)

colors on the same surface almost always lie in different depths. An even color, especially in oil paint, covering all or much of a painting is almost always flat and infinitely spatial.”⁴⁷ The psychological negotiation of the homogenous surface slows the viewer’s navigation of the work so that every action in the body’s surface comes to play an independent, but inseparable role in the relationship between the object and its resolution. I chose to work in value systems where the dominant structure is distilled to wither white or black. For me the inner harmony of both white and black is that of infinite and unobstructed possibilities. Black becomes absorption while white becomes a reflection; however, either end of the spectrum presents pause and clarity.

Trying to make sense of the unfamiliar is an engagement with our relationship to logic and cognition activated by visceral response and the cognitive unburying of the fossil fragments of experience. “...the active imposition of an interpretation on incoming experience. The point made by the duck-rabbit drawing can be broadened into a suppler and more inclusive notion of cognition as a process of finding meaning in the world.”⁴⁸ I work in a considered hedging upon the borderland of the present and the absent, the arbitrary and the intentional, and the mistake and the recovery seeking to shape a direct and earnest respect for an internal reality in each object.

I am dealing directly with the dissolution of the human figure through abstraction; thus, the figurative nature of my work is predicated by its formal content and evocation, as well as the physical presence of the artist action. Consider Amy Sillman’s body of work, *Third Person Singular*: each painting begins when she invites a subject into her studio to make a portrait of. She then waits a few hours after the session ends and remakes the portrait from memory, and does so several more times over the course of several weeks. The resulting image is a complete

⁴⁷ (Judd, *Specific Objects* 1965)

⁴⁸ (Varnedoe; *Abstraction* 2013, 58)

distillation of the portrait into the artist's memory and cognitive response to the past moment through creative action. "Her work acknowledges the limitations of representation—how our experiences of the morass of things juxtaposed in the world do not easily translate into a single picture surface..."⁴⁹ as Sillman works, and reworks each image, the figures become fractured and distance themselves from legibility, but in this the greater aura of the image, the absence of the figure becomes more important than its representation because it informs the viewers response and desire.

In Sillman's practice, personal cognition serves the formal logic of the resulting image. This does not to exclude the viewer from the figurative or cognitive relationship, but provides them with a ground to develop a more direct, tense, and intimate engagement with the work. Sillman seeks to present a tense image where the object of our desire exists in our concern for the figure and our relationship to its open circumstance in the image. "Part of Sillman's seduction lies in her aptitude for offering humorous and honest interpretations of what feel like familiar scenarios, evoking a sense of shared experience whose lineage seems to be in the historical forms of allegory or myth."⁵⁰ Her paradox is in the viewers' desire: their sense of knowing, even being able to consciously or subconsciously feel the lingering figure without it ever fully appearing. The transformative capacity gives the viewer a field of thoughtful engagement which Anne Ellegood calls "veiled abstraction,"⁵¹ but the reverse works as well. These images are veiled representations, several times removed from their initial stasis. Just as Hal Foster points to, in reality abstraction and representation do not work in opposition; rather abstraction sublates representation grounding it in reality and rescuing it from the arbitrary. Herein, treating abstraction and representation not as oppositional modalities, but as modes of operation which

⁴⁹ (Ellegood 2008, 55)

⁵⁰ (Ellegood 2008, 62)

⁵¹ (Ellegood 2008, 61)

are *already reconciled*,⁵² serves to better ground the abstraction in an engagement relating directly to knowledge and experience.

It is my belief that abstraction has the power to inform the internal nature of art and life, and it does so in ways that engage the creator and the viewer alike directly through perception, imagination, desire, and, most importantly, cognition. Through my practice I seek an action based process as a means for imbuing each object with an embodiment human experience. A work of art is simply a circumstance presented through a particular set of sensory language—be it visual, auditory, or tactile. This circumstance is directed by the artist through the act of creation, and guided by the viewer in reception. In this, the viewer will always bring their cognition to this circumstance. I do not begin with many preconceived notions, instead I allow the process of building, taking apart, and reconfiguring to create objects which are both familiar to the mind and wholly unique. Ultimately the art object, whether two-dimensional or three-dimensional becomes the pursuit of a cognitive and visceral communion with the human experience expressed through an active process of action and response—or a set of traumas and recoveries.

Theory and Conclusion

In trauma there is recovery, and in recovery old ghosts can be unburied and new veins can be opened to move forward with. These are the moments in our lives which shape our present reality. It is my belief that these moments occur on many scales, and carry with them relationships on many levels. From the mundane to the grand; from our daily toil to earth shattering tragedies the essence of our reality is in constant flux an unresolved and fluid stream which remain as fossil fragments of the fleeting moment. All of these moments serve to inform

⁵² (Foster 1996, 103)

the totality of our knowledge, and the ways in which cognition helps us to make sense of the world around us. My work is no more about the big moments than it is about the small ones; it is as much about the aching shoulder as it is about the broken wrist.

What interests me, herein, is finding ways in which these moments can be dug up and unearthed through visceral response and cognitive interaction prompted by dealing with unfamiliar circumstances. In my art practice, interacting with the unfamiliar through my intuitive action and the force of spontaneity becomes the foundation for dealing directly with personal intimacy. Just as Rose Slivka points out, “In this process the artist comes to know himself, and in turn reveals himself to others.”⁵³ By leaving the object in an open circumstance the viewer too has the ability to transform and reveal themselves through the intimate act of psychological navigation and the objective engagement with the art object. My art practice is a pursuit into articulating and inspiring the visceral moments where buried and forgotten memories, traumas, are brought to surface through dealing cognitively with an unfamiliar circumstance. In this, pursuing figurative abstraction rather than pure form serves to direct the ways that each object can trigger sensations that are easily relatable. Abstraction is not about knowing, it is about finding; it is about universals, not specifics.

My work pushes on the border between the human condition and the human experience in the same respect as Peter Voukos, “A Pervasive feeling of ruin, mortality, and the transitoriness of life permeates the pieces. But at the same time, the stacks also evoke a sense of resurrection and rebirth—of jarring the viewer into thinking about the meaning of life.”⁵⁴ I want the viewer to think about life, not in terms of its end, but in terms of its revolution and continuation. While there certainly is a sense of mortality in my work, what interests me is the

⁵³ (Slivka and Tsujimoto 1995, 124)

⁵⁴ (Slivka and Tsujimoto 1995, 124)

essence of life in the matter, the experience, and not its end—the unresolved nature of human activity.

Nothing has a specific point of “out of nowhere” origin, nor do things simply cease to exist. Points of origin are only false ascriptions for points of departure. To examine points of departure is to look seriously at the past with an inclination forward. David Lichtenstein points out that nothing in this world comes out of nowhere; rather, all things develop through a series of transformations and mutations which build, and continue to grow—each one in success leads to the next, and builds along the border of its last without resolution providing a sense of infinite variation.⁵⁵

The goal is not to pursue an absolute, universal, or wholly unique reality; rather, the adjunct reality is only an extension and reflection of the reality we exist in. The adjunct reality does not come out of nowhere and it cannot be an absolute, and it cannot be wholly unique for if it were it would be unintelligible to the point of being meaningless and impossible comprehend. Mark Rothko points out that the adjunct reality is about the unfamiliar. “Instead of appealing to our sense of the familiar, it simply functions in another way. It appeals to our abstract experience pertaining to the familiar relationships between space and shapes... in the sense of a philosophical narration of bringing all the related elements together in some unified end.”⁵⁶ The elements of the object serve the greater pursuit of its philosophical implications rather than anecdotal presentations of the man himself. Rothko is pushing on the boundaries of the ways in which abstraction can come to be engaged with in terms of the objective production of a man versus the production of the genera of man through a language unique to its self, but which communicates in a language which is objectively familiar to the mind. Now in my practice, each

⁵⁵ (Lichtenstein n.d.)

⁵⁶ (Rothko 2004, 80)

image or object exists in relative unfamiliarity; however, once the object is recognized as figurative, every mark and action comes to serve a specific role in the objective navigation of the work.

Abstraction activates knowledge, cognition, and it does this through imagination. As Edmund Burke points out, “It is one thing to make an idea clear, and another to make it *affecting* to the imagination. If I make a drawing of a place or a temple or a landscape, I present a very clear idea of those objects; but then my picture can at most affect as the place, temple, or landscape would have affected in reality.”⁵⁷ What imagination does is to create a greater critical engagement with the art object—for as it exists in unfamiliarity the viewer must imaginatively engage with its new reality in the world. This begins to get more psychologically interesting for the viewer when the new entities and bearers of thought relate indirectly, with reasonable complexity, and through a good level of unfamiliarity and obscurity.

Space is an active presence, be it real, implied, or entirely physiological the critical distance makes for a more compelling and dynamic set of psychological and intellectual engagements. As Andrew Benjamin points out if a work of art is to have any sort of power in the sublime it must announce a temporal and spatial set of distance, especially concerning obscurity.⁵⁸ Now, my form of obscurity is rather different than the landscape image Benjamin is discussing; however, obscure distance matters in abstraction on the same level as the distance from one object to another, as well as the distance from the root of the departure to its final stasis, because the refusal of clarity through a distancing of the immediate and the literal intensifies the engagement between the viewer and the object. “If what is at stake were abstraction, then representation could be understood as distanced to the extent that perspectival

⁵⁷ (Burke 2004, 103-104)

⁵⁸ (Benjamin 2011)

space no longer has a determining effect on presentation...”⁵⁹ As obscurity is a form of distancing, of spacing out, then from clarity to obscurity can be dealt with in similar terms to that of the present and the absent, and the subsequent creation of desire and enthusiasm. Thus, the terms of their engagement shift into terms of their personal cognition, and how the viewer must imaginatively connect certain dots curated by the object. Obscurity, openness, and the unfamiliar come to serve the abstract object as it becomes compound abstraction and a plural event.

Words are loaded with content in the same way that forms are. Some are attached to a specific content or image, but others are complicated and produce an uncertain or huge variation of response. I consider this interaction of the unfamiliar and the obscure on the viewer in similar terms as how Burke explains simple and compound abstract words. Words which are compound abstractions and their inherent weight are. “...compound abstracts, such as virtue, honour, persuasion, docility. Of these I am convinced that whatever power they may have on the passions, they do not derive it from any representation raised in the mind of the things for which they stand. As compositions they are not real essences, and hardly cause any real ideas.”⁶⁰ Compound abstractions do not inspire a specific image; rather they generate emotions which have the power to raise any number of images in the recipient.

The possible images raised, herein, are compounded in that; they speak to several levels of human thought and interaction. Consider of course justice: justice elicits a compounding of cause and effect. We think of both the hero and the villain, the compound of which is of course the person, the action, and the antonym—injustice. Unlike simple abstracts which produce specific images, Burke suggests that compound abstractions produce no picture or image in the recipient; however, I would argue that compound abstracts do in fact inspire images. Those

⁵⁹ (Benjamin 2011, 163)

⁶⁰ (Burke 2004, 188)

images, however, are varied and fragmented depending upon the recipient's knowledge. The creation of an image from such words then relates directly the recipients' cognition. Now this is important for the fact that the meaning or image of each compound abstract carries forward subjectively for each viewer.

The difference between words and forms is that both exist as a set of signifiers for relating a particular concept; however, a form presents an objective figure to suit some particular role in life. "The Expression 'form of life' of course comes from Wittgenstein: he said, 'To imagine a language is to imagine a form of life.' But the same thing must be said about art: to imagine a work of art is to imagine a form of life in which it plays a role."⁶¹ Until we get inside the work, our relationship is external which is a surface and facile and exists only as the surface referent, but once the referent is given a role, it asserts a reality of its own. And this conclusion is made through the psychological negotiation and objective navigation of the art.

Here desire comes back to the forefront, "Its value for the perceiver lies in its power to activate and organize the movement of desire: in our desire to know what is behind it, imaginative thought and knowledge are engendered. Hence, knowledge is not discovered in the object, but in the process of the search, and the search can only proceed from the feeling that something 'lost' must be recovered."⁶² The unfamiliar and the obscure present a specific dynamic with desire which engenders an engagement for the viewer of searching, especially when the object of desire seeks an open relationship to the sort of symbol it replaces. In my practice, the object of desire is the fleeting moment which I engage with through the pure creative moment and the distillation of human figure. In the fleeting moment, the thing that is lost is the actuality the experience.

⁶¹ (Danto 1997, 202)

⁶² (Fisher; *The Sublime* 2012, 89)

We live in an incredibly fragmented, anxious, and overwrought time. The contemporary pace of development is unrelenting, and in our daily lives we are bombarded with content at almost every turn. In this, everything is subject to change and impermanence. It seems to me that each moment is fleeting faster and faster into uncertainty. As Fredrick Jameson points out, “the disappearance of a sense of history, the way in which our entire contemporary social system has little by little begun to lose its capacity to retain its own past, has begun to live in a perpetual present and in perpetual change that obliterates traditions of the kind which all earlier social information have had, in one way or another, to preserve.”⁶³ This perpetual change destabilizes our present leading to a sort of social amnesia, or schizophrenia, where our recent past is a distant future without resolution.⁶⁴ This is of course, the contemporary condition: perpetual, by the moment, progress.

My art practice is as much about the mistakes and the rewrites, as it is about how I fix and finalize each action. Or, how I pick it back up, dust it off, and put it back together anew through a constant, unresolved state of transformation, which is the human experience. Looking to give no answers, and to impose no positions, I seek only to present the viewer with a circumstance; wherein, questions, cognition, and imagination are ushered along in the investigative circumstance. For me, the absurd and uncouth nature of abstraction creates an open pursuit for engaging with our present moment in respect to the fleeting moments that got us here.

⁶³ (Jameson 1998, 20)

⁶⁴ (Jameson 1998, 1-20)

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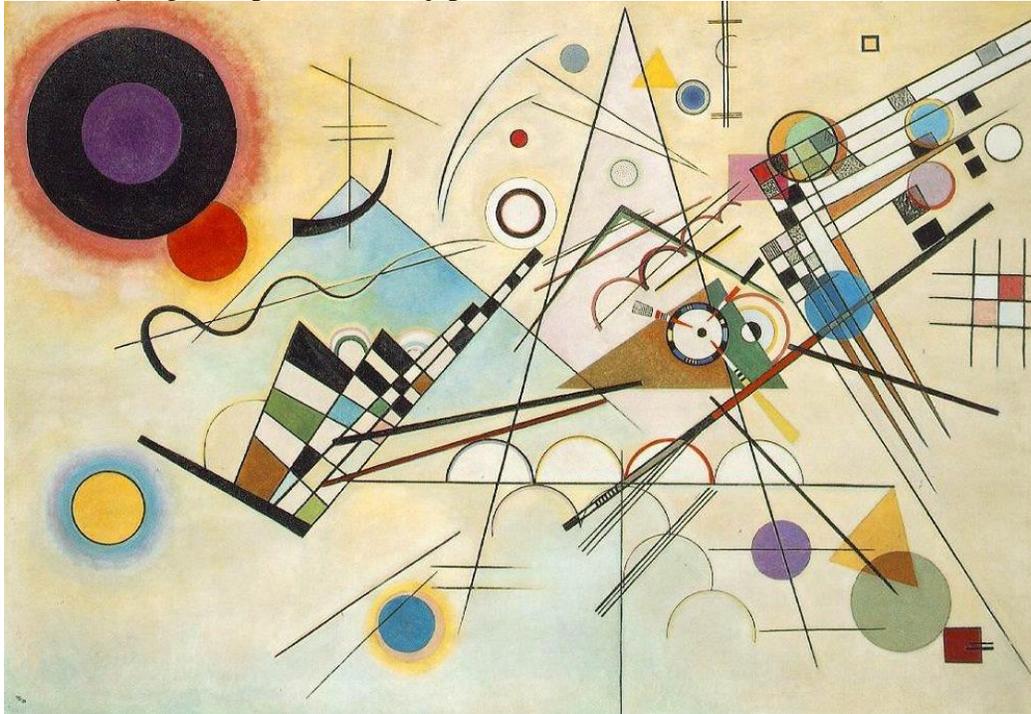


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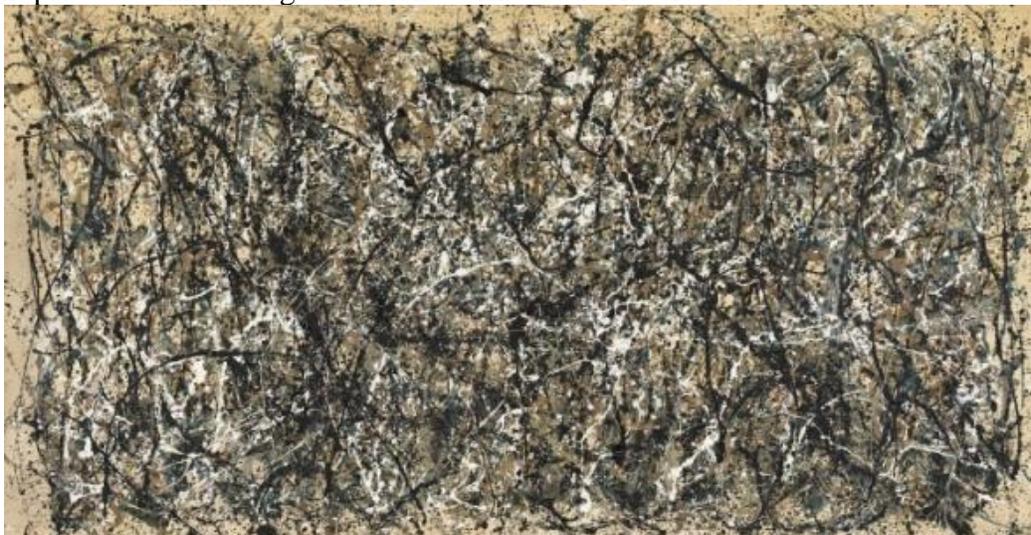


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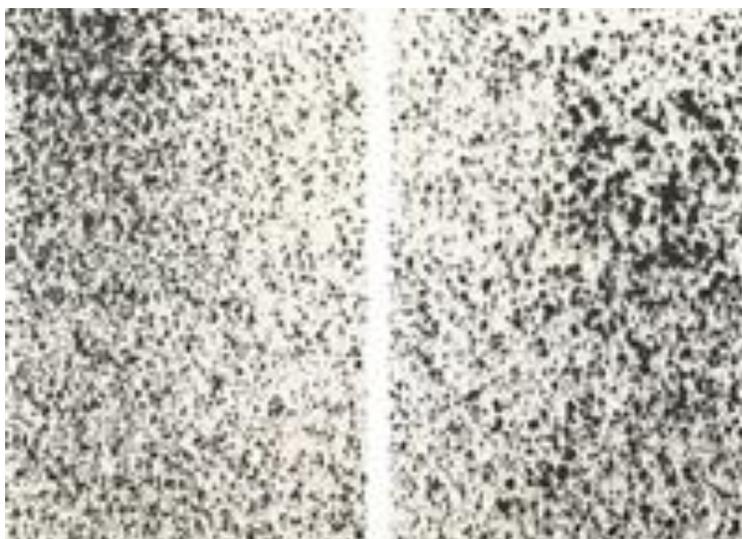


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