

Thesis dissertation

The Line that Splits

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Abstract

The body of work I have created since beginning my MFA has been informed and impacted by my research into various inter-connected subject matters: subcultural spaces, the behaviours of crowds, micro and macro and territories and systems. These have been the philosophical and conceptual rationale of my studio practice. Meditation on these concepts is an important part in the preliminary stages of my process and the praxis of my studio work has been to interpret and implement these ideas. In many ways, this process suggests its own direction. I had no exact endpoint in mind but wanted to be driven and led by the process and the cyclical examination of ideas and expression of said ideas in paint and other experimental methods. Through the interdisciplinary scientific research, formal methodologies detailed in this document, and looking at how other artists integrate, apply, and present their work, I have followed a path both intuitive and logical. I am fascinated if chance and intention can strike a balance to form a visual vocabulary that not only provokes a visceral experience but also stimulates precognitive agreement.

The central evolving proposition of this body of work is that human behaviour, particularly group behaviour, is in many ways optimised to designate space and mark turf. My intuition was that people act in this way as a subtle defence mechanism: learning about how birds form large groups to self-protect, I was fascinated to find possible connections between their behaviour and ours. Groups represent natural systems; it seemed logical to look at other natural systems to see if this behaviour is also present. Next, I wondered if this behaviour was scaled, and whether it appeared in micro-organisms that colonise and create boundaries to demarcate and establish territory.

Borders are used in many contexts to separate and safeguard: whether physical or ideological, lines are drawn. Inevitably sides are formed, and binaries and dualities occur. My challenge was to create a body of work communicating all of this and to begin a critical dialogue focusing on how we understand the logic of the border.



Figure 1: Stria, Acrylic on Canvas, 2019

The process of my new paintings is the result of a conscious effort to examine conceptual narratives with the hand and if formal principles could direct the read of the paintings. The clinical process of growing bacteria , in the RISD Nature Lab, also changed the way I began painting in the studio. The gradual growth of these organisms created a flow that provoked a stirring assemblage, which in turn inspired me to handle paint differently than before. I became interested in layering, luminosity, and a visual depiction of these controlled processes that may seem at first to appear by chance or without order, but that had a system to it. The act of congregating layers of paint took its own course of time; each layer was poured separately and was left to dry for five or six hours: the resulting works had me pouring sheer translucent layers of paint for more than a month. The thinness of the paint seeping into the linen seemed like a natural way to embed information into the poised surface of the material. The toothy linen could assimilate layers of colour upon colour, allowing the hues underneath to show their translucency: and this to me seemed like a pool of coded information co-existing in harmony with itself. As the psychologist, J. J Gibson defines it: “The surface is where most of the action is. The surface is where light is reflected or

absorbed, not the interior of the substance. The surface is what touches the animal, not the interior. The surface is where chemical reactions mostly take place. The surface is where vaporization or diffusion of substances into the medium occurs. And the surface is where vibrations of the substance are transmitted into the medium.”¹

In my paintings, the earthly tone of the ground created a space of its own and so each stain could imbue its own autonomy as pigment, a mark and as a container itself. The gestural drawing of a bird’s wing in flight became the inspiration for a way to pour paint quickly, developing into a technique of how I systematically dispensed paint. I started referring to these stains as ‘Settlers’, fortified between structural notations of hard edged lines functioning as a band of borders: a frame within a frame. To add more complexity to the work, I started using transferring methods to collage microscopic index prints of bacterial colonies that were sampled from a public bench onto the linen itself, juxtaposing element of both painting and photographic imagery side by side.

Background

“American fundamentalist Christian missionary John Allen Chau was killed in November by tribespeople when he illegally went to the North Sentinel Island in the Andamans to convert them. ‘The US government has not asked or pursued any sort of sanctions that the Indian government would take against the tribal people in this case,’ said Samuel Brownback, the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom, on Thursday. Brownback’s

¹ J. J. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (1979: 23)

reaction could be tempered by the fact that Chau threatened the very existence of the North Sentinelese, who are estimated to number between 50 and 200, by exposing them to diseases that their isolation has not prepared them to face.”²

I grew up in a tightknit community of an offshoot of the Shia Islam sect in Karachi, where customs among community members are closely guarded in the name of religion. This maintains conformist values and norms that are hardened into you from a very young age. The result is that you grow up knowing only one set of environments; a set of conditioned behaviors that creates a certain order. Everything from your mannerisms to your personal outlook has an outside authority. I can happily say that I am here today as a result of defying such potencies. However, this is not a critique of just one creed or a culture but the opposite; what influences my work is the loss of individuality in the face of the collective, and how individuality is shunned in *every* society. The realization that we all live in various bubbles has been a process of understanding that we create formations to protect and preserve. While this is reasonable and understandable, we need to reconsider this path.



Figure 2 : The ship of Fools,1490

² Indo Asian service news, Published by Hindustan times, February 08, 2019

In *The Ship of fools*³ (1490), Hieronymus Bosch draws our attention to a social scenario and immediately situates the viewer as a voyeur in order to understand this painting. The poetics of place and position of the characters are arranged to capture an imagined allegory of mankind, sailing through a passage of time in a small ship drifting aimlessly. This is how we live, says Bosch: we eat, drink, flirt, cheat, play silly games, pursue unattainable objectives. By externalizing the dreary through a group of people occupied in human folly, the artist suggests an alarming outcome steeped in ignorance which draws an important perspective still relevant to our current times. Bosch collectively places them on a boat to create a perspective of distance, and give us a sense of otherness to reflect back at humans, as a human, to provoke a shift in perception.

Flock

The change in the behavioral state of one animal affects and is affected by that of all other animals in the group, no matter how large the group is. Scale-free correlations provide each animal with an effective perception range much larger than the direct inter-individual interaction range, thus enhancing global response to perturbations. Our results suggest that flocks behave as critical systems, poised to respond maximally to environmental perturbations.

Giorgio Parisi, theoretical physicist with the University of Rome⁴

³Stefan Fischer, Hieronymus Bosch, Pg

⁴Giorgio, Parisi, PNAS, 2010

When I was a child, my father was a bird lover. He would derive real pleasure from looking after birds, and I remember him caring for the sick ones and nursing them back to health. Even at an early age I remember them whistling to one another, communicating, speaking. The sight of a group of thousands of starlings moving in unison like one giant organism is something to behold. The sublimely gracious movement of the group forming, merging, and almost melting away in real time is an incredibly choreographed display; its visual beauty belies its strategic and existential necessity. The birds are responding to perceived threats, a predator such as hawk or a falcon, and this incredible dance is a complicated defence mechanism that has no conception of its visual beauty. It makes me wonder if perhaps, if seen from a certain perspective, other predator–prey relationships may take on an aesthetic quality to observers far removed from the consequences of the reality of the scenario. Our voyeuristic detachment is broken when we witness or read about people acting in similar coordinated ways: in crowds with a herd mentality, where the power of the individual is given over to that of the mob. All too often we can see examples, even in recent history, when people in groups did terrible things that they later found impossible to justify. Crowd behaviour is of enduring interest to psychologists and it has often been observed to have a bloody end. This behaviour is seemingly found all over the animal kingdom. Insects, which live in enormous numbers, appear to act even more determined in this way, which made me consider the fractal nature of this behaviour. Perhaps it was a phenomenon that appears at all scales, and if so, would it be evidenced at a microscopic level?

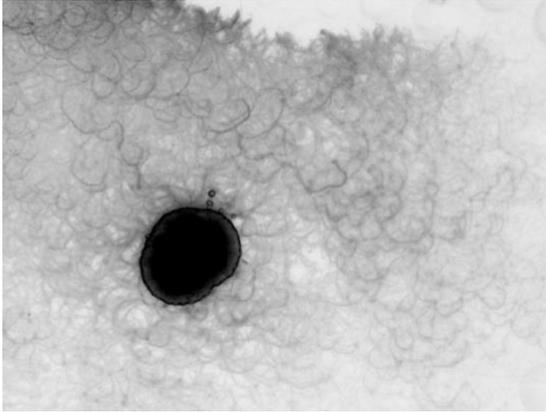


Figure 3: Human skin bacteria, *Day 2*



Figure 4: Bacteria of a public bench, *Day 12*

Migration

Daniel Dennett, philosopher, writer and cognitive scientist, talks about Adam and Eve in his book *From Bacteria to Bach and Back*. He describes a “significant moment in time when Eve was created out of Adam’s rib”. He compares his thesis by quoting Cane’s explanation of this event to “the splitting of a single cell into two units, to form other microbial colonies.”⁵

Trying to understand systems has led me to seek answers in nature, from the microscopic to the macroscopic. In the fall of 2017, I was first handed a set of petri dishes, swabs, and a pair of gloves at the RISD NatureLab to go and explore the microscopic world. I went to collect samples of a tree, a leaf, soil, a bike, a bin, and a shoe. I decided to choose these subjects as they are potentially linked to one another and to how organisms grow on living and inorganic things. It took a cycle of 24 hours for the bacteria to appear from their dormant state; within the next cycle I saw more colonies grow. My first attempt to grow these organisms in the petri dish was not enough, until I proceeded to my second and third tests, which included

⁵ Daniel Dennett, *From Bacteria to Bach and Back*

samples from public spaces including a public bench and some fast food joints. For the third test I took human skin samples of 12 different people: I divided them into 4 groups, sets of those who associated in close proximity with one another on a daily basis. Samples were placed as individuals, in pairs and groups with tests running for 12 days in the approximate temperature of 31 Celsius.

I started growing bacteria to find out how they colonize on a micro scale: predator and prey relationships in animals have become a way for me to categorize opposing behaviors addressing similar social and hierarchical divides. All of these seem to me a sub-set of a larger conceptual framework or a conversation which challenges me to form a vocabulary that can be painted in a way where chance and intention both can form its own reality, propagating and self-classifying human behavior in a manner which can depict a sense of duality in all of us. The collective, that which can provide sustenance, protection, and growth, can also be ominous to the other. So, it is this symbiosis which leads to my investigation of systems within systems and ideas around binaries.

Amidst these scientific explorations here I was: a painter, an artist who has no idea how these things work in principle, and I was about to grow a new life form—an unknown to explore both similarities and differences between these organisms and how they behave. My daily observations led me to understand their behaviour more closely and I was able to notice subtle differences in ways they were growing. The behaviour appeared territorial and in pockets, as they were growing in the vicinity. By the end of each cycle it was astonishing to see the bacteria create a perfect ecosystem in which more of a similar kind could grow around their associates. Conducting these tests was surprisingly nurturing; I felt awe to see life distinct from humanity reminding me of and mirroring human actions of occupying and defining borders.

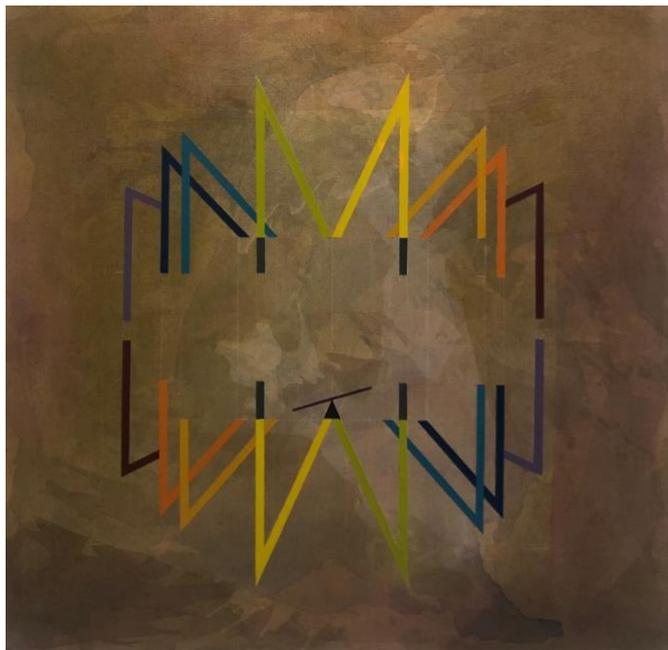


Figure 5: See Saw, 2019

Borders

Euclid defined a boundary as “that which is an extremity of anything”⁶

Things have beginnings just as they have endings, or do they? Where do I begin, where do I end? The most self-evident border is that of the individual, the body, our personal space—and following on from this our immediate family, friends and then our community, society, culture or country. Traditionally all of these factions have conditioned us to believe that we must define territories, that we must partition our lives to keep ourselves safe from threats. These tribal distinctions are the basis of the boundaries that, if broken by outsiders, create the most discord.

Part of growing up was witnessing such aspects of reality. I personally understand what it’s like to be part of one large cluster and then to live on the periphery and can see parallels in nature that reflect similar reservations to protect and grow a mono culture. In this context, the metaphoric use of a border posits collaboration and synthesis in favor of hierarchy. This paradoxical relationship deconstructs the very idea of a boundary.

‘Aristotle's definition (as well as standard topology) suggests that there is always a sharp demarcation between the inside and the outside of a thing. Yet it may be observed that ordinary objects and events, as well as the extensions of many ordinary concepts,

⁶ Euclid, *Elements* Bk I, Df 13

may have boundaries that are in some sense fuzzy or indeterminate. Clouds, deserts, mountains, let alone the figures of an impressionist painting, all seem to elude the idealized notion of a sharply bounded entity'.⁷

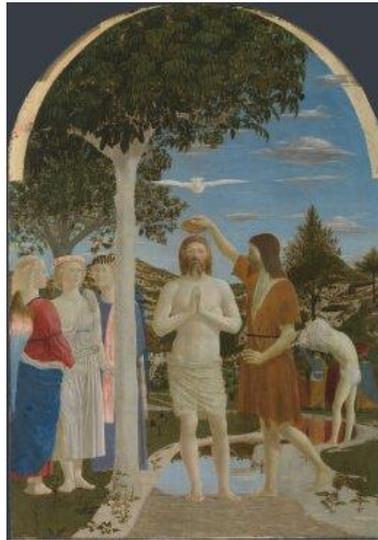


Figure 6: *The Baptism of Christ*

One's of Piero Della Francesca early commissioned works, *The Baptism of Christ* (1460), was a centre section of a triptych originally painted for the Chapel of Saint Giovanni which now resides in the National Museum of London. I really enjoy this work and feel it has played an influential role in the development of my understanding of how painting communicates numerous subjects effectively. This painting encodes multiple interpretations through the use of symbolism and geometry. Piero tactfully guides the viewer to witness Christ being baptised simultaneously with a common man, and the scene takes place within an extremely ordered geometry which has been scrutinised to reveal its composition based on

⁷ Achille. Varzi, Boundary, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy

platonic shapes. The noticeable landscape in the setting depicts the town of Borgo Sansepolcro, Piero's birthplace in Italy, and to me progressively punctuates the baptism of the entire town and thus ceremoniously leads the viewer back and forth between the individual and to the collective.

Piero's remarkable use of line and geometry guides the viewer to deconstruct his intention, and with the help of his protagonists, the artist encapsulates the entire town by containing it in an ontological boundary to baptize and in this way, the mathematical play charges us with the unforeseen and provides multiple ways to interpret the same image. I am also drawn to how artists used traditional altarpieces as a means to narrate the conscientious framework of human parables to describe timeless religious or philosophical interpretations.

Moreover, the notion of a border represents in my paper a fictionalized element that can be used to understand the systems of things both formally and conceptually. The border is both a way of creating space and a way of restricting movement, of defining and confining: perhaps dividing to rule?

Fragments

Breaking things apart to see how they come together is a powerful means of investigation. Conversely, the act of seeing from multiple vantage points influences the way we know and subjectively understand things. I wanted to use a form that could replace and represent human beings, and I decided on using a chair to symbolize human autonomy or agency. I decided to use the image of a chair as a unit that could be broken down into its composite parts and create a language from these components and other symbolic references

with the application of various media to build a complexity into the canvases, paintings and prints. A chair is made only for human use (its parts are named after human anatomy) and it also speaks to social dynamics and relationships by its placement in a space. Even in a vacated room, the position of the chairs tells of the subtle dynamic of the meeting, gathering or the conversation just had. The chair has the potential to replace a human presence in my work. The symbol of a fragmented chair, broken down into its composite parts, could be a way to discuss social systems, including human, animal and bacterial behavior—and thus to speak epistemologically about natural collective environments. To this end I created a typography based on my chair and began experimenting with it.

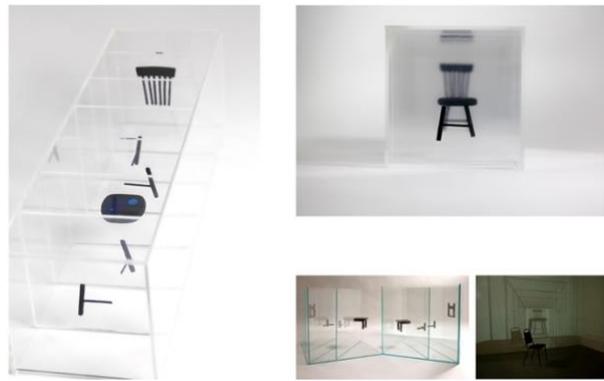


Figure 7 : In-between earth and cosmos, 2018

Is it possible that fragmented chairs depict the order and chaos of a set system? And in this context, can the chair fragments become a breakable code to further scrutinize individuality itself? Hence is the script, formed from a deconstructed chair, also a way to re-examine collective groupings?

In looking for inspiration from others, I am researching artists who are trying to express a narrative that has meaning on various levels, similar in ways to my own experimentation.

This along with the skill to do so with an engaging and satisfying visual impact, these works have a strong sense of resolution in their ability to communicate both gestalt and ideation.

Magritte wrote, “We must be careful to avoid – as far as possible – titles that lend themselves too easily to stupid interpretations”⁸



Figure 8 : *The Palace of Curtains*, 1929

In *The Palace of Curtains*⁹ (1935), Magritte explores the echoes between words and images and deconstructs a comprehensive reality, one that is presented as trompe l’oeil and the other that succumbs to the cognitive response in two identical panels placed as both interior and exterior of domiciliary spaces. Magritte’s desire as a painter to meditate conceptual concerns with his visual vocabulary corresponds to my studio practice; in a way, I am breaking apart objects to form narratives that allows me to contemplate sources outside my immediate dominion. In my own work the use of text is concealed intentionally by creating a script out of deconstructed parts of a Windsor chair, a colonized totem of the past hidden in plain view.

⁸ [René Magritte](#), *The Palace of Curtains*, 1929, The Museum of Modern Art.

⁹ Julie Mehretu, *Stadia III*, 2004, Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh



Figure9: *Stadia III*, 2004

Julie Mehretu draws her abstraction from the emblems of the streets and the authoritarians to configure her paintings. She erases all human presence and lets us conceive of a space familiar to us. In *Stadia II*, the cherished memorabilia remind us of the collective depicted in layers of embodiments of paint and in the momentous motion of misty graphite lines. The sense of orderly chaos is expressed using both abstraction and representation at the same time. Her complex work tackles both construction and deconstruction of time, space, society, politics and its amassed repercussion through gesture and movement.

Synthesis or Sublime

Painting is a meditative process for me: I am drawn to the idea that my hand is a way to communicate some of my epistemological worldviews. The unknown and the sublime create questions which extend beyond the physical, and playing with such notions has constantly been a way for me to create my work. I always think of how I can construct a world that stems out of questions I put forward and delve into; that is why I am not afraid to start, refresh and reiterate, or to create a new body of work. Even though painting cannot be rationalized in its

entirety, I am drawn to make the workings of the mind become more accessible, relatable, and or understandable through a visual language. Perhaps in this way, spirituality plays a role in my work. I am a person who enjoys engaging in many experimentations and many mediums—a restless soul who is always creating things and keeping the word ‘investigation’ in mind. When I look at the works together in the chronological order, I consider them as milestones, in the same way the idea of collective can be broken down in so many forms. This has led my practice to my current making both formally and conceptually. In the period of time that these works have been produced I have moved through several ideas but all are evolutions of the same theme; in many ways, each represents the output of the specific nuance of the idea at the time. In the later works I have used photography and sculpture, but these have always been part of my practice and my medium of expression is still primarily conceptual.

Conclusion:

Strata and class systems dictate how we view the collective. I often ask myself, ‘why are we dividing in the first place? Is it survival?’ Then, the rational self-kicks in, who is desperate to paint an ironic picture to unpack or unearth the manner in which we behave. This is how signs and symbols emerge into form. I ask, can the politics of a human brain can be observed through a placement of chairs? Can a hot air balloon symbolize an escape? How can we find different ways to say the same thing? I want my viewers to question my paintings without any set interpretations, place or position. I want visual connections to imbue multiple meanings of their own relevant to my conversation. To me that is an ideal way to read my work. My paintings are reflective of what I see, an anthropological response. I am presenting my opinion and I want my viewers to reflect and dissect that. Ultimately, I feel my work

researching categories is an attempt to escape categorizing—to be free from it, the freedom of the imprisoned mind.

“Maybe the journey isn’t so much about becoming anything. Maybe it’s unbecoming everything that isn’t you so you can be who you were meant to be in the first place.” Paul Coelho¹⁰

¹⁰ Paul Coelho, [Lesley Stedmon](#), *Becoming Unbecoming*,

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Figure 1: Jewanjee, Zahra, Stria, Acrylic on Canvas, 2019.

Figure 2: Bosch, Heironymous, ‘The Ship of Fools (Wayfarer Triptych)’, ca 1500-10, [Musée du Louvre, Paris](#).

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Figure 3: Jewanjee, Zahra, Human skin bacteria - Day 2, Olympus IX51 Inverted Microscope, 2019, RISD Nature Lab.

Figure 4: Jewanjee, Zahra, Bacteria of a public bench -12, Olympus IX51 Inverted Microscope, 2017, RISD Nature Lab.

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Figure 5: Jewanjee, Zahra, *Stria*, Acrylic on Linen, 2019, RISD.

Figure 6: Della Francesca, Piero, *The Baptism of Christ*, 1481, The National Gallery, London.

<https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/piero-della-francesca-the-baptism-of-christ>

Figure 7: Jewanjee, Zahra, *In-between earth and cosmos*, Plexiglas, Miniature chair, 2018, RISD.

Figure 8: Magritte, Rene, In *The Palace of Curtains, III*, 1935, 32 x 45", Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Figure 9: Mehretu, Julie, *Stadia II*, 2004, 108 x 144", Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh

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