

Aparna Sarkar



dive

dive

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
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of Fine Arts in the Department of Painting at the
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by
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Untitled
2021
15x11"
Acrylic on paper

acknowledgments

*Untitled
2021
20x15"
Charcoal on paper*

Thank you to my close friends and peers at RISD. You grounded me through the turbulence of the past two years.

I am grateful for all of my professors. In particular, I want to thank:
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Finally, thank you to my family—Mom, Dad, Shilpa, and Mausi—who supported my decision to be an artist and made it possible in the first place. I love you.





Fire Starters
2021
65x48"
Oil on canvas

abstract

In my thesis paintings, abstracted bodies collide with sticky shapes and residues in otherworldly spaces to form a queer, diasporic mythology. Bodies are slick, crusty, diaphanous, partial, chunky, other—they vary in legibility, suspended in emergence and expulsion from the environment. Multiple selves make these works. One asks sensorial questions of painting: what feelings, memories, and experiences can I transmit through color and material? I embed the smell of marigolds, the swift temperature change of the California desert, or the thick haze of a three a.m. dance floor make-out. My trusting self follows visions of color and shape, believing that they reveal my ancestry and life experience. At times I search for the painting through my body: I press, rub, and scratch, my actions becoming form-events. Still a fourth self renders and excavates the mythic bodily forms, made not born, who dive through, push, and hold up the paintings.

I am dealing in murky exchanges between figuration and abstraction, flatness and depth, intuition and invention. Right now, I digest these back-and-forths by thinking of works as relational. Like bits of code, they inform one another. They are each free to answer a different question—or different parts of the same question. This thesis is, similarly, structured as a partial decoding, which creates a cross-pollinating map of recent work in the context of influential texts and artists.



Untitled
2021
20x16"
Oil on canvas

subject in process

Stuart Hall describes identity as a suturing between subject and social structures: a series of meeting points that come together and break apart, as opposed to a stable core of the self. I love “subject-in-process”² as a way to think about withholding legibility of identity in my paintings. I invoke Glissant’s right to opacity,³ believing that there are colonialist undertones to the desire to make clear differences that mark one as Other. The figures in my paintings are illegible and opaque, to various degrees, because I am interested in countering the desire for transparency and stability of identity with something stickier... a limbo between body and space, where figures are suggestions and specters of multiple selves rather than depictions of real people. I desire a non-hierarchical structure in my paintings: figures alongside objects and spaces that share vitality, in which seduction is employed to bring the eye into an armpit as well as a pocket of clotted, quilt-like space.

¹Stuart Hall, “Who Needs ‘Identity’?” in *Questions of Cultural Identity* (SAGE Publications, 1996), 2-6.

²Hall, 8. Predated by Julia Kristeva, “The Subject in Process” in *Polylogue* (Seuil, 1997).

³Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (University of Michigan Press, 1997), 189.

In *Queer Phenomenology*, Sara Ahmed discusses the interrelation of spaces, objects, and bodies, how they orient and shape each other. She writes that “space acquires ‘direction’ through how bodies inhabit it,” and vice-versa.⁴ My figures are compositional actors that hold up, tear through, and scaffold the space, as much as the space does these things to them. They take many forms: slick, crusty, graphic, tube-like, diaphanous. They dart into and out of visibility, or get distilled into shapes that become symbols in the next paintings: arches are divers and shelters, triangles are a view from below.

Ahmed goes on to frame queerness as a slanting device that opens spaces and bodies to the possibilities of a bad fit.⁵ I’m interested in “bad fits” in my paintings; what are they and where do they lead? Some come from figuration butting up against abstraction, graphic symbols next to atmosphere, or parts of a painting that don’t make sense illusionistically—like a series of triangles that are landscape, fabric, sky, and geometry. When painting, / am the subject in process; I explore the possibilities of not-fitting,

⁴Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Duke University Press, 2006), 12.

⁵Ahmed, 70.

turning around, and becoming
through actions like making new
paintings out of old paintings
and letting spaces infiltrate
bodies, as much as the reverse.

Playground Meeting
2020
36x24"
Charcoal, crayon, and gouache on handmade paper





Backrub
2020
7x5"
Oil on panel

The figures in my paintings are illegible and opaque, to various degrees, because I am interested in countering the desire for transparency and stability of identity with something stickier... a limbo between body and space, where figures are suggestions and specters of multiple selves rather than depictions of real people.



Pool Diver I
2021
10x8"
Oil on panel

I hope that my visual language is more decipherable to some, and that residue of my in-process identity remains in the work for those who can see it. José Esteban Muñoz's concept of disidentification resonates when I think about the styles in my work. He says: "to disidentify is to read oneself and one's own life narrative in a moment, object, or subject that is not culturally coded to 'connect' with [you]."⁶ Rather than identifying with or imagining oneself as outside of a dominant ideology, one can use disidentification as a framework to work on, with, and against it.⁷ For me, disidentification involves accepting the instability of self and searching for possibilities created by misalignments. It is also a strategy to digest and cannibalize art history. I disidentify when I lust over the color and form in a Matisse painting. Matisse's seduction is not mine, but I move through it, giddily. I also experience disidentification as an important part of diasporic identity. I see my drawing hand in the patterns of Indo-persian miniatures and the modernist Indian renderings of almond eyes and curved arms; I feel belonging. At the same time, most of my encounters with this art happen in Western contexts: the South Asian wing of museums like the Met, or library books, usually compiled by European authors. Making art before RISD on my own in New York, I performed stylistic connections to miniature and modernist Indian painting in order to strengthen that which I felt as an undercurrent—and by doing so, I eventually further absorbed these ways of making into my hand and my taste. The embrace of disidentification led me to a place where, now, the curved, calligraphic, pointy shapes in my work symbolize that process of diasporic affinity, longing, and metabolization.

⁶ José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 12.

⁷ Muñoz, 12.



Red Studio 11.3
2020
7x5"
Oil on panel

*My figures are
compositional actors
that hold up, tear
through, and scaffold
the space, as much as
the space does these
things to them.*

color

dive — color as material

*Meeting
2020
15x11"
Acrylic and monotype on paper*



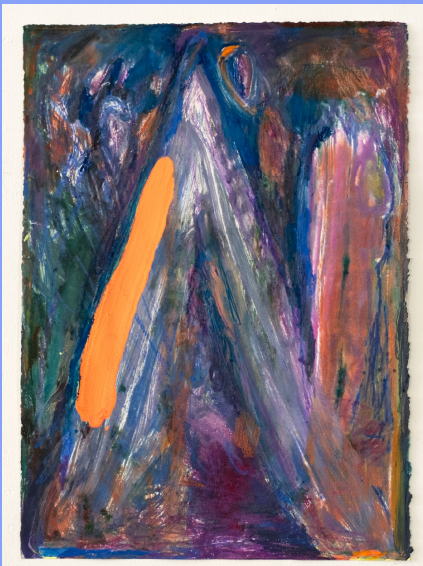
*Untitled
2021
15x11"
Acrylic on paper*



as

material

*Untitled
2020
15x11"
Acrylic and monotype on paper*

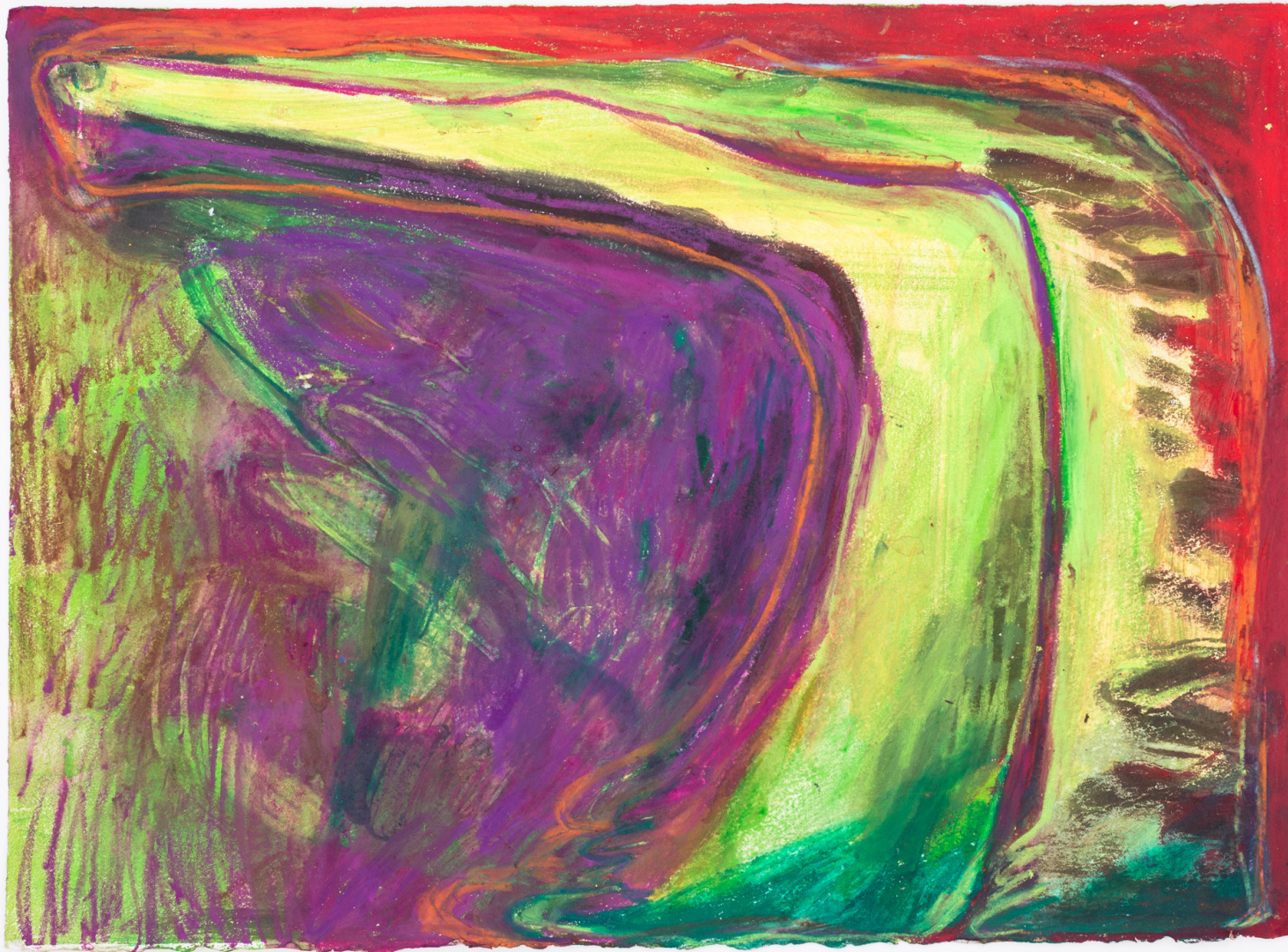


*In his 1990 essay *Matisse and Arche-Drawing*, Yve-Alain Bois writes that Matisse's fundamental discovery in color was that quantity equals quality; in Matisse's words: "one square centimeter of any blue is not as blue as a square meter of the same blue".⁸ Last year, I*

read Bois's text and became fixated on this idea and its extensions: how color alone creates space, weight, and difference through scale and relation, and how saturation and value are entirely relative. Treating color as material became central in my studio. The tiny things that I learned thrilled me; greys and browns taking on different hues next to each other, or the light created by a dot of high-chroma paint on an unsaturated surface.

Scrawled Pthalo Blue became water hitting fin-like hands in my first diver drawing. I mixed an orange with the express desire for it to generate heat in my belly. Things began to stand apart in my increasingly geometric paintings through color shifts. I reached for some tubes of paint again and again—these pigments became secret weapons, guilty pleasures, and symbols. Indian Yellow (originally made from cow urine) is marigold at its fattest, then, when rubbed thinly into canvas, a hot sunset light. Indian Red is a really flat, matte pigment; I mix it with sand and wax to create a thick crust, earth that I dig into with my nails and metal tools. In contrast, I make moon rock in a cool, thin tint of Payne's Grey and Transparent Orange. Indanthrone Blue—transparent, smoky,

⁸Yve-Alain Bois, "Matisse and 'Arche-Drawing'" in *Painting as Model* (MIT, 1998), 22.



Earth Scratcher
2020
11x15"
Acrylic and monotype on paper

Untitled
 2021
 20x15"
 Acrylic on paper

black at its fattest—is the velvety night sky when I walk home alone, alert; I mix it with the highly pigmented Dioxazine Purple and any white on hand to make queer, powdery, gauzy lavenders.

Color is how I connect to a painting's mythical aliveness. I am invested in the feeling and experience of color, its potential to act on and reside in the body. The way color relationships form and change as I apply paint to canvas is alchemical, surprising. Now, though I continue to use certain hues symbolically, I want color interruptions that will pick the painting out of static harmony and hurl it into a place unseen. I look to writing by painters on their relationships to color for examples of how to be an active and challenging colorist. By proximity, I have mostly read about the colors of modern, Western painters, including Josef Albers,⁹ Helen Frankenthaler,¹⁰ and Amy Sillman.¹¹ Despite the differences in their methods, they all acknowledge color as ultimately unknowable. Each describes their particular way of holding hands with color in service of its transcendence—knowing that, when you allow them to, colors will do and make us feel things that cannot be predicted by optics and theory. This affirms my restlessness, my current searching through paint for a colorscape I cannot yet see, but that I am called towards through feeling.



⁹ Josef Albers, "Interaction of Colour" in *Colour*, ed. David Batchelor (MIT Press, 2008), 128-29.

¹⁰ Helen Frankenthaler, "Interview with Henry Geldzahler" in *Colour*, ed. David Batchelor (MIT Press, 2008), 131-32.

¹¹ Amy Sillman, "On Color" in *Faux Pas: Selected Writings and Drawings (After 8 Books)*, 2020, 47-73.



Storm Bender
2020
35x26"
Acrylic and gouache on handmade paper

Color is how I connect to a painting's mythical aliveness. I am invested in the feeling and experience of color, its potential to act on and reside in the body. The way color relationships form and change as I apply paint to canvas is alchemical, surprising.

Untitled
2020
15x11"
Oil monotype on paper



Being Held
2021
15x11"
Acrylic on paper



23

Untitled
2021
20x15"
Acrylic on paper



Untitled
2021
20x15"
Acrylic and crayon on paper

24



Divers I
2021
60x72"
Oil on canvas

lunar

dive — lunar time

Time in the paintings and charcoal drawings feels internal, lunar, spiritual—as in: it cycles, expands and contracts, and is the thing my body moves through.

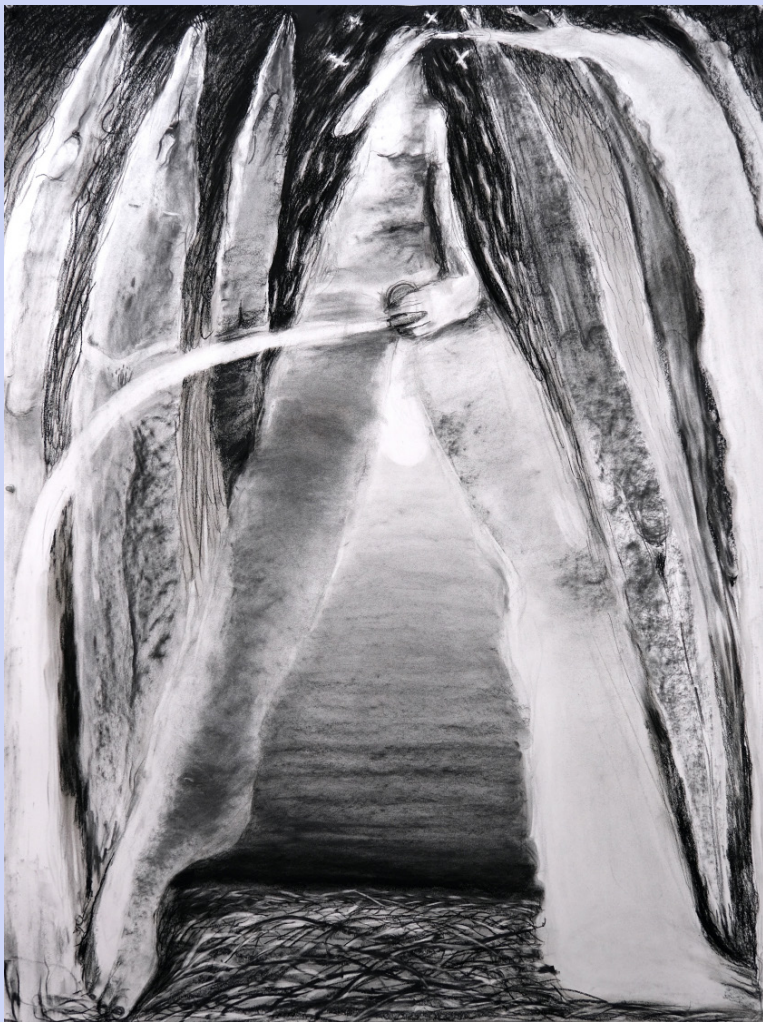
I covet the glow of rubbed transparent color on oil ground. Sometimes, I am too in love with the surface this way, and I cannot see what to do next for weeks—until I can finally look past the light and desire something more. As I build up a painting, I preserve pockets of transparency and use these imagined light sources as moons to find movement, form, and space. These lunar anchors also become centers of weight and gravity. I'm attracted to this nighttime glow. The moonlit night is coded with natural cycles, mysteries, patterns, and witchery. It's also a clue that the paintings are not for everyone; the events of the paintings are being orchestrated and staged in nocturnal secrecy. The freedom of placing multiple moons in one picture plane suggests the coexistence of multiple worlds, perspectives, and kinds of time.

Recently, I have been exploring the possibilities of giving up the canvas light, instead creating an artificial, staged light source from high-chroma color on a dark, opaque, ground.



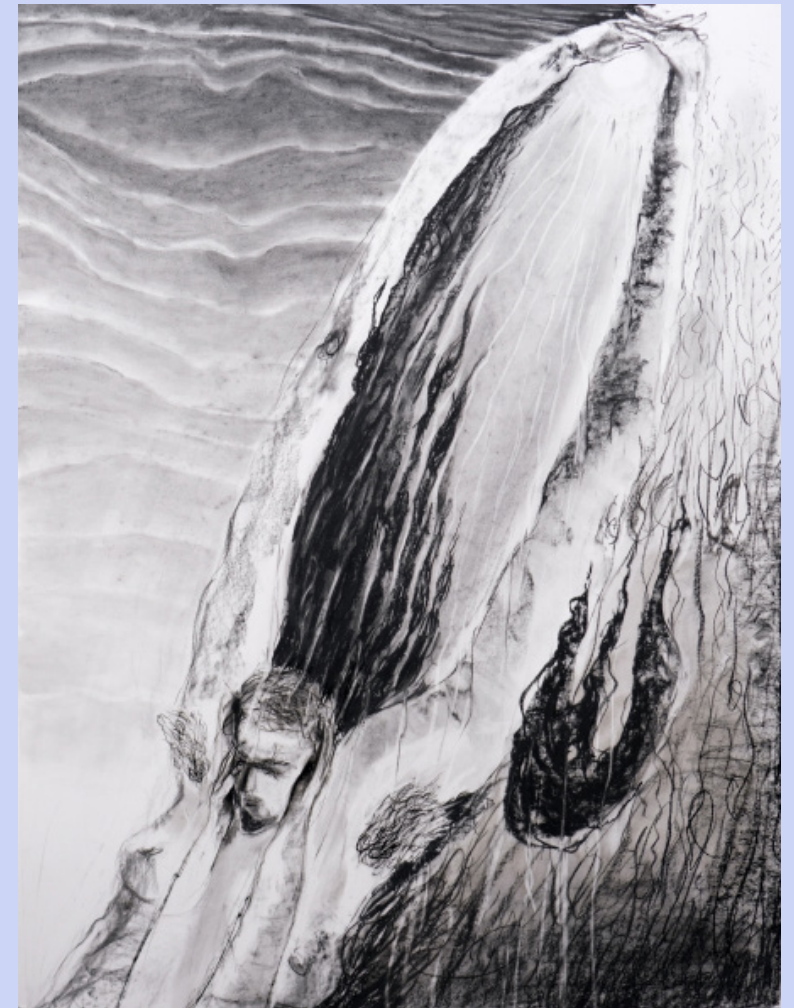
Night Walker
2020
60x48"
Oil on canvas

time



Fire Starter
2021
50x38"
Charcoal on paper

I am a Strange Loop
2021
50x38"
Charcoal on paper



*This fake light is
otherworldly but
inorganic, and is
slowly describing
a site I can return
to when I stage
future work.*



Untitled
2021
11x15"
Crayon and gouache on paper



Moon Lickers
2020
36x50"

Charcoal, crayon, gouache, and thread on handmade paper

Divers II
2021
35x28"
Oil on canvas over panel



sticky space

dive — sticky space

Fireworks I
2020
24x30"
Oil on canvas



Studio Chair
2020
4x4"
Oil on panel

My spaces are sticky with clunky shapes, crusts, and color tokens. The clogging of the atmosphere with physical paint creates a continuous exchange between figure and ground and rejects the Western aesthetic division between abstraction and figuration. Spaces describe the interior of a feeling or memory, a frontal view looking way up, or an aerial perspective down onto another world. Space can function like a net, the architecture of the painting pointing to connections between marks and folding in on itself. I'm discovering new spaces as I keep making.

Some works inherit a sense of space from Tibetan deity paintings, which captivated me in museums I visited as a child. I also loved the Nataraja sculptures of Vishnu dancing in a circle of flames, holding all the movement of the universe. Gravity is suspended; weight spirals out through movement. The same can be said in many of my paintings. I know that my painted spaces feel Other—mythological and weightless or radial. I am not drawn to emulate real spaces; in part, maybe because I moved often while growing up, and I don't feel anchored by memories of one home or one landscape.

The figures in my work often pushed into the edges of the canvas.

This tight, self-aware framing is part theater and part formalism. I acknowledge edges because I'm thinking of each painting as containing all of itself; there is rarely any reference to a continuation of the world of the painting beyond the frame.



Fireworks II
2020
24x30"
Oil on canvas

*Below: Little Fire Starter
2020
5x5"
Oil on panel*



*Right: Untitled
2021
15x11"
Acrylic on paper*



I also want a palpable sense of touch; hugging the edge creates pressure, both on the bodies inside the frame and on the viewer.



Untitled
2021
20x15"
Charcoal on paper

The play between depth and flatness is another characteristic of my spaces. I acknowledge the painting as a surface through graphic uses of line, and then turn this around by creating illusions of pocket-like depth.

Untitled
2021
15x11"
Acrylic on paper

dive — intuitive painting



I'm interested in intuition arising from the amalgamation of my life and experience, connecting me to my ancestry, my childhood, and the choices of my adult life. I see taste as part of intuition, produced, similarly, by the shifting points of identity and personal history. I've been making intuitive color drawings on paper, a practice in which I follow desires and impulses as they bubble up. I notice patterns: water, fire, air, and earth are all in the works, in part because I often start with the elemental combinations of primary triads or complementary colors. I have growing desires for discord, to see an ugly, sexy color or splotch next to something serene.

I also believe that intuition goes beyond the product of exterior forces, providing a murky line to faith and larger truths. Before I go to sleep, when I meditate in the morning, and at other random times as I move through my days, I have little visions of colors and shapes. They excite me. The more I paint, the more I have them. I write about them so that I can realize them in paint later—sometimes they are little tokens on five-inch panels that stick around, while other times they become grounds for larger paintings.

As I acknowledge the value and pleasure of working intuitively, I think about paintings made by artists who believe themselves to be divine conduits, or who realize

intuitive painting

images from their subconscious and imagination. I connect intuitive painting to these practices that claim to be fully mystical because they engage painting as an excavation of the invisible through a translation from inner world to outer.

The anonymous, Hindu, Tantric paintings of Rajasthan, made famous through Franck André Jamme's collection and publication in *Tantra Song*, were painted as early as the 1600s to aid tantric practitioners and families in meditations.¹² The makers believed they were conduits for divine communication, reducing the forms of Hindu gods and energies into simple shapes, patterns, and spaces according to instructions from a higher plane.¹³ A rigorous religious practice is inherent to the maker receiving and painting these visions, and the paintings were intended for use—not to be exhibited, bought, and sold. Through collections like Jamme's, they have entered the art-market; I first saw them in the 2017 Outsider Art Fair, whose curatorial premise I disagree with.¹⁴ But these objects transfixed me then, and they still do.

Left: *Untitled*
2021
11x15"
Acrylic on paper

Right: *Untitled*
2021
11x15"
Acrylic and crayon on paper

dive — intuitive painting



¹² Franck André Jamme, *Tantra Song: Tantric Painting from Rajasthan* (Siglio, 2011), 14.

¹³ Jamme, 100.

¹⁴ By lumping together an alarming historical and global range of works under the umbrella of "outsider," the fair further establishes the art world's center to be all that is not there.



*Untitled
2021
15x11"
Acrylic on paper*

They also made me realize that geometric abstraction belongs to global histories; there are and have always been alternatives to the violence and sterility of European abstract painting. Instead, these intimately touched shapes and forms open the door to a flood of sensorial, non-verbal reactions.

I take note of the language that vision painters use to describe their practices. Odilon Redon famously wrote of his symbolist drawings and prints from the late 1800s that he applied the “logic of the visible in the service of the invisible.”¹⁵ In the 1950s and 60s, Forrest Bess spoke of his intimate paintings as night visions that he hoped could bring about a different state of consciousness. Around the same time, Remedios Varo described her work in its myriad uses of religious, mythical, and spiritual symbols as expressing the unnameable. Etel Adnan calls her palette-knifed colors metaphysical, acting entities that come to her from God. The invisible, unconscious, unnameable, and metaphysical: these words all point to painting as a process of spiritual excavation.

I was not raised with religion, and it fascinates me. Reverence for the metaphysical is part of what keeps me painting. I think of intuitive painting like meditating; it makes me present in my body and in the world, while opening me to what is beyond the physical realm—what I cannot name or understand.

¹⁵Odilon Redon, quoted in brochure for *Beyond the Visible: the Art of Odilon Redon* (Museum of Modern Art, 2005).

embodiment:



Acrylic ground for future drawing

dive — embodiment: pushing paint around



*Untitled
2020
15x11"
Oil monotype on paper*

*pushing
paint
around*



Untitled
2020
15x11"
Oil monotype on paper

Untitled
2021
7x5"
Oil on panel



I am interested in abstracting embodiment. Materials take on second forms in my studio: paper is skin, oil paint is mud. Gestures act: scratched finger marks reveal light through digging, a wobbly neon line bows and points.

One of my artist selves is a queer body acting out. I press, rub, and scratch; my actions become form-events in each painting or drawing. These are moments where I can be madly sloppy, squishy, rushed, and loud. In her 2011 *Artforum* article *Ab-Ex and Disco Balls*, Amy Sillman addresses the reinvigoration of American Ab-Ex painting styles by queer artists:

*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... the tools themselves will mandate a certain phenomenology of making that emanates from shapes, stains, spills, and smudges.*¹⁶

¹⁶Amy Sillman, "Ab-Ex and Disco Balls: In Defense of Abstract Expressionism II" in *Artforum* (Summer 2011), 320-325.



Untitled
2021
7x5"
Oil and sand on panel

Sillman hints that queers are attracted to, or compulsively pulled towards, AbEx-ian ways of putting down paint because queerness is all wrapped up in feeling weird in your body, in turning away from what is expected of you and investigating what follows when you discover that you are oriented “wrongly.”



Untitled
2021
15x11"

Acrylic monotype with crayon on paper



*Untitled
2020
11x15"
Oil monotype on paper*



*More and more, I think
with my body through the
work—wobbling along
a line, turning back,
throwing down a large
mark and then desperately
rubbing it out—as a way
to lay bare the messiness of
process and the experience
of turning around and
around.*

Untitled
2021
7x5"
Oil on panel

In-progress oil painting



Thinking through the body could be called drawing.

Thinking through my body is also a refusal of the European lineage of abstract art that culminates in minimalism. Minimalism denied the body by denying leakage, mess, wetness, and the unplanned. By drawing, by thinking through my body, I leave a residue. In her 1989 essay *Figure/Ground*, painter Mira Schor says that minimalism's "desire for an art from which believe, emotion, spirit, psyche would be vacated...may find a source in a deeply rooted fear of liquidity, of viscousness, of goo."¹⁷ That this goo is associated with the mysteries of the body's interior and with women (which I'd update to include all non-cis-men), quickly follows. As a painter, I wield sticky liquid with a perverse pleasure, feeling that it is still a psychoanalytic horror of the patriarchy when left untaped and free flowing.

I like rubbing paint over the surface with a rag, the circular buffing action. I also like scratching the painting with my nails, sticky paint collecting under little moons that I pick out in the shower. These actions bring my hand directly to the surface, they create marks that a brush cannot, and set the bar for the range of things that can happen on the canvas-making the painting into something to dig and carve, a piece of earth.

Recently, I've been learning to destroy and re-build paintings. I kill paintings when I hate them; I don't know how else to describe it. I like hating paintings because it reconnects me to urgency. I also believe that the history of the painting becomes an un-imitable, phantom presence as I begin again. Jean-Luc Marion wrote a small book about painting as a descent into the Underworld and an excavation of the unseen, which the painter makes visible by allowing for the donations of surprise.¹⁸ This excavation is part of the quest of abstract painting, of not knowing the image before I start, and searching for something new—a thing I've never seen and is both mine and totally separate from me.

¹⁷ Mira Schor, "Figure/Ground" in *M/E/A/N//I/N/G* #6 (1989), pp. 18-27.

¹⁸ Jean Luc Marion, *The Crossing of the Visible* (Stanford University Press, 2003), 31.

Sun Diver
2021
85x60"
Oil and sand on canvas



dive



Six Divers
2020
8x8"
Oil on panel



Untitled
2021
20x15"
Charcoal on paper



Pool Diver II
2021
50x38"
Charcoal on paper

At the end of graduate school, my studio feels gutted, open, like anything could happen next. I am mistrustful of my paintings; I want more from them.

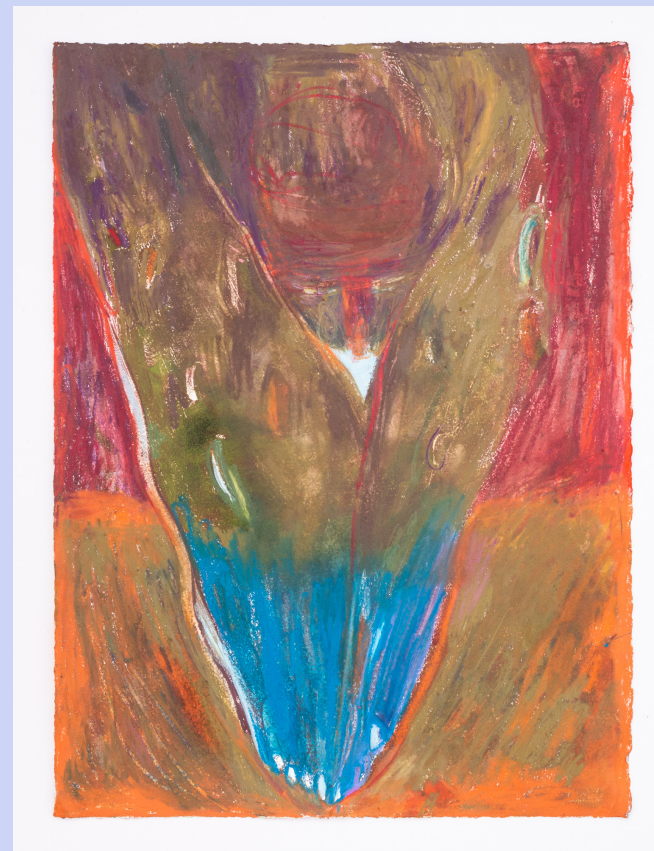


*Untitled
2021
20x15"
Acrylic on paper*



*Untitled
2021
20x15"
Acrylic on paper*

The diver is a figurative form that I remain invested in. I found this form last spring during quarantine, in a ruined monotype that became a built-up, cruddy drawing on paper. I thought about responding to the history of placidly painted bathers with a muscular, gender-ambiguous, creature-like figure.



*Diver
2020
15x11"
Monotype with acrylic and crayon on paper*

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dive

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