

MUTATIONS

By

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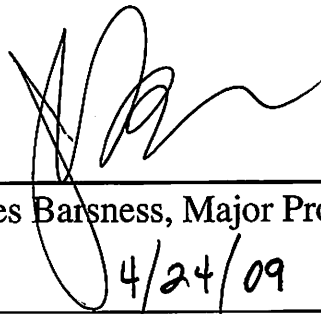
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

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Approved:



James Barsness, Major Professor

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Date

Visual Language and Process

I embrace uncertainty. This is probably why I am captivated by the mysterious nature of abstraction. In abstraction, I see endless potential for variation and mutation. The language of abstraction arguably has an expansive space yet to develop. As a visual language it has the potential to be continuously reinvented to operate within the sensibilities of the time and culture in which it is employed.

“Incidents of paint linger in the working mind of the painter as continuous thrills, as possibilities, like words you may soon use in a sentence, and-in a manner that seems to exist outside of spoken language-as beacons of hope to any human being for whom visibility is the site of questions and answers about existence.” (Schor 155)

Working through intuition threads my practice. I trust painting as a form of non-linguistic thinking. As a process driven painter, content develops through engagement with materials. Work organically comes out of the work. There is minimal preplanning as I allow a painting to unfold through time.

“For a painter there is a certainly tremendous pleasure in working out a thought in paint. It is a complete process in terms of brain function: an intellectual activity joining memory, verbal knowledge, and retinal information, is given visible existence through a physical act.” (Schor 155)

I navigate a painting in terms of qualitative relationships and rely on a visceral response to marks before an intellectual one. In this way, my work is grounded in phenomenology, or the study of how we experience the world. We experience the world by way of our senses. An initial sensuous experience opens up a path to understanding things in them selves. Working out an experience visually and tactilely, I negotiate formal qualities to construct meaning with little reliance on signs or symbols. As American philosopher John Dewey states: “To think effectively in terms of relations of qualities is as severe a demand upon thought as to think in terms of symbols, verbal and mathematical.” (Dewey 47) Paintings have this potential to communicate on a comparable level to the way sound communicates in music. In a musical composition, qualities of sound (pitch, intensity, rhythm, tempo etc.) are arranged in relationships to form an expression. This expression can both convey a mood and narrate a story in the absence of words. The way I work out ideas non-linguistically in paint develops as a dance as I relate visual qualities to sound qualities. Forms are constructed, veiled, concealed, resurface, and are restructured through improvisational mark making.

Early Explorations

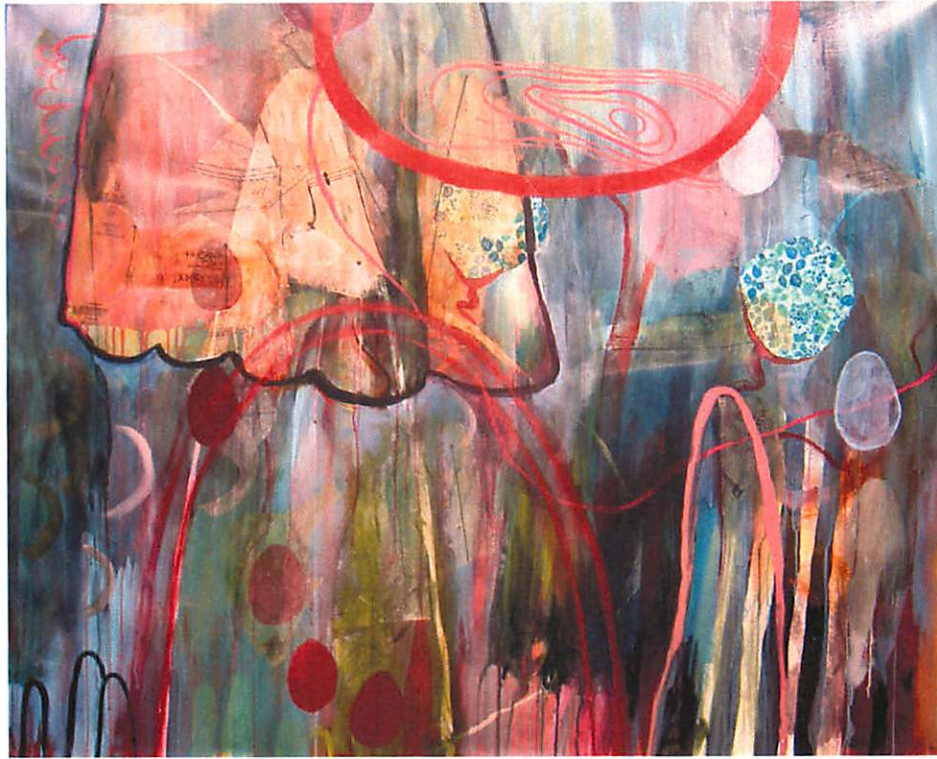
In reaction to the pace of our current speed driven digital age, my early paintings were made with ferocious gesture. Actively searching for meaning in the process of making, I saturated paintings with visual ideas. Compositions become pauses within a complex visual world in constant flux. Color decisions referenced the artificial color that permeates contemporary culture filtered through my eyes and referenced intuitively. In an increasingly automated, hands-off world, I celebrate slow contemplation and intimacy of the human touch in a painting.



Labor

acrylic, fabric, dress pattern, pastel, charcoal on paper
90x48"
2006

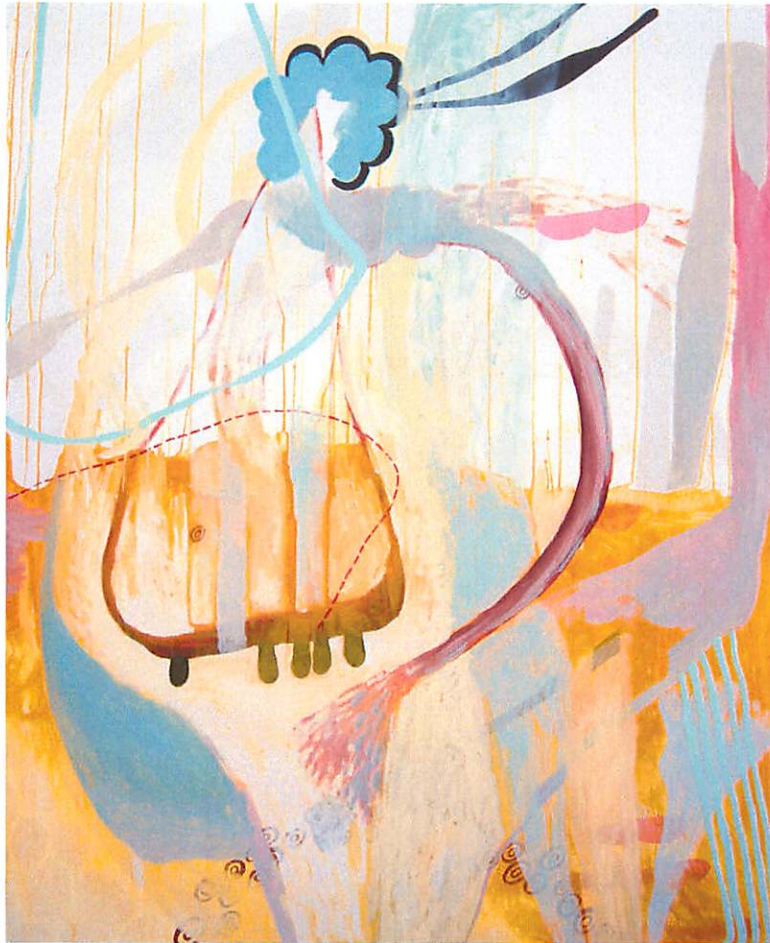
Visually, I seek to investigate human qualities and complexities. Being “figurative” in my abstract works, the body has and continues to inform both the imagery and compositional structure of my paintings and drawings. In early “interior landscapes” forms abstracted from the body function on a symbolic level. Free floating forms dance in an imagined, lyrically layered atmospheric space. A combination of collaged fabric and transparent veils of paint push forms back into space and allow other forms to emerge forward. The simultaneous concealing and revealing of form functions as a prominent pictorial device in my painting.



x-ray
acrylic, fabric, and dress pattern on canvas
60x50"
2006

“I want to engage with the language of painting, with the metaphorically expressive possibilities of the materiality of painting, trusting in the complexity of visual language in painting...” (Schor 169)

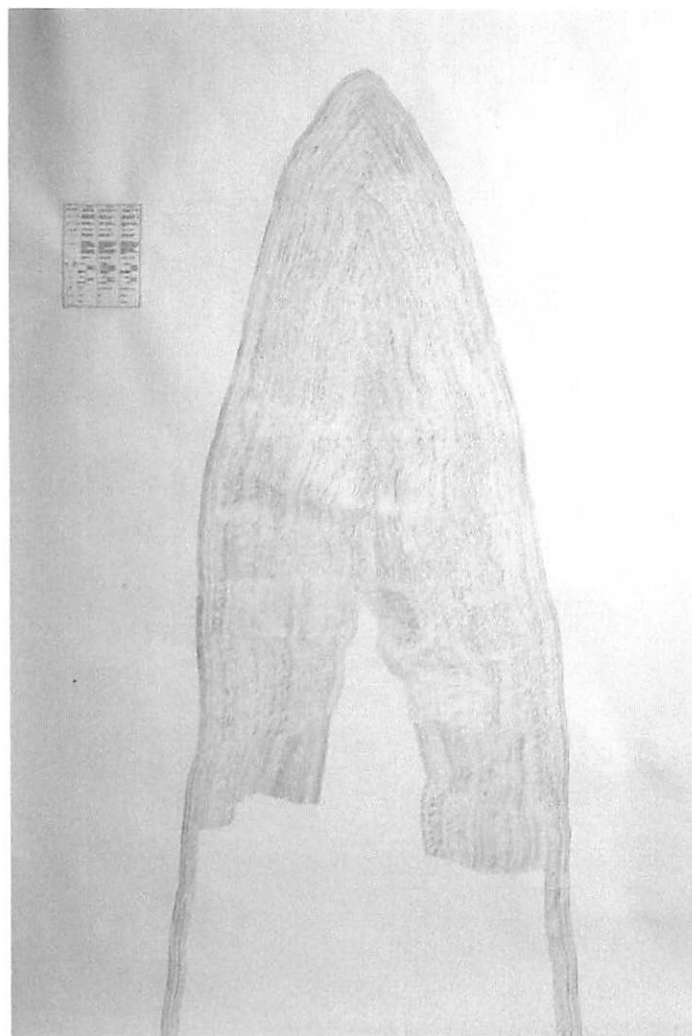
My interests soon began to shift from the exterior body to the interior and microscopic body. Images of internal organs and cells became motifs I explored with intensity to speak to the complex functioning of the human body. As my interior landscapes developed, I explored forms that became increasingly invented and less abstracted. Additionally, I began to consider how the forms floated into, out of, and around one another within my whimsical compositions. It was at this point I began to question the use of collaged elements (paper and fabric) to the intent of my work. Was collage still necessary to the work? My explorations soon became focused on working in only acrylic paint and editing out collage. *Permeable Membrane* is an example of these explorations.



Permeable Membrane
acrylic on canvas
50x60"
2007

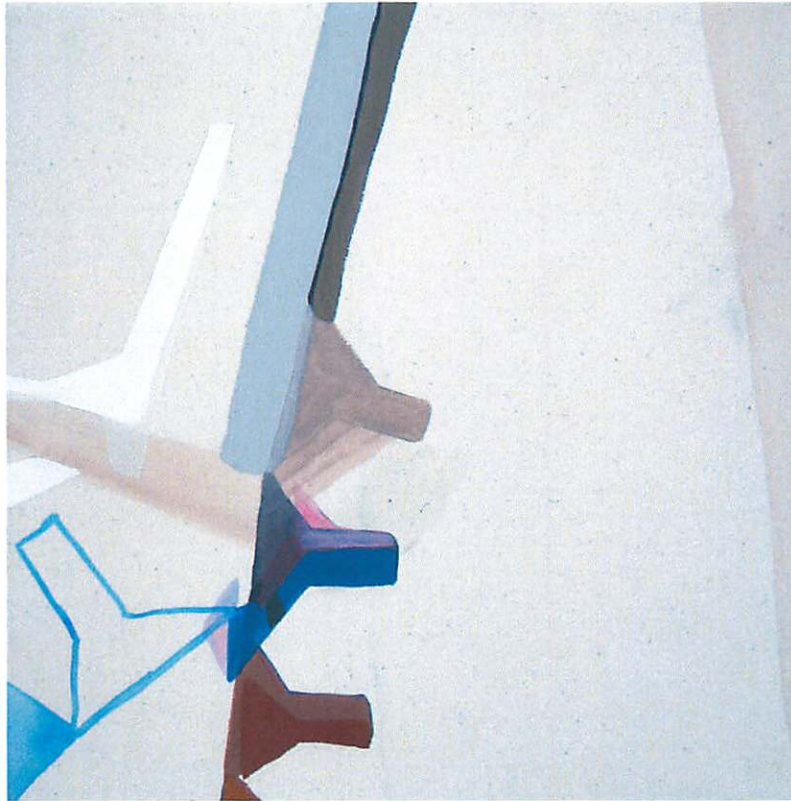
I not only began questioning my process, but also my working methods, specifically my tendency to saturate a canvas with color and form in order to “find a painting.” These formal questions lead me to new ideas about the direction of my work’s content. Was the work more about our relationship between the self and the body or about the relationship between bodies?

Prompted by these questions, editing and restraint rose to the forefront of my visual investigations. If my work was to discuss spaces “in between”, it would need to visually convey a sense of open space, negative space. On the extreme end of this spectrum, I began a minimal drawing that seemed to be the opposite of my painting. Large in scale, this drawing was made with the most essential marking making tool I could think of, an HB graphite pencil. Delicate line by delicate line I filled the space of a mound form repeating this most essential mark with this relatively primitive tool. Most interesting was how the repeating lines suggested the passage of time (like rungs of a tree or fingerprints) and how the drawing seemed to function as topographical map of a person.



Body Map
graphite on paper
50 x 90"
2006

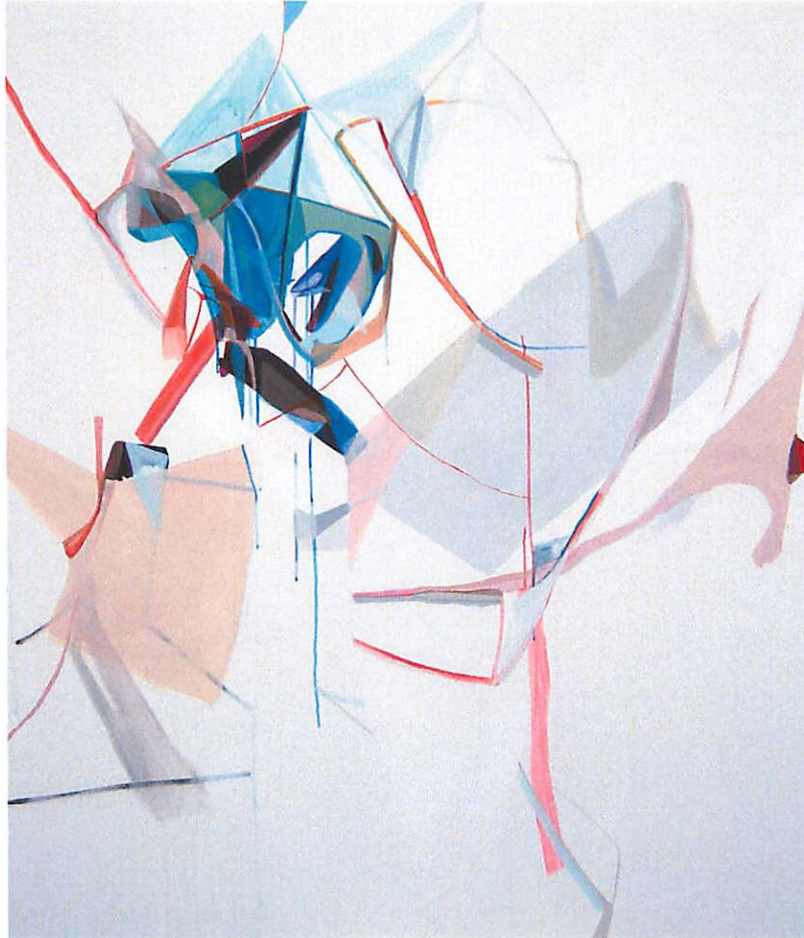
In concurrent paintings, each mark became contemplated before committing it to the canvas. Rather than compressing and layering many forms into one space, the paintings became about a more open space leaving breathing room. This use of negative space instilled a sense of lightness into each painting and drawing that had not been there before. This open quality allowed forms to suggest expansive space.



untitled
acrylic on canvas
10 x 11"
2007

Organic forms fluidly unfolded within this newly expanding sense of space. Forms remained reminiscent of my previously collaged fabric scraps, threads, and connecting lines. "Feminine geometry" was the phrase that frequently came to mind in this period of my painting. It was at this point I realized the space I wanted to visually articulate was shifting from the interior body to the invisible space exterior to the body. This is the space between.

"I don't paint things, I paint the relation between things." --Henri Matisse



Threads
acrylic on canvas
50x60"
2007

Developments

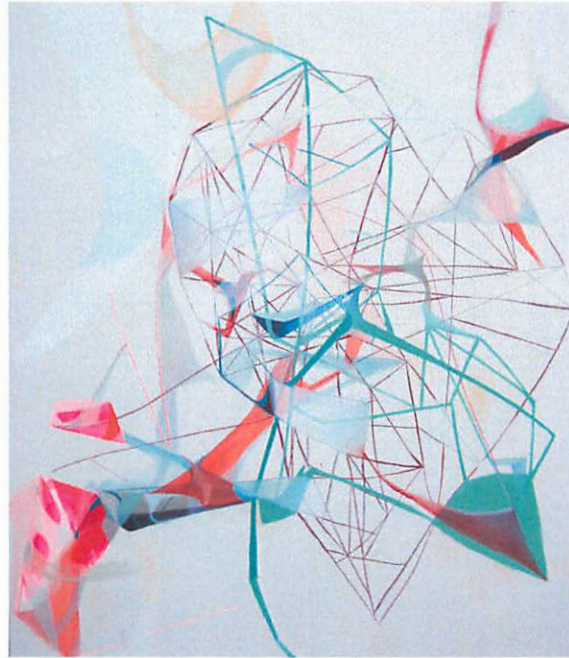
Throughout my artistic practice, I have shifted from depicting symbols that reference the figure, to fragmentations of the figure, to forms that organically suggest underlying structural elements of the figure. My most recent work is after a sense of a body presence. Through the tactile qualities of paint, I can capture a human presence through the sense of touch.

“The sense of touch is important, perhaps because it is at yet another remove from verbal language than the merely optical. And because, in the precise moment of actually painting, the painter, no matter how intellectual or conceptual, is engaged in a nonverbal activity.” (Schor 172)

Forms I currently investigate are inspired by organic natural material such as microscopic structures (cells, honey combs, and snowflakes at a structural level), biological forms and architectural spaces.

My paintings and drawings operate within a shallow illusionistic space, as forms reside close to the surface. In thinking about this in terms of everyday visual experience, I relate my developing sensibility to the way images appear on a computer screen, where depth can be indicated but is physically and illusionistically shallow.

The following two paintings mark a transition as I began to explore organic fluid forms within an architectural structure to visualize negative space or the space between.



Untitled
acrylic and oil on canvas
50x60"
2008

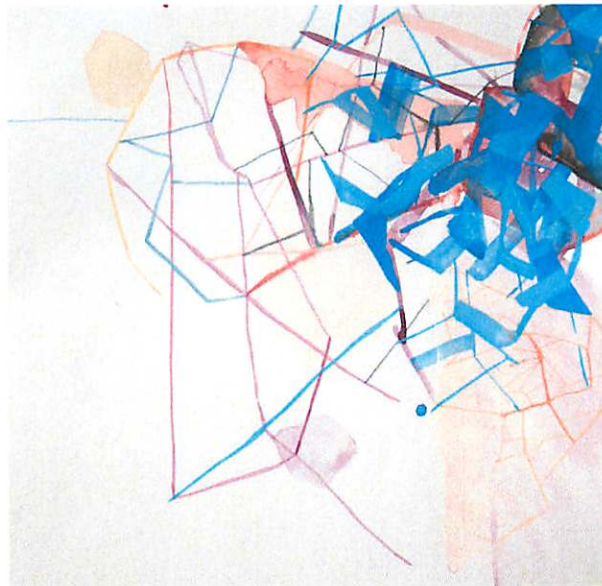


Mid Air Collision
acrylic on canvas
60x50"
2009

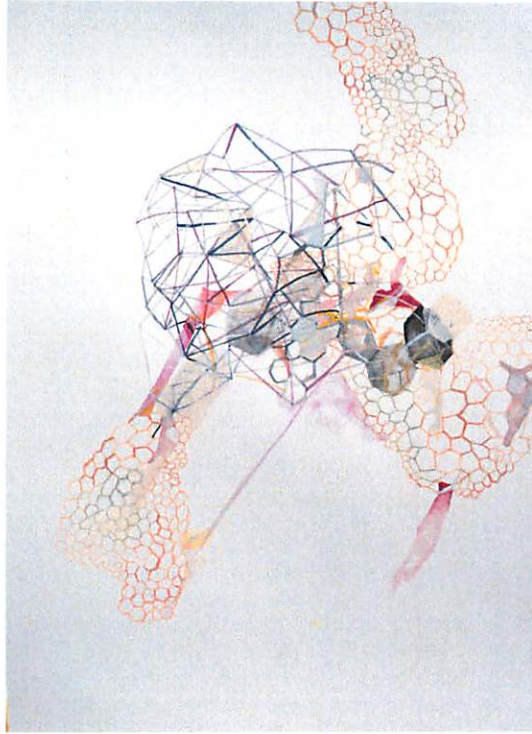
MFA Exhibition Work

A curiosity to visualize what is experienced, yet invisible drives my current work. Thoughts, feelings, and relational spaces “in between” comprise this invisible realm. My work is figurative in its presence, yet nonrepresentational.

Playfully, I investigate the nature of human communication. Through imaginatively translating subtle, complex, and intangible aspects of communication into visual form, I explore illuminating an organically structured terrain common to human experience. It is my hope that through the creation of a poetic visual world, a viewer can be lured into a meditative space for quiet contemplation of human topography.

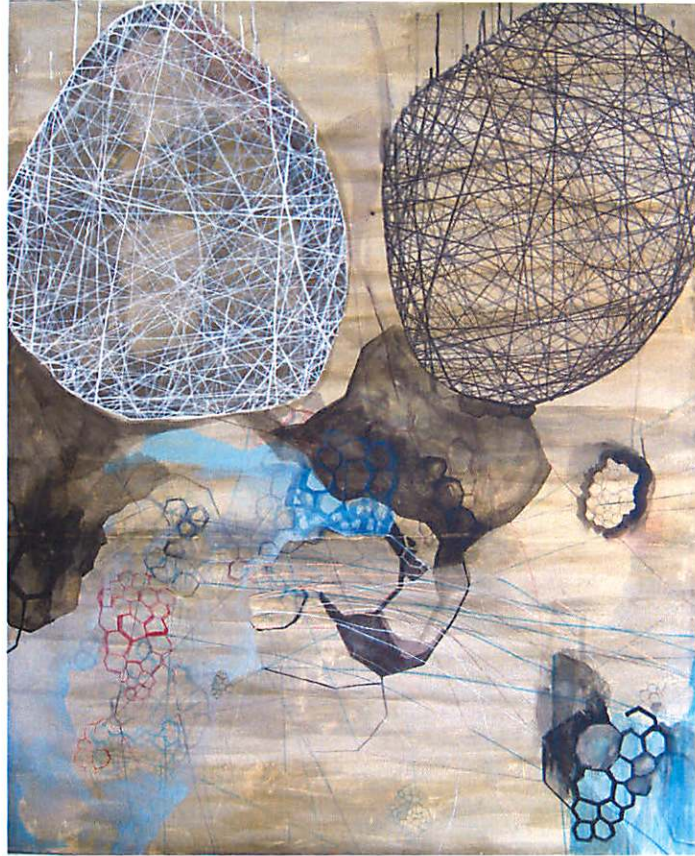


untitled, from *Unfurl*
ink, watercolor, and gouache on paper
8x8”
2008



untitled, from Unfurl
ink, watercolor, and gouache on paper
8x8"
2008

My MFA exhibition work began with a series of small-scale ink and watercolor drawings on paper. Originally, these drawings were intended to be studies for larger paintings. In the drawings, I allow myself to explore a variety of visual inclinations methodically and viscerally. Over time the drawings revealed themselves to be finished works despite their original intentions. While not directly translating the drawings into larger paintings, they fed the larger work. Additionally, they themselves became a singular large piece.



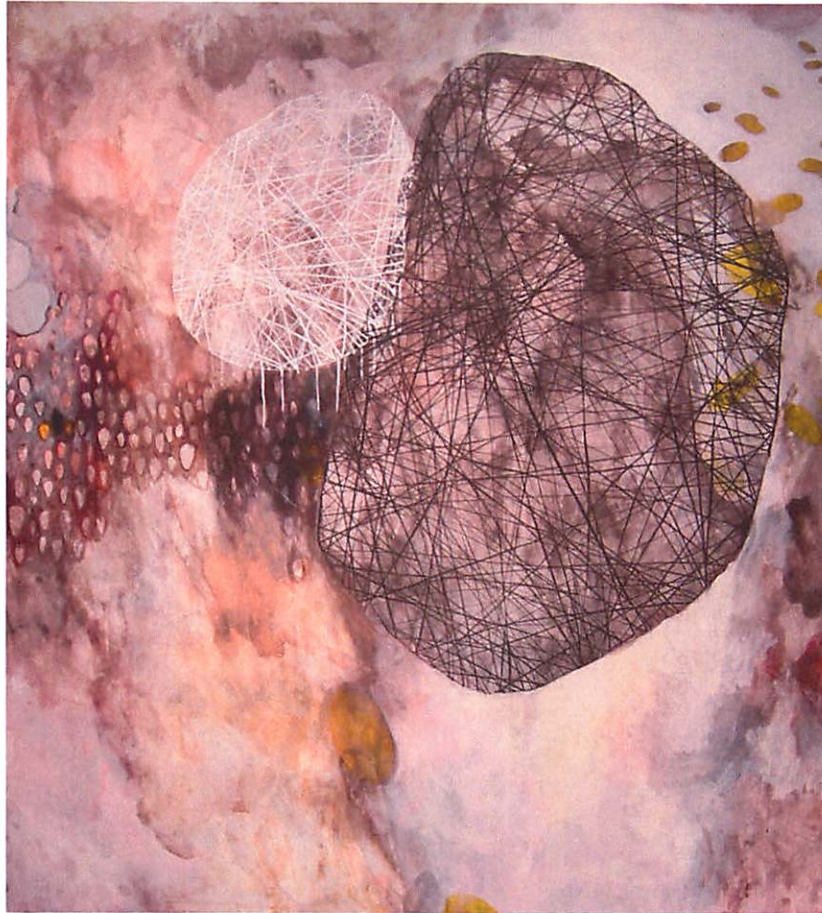
Holding Pattern

ink and acrylic on paper mounted to canvas
50x60"
2009

In *Holding Pattern*, I began to successfully translate the delicate quality of the connecting, threadlike lines from the smaller drawings to a larger scale. This happened because of a shift in support materials from working on stretched canvas to paper mounted to canvas. This simple shift in support surface allowed me to work a large painting in a similar way to a small drawing on paper.

Two organically round forms constructed of crisscrossing lines float side by side on the upper half of the canvas. They hover over hexagonal clusters that reference maps, like continental forms in a sea of a washy mossy green. I anthropomorphize these oppositional forms. Below the dominant forms, a dialogue of delicate lines connects various points of the hexagonal clusters. This space becomes a visualization of a dialogue between the two “figures.”

“Line, no matter how supple, light, or uncertain, always implies a force, a direction. It is *energon*, work, and it displays the traces of its pulsation and self-consumption. Line is action become visible.” (Barthes 35)



With Our Faces Veiled
ink and acrylic on paper mounted to panel
66x72"
2009

This exploration of defining the relationship between two oppositional figural forms continued with *With Our Faces Veiled*. While thinly painted, the painterly marks create a deeper, more atmospheric space for the forms to float within. The palette and brushwork is warm and tender. The nature of the relationship between the two forms is left somewhat ambiguous. While the two forms overlap in a seemingly intimate way, it remains unclear whether the relationship between the forms is nurturing or parasitic.



Unfurl
ink and watercolor on paper
70x85"
2009

Twelve small ink and watercolor drawings make up my next piece. Both *With Our Faces Veiled* and *Holding Pattern* possess a visual sensibility present in each of the twelve drawings. After recognizing this, I chose to extract these drawings from a larger series of studies and chose to show them as a singular work. Individually, each drawing is an extracted thought. Shown in proximity to one another, their relationships become complex and interrelated. They are displayed in a formation that allows a viewer to build bridges between the works forming visual poetry. As extractions of an unfolding thought process I titled these works *Unfurl*.



The Space Between
ink and acrylic on panel
66 x 72"
2009

The Space Between is about tension between two fields of energy. Each is distinctive in its own character, one side is organic and the other geometric. Each side of the painting I painted to be distinctive from the other rather than to form harmonious whole. Gradually, the dense white space in between the two fields becomes less a space and more a physical dense form that jars itself in between the two fields.

The Space Between is the final piece I made for the MFA show. It is also the piece I believe is the most successful. I was fortunate to have an experience with this painting that provided for me empirical evidence that defined criteria for "success". A father of a fellow graduate student was visiting the graduate painting studios and came across my painting. Declaring himself to not know much about art and to not like abstract work he went on to describe in great detail his experience "meditating" on this particular painting. He described the painting as being about the relationship and conflict between two "beings." They were divided, although not completely, each side had left something with the other. While the experience conveyed in the painting is one of conflict and tension, this viewer stated that this painting is hopeful. This is an example of how a formal

language of qualitative relationships can convey meaning to a viewer, unversed in art, without the use of concrete imagery. I am elated that someone with an untrained eye could have this kind of experience with my painting. The evidence told me that something here is working.



detail, Unfurl
ink and acrylic on panel
66x72"
2009

“There is another quality in a painting that cannot be described: it is the residue reflected in the painting of the artist’s pleasure in the making of it, especially the pleasure, the joy the artist experiences in the stages when the painting uncovers itself to his eyes. This is an internal experience of the artist which the attentive viewer can extract.” (Jack Tworkov, quoted in Schor 140)



Installation view
2009 MFA Exhibition
Gallery 307
Lamar Dodd School of Art

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