

***Sound now, seek and you will find.***

**A terminal project report by Lee Asahina**

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*Contents:*

First Thought, Best Thought

Limelight

Normal Desires

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## ***First Thought, Best Thought***

Is it all over my face/ You caught me love dancing/ Is it all over my face/ I'm in love dancing.

-Loose Joints 1980



***The Loft, New York City 1979***

In the late 70s, Arthur Russell spent time in the recording studio with producer Steve D'Acquisto (who co-produced "Is it All Over My Face?") and Beat poet, Allen Ginsberg. Both D'Acquisto and Ginsberg were Buddhists who subscribed to the "first thought, best thought" mantra of Buddhist master Chögyam Trungpa. Inspired by both men, Russell made increasingly experimental and ad-lib choices in his productions that included holding recording sessions under a full moon and trying to mimic the energy of free-jazz sessions.

Dance music inherently fosters improvisation within its main repetitive forms. Arthur Russell said of disco, "It uses an extendable structure which on the one hand is recognizable, and on the other, improvisatory. It's based on hearing what you do while you do it."<sup>1</sup> When I begin a painting, I often start with colors or a basic composition in mind, but allow myself to continually respond to what I've already put on the canvas. Just like the extended arrangements, repeated musical phrases, and improvisatory attitudes of disco music extend the life and liveliness of a party, repetition of shapes and active engagement with my

<sup>1</sup> Arthur Russell. "Comedy is the highest form of art," interview by Owen Jones, *Melody Maker*, 1987.

<sup>2</sup> Tim Lawrence, "David Mancuso's art of parties," *The Wire*, November 2016.

work as it unfolds enable me to manifest meaning in my paintings, opening up the possibility for a conversation between my work and the viewer.

A close friend of Russell's, DJ David Mancuso, was one of the early adopters of playing records all the way through, selecting them according to the crowds' energy rather than employing beat-matching that allows for seamless transitions from one record to the next. Longer records, allowed to play for their entirety, Mancuso believed, gave way to a more communal experience in a club as it encouraged the dancers to come together in a "socio-psychic" plane and allowed the music to begin to "play" the dancers. This revelation contributed to the rise of the 12" single.<sup>2</sup>

In a way that is usually only possible in the world of cartoons, time in a dance club can be experienced as flattened or dilated. I am curious about the relationship between parties that last for days on end and the depiction of time in a painting. The structure of time at a dance club opposes a usual quotidian structure, and I see this kind of time as parallel to the imaginary moments in painting. I am interested in a kind of suspension of time that's manifested in the popular 70s club motifs of free-floating balloons and disco balls. In my paintings, I like to think of the shapes as being similarly suspended in time and space; to catch the moment as in the picture of the Loft where everything seems to be floating.

### ***Limelight***

Henri Bergson describes the absent-minded comic figure as someone who is constantly adjusting her behavior to imaginary situations. The humor of the absent-minded figure stems from the seeming absurdity of her actions that, upon closer inspection, are traceable to an imaginary logic. In my paintings, forms are repeated and rearticulated. Many of the marks appear as blunders or cover-ups parallel to the way that gags, as Bergson describes them, depend on the absent-minded figure making the same mistakes over and over again.<sup>3</sup> Buster Keaton is a prime example of an absent-minded figure who creates his own time and logic. Zooming out, Buster Keaton and his foibles can be read as antithetical to particularly American ideas of ambition.

Bravo's reality television series, *Vanderpump Rules*, is a spinoff of a spinoff and fittingly low-stakes. The show follows of the lives of the

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<sup>2</sup> Tim Lawrence, "David Mancuso's art of parties," *The Wire*, November 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Henri Bergson, *Laughter* (New York: Macmillan, 1914), 6-10.

young, beautiful employees at SUR (Sexy Unique Restaurant) owned by a Real Housewife of Beverly Hills, Lisa Vanderpump. In the SUR universe, there doesn't seem to be an endgame nor do any of the cast members (ostensibly all actors and musicians) ever achieve any career milestones; rather, it's a cast of people who cyclically make the same social blunders, seeming to exist in almost suspended animation. I view this kind of time as related to the time in which Raphael Rubenstein posits provisional painting exists. He argues that painters who fall under this umbrella, for example, Raoul de Keyser, may provide a kind of contemporary vanitas that critiques ambition. He asks, "Could provisional painting, or at least some of it, be merely the medium on a casual Friday?" Rubenstein begs the question of whether provisional painting as a genre may consist of more style than substance and whether that matters.<sup>4</sup> Rubenstein describes provisional painters as making paintings with whatever subject matter is immediately available to them. I think about these kinds of minor détournements as I use the ephemera of daily life and the studio as source material for paintings. Rather than thinking of provisional painting as a stand-in for quick or slapdash, I think of the subject matter re-contextualizing pop culture moments and not worrying about the treatment of each thing in relationship to the whole history of painting

Writer Sam Anderson posits that Roland Barthes effectively invented the TV recap and presaged the criticism of mass culture done by writers for the website *Vulture* among others.<sup>5</sup> Barthes, most famously in *Mythologies*, would do close readings of banal fragments of pop culture to tell his readers what they meant about society at large, framing them as analogous to mythology. While Barthes is often angry, railing against his subjects and the petite bourgeoisie, there are also moments when he takes genuine pleasure in pop culture.

Barthes in *S/Z* describes writerly texts as texts that locate the reader as the site and the producer of meaning. Barthes insists that a text need not disguise itself as a work of fiction or otherwise so as to remain open to interpretation. Parallel to this notion, I want the viewers of my paintings to have a connotative experience. For me, the repeated elements of flowers, hands, paws, and non-regular shapes are important only in that the viewer is allowed to experience them connotatively. In my paintings, the shapes are often derived from specific sources, i.e. film, television, stickers, etc., but I am more interested in the indexicality of these shapes. For me, indexicality points to a liveliness as well as a labor on my part as well as any secondary associations or meanings the viewer

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<sup>4</sup> Raphael Rubenstein, "Provisional Painting Part 2: To Rest Lightly on Earth," *Art in America*, February 2012.

<sup>5</sup> Sam Anderson, "How Roland Barthes Gave Us the TV Recap," *New York Times Magazine*, May 2012.

may bring to a painting. I am interested in the associations the viewer may be able to make within the relatively limited vocabulary of my paintings as well as the associations I'm able to make as I paint them. Barthes calls this praxis, looking for the intrinsic relationships within a fixed set of signs.

Barthes also describes “the thrill of a future praxis.”<sup>6</sup> In one example, he describes purchasing paint colors for their names alone and the potentiality that they possess; of course, he is mainly talking about language, and paint is a handy analogy. I recognize this sensation in that shapes and marks coalescing on paper or in my head often promise this same kind of future that Barthes talks about; the locus of meaning is in the pleasure of their interactions with each other. I have often associated this idea of excitement over a thing's future in direct relation to the poem “Today”, by Frank O'Hara.

*Today*

Oh! kangaroos, sequins, chocolate sodas!  
 You really are beautiful! Pearls,  
 harmonicas, jujubes, aspirins! all  
 the stuff they've always talked about

still makes a poem a surprise!  
 These things are with us every day  
 even on beachheads and biers. They  
 do have meaning. They're strong as rocks.

(1950)

Here, O'Hara approaches Barthes' idea that the locus of meaning could lie in scintillation, the sparkle of a word or an object. In “Untitled (1),” the colors and shapes come from a photo I took of a driveway in Oakland. In “Irreconcilable Similarities: The Idea of Nonrepresentation,” Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe talks about nonrepresentation in relationship to Michael Fried's essay, “Three American Painters,” from 1965 in which he discusses Manet, synthetic cubism, and Matisse as he traces the trajectory from the representational to the abstract. Gilbert-Rolfe argues that as the objects in paintings became more flattened (Manet) and the figure-ground relationship became more confused (Matisse), paintings became filled with free-floating signs, and spatial relationships were privileged. Ultimately, Gilbert-Rolfe contends that nonrepresentational art is inextricably linked to representational art in its dependence on

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<sup>6</sup> Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010).

signs and on bodies in space.<sup>7</sup> In my own work, I'm interested in this tension between representation and nonrepresentation as I think of most of my shapes as having some kind of referent, but in the paintings, they are often flattened, brought to the foreground, and made to contend with each other spatially. I think about Gilbert-Rolfe's argument that Cézanne's forms "flattened to match the sign" in light of the zeitgeist. Regarding the internet and the immediacy of images today; it seems flatness is more of a condition than ever. There's an impulse to un-flatten maybe, I'm thinking about 3D movies and virtual reality, but I'm interested in how, when I'm looking at a computer or at my phone, everything seems to come up to the front of the screen and float there.



Lee Asahina, "Untitled (1)" 2017

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<sup>7</sup> Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, *Beyond Piety: critical essays on the visual arts, 1986-1993* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).



**Normal Desires**



*Bruce Nauman, "Human Sexual Experience" 1985*



*Paradise Garage sign 1987*

Just as Arthur Russell's disco outings signaled new possibilities for disco conventions and time signatures while also harkening its decline, there are moments in painting that similarly suggest new takes on Modernism as well as its waning powers. For one, Milton Avery achieved humor through form rather than content. Avery uses childlike signs and symbols, a directness and simplification of signs that is oppositional to the more opaque references of Modernist painting, especially Abstract Expressionism. Importantly, Avery also drew directly from his own life and emotional experiences and did not let style subsume his personal taste.

A more postmodern example is Bruce Nauman's 1985 *Human Sexual Experience* that uses "kids' sign language" to make a gesture that suggests sex. The fingers and hands make crude and funny shapes, and the changing neon lights reinforce a double meaning of intercourse and a self-reflexive gesture by the artist that points to his hand (himself). Simple gestures, signs with multiple possible meanings, and self-reflexivity are central ideas in my terminal project. Nauman's work in neon has an obvious connection to commercial neon signs. The sign for the Paradise Garage, a club inspired by Mancuso's Loft, also provides an opportunity for comparison. Also known as the "Gay-rage," Paradise Garage was both a birthplace of New York house and a famously LGBT friendly club. Like Nauman's piece, the Paradise Garage sign sells a certain image of sex, a man with a comically large bicep that acts as a canvas for the club's name. There is also the promise of anonymity hinted at by the obscuring of the face. We assume the yellow orb in the back is supposed to be a disco ball, but it's a rudimentary and almost funny representation, limited by the material of neon. Acting in a similar way to Nauman's piece, the club-goer is invited to imagine themselves in the club; a certain permissiveness and atmosphere is conveyed, but much is left to the imagination.

In "Untitled (2)," I am similarly employing a childish language of scribbles and wobbly shapes. References for this painting include erasers, the marks they make, and paint spills. The smaller white rectangle within the larger frame of the painting references a drawing board or a dry-erase board, pointing back to the painting's making and the idea of mistakes. Like both Nauman's work and the Paradise Garage sign, I hope to create a certain vibe or feeling while inviting the viewer to enter into the painting, perhaps recognizing the frustration of having to erase something.





*Lee Asahina, Untitled (2) 2017*

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