

The State of My Painting Practice

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Abstract

The State of My Painting Practice

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Painting and Drawing

Over the past two years, my painting practice has centered on botanical subject matter, particularly in relation to art historical precedents and the contemporary world. I have researched plant biology, which has given me new insight into the function of botanical forms. Seventeenth-century flower painting has been important to my practice, but other early forms of Baroque European still life have also become an important reference for my work. Inspired by contemporary artists, including Catherine Murphy, Vija Celmins, and Daniel Spoerri, my practice has moved away from the place it was when I entered graduate school, and embarked upon a distinct conceptual and formal road. This new direction introduces multiple concerns to my work, including but not limited to: scale, materiality, the duality between unity and diversity, organic geometry, vastness, and a dash of humor.

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Introduction

This document seeks to provide a summary of my painting practice over the past couple of years. Some artists seem to turn on a dime – reorienting their thoughts and visual explorations dramatically over relatively short periods of time. This is not the case with me – like a large ship changing course, there is some lag time in my reaction to the introduction of new information. Nonetheless, a small course correction on a transatlantic crossing will lead a vessel to a very different destination. Please take this document as evidence of my current thinking, which will lead me into whatever comes next.

Influences

My recent paintings grew, in part, out of a fascination with seventeenth and eighteenth century still life – particularly Dutch and Flemish floral paintings. (See figure 1).

Formally, I am interested in the particular speed and trajectory of the movements in these floral compositions, the tensile strength of the curve of the stems, and their sea-creature-like undulations. Historically, I am curious about the role of still life and its objects as manifestations of material culture, from the roots of the genre in the late sixteenth century. Rachel Ruysch and Jan van Huysum are two historical painters whose work has inspired me since the beginning of my studies. Now I am also looking at banquet still lifes, such as those by Clara Peeters and Willem Claeszoon Heda. Researching any aspect of painting from this time period is liable to turn up useful information, and art historical research has become an important part of my practice. For example, thinking about Caravaggio's *Basket of Fruit*, led me to consider Roman *xenia*, and their distant descendant, the gift basket. I found the cellophane-wrapped gift basket to be an excellent subject, with material and formal ties running back to the Roman empire, but also

referring to Pop Art through its ubiquitous commercial availability and plastic sheen.
(See figure 2).

Contemporary artists, such as Marc Quinn and David LaChapelle, have also worked with concepts drawn from sixteenth and seventeenth century botanical still life. Artists whose work has been inspirational include Catherine Murphy, Ellen Altfest and Vija Celmins.

Having studied plant identification, I learned more about these floral forms, and the evolutionary adaptations from which they spring. Most of the plants I have taken on as subject matter are the sorts of gaudy garden flowers my grandmothers grew. They are mutants, with extra petals, selected by humans for their ostentatious and colorful blooms. (See figure 3). These extra petals are often made of the parts of the flower that would normally be useful reproductive organs, making it impossible for some of these flowers to propagate without human intervention (see figure 4). Michael Pollan writes about this peculiar symbiosis: flowers that tempt humans into doing the work of propagating for them, seducing them with their showy sex organs (which is, after all, what flowers are). This might seem far-fetched, but in many cultures flowers are associated with sex (see, for example, the way Chinese Peonies were bred to echo the forms of female human genitals, as described by Michael Pollan in *the Botany of Desire*, p 73). What is more, cross-species reproductive strategies by plants are common. Just think of the role bees play in pollination.

The visual exploration of plant structures has been interesting to me, and, regardless of conceptual motivations, stands out as one of the most rewarding aspects of my work. The forms in flowers are a superb example of organic structure. The subtle variations between the petals, and the unique character of the movement in each bloom, are endlessly fascinating to me. This visual aspect of Baroque painting – the character of organic form and movement present in the work -- draws me to the time period.

Methodology

My practice centers on painting and drawing from observation – usually using direct methods rather than glazing. I often execute preliminary studies and drawings (see figure five) and sometimes work over an underpainting. I think of the lower layers of my work as a series of collected observations pushing me slowly towards a fuller observation, and respect the evolution of the piece in process. In other words, my initial drawings and underpaintings are never a law to be followed, but are very much treated as drafts. The painting evolves through the visual research crystalized in these accumulated layers of observation (see figure six).

Concept

For the past few years I have primarily painted botanical forms -- mostly flowers -- at a scale which, I hope, will provoke the viewer into a new experience of the flower's form. I am interested, formally, in the simultaneous unity and diversity of a bloom -- the way each petal is part of the logic of the individual flower, yet each one has its own distinctive character. Like a symphonic theme with variations, the flower embodies harmonious variety. Most particularly, I look for the way the flower petals move, inspired in part by

the organic sense of movement present in sixteenth and seventeenth century floral still life. The repetition and variation also point toward the infinite, and it is my hope that these paintings invoke a sort of vastness and assertiveness. The circular format I have favored lately is an echo of a mandala, or of the circular Aztec calendar, “piedra del sol,” invoking the cyclical workings of nature, such as nutrient cycling (see figure seven).

Norman Bryson touches on one way in which still life, through the use of hyper-attention, holds together two opposing tendencies. He suggests that this is done by balancing the social meaning of a given object against a painter’s tendency to obsessively work through a vision of the particular object, defamiliarizing it and pulling it out of context (*Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting*, p 89). My work intends to create such a disjuncture from everyday ways of seeing. I hope that, following from Bryson’s theory, my flower paintings will provoke the viewer to encounter the strangeness of the flower.

Recently, my work has taken a step off the wall. Inspired in part by Daniel Spoerri's *snare-pictures* -- table top accumulations fixed onto the table and then hung on a wall -- I wondered what it would be like to take a still life painting off the wall, and lay it on a table. More specifically, I intend to drape it over a table, in a manner suggestive of a table cloth, though cascading to the floor. Foregrounding the materiality of the painting, this presents the paint film in an unaccustomed way. As the observer changes position, highlights move across the low-relief of the brushwork. The observer can notice a vacillation between perception of depth and surface, provoked in part by the play of light and shadow over the draped, painted form. This recognizably Baroque-inspired

“banquet” still life, when draped over the table, occupies space in a way that is, in some ways, more assertive than the receding flatness of a wall-hung easel painting; it takes up a space in the room, coming down off the wall to interact with the viewer. At the same time, it appears flaccid, prostrate, perhaps even naked and helpless without its authoritative frame and wall-mounted privilege. With this piece, I hoped to evoke a sense of pathos in the viewer, observing this painting cast off the wall. I had also hoped that this distortion of a familiar visual trope (still life painting) would have some sense of the humor and absurdity present in Claes Oldenburg’s soft sculptures.

Conclusion

I am unsure whether or not this piece succeeded in capturing the humor and pathos that I had intended. In fact, the joy of drapery, and the visual fun of seeing a painting distorted in folds, may have eclipsed any sense that the viewer might have that something is slightly amiss. When installing the work at the museum, I discovered that it was more effective to drape the painting from the wall onto the table, adding to the dialog between the 2-D and the 3-D. The illusionism of the painting is maintained, to some degree, by this arrangement, but is simultaneously distorted and confirmed by the interaction of the painting, the wall, and the table. Working in the space at the Henry was an important part of the evolution of the piece. This is a lesson that I am taking forward – I need to practice more in three dimensions if I mean to communicate emotionally in three dimensions. And I may need to push the work farther, to open it up to a rawer, more vulnerable presentation.

This piece raises the question of where I might go next. Continuing to explore the possibility of the soft, draped, painting is one path. Or I could focus on the still life as a three-dimensional presence, moving farther from the flatness of wall-hung paintings. The idea of an “exploded” still life, inspired in part by the work of Dustin Yellin, interests me. Lately I have had a growing sense that my interest in botanical still life is connected to my desire to connect with something near the roots of humanist thought. This might be an avenue I explore further in the future.

Printmaking is becoming an increasingly important part of my practice. I am fascinated with the woodcuts of Katsutoshi Yuasa, and have been considering the merits of creating original work at a relatively modest price, making it accessible to more people. This appeals to my sense of what the world needs, as does the idea of working with less toxic materials. Recently I have made paint with various types of soil that I collected around Washington. As I submit this thesis, I am using these soils as watercolor, painting on large sheets of paper. Regardless of which direction, or set of directions, I ultimately explore, over the past two years I have encountered enough visual and intellectual fodder to keep me busy indefinitely.



Figure 1: Abundance no. 1, oil on board, 18 inch oval, Krista Schoening 2013



Figure 2: Fruit Basket, oil on board, Krista Schoening, 2014



Figure 3: Peonies, Krista Schoening, Oil on board, 2013



Figure 4: Chrysanthemum, Krista Schoening, Oil on board, 2014

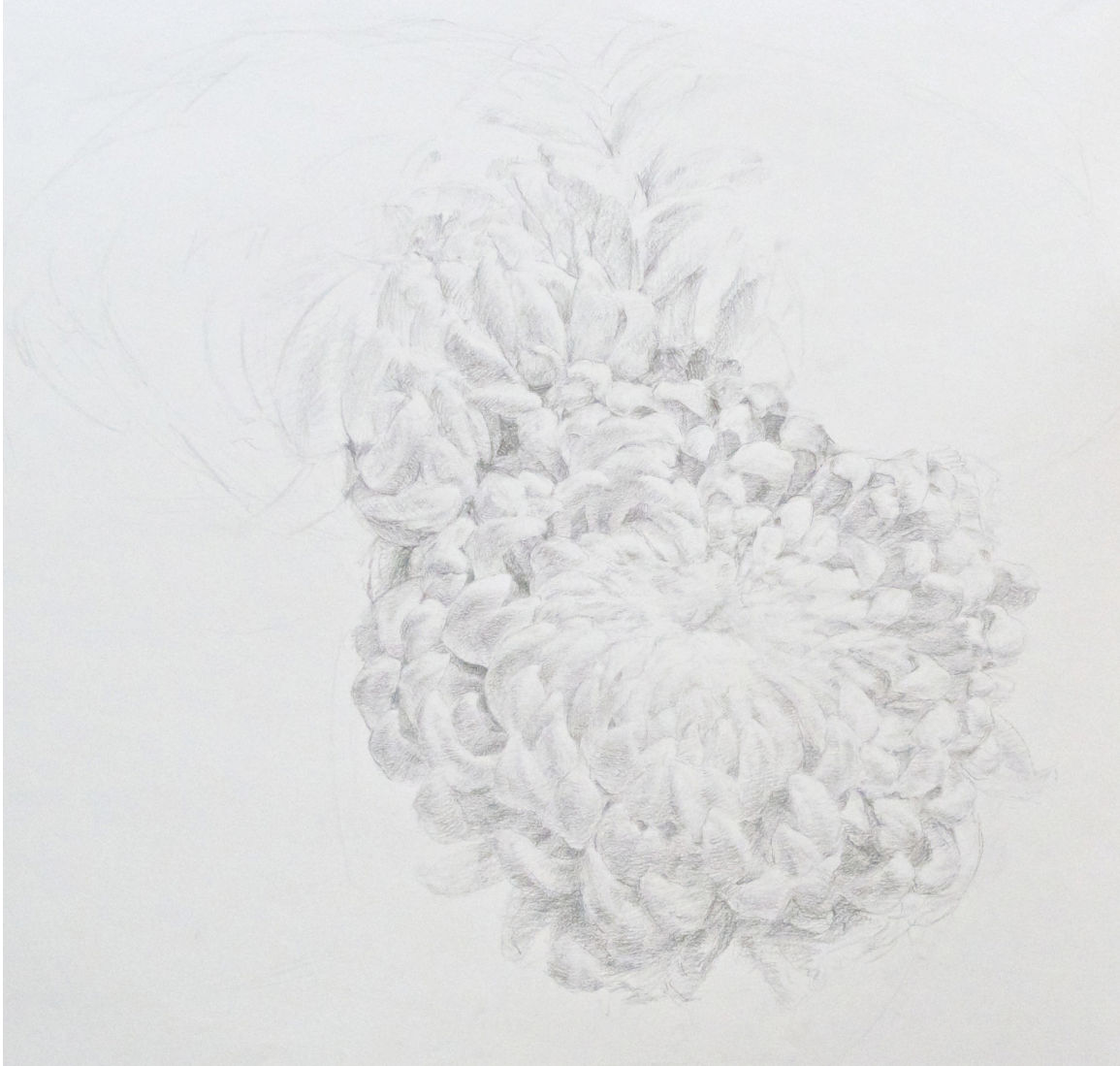


Figure 5: Chrysanthemum study, graphite on paper, Krista Schoening, 2014



Figure 6: Karma Dahlia, in progress, Krista Schoening, Oil on board, 2015



Figure 7: Karma Dahlia, Krista Schoening, oil on board, 2015



Figure 8: Still Life (Banquet Piece), in progress. Krista Schoening, oil on linen, 2015



Figure 9: Still Life (Banquet Piece), Krista Schoening, oil on linen, on table, 2015



Figure 10: Festoon, first state, Krista Schoening, drypoint print, 2015

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