

TALKING BACK

Sarah Mikenis

Terminal Project Report

COMMITTEE

Laura Vandenburg (chair)

Anya Kivarkis

Euan Macdonald

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Text

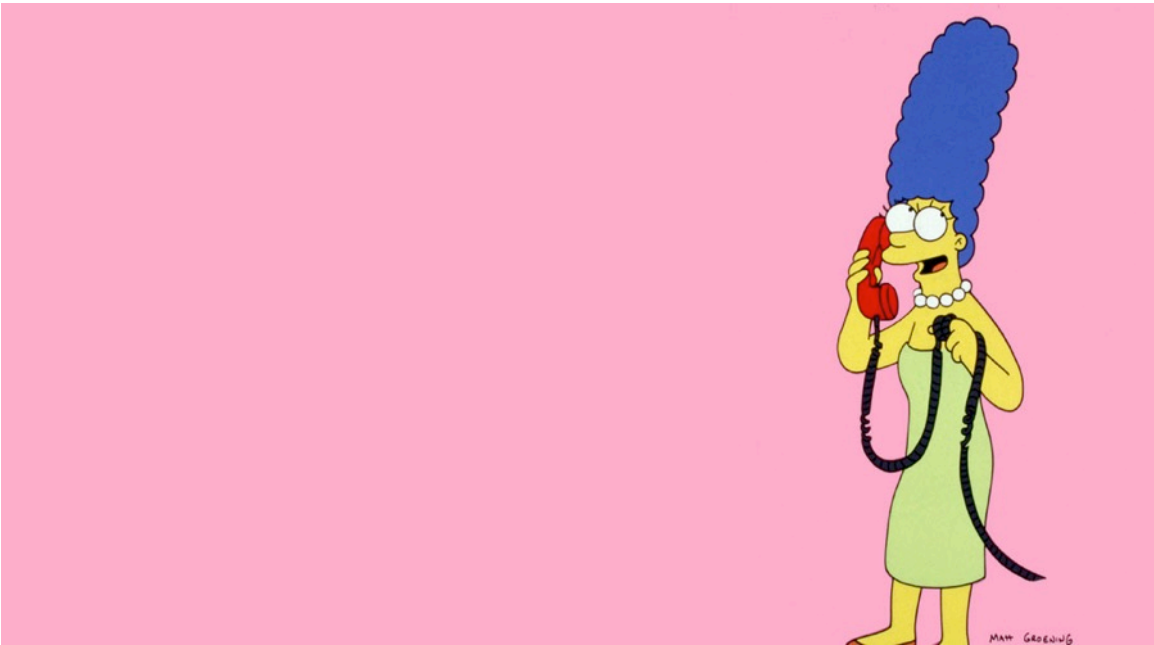
Disjecta Installation Images

Bibliography

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to all the faculty and friends who I have been lucky to get to know over the past three years. And a special thank you to my committee for your time, energy, and endless support.

During my last trip to the hair salon I asked for a peach ombre dye job. The fade of soft pinky-orange to creamy yellow-white transports me to elementary school, sitting on a grassy field while eating an orange sherbet and vanilla swirled ice-cream cup with a small wooden spoon. I can imagine the sun glinting off the walls of the Vinoy Hotel in St. Petersburg, Florida where I used to visit in college, casting a façade of glowing golden-pink.



Marge Simpson, 1989

Reflecting on the significant influence memory has on her paintings, Bridget Riley states, “My mother made a habit of looking, and she taught me to look. She would always point things out: the colors of shadows, the way water moves, how changes in the shape of a cloud are responsible for different colors in the sea, the dapples and reflections that come up from pools inside caves. All beautiful things. It was a constant pleasure just to look” (Cooke 147). Inspired by the valleys, coastlines, and changing landscape of her childhood, Riley uses illusions of space, movement, and optical vibrations to conjure the sensations of these fleeting, infinitesimal moments in her paintings (Cooke 138-48).



Yves St Laurent Coat, 1971

In an Art 21 video, Mary Heilmann describes a moment when she caught a pink glow of the TV out of the corner of her eye and walked over to see Marge Simpson standing in a brilliantly colored room, illustrated with four different shades of pink. Heilmann explained that color experienced through cartoons would influence how she thought about color in her paintings in an indirect way (Heilmann “Inspiration”). Similarly, British painter Pauline Boty pulled from her experiences of living through the products of pop culture and performed that experience on canvas (Verwoert). In her painting *Celia and Her Heroes* Boty depicts the fashion designer Celia Birtwell, her shirt unbuttoned to reveal lacy lingerie, standing in front of celebrity icons like Elvis and a portrait of David Hockney (Tate.org.uk, “Pauline Boty”). The celebrity images, seemingly tacked or collaged to the wall behind Celia, are reminiscent of a teenage girl’s bedroom. Like Heilmann and Boty, I use color and imagery drawn from pop culture—possibly pulling from fashion, magazines, or film. Other times I might pull from a fleeting glimpse of something, a memory—possibly an unnamable one—or a sensation of texture or light. An Yves St. Laurent

emerald green coat; a fuzzy, opalescent pearl-gray bath mat; the stripes of a child's black and white baseball uniform; a pinky-white bleach stain. It is only after making the work that a glimmer of another memory, a moment, a feeling I am grasping for might surface.



Pauline Boty in her studio, September 1963.

Helen Molesworth writes that Mary Heilmann returned to Color Field painting “but she was to do so with enormous irony, deploying the colors of contemporary Technicolor cinema and commodity marketing as opposed to colors with putatively transcendental meaning. And yet, while Heilmann’s colors may have been chosen tongue in cheek, she appeared radically interested in the very embodied feeling (specifically the spatial wetness of the tongue pressed against the

inside of one's cheek) of how color is always already coded—with culture, with class, and of course, with gender—and how this sometimes makes things 'hard to look at' (Molesworth 433).



Sophie Grant, model, and Noga Shalev, designer, 2015

On a hot, humid, sweaty day in August I participated in a photo-shoot for a friend, modeling a line of her designs for an upcoming look book. I remember the moment my friend Sophie tried on a bright pink dress for the camera, and the dress and her red hair seemed to vibrate wildly against the green screen background. Looking back now at the photograph, with the saturation and glow of the digital screen, the shocking contrast of color between green, red and pink, and the memory of the oppressive heat that day, the image feels almost undulating.

Fashion photographer Miles Aldridge's surreal photographic worlds are flooded with acid-hued images and impossibly polished women. Staged in banal settings like bathrooms, kitchens, and grocery stores, the saturated, candy-colored photographs are so overdone and hyper-real they take on a sinister quality. I like

for my work to straddle a line between familiarity and good taste and being slightly garish and sulfuric, like the bad taste in your mouth after eating too much sour candy. I don't want color to play by the rules; I want color that is acting out and talking back.



Miles Aldridge photograph

In an advertisement for her song *Teenage Dream*, pop singer Katy Perry appears clad in a multicolored latex bikini, standing in a dark room eerily lit with digital blue light. Like her blithe and vacant lyrics, Perry comes across saccharine, gaudy, and plastic. Perry has masterfully manufactured her own image into a blown-up and cartoonish simulation of femininity and sexuality, to such an extent that she seems partly in on the joke. I want my paintings to be as syrupy and ambivalent as Katy Perry's media persona: simultaneously serious and formal as well as skeptical and tongue-in-cheek. I might accessorize a striped or monochrome painting with giant sagging pockets, stuff it with upholstery foam, or adhere fringe

or a tassel. There is a feeling that the paintings are dressing up as something else—hiding, concealing, and pretending.

My paintings are faking it.



Katy Perry in Teenage Dream, photographed by Emma Summerton

A painting with shoulder pads?

-Studio note, October 13, 2015

Through stuffing, gluing, tugging, and pushing canvas against stretched canvas I try to capture the gesture of a skirt electrically sticking to tights, billowing

out in places and, in others, awkwardly hugging and revealing the body underneath, or a taut, wet swimsuit filling with water and air, or bubbling linoleum tile in a bathroom that has been flooded with water, or struggling into too-tight pants in a fitting room. The rumpled-ness and wrinkling of canvas recalls sheets, a bed recently evacuated, maybe with the fresh indent of bodies, or a shirt after a long day of travel.



Pink Bathroom, image courtesy city-data

I run my tongue over my lips, coated in a thin film of waxy chapstick. I recall spending afternoons after school with my grandmother as a small child. She hands me her favorite candy from See's, the soft caramel and marshmallow interior gently pressing against the semi-transparent wax paper cover.

Claes Oldenburg's "*Giant Loaf of Raisin Bread, Sliced*" from 1966-67 suggests a body reimagined as a loaf of bread. Oldenburg wrote in 1966: "Manmade things

do look like human beings, symmetrical, visage-like, body-like. Man wants his own image, or simply doesn't know any other way" (Russel). The work, acrylic paint on stuffed canvas, sits comfortably somewhere between painting and sculpture. Soft, lumpy, and brown, the piece simulates raisin bread flawlessly, the coziness and pleasure of warm cinnamon and butter and the texture of raisins. And yet it also simultaneously becomes a body: slices falling from the remainder of the loaf imply gravity, and the slices of bread, collapsing and sprawled, work to recall furniture, bed cushions, and a figure reclining.

Standing in front of my own work, I experience the presence of a body. The paintings lean away from the wall and protrude into space; I remember the feeling of unwelcome advances. The familiarity of being too close to another body, a crowded bus, touching hands with a stranger accidentally, or my thighs pressed against the thighs of the person next to me on an airplane.

I think about times my own body feels like too much.



Claes Oldenburg, "Giant Loaf of Raisin Bread Sliced" 1966-67

Paunchy belly
Pillowcases with the indent of a head

-Studio note, January 28, 2016

Could a painting turn its back on you before you turn your back on it? Could you bore a painting? Could a painting become fatigued? Could a painting fold over and have a view of itself, or cover and obscure itself from view?

Frank Stella's Black Paintings (1958-1960) utilized stripes as a structural element to divide the pictorial plane and point to the space in front of a painting (Luke 5). Rather than the traditional idea of a painting as a picture or a window into space, Stella's paintings negated illusionism and emphasized, instead, the objectness of painting (Luke 5). Somber and austere, the Black Paintings did not make allusions to things in the world but rather referred to themselves. Stella said that his ambition was to "keep the paint as good as it was in the can" and "to get the paint out of the can and onto the canvas" with as little mediation as possible (Luke 4).



Frank Stella in his studio, photographed by Hollis Frampton, 1958-1962

In *Men Explain Things to Me*, Rebecca Solnit writes, "Mystery is the capacity of something to keep becoming, to go beyond, to be uncircumscribable, to contain more" (Solnit 93). Oscillating between being art objects and masquerading as everyday objects, my work is at once a painting and a pair of pants, or a pillowcase, couch cushion, or tile floor; they are unresolved, defying easy categorization. It is this ambiguous, indeterminate space of painting that intrigues me. Although it is representational with its two sagging, stuffed pockets, "*Loaded*" retains a sense of strange uncertainty. The two pockets almost reference a pair of jeans, but why are they green? What is in the pockets?

Like a murphy bed
Like a body bending
The gesture of putting your head down

-Studio note, January 6, 2016

My work pretends to respond to the weight of the world like people do: forms bend, ostensibly pulled down by the weight of a tassel, canvas gets heavy and starts to sag, or objects buckle and fold, unable to stand upright against the wall any longer. The paintings appear animate, almost like they have been "caught in the act." Although they seem mirror-like, reflecting human actions, the paintings are awkward, stiff, and stuck.

I question how pattern or the surface quality of paint might interrupt or conflict with, conceal, or ignore the physical form of a painting. The paint could suggest an illusionist space at odds with the form, like a protruding form containing a suggestion of deep receding space. Or, a soft, pillow-like structure could be denied and confused by a shiny, hard surface. Similarly, if surface or pattern is not utilized to disrupt a spatial understanding of form, sculptural elements adjacent to or on top of the form might serve as a visual or psychological interruption. Finally, the

physical form of the painting—bulging, bending, and folding over—acts as an intrusion into the space of the gallery.

Bath mats at Bed Bath & Beyond
Shaped to fit around toilet
How to make carpet texture in paint?
Looks like a cartoon tooth.

-Studio Note, February 1, 2016



Karin Davie, "Pushed, Pulled, Depleted, and Duplicated #1"

Karin Davie explores a similar line of inquiry regarding purposely confusing the relationship between the physical and optical in her paintings. She writes, "I was always playing this relationship between the objectness of the canvas, as with the shaped-canvases, how the paint sat on the surface, the allusion of the curves and the bulging of the painting, against the more obvious illusionism within the painting

or the pictorial space that's created through color and line and a sense of perspective. All my paintings are really about trying to bring those two elements together and allow them to really coexist uncomfortably, so that you get this funny relationship between something that's optical and physical while alluding to space and denying it all at the same time" (Waltemath).

Visiting my grandmother in the hospital I notice how small her body appears, sunken into the bed, her legs and torso shrouded by layers of pale beige blankets. I hold her hand; feel my skin against her skin, crepey, so thin its almost transparent, and dotted with deep bluish black bruises just under the surface. Although she's been in the hospital over a week her nails are perfectly manicured, painted a soft shade of rose quartz.



See's caramel and marshmallow candy

For the 1969 exhibition "Dusseldorfer Szene" Blinky Palermo submitted sketches of two potential proposals. One sketch, titled "6 Windows Pointing

inward” depicted crayon wall drawings of six square grids lining the gallery walls that resembled windows in a long hall (Kuper 71). Playing on the Renaissance belief that a painting acts a window to another world, Palermo’s window drawings instead pointed inward, “returning the viewers attention to the room in which he or she stood as well as to the viewers themselves and to the moment of perception” (Kuper 71). Through mirroring architectural features of a site, or using a perspectival vantage point, Palermo’s work proposed to make the viewer aware of both the space of the gallery and themselves in relation to the work.

At Disjecta, gravity was unmistakably an animating force for the work. After hanging my paintings at a standard, 60-inch center, and subsequently re-installing the show to hang works at various heights, I learned how the placement of my paintings in space and relative to each other could make the relationship of the viewers’ body to the work more evident. Through hanging a painting higher than expected the viewer was forced to stand under the painting, slightly covered by its bending form, and look up into it. By installing a piece at hip-height, I wanted the painting to feel heavier and uncomfortably low, prompting the viewer to reflect on his or her own butt and hips relative to the work. A painting hung so that it grazed the floor of the gallery felt activated by the force of the ground pushing back up into the piece. After the show at Disjecta, I am left questioning how future possibilities for installing work could affect a viewer’s interaction with the work as well as inform how the work is made.

The front cover of my magazine sticks to the tops of my thighs, slick with sweat from the afternoon heat, imprinting fragments of text and images onto my skin. Ridges form on the back of my legs, mirroring the pattern of the plastic strips lining the deck chairs. I notice people dangling their feet into the water and birds occasionally flying overhead, casting ambiguous deep blue shadows that dance across the bottom of the pool. Submerged in the water, all other sounds are muffled; my body feels buoyant and borderless.

Disjecta Installation Images



Loaded, oil on canvas, 2016



On the Fringe, oil on canvas, 2016



Soft Directions, Oil and spray-paint on canvas and carpet, 2016



How to Mix Stripes and Florals this Spring, oil, acrylic, spray-paint on canvas, 2015

Bibliography

Aldridge, Miles, Ian Luna, and Lauren A. Gould. *Miles Aldridge: I Only Want You to Love Me*. Print.

Aldridge, Miles. N.d. *Miles Aldridge*. Web. 6 June 2016.

Cooke, Lynne, and Nadia Chalbi. "Bridget Riley in Conversation with Lynne Cooke." *Bridget Riley Retrospective*. Ed. Anne Montfort. Paris: Musee D'Art Moderne De La Ville De Paris, 2008. 138-48. Print.

Davie, Karin. "Pushed, Pulled, Depleted & Duplicated #1". 2002. Mary Boone Gallery. Mary Boone Gallery. By Karin Davie. Web. 6 June 2016.

Hollis Frampton, *The Secret World of Frank Stella, 1958–1962*, printed 1991, gelatin silver print, Addison Gallery of Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, Massachusetts (gift of Marion Faller, Addison Art Drive, 1991)

Kuper, Susanne. "About Space and Time: Blinky Palermo's Wall Drawings and Paintings." *Blinky Palermo Retrospective 1964-1977*. By Lynne Cooke, Karen Kelly, and Barbara Schroder. New York: Dia Art Foundation, 2010. Print.

Luke, Megan R. "Objecting to Things." *Frank Stella 1958*. By Megan R. Luke and Harry Cooper. New Haven: Yale UP, 2006. Print.

Marge Simpson. 17 Dec. 1989. Planet Claire. By Matt Groening. Web. 6 June 2016.

Mary Heilmann: Inspiration. Prod. Wesley Miller and Nick Ravich. Perf. Mary Heilmann. Art21 "Exclusive" - YouTube. 23 Oct. 2009. Web. 1 May 2016.

Molesworth, Helen, and Lisa Gabrielle Mark. "Painting with Ambivalence." *WACK! : Art and the Feminist Revolution*. By Cornelia H. Butler. Cambridge: Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, 2007. Print.

Oldenburg, Claes. "Giant Loaf of Raisin Bread Sliced". 1966-67. The National Gallery of Art. The New York Times. By Claes Oldenburg. 6 Mar. 1995. Web. 6 June 2016.

"Pauline Boty Artist Biography." Tate. Web. 4 June 2016. <<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/pauline-boty-2684>>.

Pauline Boty in Her Studio in September 1963. Sept. 1963. Lewis Morley Archive/National Portrait Gallery, London. The Guardian. 27 Apr. 2013. Web. 6 June 2016.

Russel, John. "ART REVIEW; Oldenburg Again: Whimsy and Latent Humanity." The New York Times. 6 Mar. 1996. Web. 22 Apr. 2016.

Solnit, Rebecca. Men Explain Things to Me. Chicago: Haymarket, 2014. Print.

Summerton, Emma. Katy Perry. N.d. Teenage Dream Photoshoot. Fan Pop. 2010. Web. 6 June 2016.

Verwoert, Jan. "Why Are Conceptual Artists Painting Again? Because They Think It Is a Good Idea." The University of Glasgow. 16 Apr. 2010. Vimeo. Web. 20 Feb. 2015.

Waltemath, Joan. "In Conversation: Karin Davie with Joan Waltemath." The Brooklyn Rail. 5 Mar. 2006. Web. 15 Apr. 2016.

Yves St Laurent Emerald Green Fur Coat. 1971. Pinterest. Web. 6 June 2016.