Flat Places
And
Dynamic Spaces

by

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A thesis exhibition
presented to the University of Waterloo
in fulfilment of the
thesis requirement for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts
in
Studio Art

Render Gallery, April 7th – 13th, 2008

Waterloo, Ontario, Canada, 2008

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I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

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ABSTRACT

*Flat Places and Dynamic Spaces*

As found in modern art and architecture during the 1950's and 1960's, North Americans were conditioned through advertising and media to adopt modernism as a new and better way of life. Modernist styles such as Abstract Expressionism were promoted as leading edge ways to make art that defined American culture. In architecture, modernism infiltrated the development of suburbs and represented a way of life that promoted consumerism, leisure and the nuclear family.

Much of the urban and suburban spaces we live in have been influenced by modernism. I am interested in exploring the vocabulary of modernist abstraction through the language of contemporary figuration. I am influenced by late modernist Formalism, colour field painting, gestural mark making and Abstract Expressionism.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to acknowledge my partner Jacqueline for her countless hours of support and encouragement. I would like to thank Professors Jane Buyers and Doug Kirton for their continual support, helpful criticisms and overall guidance behind my works’ progression and achievements.
DEDICATIONS

I would like to dedicate this paper to my first art instructor, my mother.
Thank-you
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Modular Units (2007), Oil, Acrylic & Coloured Pencil on Canvas, 48” x 60”

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I am interested in the ways people inhabit space and the inherent tensions and energies generated within the complexities of a dynamic space. My work combines familiar architecture with social spaces in urban and suburban spaces that are common in contemporary society. I activate the spaces within my paintings through a dynamic fusion of representation, abstraction and the fragmentation of imagery. This paper will explore my process of creation and the ideas that influence my work, while highlighting the work’s evolution through historical and contemporary relationships to late modernist painting and architecture.

The urban environment has affected its population on an emotional and physical level with the compartmentalization and organization of people into cities, suburbs and neighbourhoods. The continuing growth of urban centres has created several metropolises, which act as important hubs for regional or international connections and communications. Initially my work was influenced by my research regarding urban planning, development and the changing ways in which humans engage with and experience architectural spaces. My research began with an exploration of Edward Soja, a postmodern urban theorist and professor of urban planning who asserts that the social, historical and spatial dimensions of our lives are inseparable and interdependent. In specific reference to the urban space, Soja defines the configuration of social relations, built forms and human activity that exist in a city as the spatial specificity of urbanism. Viewing city spaces from this perspective discards the idea that cities are built environments that exist as stages or containers.
for human activity. Rather, city space can be regarded as a dynamic and socially constructed space filled with tensions and energies.

In many of my earlier works, such as *The Conversationalist* (fig. 1), I explored Soja’s concepts about tensions and energies within the urban environment. A tension is created between the visible buildings in the foreground and the dissolving buildings in the distance, which can be seen as either deconstructing or emerging. This ambiguity is intended to reference urban development, reconstruction and the continual evolution that exists within a city. I wanted my work to show the city as an evolving space that housed people and their interactions. As I reflect on this earlier work, I notice that I continue to use outlines or silhouettes as a compositional device in my work. As exemplified in the later painting, *Dean Residence* (fig. 2), my earlier ideas evolved into overlapping architectural forms.
that dissolve and emerge from the abstracted under-painting. Also, the process and expressive qualities of the work represent my own energy that is recorded throughout the process of making the painting.

The tensions and energies represented in my work relate to Soja’s description of the spatiality of human life. Soja asserts that a reciprocal relationship exists between people and place, as people continually shape their society while society also shapes them. The process of producing spatiality begins with the body and an understanding that the body is a spatial entity involved in a complex relationship with its surroundings. Thus human spatiality is a product of both environmental surroundings and human development.

Soja has developed theories about three interconnected perspectives of space and how we process the space we inhabit. The first space perspective he calls Perceived Space which is a real space that is measurable and mappable. It has configurations and qualities, and emphasizes things in space. The second space perspective is Conceived Space; it is space that is a visualized space or imagined space. This is comparable to a mental map that we develop in our mind and can become an active part of how we experience a city as an “urban utopia”, an imagined reality that affects our urban experience and behaviour. According to this perspective, space is more subjective and it emphasizes our thoughts about places. The third space perspective Soja describes is a Lived Space which is both a real
and imagined place which can result in an individual and collective experience within a space.\textsuperscript{5}

Soja's concept of interconnected perspectives of space and the ways people experience them is a concept that has influenced and informed my work. I have been most influenced by Soja’s concept regarding the \textit{Lived Space} perspective, as I invent, embellish or combine images from sources, including my memories and imagination, in an attempt to convey the experience of a place.

I have also found inspiration from the Canadian artist Eleanor Bond, whose paintings explore concepts of combining lived and imagined spaces. As demonstrated by \textit{Offshore Barge Draws the Beach and Sailing Communities}, Bond’s work depicts a duality by incorporating real and invented elements of the urban environment. In her series, \textit{Social Centres}, Bond explores how built forms express and define the collective perceptions of space within urban environments.\textsuperscript{6} Bond creates imaginary places as narratives that critique contemporary relationships with nature and built environments. These urban spaces are re-imagined as sites for social revitalization. Her paintings suggest strategies for social and spatial separation which respond to the effects that modern technologies have on our lives and the resulting loss of identity.\textsuperscript{7} Bond’s paintings provide a large scale representation of illusionary spaces that are accessible to the viewer. She uses intense colours and distorted perspectives and scale to create active tensions in her work. Much of my work plays on similar interests as Bond’s paintings, depicting artificial, engineered architectural
spaces that reflect synthetic environments. In my work, *Bending and Tension* (fig. 3), I use overlapping shapes and architectural forms to develop a space that references a suburban or commercial dwelling. The space looks artificial and lacks a reference to the natural world, through intense colours, exaggerated perspectives, diagonal lines and multiple vanishing points.

As found in modern art and architecture during the 1950’s and 1960’s, North Americans were conditioned through advertising and media to adopt modernism as a new and better way of life. Modern styles like Abstract Expressionism were promoted as leading edge ways to make art that defined American culture. In 1967, the *Ideal Toy Company* of New York introduced a building block kit designed for children, called *Super City*. The kit offered plastic modules, triangular struts, and bubble skylights so children could build miniature slabs and towers. The writer and artist Douglas Coupland claimed that the *Super City* building kit was the first purely modernist building kit.\(^8\) Coupland stated that modern architecture had reached the
pinnacle of its pervasive influence in 1967 as the modernist style had become so ingrained in North American culture that even children’s toys mimicked the style.  

Modernism also infiltrated the development of suburbs and represented a way of life that promoted consumerism, leisure and the nuclear family. Suburbia has been described by historians as the defining characteristic of the twentieth century.

Originally a self-conscious artificial retreat providing controlled environments separated from urban life and the polluting affects of industry and commerce, suburbia offered families a sense of community, harmony, social mobility and individual fulfillment. While the precise configurations of suburban spaces have changed their basic elements still exist; containment and isolation combine with the pursuance of personal contentment and are nurtured by a space that combines healthy, harmonious nature within a homogeneous social community.

Suburbia promoted the importance of the community and the domesticated families who lived in them, while offering a more prescribed modern lifestyle characterized by leisure, recreation, entertainment and sanctuary. A popular suburban style of modern architecture is exemplified through the 1950’s Ranch House design. Described as a “thoroughly modern architecture”, the Ranch House was one of the most successfully modern suburban dwellings of the twentieth century. The Ranch House symbolized the ultimate modern home that defined a proper way of living and reflected a lifestyle of simplicity and privacy. The Ranch House was marketed to new home owners as offering rugged individualism, self determination and
convenience while representing an adaptation of pure modern ideas.\textsuperscript{16} The Ranch House design consisted of a low structure, unornamented forms with rustic elements, open trusses, exposed brick walls, and broad front lawns with the long side of the house facing the street. This offered larger lots and a backyard for privacy, recreation and entertaining. The open floor plans and sliding glass doors also added spaciousness, as the inside was connected to the outside through a patio that expanded the domesticated space. Ranch House architects were trying to develop a home that was affordable, efficient, marketable and profitable as a mass-produced house.\textsuperscript{17} The Ranch House style was a prime building block for suburbia and it became the major thrust of urban growth in the United States after World War II. Because of the returning war veterans and the baby boom there was also a massive population shift from inner cities into developing suburban areas.\textsuperscript{18}

The architecture used in my paintings has a simplicity and familiarity that may enable the viewer to identify with a place through memory or association. The association the viewer brings to my work is linked to the homogeneity of urbanism and the standardization of development, like the box store, modular home or suburban subdivision. I am interested in the synthetic relationship the viewer could develop while viewing my work or the possibility of association and identification with the places I have depicted. I strive to make associations with the viewer, specifically by focusing on social interaction and architectural space. Recently I have been exploring ways to further emphasize dynamic compositions that activate the spaces
in my paintings. By drawing attention to my process and medium, through visible
brush marks, neon under-paintings and variations of paint application, I emphasize
the architectural structures and the presence or absence of light. I also explore
pouring different acrylic paints over the neon grounds, allowing the paint to mix
optically on the canvases. The resulting painting undulates with mixtures of colour
and creates an abstract pattern describing varied pockets of space. I then render
architectural structures on top of the painting, allowing certain pockets of the under-painting to
be visible and creating an interaction and
weaving between abstracted areas into further
rendered areas. The exposed under-paintings
are also intended to act as unifying devices and
provide entrance and exit points for the viewer to
engage with the work. In the work, Inside Out
(fig. 4), I use the abstract under-painting to define
the exposed trusses that diagonally intersect on
the canvas. I also leave parts of the under-painting exposed through thin washes,
which are used to mimic the buildings reflection on the right-side of the painting.

I use neon under-painting to represent a synthetic or artificial environment; an
environment that looks engineered, plastic or imaginary. The colours also act as a
device to attract the viewer’s attention, as the brightness of the colours seem to
illuminate the paintings. The process of developing the under-paintings acts as a non-objective way to begin my paintings with a reliance on intuition and chance. Paint is poured onto the canvas in various consistencies or squeezed directly from the tube and scraping devices are employed to create expressive marks. I often start the work on the floor, enabling me to engage with the canvas from all sides. Similar to the Abstract Expressionists, I use drips, as I move vigorously around the canvas recording my actions, or stains as I allow the poured paint to optically mix on the canvas. I rely on my materials to create an autonomous object that records my actions and movements. This process acts as a starting point from which I integrate the abstracted pattern into more defined objects and areas in my paintings.

The exposed under-painting helps the viewer decipher my artistic process, as my works rely on a deconstruction and construction of a space. I also create space through the use of distorted perspectives or one point perspectives that lead the viewer into deep illusionary spaces. I intentionally incorporate diagonal lines to construct the architectural motifs in my paintings. These perspective lines may be twisted, contorted and deliberately confused. Drawing marks remain visible to show the process and development of the image while adding a dynamic element to the painting. The scenes I depict are embellished truths rooted in lived spaces, yet also incorporate imagined and invented visual elements. I construct spaces that are intended to reflect my memories and offer the viewer a connection to their own memories, perhaps creating a sense of nostalgia.
There is an intermingling of abstraction and representation in my work. Where representational painting may be interpreted as representation of reality, abstraction can be considered a fiction or an embellishment of something real. I allow the abstract patterns in the under-painting, and the forms that overlap it, to mix into one another, using parts of the abstract pattern to depict the objects being rendered. As the abstract areas push and pull the surface of the painting, a fragmenting of information occurs by exposing pockets of abstraction. This process offers the viewer portions of representation that enable the viewer to bring their own conclusions to what is missing. The work, *Inside Out* (fig. 4), I use the under-painting’s abstract pattern to define parts of the foliage and reflections in the window.

I fragment images by making conscious decisions to omit or include parts of images used in my paintings. It is my intention that the fragments I choose to include will create an association with the viewer even though they are only seeing part of a whole or seeing these fragments in a constructed setting. As demonstrated in the work, *Mammoth Mountain Inn* (fig. 5), only the outline of the shape of the car is visible in the bottom
right of the painting. The viewer is able to complete the fragmented form as a car and identify it. Another example of fragmentation used in my work is in, *Pappenfort Residence*. As seen in the detail (fig. 6), I outline part of an apartment building in the background, which is sufficient for the viewer to assume the association of this shape as a building. I wish to engage viewers through these associations and draw them further into the work, creating an engineered simulated experience.

My process dictates a fracturing of overlapping images, as I use projections to build up my compositions. While projecting, I can only see a ghosted image as I leave some overhead lights on, or I eliminate all lighting sources, adding an element of ambiguity to my colour selection. As demonstrated in the painting, *Haine’s Residence* (fig. 7), I often overlap projections enabling me to fragment
the space and create a grafting of architectural images over top of one another, resulting in a hybrid building. I take an exploratory approach to painting rather than embarking on a work with the intent of creating a polished work. I approach it as an evolving process that carries from one painting to the next. It is an accumulative process and continuation of knowledge that informs my approach. I do not always begin with a plan; rather my plans often develop as the work progresses creating an element of spontaneity and chance in the work that records my relationship with the painting.

I include modernist architecture, such as the Ranch House style, as a subject in my work as a connection to late modernist art and the prestige it once represented as a new radical art form that promoted pure and autonomous abstract art. Also, I am interested in modernist architecture because of its similarity with modernist painting, as it incorporated abstraction, truth to materials and a relationship with theories about modern art. Such concepts were promoted by the influential art critic Clement Greenberg.

In Greenberg’s essay, *Modernist Painting*, he defines modern art as a pure art characterized by the prominence of truth to the materials and the discipline. Greenberg claimed that to be modern, distinct disciplines needed to be redefined and purified through self-criticism. In order to be modern, painting needed to become an autonomous original object, separated from other artistic disciplines, through an emphasis on flatness, pigment and the painting’s support. Greenberg
believed that in order for art to achieve autonomy, especially painting, it must reject the representational and become abstract.\textsuperscript{19} Greenberg concludes that there has been a gradual flattening of the picture plane throughout the evolution of painting from Impressionism to Cubism. A continuation of this process of flattening the picture plane resulted in modern abstract images.\textsuperscript{20}

I am influenced by late modernist formalism, colour field painting, gestural mark making and Abstract Expressionism. I am interested in exploring the vocabulary of modernist abstraction through the language of contemporary figuration and narration. Through the physicality of the medium, the insistence on the material qualities of paint and the construction of images that reference the picture plane, I call attention to the surface’s flatness and apply this modernist vocabulary to image making. I stretch and elongate the forms found in my source images to echo the shape of the canvas. I use expressive mark making resulting in abstract shapes. I develop an abstracted under-painting; I overlap flat forms and shapes to reference the flatness of the picture plane. Initially I use acrylic paint, where the matte finish reinforces the flatness of the canvas, calls attention to the picture plane and stresses the physicality of the medium. I call attention to the painted surface by revealing my process, through exposed drawing, under-painting, thick paint ridges, and expressive marks that collectively remind the viewer of the materiality and surface of the painting. Through its invented construction, the painting becomes an autonomous object where the modernist architecture is broken down into flat shapes.
and planes of colour as though it were an abstract painting. In my painting, Robbins’ Residence (fig. 8), I incorporate the abstracted under-painting in the windows of the building and the trees behind the architectural form as a way to explore an interaction between emerging and dissolving forms that are concurrently in both a representational and abstracted state.

In my paintings the modernist architecture acts as an armature that structures the space and acts as a compositional device that divides up the canvas. Similar to the way that Jasper Johns uses the grid-like structure of the American flag or Robert Rauschenberg uses his own quilt as a structure to physically support the paint, I take modernist architectural forms and use them as a way to create space in my paintings. Just as the modernist architecture in my work represents real objects, they can also be seen as abstracted patterns. The flag and the quilt represent actual objects, yet they may also be viewed as abstract patterns that help divide up the space and determine the placement of materials. The architecture in my work
not only determines a structural pattern, it also creates perspective, spatial references and space.

The gradual flattening of the picture plane is an important part of my work. I use flat shapes as compositional elements and paint them with bright and cool colours to push and pull the viewer through the painting, creating a sense of dynamic motion. I incorporate formal elements, such as geometric shapes or invented abstract forms, to build up and enhance the spaces. I also reference modernist painting and its historical associations within the progression of formalism. Through the use of Barnet Newman’s stripe, Kenneth Noland’s chevron, Frank Stella’s hard edge or Jackson Pollock’s gestural mark, I employ such artists’ autobiographical logos or recognizable signature styles as playful tropes that references late modernism. In my painting, *Modular Units* (fig. 9), I use rigid stripes to depict the side of a warehouse. The stripes make the form more complex and the contrasting colours electrify the overall appearance, helping to active the space. I use the shape of the chevron in the lower left to break up the foreground and lead the viewer into a deeper space. 

Gestural marks used in combination
with harder edges help create a chaotic freshness which is juxtaposed against a
grid-like, congruent pattern that organizes the composition. The use of flat shapes in
this painting, such as the bright red chevron and the red pennants, employ flat colour
that is used to direct the viewer into an illusionary space.

My paintings use the vocabulary of modernism in a playful, hybrid manner that
incorporates a pastiche of styles, combining representation and abstraction. Flat
planes of colour, geometric shapes, expressive mark making and monumental scale
are aspects of late modernism also evident in the works produced by a
contemporary group of East German painters known as the New Leipzig School of
painters.

The New Leipzig School has taken traditional concepts, including representational
painting, oil on canvas and glazing, into new ways of reconstructing illusionary
spaces. The group’s exploration uses multiple perspectives, dynamic architectural
structures, layered design motifs and fragmented images. The group consists of six
painters, Tilo Baumgartel, Martin Kobe, Tim Eitel, Christoph Ruckhaberle, David
Schnell and Matthias Weischer. These painters’ works can be described as
grounded in representation with an incorporation of unusual spaces with altering
perspectives, surprising shifts in scale and unorthodox sight lines. The works
include elements of fiction and seem to bend our perceptions of reality into an
alternate reality. The subjects depicted in their work tend to focus on the mundane
and banal situations. The spaces feel as if they are in a constant state of flux,
transformation or fragmentation as rendered areas intersect or dissolve into flat shapes and further abstracted areas of the paintings. The overall sense of the spaces depicted by the Leipzig painters is dynamic and makes reference to a place somewhere in between reality and fiction.

The most striking aspects of the Leipzig groups’ work are complex psychological nuances combined with a sense of nagging loss. With an uneasy dislocation, the viewer reflects inward as they view the works.22 The artists’ styles and approaches vary, but the similarities found in the works are a use of single-point perspective, dynamic angles and intricate brush work, complex colour combinations and colour layering. The paintings are intensely communicative and probe issues associated with belonging, alienation and isolation.

Similar to the Leipzig group the mood in my work invokes a sense of motion and tension and represents a space in flux or transformation that is comprised of recognizable forms and objects that fragment into abstraction. I feel the motion and tension in my paintings is a result of the tension between the materiality of the surface and the illusionary spaces. The viewer enters the work and the materiality of the painting repels them back to the surface of the work. This constant back and forth activity causes an added dynamic tension as the viewer gets pulled and pushed through the paintings.
I am particularly interested in the work of David Schnell, Matthias Weischer’s and Ulf Puder. They all reconstruct illusionary spaces through combining representational objects, flat shapes, linear perspectives and vanishing points, while allowing the viewer to see expressive brush marks, under-painting, grids and pencil lines that reaffirm the flatness of the picture plane.

In Schnell’s painting, *Schilder*, he leads the viewer into a complex and deep space, which is constructed through the use of a dominant vanishing point. The experience of looking at the painting is similar to that of traveling through a maze or solving a puzzle. The mind automatically attempts to make sense of the space, yet Schnell has fragmented the picture plane and isolated areas in the painting that seem logical.

Matthias Weischer’s work focuses on the depiction of interiors spaces. The empty rooms are void of figures, sparsely furnished and minimally decorated. In *Fernsehturm*, Weischer includes an eclectic mix of objects that do not appear to reference a specific period of time or place. Some of the objects appear to be flat, cut out shapes that seem out of place. The room appears dingy through the use of muted and sombre colours, visible under-painting and graffiti like marks and splatters on the walls, which can be seen as references to the signature drips and splashes of Abstract Expressionism. Weischer has created a shallow space through his use of perspective, flat painted areas of colour, and the lack of an exit or entrance.
Ulf Puder combines the neo-social realism, characteristic of the former Eastern Germany, with a surrealistic bent. Ulf Puder creates unique imaginary worlds of architecture and inhabited landscapes, described in a characteristic colour palette of dim, almost smoky tones. The forms reference modernist prefab homes. Puder uses overlapping geometric forms with hard edges to construct his images. I am influenced by the illustrative quartiles in Puder’s works and rendering of light and shadow against the gestural marks and paint splatters that show evidence of the artist.

The Leipzig painters’ different strategies to construct the spaces in their paintings have influenced the development of my work. Pudder’s architectural spaces, Schnell’s obsessive construction of his spaces, through flat overlapping geometric shapes, visible lines and vanishing points or Weischer’s shallow interior spaces that reveal to the viewer the process behind the painting, have influenced me and encouraged me to investigate and develop ways to further evolve my paintings. The incorporation of under-painting, quirky view points and distorted angles are elements in my paintings influenced by Puder and the Leipzig School of Painting. In my painting, Upton Residence (fig. 10), I reveal pockets of the neon under-painting, remnants of paint splashes and poured abstracted patterns intended to bring the viewer in and out of the painting, while also allowing the under-painting to show my process and give the piece a sense of motion and dynamism. The viewers enter the painting’s space at an unexpected high vantage point. In order for the viewers to
reach the horizon line they must work their way through the elongated and exaggerated composition. Along the way, viewers encounter skewed shapes, overlapping abstracted forms and patterns. The space depicted behind the red beam structure in the right of the painting is layered with overlapping coloured shapes, splashes and lines, creating a dense complex space.

The 1950’s and 1960’s represented a time when the artist could become a celebrity and modernism became the definitive style. Modern art stood for freedom, individualism and progression. Artists formulated ways to make progressive and autonomous art objects that reflected the modern time in which they lived. The gradual progression into complete abstraction that relied on the paint’s materiality reflected the artists’ engagement and translated their experience into a painting. Modern architecture also represented a three-dimensional version of this abstraction, as the unornamented forms overlapped and intersected space.

I began working with formal modernist tropes, such as the drip or chevron, in my practice as a starting point for my work in a playful way, not to mock or rebel against
this part of art history, but as a genuine interest, historically, that promoted a definitive solution in modern art. I then wanted to combine various styles in painting and ultimately end up with works that reflected a middle point where abstraction and figurative merged or possibly transformed from one to another.

Modern art and architecture were conceptualized as a means to attain an advanced lifestyle. I want my work to allow for the viewer’s engagement on multiple levels. It is my intention that the artificial constructions I create will generate contemplation of the on-going development of the social spaces in which we live. The spatial relationships that exist between humanity and architectural spaces are integral to an understanding of our visual world, as we make deliberate choices to define our surrounding spaces we are ultimately defined and affected by the spaces that surround us.
Installation Shot, *Flat Places and Dynamic Spaces*  
2008

Installation Shot, *Flat Places and Dynamic Spaces*  
2008
Upton Residence
Oil, Acrylic & Coloured Pencil on Canvas
40" x 60"
2008

Mammoth Mountain Inn
Oil, Acrylic & Coloured Pencil on Canvas
54" x 72"
2008
Leisurescape
Oil, Acrylic & Coloured Pencil on Canvas
54” x 72”
2008

Pappenfort Residence
Oil, Acrylic & Coloured Pencil on Canvas
36” x 48”
2008
Robbins’ Residence
Oil, Acrylic & Coloured Pencil on Canvas
24” x 36”
2008

Haine’s Residence
Oil, Acrylic & Coloured Pencil on Canvas
32” x 48”
2008
Inside Out
Oil, Acrylic & Coloured Pencil on Canvas
48” x 36”
2008

Pappenfort Residence with Birch Trees
Oil, Acrylic & Coloured Pencil on Canvas
36” x 48”
2008
Bending and Tension
Oil, Acrylic & Coloured Pencil on Canvas
54" x 72"
2008

Modular Units
Oil, Acrylic & Coloured Pencil on Canvas
48" x 60"
2007
New Office
Oil & Coloured Pencil on Board
48” x 72”
2007
2 Soja, p. 6.
3 Soja, p. 10.
4 Ibid.
5 Soja, p. 11.
7 Ibid.
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14 Hess p.12
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16 Hess p.14
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