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SLIPPERY IMPLICATIONS: ASSESSING AMBIGUITY IN  
CONTEMPORARY PAINTING

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## ABSTRACT

Much of contemporary art, including painting, embraces pluralism, especially when it comes to an artwork offering diverse possibilities underlying its meaning. A viewer may not be able to glean a singular message from the painting, or they may discover multiple ways of viewing the work. This quality, which I call a “slippage of meaning” due to the work evading a viewer’s tight grasp on its “message”, provides a positive asset to the work because it allows for multiple experiences. In this thesis, I will first highlight how the artist constructs their image, keeping in mind the ambiguous meaning in a painting. Then I will discuss the reasons why a viewer would prefer the experience of an ambiguous work of art. Taking a closer look at examples of ambiguous paintings, in the third chapter I provide a visual analysis of two artists’ works.

My interest in the ambiguous stems from my own experience of grappling with allowing a painting to contain a quality of the unsaid. In this thesis, I will briefly discuss some of the paintings and drawings I produced during my senior year at Penn State, which will culminate in an exhibit that will take place from May 19 - September 7 2017 in the HUB-Roberson Center on the University Park campus. I will discuss the progression of my changing studio practice during this time, and how the research of this thesis influenced my work as an artist.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **The Artist's Role in Constructing An Image**

This chapter will introduce the exigency of the thesis as well as the importance of ambiguity in the creation and the interpretation of a painting.

#### **Background**

My interest in exploring the ambiguity in painting stems from a developing theme in my own work: I make unintentionally ambiguous work. After experiencing two final critiques and various studio visits in which professors and visiting artists have puzzled over the connection between my explanation of my paintings and the paintings themselves, my interest in incertitude derives from an effort to understand myself. While I knew early on I did not want to create paintings with didactic messages, I strived to create works that balanced the ever-quavering visual tightrope of content and form, activist and painter, work and play. My final critique at the end of the 2016 Fall semester, however, did not reflect this balance. Even though I knew my ideas weren't fully formed, in my paintings I was trying to allude to human interaction and connection, celebrating the ups and downs of our messy relationships with each other. I expected the ambiguity of our relationships and situations could be spoken through the uncertainty of the narrative, but the majority of my professors didn't see that message communicated. Nonetheless, the images were rich in and of themselves, and they invoked many references and lines of thought.

It was a fair critique, and I began to wonder about the goal of balance I had previously elevated. I called into question my end goal: was it really important for my viewers to fully understand my paintings as I understood them? Can an image's strength be its ambiguity? Could this feedback evolve the way I approach my studio practice?

In other words, how could I use my obviously natural inclinations towards producing ambiguous images to my advantage? These questions make up the beginnings of my thesis and the direction of my paintings and drawings following my 2016 Fall semester final critique.

### **Dissecting Art School Jargon (Failure of Language)**

This thesis focuses on ambiguity in painting, and thus the writing intends to clarify the image without finding any certain solutions. Since the creating process as well as the final product can be disorienting, making any finite conclusions on another's painting as well as my own is counterproductive. Thus, much of this thesis is based off of personal observations with the goal of encouraging readers to find value in subjectivity and ambiguity. Despite the objective to clarify, ambiguous language such as art world jargon will sometimes appear in this thesis. This is due to the slippery nature of the creative process: contemporary painters take images of objects or ideas that affect them, they create images based loosely off of these feelings, and during the process, they allow the intervention of paint to convince the feeling into an image. This engineering through the canals of imagination results in an irritating failure of language to assist artists as they battle to understand their own work. After years of undergoing critiques, I have collected fragments of advice from artists that match the ambiguity of the painting process

itself. These include the phrases, *Do what the painting needs*, *It's just as much about what's painted as what's not painted*, and *Allow the viewer to have a conversation with the painting*.

Yet, the nebulous quality of these quotes is important to their gravity. I have allowed them to stir in my head as my hand paints, and they provide spurts of clarity during the foggy creation process. Yet, language, including art jargon, more often than not proves insufficient when reflecting on completed works, especially when the works are evasive in meaning. Despite this failure, I will strive to uphold the strengths of enigmatic paintings and viewers' experiences of them.

### **The Incomplete Painting**

Contemporary painters often allow room for interpretation within their work, using the idea of "the unsaid" as a deliberate strategy to create work that asks more questions than produces answers. According to the artist Liam Gillick, "this sense of the unsaid has emphasized the role of the contemporary as a loose binding term that is always pointing away from itself rather than a term articulated and rethought from the center." This trend within the contemporary art world emerges in the composition of a painting as well. A painting presents a world that apes our world, muddling the details while bringing into focus certain underlying truths. The characters are recognizable, relatable, but slightly more human than those that exist in reality. The composition includes all the elements that need to be there, erasing superfluous details found in our life that have no business floating around in this other world. As these elements coalesce,

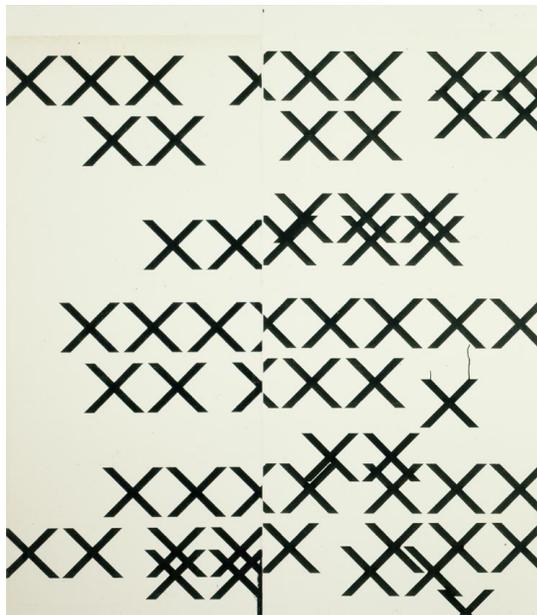
the artist decides how much of the story they need in the painting. They must choose to either spell out their narrative or to leave holes in the argument of their fabricated world.

In this thesis, I focus on the contemporary paintings that go for the hole, the unsaid. These paintings contain worlds that have no easily decoded logic. In one corner, the painting could house a figure described with choppy brush marks while in the other corner, there is a dog languidly laying and dripping with insouciant brush strokes. There could be no other reason for this change of paint language than the artist's desire to paint an anxious human next to a lazy dog. Or, the viewer could uncover a motive for the painting, a story that lies within the crevice of this juxtaposition. If the viewer questions this painted world, the reason for its existence, the painting contains this element of the "pointing away from itself" that Gillick suggests. Like poetry, the painting evades an obvious narrative, a logical progression of events. Following the analogy, paintings that spell out their reasoning read like newspapers. Quickly read, they tell the viewer about a world they already recognize.

### **Abstraction and the Unsaid**

Since I approach my studio practice thinking primarily in relation to the body, this thesis discusses mostly figurative painters; however, without the use of abstraction, figurative painters could not harness the power of the unsaid. An abstraction is a distillation of an idea or an object's content or form. This distillation can be an attempt to harness the idea or object's purity, its being without form. While this process can aim to render an image that speaks of whatever

the core being of an idea or object would be, it produces an image with no one meaning. Wade Guyton's work is an example of this.



**Figure 1. Wade Guyton. *Untitled*. 2006. Epson ultrachrome inkjet on linen. 70 x 61.5 in.**

Guyton feeds linen into a printer that prints out images and text created on the computer. The process of printing creates mistakes such as ink smudges, and the artist's hand can be seen in the disruptions in the image resulting from Guyton moving the linen in and out. Art historian, Johanna Burton, writes about his images containing X's and U's: "They are too easily generalized to be attributed to any singular context and, because of this, are not naturally of any context at all" (Petzel Gallery). Since his subject matter is so ubiquitous, it resists any one interpretation. X's are crosses, and they invoke mistakes. X's are chromosomes. In math, X's imply multiplication, or it is a substitute for the unknown,  $x$ . In a printmaking context, artists X out a plate to mark that it has been exhausted. Through the repetition of X's, it seems that Guyton is thinking about process, but the work remains open to diverse interpretations and experiences. The less explicit the subject matter, the greater room there is for diverse readings of

it. Due to the work's possibility of many references, the work remains elusive, and that is part of its strength.

## **Chapter 2**

### **The Viewer's Role in Completing an Image**

This chapter will address the process of a viewer's interpretation of a work of art. Psychological evidence is presented to show how ambiguous art can lead to greater viewer satisfaction, followed by a discussion of the relevance of objective research compared to subjective experiences in valuing art.

### **A Disconnect Between Artist and Viewer**

While it may be tempting to conclude that contemporary artists poke holes in their work in order to please the viewer, it should be stressed that artists make art because they have to, not because they need people to look at their art. Sharing ideas can be an important part of the impulse to make art, but the painter's job is not to create work in order for their work to be put back together like a puzzle. Most of the time, artists cannot know how people will read their work. Katherine Bradford, a painter whose ambiguous work I will delve into later, says of the viewer, "I don't know what it is they are seeing, what they are liking, or what they are not liking. And maybe I shouldn't know" (Samet). Francis Bacon echoed a similar instinct.

I don't think you can be interested in whether people understand your paintings or not.

After all – it's only your nervous system that you can paint at all... [Valéry] said that

modern artists want the grin without the cat and by that he meant that they want the sensation of life without the boredom of its conveyance. So the thing is, how can I draw one more veil away from life and present what is called the living sensation more nearly on the nervous system and more violently? (Walsh 235)

Bradford and Bacon agree when it comes to painting: there will always be a disconnect between the way the painting registers to a viewer and to the artist that created it. What may seem like a blatant read to the painter may be an equivocal fog to the viewer. This element is a gift rather than a curse. Bacon touches on the philosophy of the unsaid. Rather than looking into a mirror, we can look into a reflection of a hyper-real world when viewing a painting. By leaving out parts of the picture, painters can evoke a sensation rather than a logical narrative. Various interpretations of this evocation exist, but the contemporary world celebrates this plurality, this pointing away.

### **Preference for the Ambiguous: Case Studies**

All this theory of the unsaid can lead us to question the integrity of the contemporary art world, and rightfully so. Why are we drawn to the ambiguous? Has the art world devolved into a confused mess in which we question everything and learn nothing? Is the trend of ambiguity in both jargon and picture just an excuse used to cover up the contemporary artist's lack of focus and control of their medium? After all, ambiguous work presents problems to art historians in particular. Historian James Elkins reminds us "in past centuries, single declared meanings [of

paintings] were the norm, and ambiguities beyond the double register of allegory or neo-platonic metaphor were rare... The entire machinery of traditional art history is constructed in order to conform to that structure: to trace, fix, and confirm unitary intentional meaning (228). He cites common themes found in art history such as depictions of the Healing of the Blind Man that declare their purpose for being painted. These Western-centric works often relay stories from Christianity or events that occurred during the artist's time and therefore serve to teach or celebrate the narrative. Later, he accuses contemporary, pluralistic art of being "troublesome" and even "monstrous". Should we cater to the art historian and make art that is easily seen, easily written about? Let's turn to a more tangible, unbiased judgment (a rarity in the world of art).

Psychologists have tested these questions, studying the "Aesthetics of Ambiguity", and have found that people objectively prefer art that allows for divergent meanings. One psychologist studied the neurology of ambiguity, and concluded "it is not ambiguity itself . . . that is aesthetically pleasing . . . It is rather the capacity of multiple experiences" (Zeki 192). Works of art that provide equally plausible solutions through their ambiguity cause the brain to entertain each of these solutions, searching for the correct one. However, other psychologists have found that while puzzling over works, gaining a better sense of the work's meaning "might be rewarding; however, a complete resolution of ambiguity is not necessary for the appreciation of an artwork" (Muth, Claudia; Hesslinger, Vera M.; Carbon, Claus-Christian 212). This is an exciting discovery for artists in particular. Knowing that viewers can appreciate a work of art without exactly understanding what it depicts or what it means can free the artist to create what they need to create. In other words, art is no longer meant to "confirm unitary intentional meaning"; in fact, solvability of ambiguity may even correlate negatively to viewer interest and

affect (Muth, Claudia et al.). The artist need not worry if the viewer will interpret their work the way they meant for it to be read. Rejoice in the monstrous painting.

Another finding from the studies on aesthetics reveals a concrete reasoning behind the classic art world phrase “to have a conversation with the artwork”. From their studies, psychologists have found that “The variance in people’s descriptions of a single stimulus furthermore reveals that an object is not ambiguous, interesting or affecting per se but only as a consequence of people’s active elaboration of it” (Muth, Claudia et al. 213). Active participation in looking at a work of art is the only way to satisfy the brain’s curiosity of it. The viewer must have a conversation with the painting: the eyes process a man and a woman in a painting, and, if a lack of clues presides, the brain will ping pong with questions. What is their relationship? Are they married? Brother and sister? Father and daughter? Why does she have a blue hand? What could that clue add to the relationship? If these questions remain unsolved, no foul. The viewer has already spent a few minutes engaging with the work of art, exercising their mind to complete the painting for the artist. That in and of itself is a triumph.

### **Paintings, Not Puzzles**

All this psychological material is helpful and interesting to us, telling us why we are attracted to ambiguous art, but that doesn’t have to become its only value. We don’t need scientists to tell us our work is valuable. Even psychologists studying Aesthetics Ambiguity emphasize art’s diversion from a puzzle, or a logical problem.

Artworks are not riddles to be solved via analytic steps. In contrast: the differentiation between solvability of ambiguity and strength of insight as described above reveals that people might well also experience insight (in the broad sense) even if it does not refer to a previously perceived problem, and that an insight does not necessarily have to lead to the solution of any such problem at all in order to be appreciated (Muth, Claudia et al. 213).

Viewers are not meant to solve a painting through a series of logical steps. Imagine a viewer who beholds an explicit Carroll Dunham painting for the first time. The image of a tumescent jungle lady suspended between cylindrical tree trunks may result in a physical reaction by the viewer: eyes widen, mouth lets a subtle scoff escape. The painting howls delinquent. Perceiving the problem is not the issue here; rather, bewilderment sets in. A generalized *why?* nags the viewer. If the viewer dares to linger before the painting (over-coming the fear of criticism for staring at pornography in public), they will begin to make connections between the obscenities and the scene. The hills (always in pairs) surrounding the sexualized female figure are as lascivious as her swollen buttocks. Palm trees wildly unfurl in the distance, mimicking the unkempt bush protruding from the woman's armpits and crotch. As we begin to uncover these associations, we realize the fear of lingering in front of an image of the grotesque sex becomes a part of the painting's looking experience. Harking back to Titian, we wonder why it is much easier and socially acceptable to behold a hairless, softly curving woman than a fauve female flaunting her spunk. Or maybe we're simply peering into a teenage boy's lusty vision of a naïvely misogynist world. All of these insights can enter into the viewer's mind without answering the question *why? Why would a painter do this? What does it mean?* These

connections don't lead to a logical solution, but they bubble up and create a steam that propels the viewer through the visual journey, unconcerned with where it may lead. To the art historian's dismay, the possibility for multiple experiences remains.

## Chapter 3

### Two Contemporary Painters

This chapter takes a closer look at the works of Neo Rauch and Katherine Bradford to explore the different ways in which ambiguity contributes to the strength of the image. These visual analyses result in a heightened understanding of the work without coming to any one conclusion.

#### Neo Rauch



Figure 2. Neo Rauch. *Die Fuge*. 2007. Oil on canvas. 300 x 420 cm.

Contemporary painters can render figures masterfully in an image and still speak in an opaque language. Neo Rauch, a contemporary German painter, makes use of this technique. Rauch's work emerges from the rubble of the Berlin Wall, implicating politics but evading a single meaning or even any discernable meaning. The painting *Die Fuge* (Figure 2) provides an example of the artist's detail heavy yet illogical work. The scene depicts a multitude of visual levels from foreground to background to multiple middle grounds. A deep ditch in the earth resembling a surreal earthquake provides the eye a path connecting foreground to background. Figures clad in uniform wrestle with a red tube that disappears into the trench. Behind them, figures float over a building. A slumped-over figure pours over a book at a table. In the distance towers a huge mountain and a stormy sky. All of these elements collage together in a way that creates one believable space or world. Rauch keeps the light source consistent, and the figures and objects are rendered in a similar way, evoking a comparable visual language as that used in East German propaganda posters, and book illustrations (Volk). Through the coherent use of space, light, and style, the painting claims that it should make sense, that it should add up to a logical climax. However, upon further examination, the painting fails to uphold its hinted promise, revealing its disarraying quality and lack of logic.

*Die Fuge's* indeterminate meanings lead the viewer to question preconceived judgments of history. Like the title suggests, a plethora of layers dwell within the painting, causing the mind to swerve in and out of clarity much like the progression of a fugue. It is unclear whether the crimson tube squirms out of the firemen's hands or obliges to pull people and objects out of the trench. *Can we even assume they are firemen? Are those floating figures dancing or fighting?* The hovering girls appear to be attached, and their dresses flap like a flag – *is that the French flag?* We can't be sure. *But suppose it is the French flag, then who are they dance-fighting with?*

The other figure is black, red, and yellow – *the German flag colors!* Is that why they're suspended so high above the grounded figures? Where else can we find possible logic... *The trench could divide the painting into East and West Germany, serving a similar function as a wall.* And that graffiti tag on the building must *mean something*, and the man emerging from the trench must be based off some historic figure. One gets the feeling that they must be missing something; if only we had a better grasp on post-WWII history, then we could decode this pictorial bewilderment. The visual equivalent to busting a gut on a treadmill, we're working for it, but it's not really leading us anywhere. This frustrating, contradicting experience itself plays a part in the work. War appears warranted; there is no justifiable logic behind it. We think we can place certain people or objects in history; history is a living and breathing plane in which we live and mine ideas into existence again. There is no beginning and end to the work, no start or climax. We must always question what we think we know. The viewer soaks uncomfortably in the uncertainty, relaxing their muscles post workout.

If we can't understand the painting, we can at least understand the why: Rauch's values on the creative process contribute to the ambiguity in his works. While the painting is loaded with hints to obscure references, Rauch admits that sometimes he includes elements in the painting for formal reasons. When asked about the meaning behind his characters, Rauch "candidly admitted that he couldn't always say for sure, but sometimes his figures are there simply because the picture requires it, in really formal terms: color, balance, scale and proportion" (Volk). In an interview, Rauch again declares his devotion to the painting's needs: "the painting cannot really go astray, but its creator can, if he or she is unable to comply with the demands of the work" (Russ). By including elements that either hold symbolic meaning or formal necessity, Rauch further complicates his paintings. Maybe the red tube in *Die Fuge* isn't

squirming or helping at all; maybe Rauch just needed a swerving red line to visually unite the firemen. Since there is no way to know what the artist intended short of calling him up ourselves, the viewer must determine their own interpretation. While this philosophy may cause the drowsy museumgoer or conservative art historian to throw her hands up in anger, this is an exciting assertion for artists. The creative process is riddled with confusion, and often the artist cannot determine what the painting “needs” visually. However, a punctuation of clarity can cause the artist to realize they need a certain element, like color, light, shadow, balance, or contrast in an area to aid the image. If this element does not fit rationally in that space, the artist may have no fear: Rauch has shown that illogical figures or objects fashioned for a formal purpose can create successful disarray in the experience of a work of art.

**Katherine Bradford**

**Figure 3. Katherine Bradford. *Blue Swimmers*. 2015. Acrylic on canvas. 60 x 48 in.**

Katherine Bradford's paintings emit ambiguity in a different way than Rauch as they resist narrative and rather celebrate the capacity of paint to reveal our imaginations and desires. Bradford, an American painter in her seventies, has included in her recent work scenes conjuring willowy figures caught between collisions of oceans and galaxies. In her painting *Blue Swimmers* (Figure 3), the figures' bodies bob in and out of sight, almost unaware that others crowd the pool around them. The cerulean wash over the bodies makes some figures appear as if they are totally submerged, and fish swim around and overtop of one figure. How deep are these figures in the water? The painting darkens with unanswerable problems. Unlike Rauch whose paintings hint at

possible convoluted meanings, Bradford allows her paintings to sit and be without justification. The consequence of allowing a quality of the unsaid to reside in her work is that “she suspends us in a pictorial never-never land” (Yau, “The Nocturnal Worlds of Katherine Bradford”). In his review of Bradford’s work, Yau goes on to answer his own question: “Where does one find such a thing? Perhaps it can only be found in a painting.” The indefinite nature of Bradford’s scenes becomes a window into her imagination. The viewer, suspended in disbelief, is invited to lap around the painting along with the swimmers. The pleasure of gazing at a painting equates to the pleasure of splashing around in water: there is no means to an end involved with swimming or painting if we don’t want there to be. The figures in the paintings wade awkwardly around, grasping at the feeling of being in water rather than the picture of it. This is a result of Bradford’s imagination peeking through in the painting. Forgetting we even have unanswered questions about the swimmers, we are sucked into the pleasure of looking and demand no other justification.

Paint lends itself to creating uncertainty in pictures due to its capacity for opacity and transparency, and Bradford harnesses this capacity in her work, exposing the vulnerable act of painting. Paint is a medium with a wide range of possibilities and forms. Painters can wrangle the gushy spurt from a paint tube into structured lines, thin washes, and meticulous marks. Bradford, however, takes advantage of paint’s capability to make a mess. Her surfaces are soaked in paint. One can only appreciate the rogue flecks and washes of pigment clinging to the surface in person. In *Blue Swimmers*, layer upon layer of paint piles on to build a rippling texture, and her figures hazily sink into their environments. This heavy texture erases bodies of their details, and rather than judge figures by their features, the painting focuses on the sensation of being in water. In the same painting, Bradford also allows her under painting to peek through

to the surface, arriving at what Philip Guston defined as “the simultaneity of thinking and making” (Yau, “Katherine Bradford Dives In”). The result is a muddling of time and demarcation. A pink figure was painted over with the lower left blue figure, but why does Bradford allow us to see where she changed her mind? The bodies morph on the plane, and we are left to wonder if they represent time passing or if they were simply dubbed necessary for the sake of the painting. The painting becomes an archive of decisions, revealing the fluctuations of uncertainty and clarity during the painting process. Unlike writing a text or playing from a sheet of music, painting allows the creator to reveal their missteps and edits, inventing a space of vulnerability. Bradford does not shy away from this vulnerability; rather, her paintings are stronger for it as the viewer discovers these changes only by looking closely. Through the globs and glazes, Bradford’s paintings erase details and reveal process, emanating ambiguity and vulnerability.

## Chapter 4

### Developing My Work

In this chapter, I show images of my own work created over the course of my senior year (Fall 2016-Spring 2017). I bridge the gap between this written thesis and my studio practice, and I discuss how they influenced each other.



**Figure 4.** *Slipping Between Pleasure and Mess.* 2016. Oil, acrylic, spray paint, and stand oil on canvas. 72x48 in.

*Slipping Between Pleasure and Mess* (Figure 4) was one of the first paintings I completed during my Fall 2016 semester. Over the summer I had begun to paint scenes of people congregating around campfires, so this painting built upon that interest. I began with the idea to paint figures partying in a backyard illuminated by light sources like a campfire and a house. The light morphs the bodies, producing beings that meld into one another as they chat or make-out, expressing care for one another. Cold city buildings loom in the background, lacking light. When I began painting it, I knew I wanted the figures to be ambiguous in where they ended and their partner began. I find the figure making out with the lips protruding from the campfire to be the most successful in this – the viewer can't determine if a figure hides behind a campfire or if the light of the fire is wrapping up the figure.

I received some helpful feedback about this painting during a studio visit with my professor, Chris Staley. He saw the more ambiguous figures as reveling in the uncertainty of communication and relationships between friends and lovers. He also observed a common thread in my work which is I tend to leave out parts of the worlds I describe. For example, I didn't paint in the entire house, and the cityscape suggests that it extends beyond what I painted. He found that this alluded to a world beyond what I described, allowing the viewer to imagine what the rest of the scene would look like. We both agreed that this ambiguity needed to be pushed farther, and this conversation lingered in the back of my mind throughout the rest of the semester.



**Figure 5. *Campfire*. 2016. Oil and spray paint on canvas. 20x20 in.**

In my smaller paintings, I like to play with paint through experimental abstractions, and *Campfire* is an example of that. I began the painting simply wanting to see what a dark background against a fluorescent blur of light would look like. I added the foggy gray paint after because I wanted to block out some of the light. Only after a studio visit with my professor, Brian Alfred, was it pointed out to me that it was an abstraction of a campfire. It made sense since I had been painting communal campfire scenes for the past few months, but I was surprised I hadn't realized it. I had been painting scenes with campfires in them, but my subconscious wanted to see the campfire, site of warmth and community bonding, distilled. It was an important lesson: allowing myself to begin a painting without a structured meaning could still result in relevant themes I had been exploring all along. Plus, the abstraction arrived closer to the feeling of a campfire rather than just the picture of one. I made a mental note to trust my subconscious more often.



**Figure 6. *Paintings are Protest Signs; Protest Signs are Paintings.* 2017. Oil, acrylic, and spray paint on canvas. 59x47 in.**

I painted this during my senior spring semester, just after the inauguration of Donald Trump. I had participated in the Women’s March in Washington, D.C. on January 21<sup>st</sup>, and my painted protest signs began to amass in my studio. I spent a lot of time talking and wondering about the role of the artist during times of political uncertainty and intolerance, and I began to see my protest signs as paintings, and vice versa. I didn’t care that painting my studio was a departure from what I had been done recently; I felt an urgency to paint this that equaled the new urgency I felt to call my senators and march in demonstrations. As I was painting, I decided to leave the protest signs’ messages indistinct in order to confuse them more obviously with the

paintings, and I made sure to include a newspaper in the scene. I questioned the role of ambiguity in art, as it seemed to contrast with the exigency to speak out against injustice. I determined ambiguity can be used as a tool just as much as didactic messages can be, and I continue to think about how I can use ambiguity to critique our world in my work.



**Figure 7. *Flesh and Cheer*. 2017. Oil and acrylic on canvas. 76x47 in.**

This was the first painting that I began with the goal of using what I had learned about ambiguity. I wanted to paint an object in the foreground that obstructed a contrasting scene in the background. For example, I first thought of a watering can blocking the view of a forest fire in the background. A pathetic solution to the problem is presented; we know the watering can has

no chance of extinguishing the forest fire. Following that, I came to the idea of painting a celebratory object in front of a scene of death, hindering the viewer to completely make out the carnage. I thought the negative space between the plastic strings of a cheerleading pom-pom would allow hints of an animal carcass to poke through from the background. As I was painting, I found that the strings appeared to cut across the meat as if they were contributing to the violence. Ambiguity is achieved through obstruction and abstraction: the meat becomes an abstraction of raw life or humanity, rather than the poster of a dead animal. I want the viewer to wonder about the contrast between the restless plastic strings and the fleshy slaughter. As the research for this written thesis begins to make its way into my studio practice, I am interested to see where my work will go as I continue to wrestle between giving away too much or not enough.

## Chapter 5

### Conclusion

My research for this thesis has led me to both understand the importance of reflecting on painting and conclude that painting requires no justification. The space that exists between a written analysis about a painting and the actual painting is vast. Analysis attempts to wrestle the image into a logical argument; the image squirms just out of reach. In the opening lines of John Berger's *Ways of Seeing*, he explains, "The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled. Each evening we see the sun set. We *know* that the earth is turning away from it. Yet the knowledge, the explanation, never quite fits the sight" (7). Analysis will never be a substitute for experience. Looking at a painting is a physical experience that comes with the baggage of expectation, uncertainty, and sometimes discomfort. There will always be an element to the experience that evades words. However, words provide the possibility of clarity. Analysis of a painting demands sustained concentration and thought. The slow labor of writing and editing has led me to make conclusions about paintings that I never gleaned from just looking at them. Furthermore, analysis of art requires an unexpected amount of creativity. Writing about a Carroll Dunham painting demands an index of suggestive vocabulary, for while the writer knows they cannot replace the experience of looking at a painting, they can at least try to come close by using vivid language. In the end, however, looking at art in order to analyze is a means to an end. Looking at art for the sake of looking is like watching the sunset: it is a means unto itself.

Art, too, contains an element of universality that language does not. Art does not need to be translated like written works in order to be appreciated. As the art world becomes less central to Western culture, art that allows for slippage of meaning becomes more and more important. Since these works intend to evoke multiple experiences, they welcome diverse viewers to

consume them. Art that demands one interpretation assumes the viewer approaches the image with prior knowledge of a certain history. In the contemporary world of painting, however, ambiguity can function to uphold the values of globalization: allowing the flow of information and knowledge to create new ways of thinking, as well as reveling in the plurality of interpretation. In the unsaid, it turns out, many voices are able to be heard.

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Other programs during undergraduate education:

Yale Summer School of Art

Norfolk, CT

2016

Studio Art Centers International

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### Solo Exhibitions

**2017**

*Making Ourselves Sick*, Art Alley, HUB-Robeson Center, University Park, PA

**2015**

*Domestic Daydream*, Patterson Gallery, University Park, PA

### Group Exhibitions

**2017**

*Canon Fodder*, Zoller Gallery, University Park, PA

## **2016**

*Undergraduate Juried Exhibition, Juried by Richard Reinhart, Zoller Gallery, University Park, PA*

*Study Abroad Show, Zoller Gallery, University Park, PA*

*End of Semester Show, Palazzo dei Cartelloni, Studio Arts Center International, Florence, Italy*

## **2015**

*Undergraduate Juried Exhibition, Juried by Liz Nielson, Zoller Gallery, University Park, PA*

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## **Awards**

### **2017**

Fulbright U.S. Student Program Award 2017-2018

Student Marshal for Penn State School of Visual Arts

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### **2016**

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Kara D. Berggren Award for 2015 Undergraduate Juried Exhibition

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