

*White Noise*

An Exhibition of Painting

by

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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

The paintings in *White Noise* are a response to temporal lighting conditions that occur at night. A discussion of sensory affect demonstrates how perception is inextricably connected to the body's sensory capabilities such as sound and touch. By examining Maurice Merleau-Ponty's theory of phenomenology and looking at Gestalt Psychology based experiments it is made clear that seeing whole and complete forms in the world is a product of embodied perceptual experience. I recall early experiences of being affected by light describing the optical illusion of the afterimage and then move into the everyday perceptions that inform my current painting practice.

The painting studio process is examined as a beacon from which to reconcile the affecting nuances of observed lighting at night. I discuss the importance of allowing trial, error and patience to take place while making paintings to in turn seek out optimal colour relationships and shape interaction. By developing a specific painting vocabulary that responds to the colour, texture and sound associated with perceptual experiences I reconcile through the abstract process of painting how affecting experiences can be re-presented and reinvented onto the canvas.

## Acknowledgements

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Light is one of the revealing elements of life. To man, as to all diurnal animals, it is the condition for most activities... It remains for the artist and the occasional poetical moods of the common man to preserve the access to the wisdom that can be gained from the contemplation of light –Arnheim, *Art and Visual Perception*

## **Introduction**

In this support paper I examine how my practice has evolved over time by relating my previous body of work to my current project, in which the nighttime environment has become the subject for my work. I explore how my studio process operates as a refraction of light perception and the theoretical writings that correspond with this project. I then discuss my thesis work in relation to contemporary culture and contemporary art practice at large.

My thesis exhibit *White Noise* examines the physical and perceptual affect of shifting lighting conditions that occur in the vacant night. The illuminating conditions that occur at night depend upon artificial and natural light sources, whether they are sharp slivers of moonlight cast on my studio floor, or the glow of an apartment's entranceway projecting outward like a beacon into the dark. Such illuminations enact physical sensation, thus unbalancing cerebral contemplation. For example, a distant patch of yellow light reflecting on the sidewalk can trick the eye into believing it is seeing a physical object, yet upon approaching the object the phenomenon of light is revealed. Such experiences are disorienting and can provoke either an involuntary wince or an overwhelming sense of awe. As such, perceptual illusory phenomenon based on the conditions of light is filtered through the dual prisms of thought and affect.

## Light and Shadow

For the past three years my paintings have been premised on experiences of walking at night in search of a heightened perceptual “sensation” of the world. For instance, during one late night walk I was attracted by the glow of a single house’s living room light projecting onto the sidewalk. Approaching the house I noticed that the exterior environment was reflected on the window, thus creating a holograph-like illusion of an outdoor/indoor space, collapsed together. Trying to reconcile this experience of perception on a single canvas proved difficult, and my finished painting wound up presenting itself as nothing more than an image of an interior space melded with exterior information (i.e. trees and streetlamps, fig. 1). Ultimately, it became clear that my efforts to express the “sensation” felt on my night walk needed to be further considered in terms of how painting can serve to demonstrate (rather than merely illustrate) lived experience.

In his book *The Logic of Sensation*, French philosopher Gilles Deleuze characterizes sensation as it pertains to art by analyzing Francis Bacon’s painting of the screaming pope. He defines the word “sensation” as referring to a condition that acts upon the nervous system, and as being something that is “felt on the flesh of the body” (34). He draws careful distinction between the concept of “sensation” and the term “sensational.” To Deleuze sensational is described as an emotional, cerebral and illustrative response to one’s surroundings (31). For his essay, Deleuze quotes Bacon as having stated: “I wanted to paint the scream not the horror,” thereby proving that Bacon did not confuse “sensation” with the “sensational” (Deleuze 34). Deleuze elaborates in this instance, “the pope is neutralized in the image by the curtain that isolates him and the horror is multiplied because it is inferred from the scream, and not the reverse” (34).





(fig. 1) *Untitled*, 2010, 48" x 40", oil on canvas

The decision to isolate a single, seemingly mundane event within my paintings demonstrates a significant shift in my overall practice. I am intrigued by instances of extreme darkness and light. Reflected light and shadow—a fissure of light slicing across the wall, or a geometric shadow cast onto the floor—activate the spaces that I observe. Such events, when painted as an image, allows the viewer to experience a moment that is uninterrupted by narrative.

Currently the lighting within my studio at night operates as the subject for my work. The studio is located in the East Campus Hall building of the University of Waterloo. This industrial-style building is constructed of concrete cinder blocks, coated in white paint. I find the daytime light within the studio to be so blindingly white that I wait for the evening to begin work. Once the shared studio empties, I dim the lights, which transforms the stark white space. At night, the studio emits cast light and shadows; shapes that appear as portal-like slivers, dispersed throughout the darkened room. Each shape possesses a different quality, and my paintings are formed from my close observation of them. When I adjust the lighting of the studio I feel as though I discover moments that others are tending not to see.

I recall these slivers of light and cast shadows when thinking about colour and formulating compositions. For example, in the painting *V-Hold 3*, (fig. 2) unevenly spaced slabs of bright yellow light divide a vibrant green coloured field that spans the canvas surface. The green is conjured by a moonlit sky emitting a yellow-green glow onto an interior studio wall. The bright yellow and white slabs of paint are a response to wide vertical rectangular shapes cast from the studio window's panes; an interiorly lit



(fig. 2) *V-Hold 3*, 2012, 43" x 36", oil on canvas

reflection that caused vertical divisions to appear as dividing spaces on the green projection on the wall. The lighting effect results from outdoor moonlight interplaying with the interior halogen lighting. *V-Hold 3* proposes a perceptual balancing act: the thick slabs of paint simultaneously pulse in and out from foreground to background in turn confusing the figure and ground relationship of the painting.

The effects of light playing on architecturally fabricated surfaces at night is visually stimulating phenomena. However, it is not a phenomena that is strictly bound to sight, sound too plays a contributing role. Art critic and curator Emily Falvey who wrote "Painting With It's Eye's Closed," an essay on the Canadian abstract painter Angela Leach states, "sound and resonance are the over looked companions of abstract painting" (20). She explains, in the past artists and critics have explained paintings of Abstract Expressionism, Post Painterly Abstraction, Op Art, Colour Field and All-Over painting as being acoustic, even musical (20). Clement Greenberg referred to the sonorous definition of "all-over" painting as polyphonic, yet he also explains that such "all-over" formalist pictures came close to "the noise and repetition of wallpaper" (154).

Sound is an integral component of my work. As such *White Noise* is the title of my thesis exhibition. White noise is described as " a heterogeneous mixture of sound waves extending over a wide frequency range."<sup>1</sup> White noise phonetically is a sssssssshhhhhh sound; a low frequency sound that when combined with a visual event such as a low light condition can elicit perceptual stimulation. White noise is used as an

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<sup>1</sup> "White Noise." *Merriam-Webster.com*. Merriam-Webster, 2011. Web. 8 May 2011.

audio component in Ganzfeld experiments within the field of parapsychology. The Ganzfeld tests, a series of mild sensory deprivation experiments, originally conducted by Gestalt theorist Wolfgang Metzger in the 1930's proved that low-light vision is more fundamental for the theory of vision than the retinal image (Adcock 219). Current Ganzfeld experiments employ a low-light condition paired with white noise that generate moments of sensory deprivation for participants which in turn aims to stimulate extra-sensory perception.

Painting is a primarily a visual medium, albeit I am interested in seeking out its ability to absorb and echo sound (even if implied) to produce moments of visual and audible stimulation for the viewer. I liken the title *White Noise* to the sounds that accompany my quiet observations of lighting in the night, such as the buzzing of a hydro box, the muffled stirrings of a stereo humming, or the submerged sound of conversation on the other side of a wall. Such sounds function as an audible backdrop for experiences of the visual world. Sound in turn can become the synaesthetic<sup>2</sup> informant for colour, not only influencing my real-world observations of light, but also my colour choices during painting.

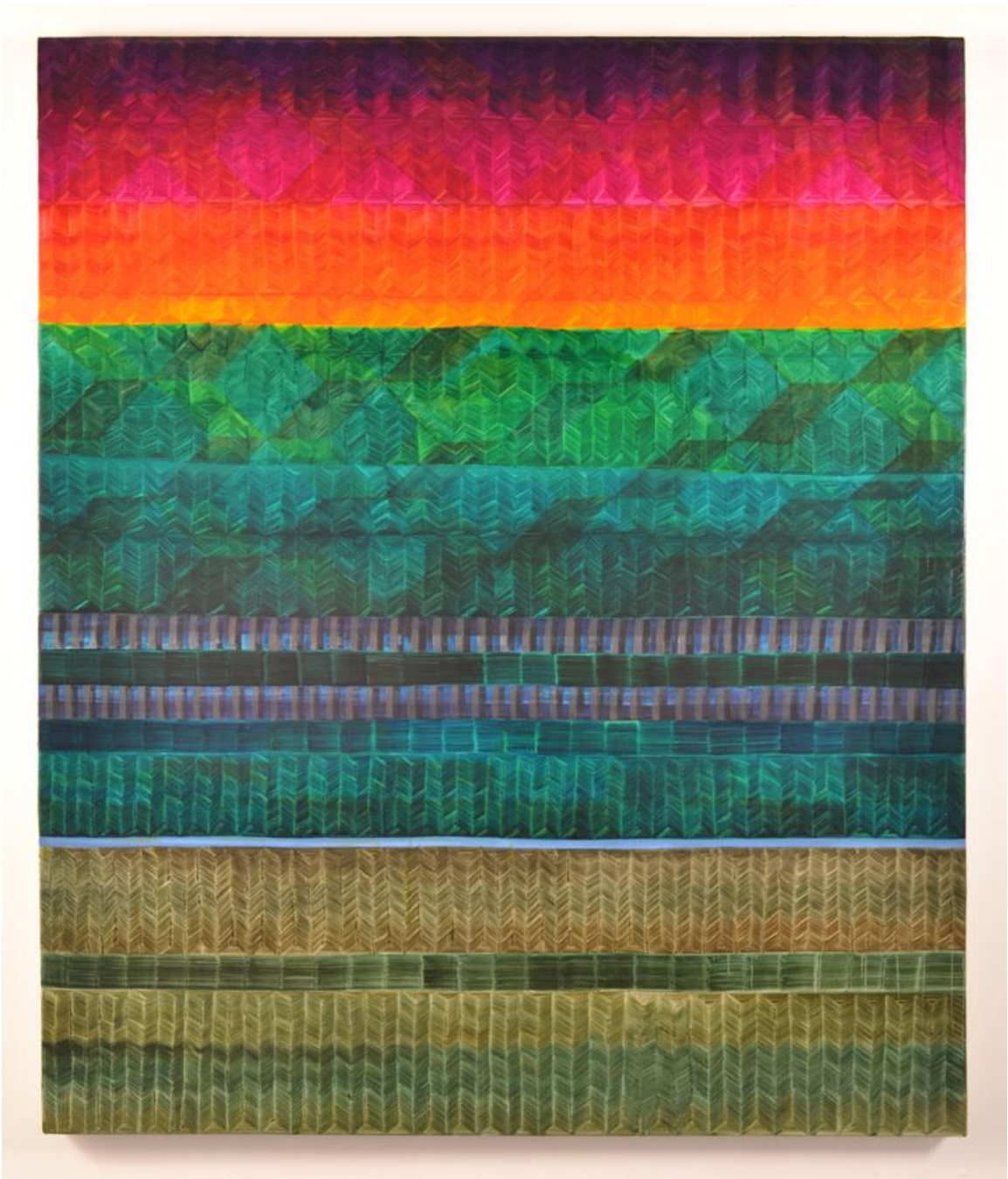
In the book *The Spiritual In Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985*, writer and art historian Sixten Ringbom outlines how the painter Wassily Kandinsky's found interest in synaesthetic processes. Ringbom proclaims that Kandinsky was influenced by an occult article by Dr. Franz Freudenberg, in which the author described a patient who had the remarkable faculty of experiencing taste as colour (Ringbom 133). The topic of

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<sup>2</sup> Synaesthesia is the ability of the senses such as sight, hearing or taste to work together in harmony. Consequently, informing one another. For example, specific sounds may produce the perception of specific colours. (Ringbom 133).

synesthesia excited the painter Wassily Kandinsky and inspired his development of a system that translated the sensation of sound into colour and form.

The painting *Heavy Together* exemplifies how I incorporate sound as a synaesthetic part of my process (fig. 3). The painting derives from my observation of a geometric pattern reflected onto an apartment's glass entranceway doors. The seemingly fused pattern on the glass was caused by a chandelier's light rebounding off a tiled wall onto the glass's surface. The result was that of a ghostly patterned wall veiled by the glass doors in front of it. I noticed biomorphic and geometric shapes and minimal permutations in colour emerging from the veiled space, while in the same moment hearing the low buzzing sound of a hydro box murmuring in the distance. The illusory light condition paired with the sound of buzzing together created interplay of stimuli. The title *Heavy Together* effectively responds to the culmination of sound and perception combined into a single image. In the making of the painting the colour is conjured from associating sound to an intuitively felt hue. For example, I attribute the low buzz to a deep magenta and orange while the ghostly ethereal light is represented with a nuanced emerald green.



(fig. 3) *Heavy Together*, 2012, 62" x 52", oil on canvas

## **Material and Language**

In the essay “Art For An Anxious Time” from the book *Tomma Abts*, curator Laura Hoptman states that since abstract art’s inception at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century there has been “a binary opposition that is not merely visual; but rather, one which represents an almost ideological split between a kind of art that concerns itself with reflecting the world and one that strives to add to it or even remake it” (12). As an abstract painter today I confront the question: on which side of the binary fence do I stand? By making a hybridized work that combines the reflection of my lived-environment and employs invention (i.e. “re-makes the world”) in one fell swoop my work strives to play in the space between Hoptman’s ideological split.

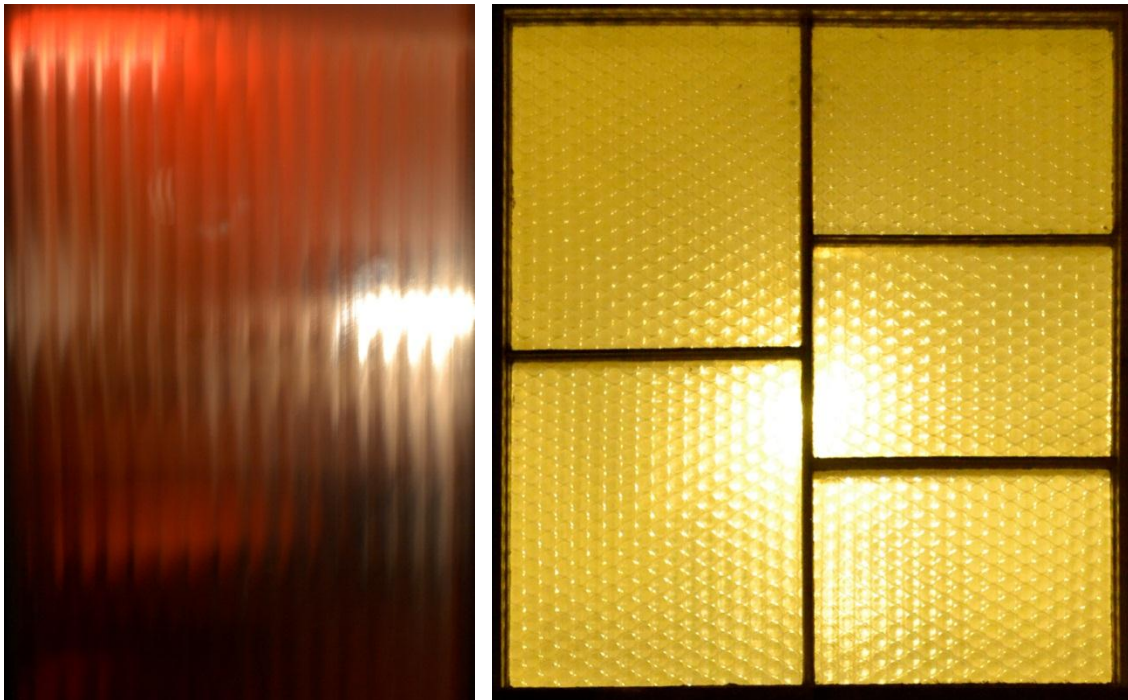
The architectural elements of my urban environment such as rippled glass windows, a building’s reflective exterior wall, and the space of my studio all operate as subjects for my work. However, I am not interested in representing these objects and surfaces directly. I am interested in capturing the fluid and temporal moments at night when a passing natural or artificial light stimulates these otherwise mundane structural elements. For example, perceiving a television’s light flickering on a rippled glass surface (fig .4). Divided by the glass wall I perceive an inner activity made exterior.

Painting is a means by which to respond to the temporal and physically stimulating effects of light. For me, the studio functions as a place to recall my observations and then to inventively work out on canvas how such light phenomenon appeared in the world. The perceptually stimulating effects of illumination, colour and shadow in turn become elements of interaction and interpretation in the space of the painting. In effect, the paintings un-tether from their initial sources and I give myself



permission to let an abstract language of thick and thin paint complete my interaction with the subject of light.

I allow the painting process to be derived from intuitive action, reaction and rhythm wherein the hand often reacts before the mind. In my practice I use a repetitive freehand brushstroke to create hatched fields that span the surface of each canvas. In many of my works the hatched motif loosely mimics the reflected surface of rippled privacy glass that encases doorways of residential houses (fig. 4). The meditative activity



(fig. 4) *Rippled Privacy Glass*, 2012, digital photograph

of painting the hatched effect is constant, imperfect and uninterrupted akin to the hypnotic and disorienting experience of perceiving the emerging nuances within a play of light.

I relate the studio process to destabilizing sensations such as staring at the pulsating perceptual effects revealed by illuminated rippled glass. In the work I methodically paint a hatched mark that creates the illusion of three-dimensional folds on the canvas surface. I paint the hatched pattern until I find myself to be physically and visually imbalanced by the collected maze of brushstrokes. Once I am immersed in the deceptive pictorial space I intuitively make my next move whether it is a vertical, diagonal, or horizontal one. Such an intuitive maneuver enables a fluid illusory process rather than a disjointed and overly contemplative one. It can be useful to consider the act of painting according to the terms of French phenomenological philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty and his theory of the “lived object”— an all-encompassing manner of seeing, that is capable of touching depth, texture, density, and materiality (Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 135).

In *The Spiritual In Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985*, art critic Donald Kuspit discusses the alchemical approach in art. He states, “both silence and alchemy are spiritual in import, but where silence is an articulation of the immaterial, alchemy is a demonstration of the unity of the immaterial and the material” (315). Kuspit continues, by implying that art can “free itself from the prison of things” (the noisy sound of reality) (314). An increased use of silence can be seen in works of abstract artists who seek formal purity; in the work of Agnes Martin, for instance. She invites the audience to contemplate a quiet grid that echoes the minimal geometry of the canvas (315).

To explore light and shadow as a subject is to observe and materialize something that is ineffable like silence. Achieving a specific painting surface and material application is crucial in materializing the ineffable quality of light. Considering

luminosity through translucent layers of paint aids in the creation of my works. I treat the surface of each canvas with several layers of gesso, sanding in between each coat.

Through this process I achieve a slick surface to work on which allows the paint to slide fluidly. It is crucial that a smooth surface be achieved so that when I apply translucent layers of oil paint an almost glass-like luminosity results. A palimpsest effect reveals the under layers whether underlying geometric or biomorphic forms. The illusory effects of such a luminous and reflective surface cause the painting's surface to distort when seen at different angles and distances. I apply thick brush strokes which juxtapose the thinly painted areas of each work. The heavy slabs of paint are meant to appear as if an almost literal materialization of light. At first glance the thick strokes of paint appear as being flat rectilinear shapes. Yet, when approaching the work closely the thick strokes ooze with a material quality comparable to icing on cake.

In a recent *Frieze* article titled "Dear Painter", curator Christopher Bedford discusses the relationship that spiritual and metaphysical concerns have with contemporary abstract painting practices; Bedford speaks with Tomma Abts, Tauer Auerbach, Matt Connors, Charline Von Heyl and Bernard Ribbeck. Through a series of interviews Bedford learns and states "none of these painters seem interested in spirituality as a social idea or abstraction as a historical category, but they share a real belief in the metaphysical properties of non-objective image making. Their desire is not for transcendence through abstraction but for a greater embeddedness in the world through materials and work" (99). Tomma Abts recalls Signar Polke's statement on the topic of spirituality wherein he expressed that "most painters have the experience that painting 'happens' not when you try really hard, but in the moment when you let go. Things can fall in to place in a way you couldn't have conceived before"(100).

I deeply agree with Polke’s sentiment toward studio experience being a process of “letting go.” For me, achieving a transcendent state—which I’ll compare to a non-verbal and exhilarated feeling—comes from the benefits I arrive at after exercising patience while observing light and shadow, and when involved in the making of a painting. The night is a stage to attain inspiration from silent and immaterial nuances; to elicit what artist and art critic Suzie Gablik calls “magical perception.”<sup>3</sup> As such, staring at a moment of reflected light can appear as a mundane activity, yet when patience is employed what is revealed is the ability to perceive further beyond my thought potential. I believe that working in the studio should retain an element of uncertainty accompanied by trial and error. I work for hours in the studio at times simply looking, waiting, relaxing, and then finally something is added or removed from a painting. Thus the painting—like a puzzle—is solved. This process feels inexpressible but it is lodged in patience. I am grateful for each exhilarating moment in the studio, for my willingness to wait out the storm and arrive to a steady rhythm where the painting paints itself. In the essay “The Beauty and Politics of Latency”, from the book *Tomma Abts*, art critic and curator Jan Verwoert states, “abstraction is the opposite of information” (92). Furthermore he expresses, “you cannot own abstraction; you can only perform and experience it under the conditions and pace set by the particular nature of performance and experience itself” (92).

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<sup>3</sup> In *The Re-enchantment of Art*, Suzi Gablik expresses, “in Western culture we are losing our sense of the divine side of life, of the power of imagination, myth, dream and vision. The particular structure of modern consciousness, centered in a rationalizing, abstracting and controlling ego, determines the world we live in and how we perceive and understand it; without the magical sense of perception, we do not live in a magical world” (42).

Formally speaking, my paintings imbue a compositional strategy that echoes post painterly abstraction and minimalist painting, although there is a renovation of the past that is contemporary and perhaps post-modern, in the way that there are elements of “then” and “now” evident in the work. My use of horizontal and vertical bars could be compared to that of Ellsworth Kelly or Agnes Martin. My decision to arrange the pictorial space using this striping vocabulary is in response to my own experiences of viewing seminal modern paintings. For example, when viewing an Agnes Martin, the paintings demand that the viewer slows down the process of looking to fully experience the gridded and ethereal presence of the work. I appreciate the slow burn of Martin’s paintings and how they appear as if they were slowly and methodically created. In my work I try to find the space between speeding up and slowing down. I sometimes find myself moving too quickly in the studio, trying to force the painting to be finished. There is an urge to slap paint on haphazardly, throwing caution to the wind. Rhythm feels lost during my speedily painting efforts; it is not until hours pass that I finally ease into a steady rhythm. Resultingly, the pictures demonstrate a steady pace of brushwork in their finished state. My paintings, although constructed with a minimalist grid are painterly in their free hand application and in the exchange between thick and thin paint. Thus, there is mediation between fast and slow, painterly and non-painterly.

Two exhibitions that I recently visited in New York: Mark Grotjahn’s *Nine Faces* at Anton Kern and Garth Weiser’s untitled exhibition at Casey Kaplan demonstrated how paintings—when hung together—can create an overall visual vibration. Grotjahn’s large paintings—dense with thickly braided strands of oil paint—symphonically projected a frenetic and updated version of abstract expressionism. The paintings curated as a whole reverberated the fast paced rhythms of Be-Bop Jazz. While Weiser’s show at Casey

Kaplan presented optically stimulating paintings that harmoniously created more of a nervous energy in the space. His busy line work featured blinding colour combinations of orange, white and silver that beamed and rebounded from one canvas to the next. Both shows featured materially heavy works that effectively sang as a group, while offering a tactile sensibility close-up.

My thesis exhibition *White Noise*, takes a curatorial cue from the shows mentioned above. *White Noise* groups together my luminous paintings into one wide-open gallery space. I am particularly fond of the UWAG's flawless concrete floor. The floor appears as if a black-ice rink, that courts and reflects the vibrant colour of the paintings into its lake-like sheen. In the exhibition the paintings are evenly spaced; each glowing entity rallies its colour from one painting to the next. The rebounding rhythm of colour moves throughout the space as if treating viewers like a pinball in an arcade. I hope that the culmination of paintings together draw the viewing audience in to see the exhibition as an installed entity as the reflective surfaces of each painting project and absorb light, yet when more closely inspected indicate their materiality and the subtle and exuberant nuances of light and shadow.

## **Theoretical Influences**

The phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty is pertinent to my perceptually based practice. In Maurice Merleau-Ponty's "The Body as Object and Mechanistic Physiology", from *Phenomenology of Perception* he outlines his theory of the body-subject. Ponty states that humans are active beings and should not be understood as passive machines when in contact with the world (423). Rejecting mind-body dualism he argues for a mind and body relationship that is intertwined, and wherein our senses such as touch and vision work in combination when perceiving objects in the world (423). My work is driven from prolonged interactions with light and shadow. For example, when observing the effects of artificial light reflecting on glass I pay close attention to the subtle texture of the translucent surface, the colour of light and the accompanying sound during the event. Such close observation requires the culmination of my senses to in turn see, feel and hear the environment at hand. That said, in the modern age it would be convenient to simply snap a digital photograph of a compelling instance of light and then make a painting directly from the photo source. However, this approach would prove problematic. It would eliminate the benefit of absorbing a lived-experience and merely produce a representational document to be once more readdressed through the filter of painting.

In his essay "Cezanne's Doubt," Merleau Ponty uses the works of Cezanne to clarify through an artist's painting how embodied perception can be observed. His goal is to explicate how the sense-making activity of painting is closer to the phenomenological approach—a more primordial encounter in perceiving the world—rather than one tied to linguistics. To illustrate his point he compares Cezanne's paintings to the Impressionist mode of painting of that time. Ponty states that the Impressionist's paintings present the

object as an empty shell of color, “a mosaic of color patches” (02). The Impressionists in this sense paint the impression of light, the all-over patterned style reveals an illuminated survey of an entire scene while obeying a Cartesian logic of linear perspective i.e. objects appearing larger in the foreground and smaller in the distance. The important distinction here is that Cezanne resisted such Cartesian logic. He moved from inside the studio to the outdoors to faithfully capture the experience of nature before him. In doing so, he found that the rules of linear perspective appeared to oppose Cartesian rules of perspective: objects in the distant appeared in fact even larger than those in the immediate foreground (18). Cezanne’s paintings show us multiple perspectives wherein a lived-perspective more accurately describes a primordial contact with the world. Ponty writes “The artist is the one who arrests the spectacle in which most men take part without really seeing it and who makes it visible to the most ‘human’ among them” (18).

In “The Body as Object and Mechanistic Physiology” Ponty states “all experience is a process of gradual clarification and rectification through a dialogue with itself and others” (425). He discusses the habitual nature of the human body providing the example of persons who have suffered from having severed limbs. Ponty observes that several amputees experience the phenomena of the phantom limb; a phenomenon wherein the limb is still felt and believed to be attached to the body. He discusses cases where individuals repress traumatic events such as the original moment of their limb’s detachment. Ponty deduces that in effect the body has the ability to store away repressed events and it is not until a future date when the trauma is triggered in one way or another that the repression is made visible.



Ponty's idea of gradual clarification can be applied to the process of painting in terms of how a work is realized from the experience of its subject matter to its inception in the studio. I believe that painting as a haptic and responsive activity can trigger what has been stored away in the body; therefore, perceptual events witnessed a priori can be made clear and possibly more convincing when readdressed through the tactile activity of painting. Painting is an activity that requires the senses of touch, vision and even sound to conjure up colour, form, texture and spatiality onto the flat canvas; temporal moments from the world made solid. In my practice I rely heavily on memory and intuition when working in the studio. Perceptual events seen and felt in the night are revisited and realized in the hallowed shell of the studio space. I am particularly charged by the unpredictability and interactivity of what colour to react to, or what shape to play off of during the painting process. Having developed a system and a language that I work within—the layering of thin translucent paint comprised of hatched patterns accompanied by thick and voluminous strokes—sets up a framework that I can intuitively reorganize and play within during the process of each painting.

The acute perception of light and shadow can be compared to the phenomenon of the Gestalt Effect. The Gestalt Effect is described as the ability of our senses to recognize figures and whole forms instead of just a collection of simple lines and curves (Adcock 219). In the *Principles of Gestalt Psychology*, German Psychologist Kurt Koffka describes feeling the essence of both things and non-things in our environment. Koffka gives the example of a dense hovering fog as a “non-thing,” since it has no boundary or shape and it is absolutely static while temporal (71). He elaborates that it is the interrelatedness of things such as the breeze in the air, the blurry haze of the fog, and the feeling of disorientation—the connection of behavior and perception together—that

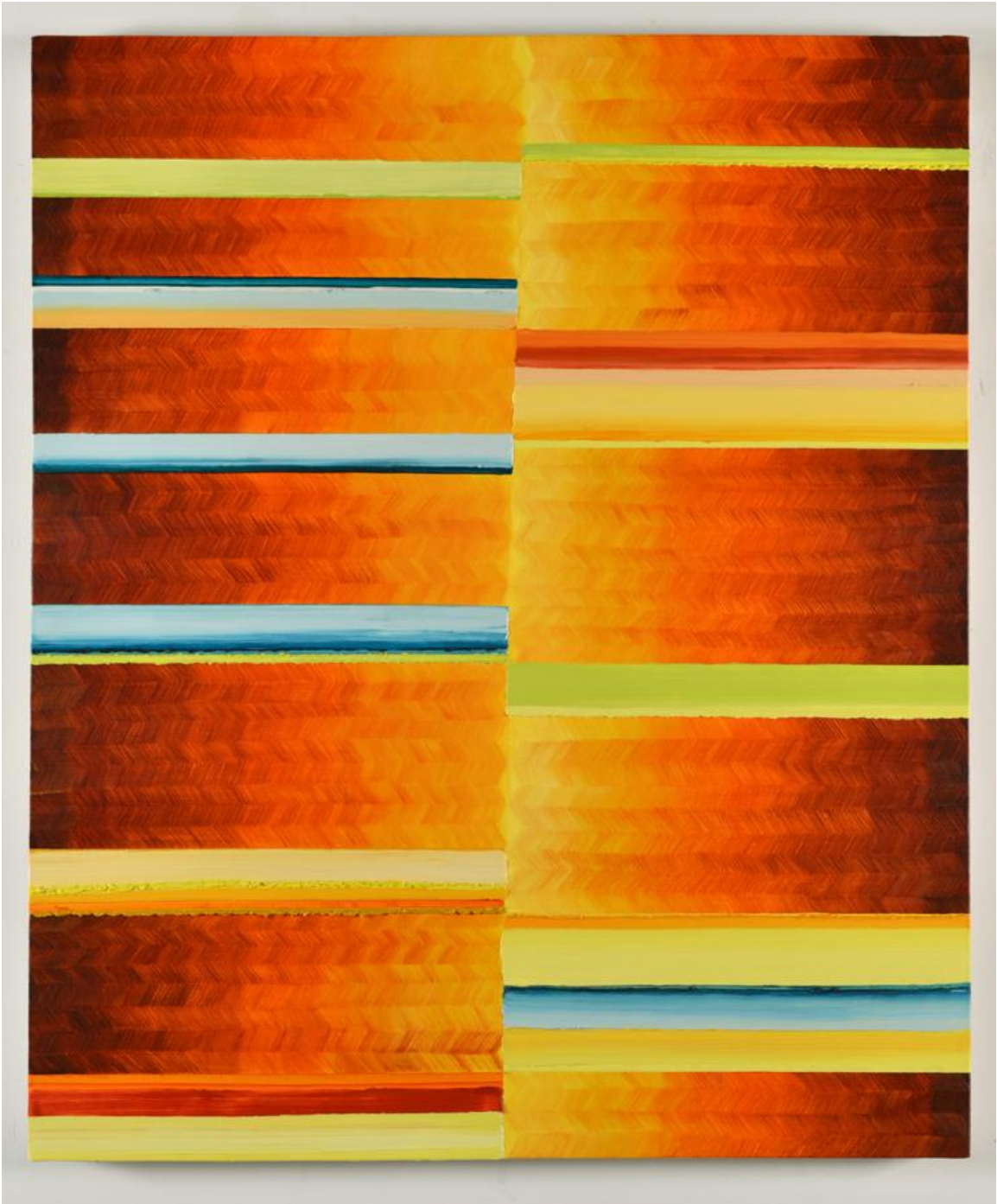
facilitates the perception of “non-things” within the environment (71). I see the perception of light and shadow as being both a temporal and static event, a perceived “non-thing.” It is dependent upon the time of day, whether the encroaching evening, the still of a late night, the flickering of a halogen light, or the buzzing sound of an electrical box that coalesce together to affect behavior and formulate a perceptual and embodied experience.

“The Beauty and the Politics of Latency” an essay written by art critic and curator Jan Verwoert on the paintings of Tomma Abts, describes her paintings and drawings as “subtly and thoroughly undermining the principles of gestalt recognition by creating pictures that at first present themselves as *if* they were unambiguous renderings of unitary forms”(94). Yet, when spending time with Abt’s works, they gradually reveal themselves to be highly ambiguous configurations. Furthermore, Verwoert states that the work performs a visual latency as elements of the process echo from beneath the surface of her seemingly perfect geometric arrangements. In my own paintings I feel a kinship with Abts in that my paintings, when viewed from a distance appear as being fully realized configurations built from reflective geometric forms, yet the appearance of such elements diminish when closely observed. Staring through the translucent layers of paint evinces the process and the history of the painting that is grafted under each layer of the painted surface.

## **The Works' Relation to Contemporary Culture and Contemporary Art Practice**

My interest in the affecting conditions caused by light began in my last year of high school during an outing with friends to attend a Friday night laser light show at the Vancouver planetarium. I remember reclining in my seat and staring upward at the psychedelic imagery, choreographed to the music of Pink Floyd. The hour-long show was visually dazzling as Technicolor airplanes crisscrossed above during the song *The Wall*, and pennies rained from outer space for *Money*. However, it was the moment after we left the planetarium that truly stuck with me, when, in the planetarium's parking lot, I tilted my head upward and noticed the seams of the planetarium dome lining the night sky. This experience was physically disorienting and almost unbelievable. Later, I learnt that I had witnessed what is called an afterimage. Afterimages are optical illusions that occur when an image continues to appear on one's retina even after the exposure to the original image has ceased.

The planetarium afterimage influenced my decision to make a painting titled *V-Hold 4*(fig. 5). It consists of a deep yellow-orange plane that fades into a dark earth-red colour on the right and left sides of the canvas. Neon bars of thick paint are staggered into two rows moving from the top of the canvas to the bottom. The brightly painted bars set against the deep yellow-orange plane create an optical oscillation by leaving an imprint of their shape on the viewer's minds-eye. Following an extended viewing of this painting a strange optical illusion takes place in which the afterimage shapes simultaneously appear and disappear (like blinking lights) alongside their painted counterparts.



(fig .5) *V-Hold 4*, 2012, 41" x 36", oil on canvas

Similar perceptual phenomena found in the lived-world are celebrated in the light installations of James Turrell. During a recent visit to the Mattress Factory, a space in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania I encountered the works of James Turrell. In *James Turrell: The Art Of Light And Space*, author Craig Adcock quotes Turrell as stating, “my work is about in a certain sense the deep sky and empty desert, and the feelings of solitude they can engender” (1). A statement from which Adcock discerns that “[...] Turrell does not think about the ways light has been used historically in painting and sculpture. He looks to the rich visual texture of southern California (his place of birth and current home) with its sun shot climate, low horizons, open land, and seascapes with big skies [...]” (Adcock 2). In this way, Adcock seemingly makes the argument that Turrell’s sensitivity to his immediate environment functions as a distinct and authentic vantage point to make ones lived experiences visual.

In Turrell’s piece *Danae*, housed at the Mattress Factory, a field of violet light floods the back wall of the space, causing it to resemble a large monochromatic painting. This deceptively simple piece contains a surprising element: the closer the viewer approaches the seemingly flat plane it reveals itself to be an actual opening in the wall. As a result, the space becomes portal-like. What I found most compelling in experiencing *Danae* firsthand is the sense provoking quality of this work. The viewer is confronted with a space that is simultaneously projecting outward and inward; it is a disorienting sensation. Personally experiencing Turrell’s work, in life, I learnt that his light installations largely rely on the ways in which the viewer moves through the space of the installation. Turrell’s work “reveals the intrinsic differences between illusion and perception. If we are paying attention, they reduce our bewilderment in encountering the world” (Adock 214). I have learnt from Turrell’s illusionary tactics when approaching

painting. By treating the surface of a painting in varied ways (such as thick or thin, reflective or non-reflective), so that the work may allow for multiple experiences when viewed from different vantage points. I can manipulate the viewer's perception of the works from within the space of the gallery.

I was introduced to the work of Canadian abstract painter Elizabeth McIntosh at the "Paint" exhibition at the Vancouver Art Gallery in 2006. "Paint" an exhibition Curated by artist Neil Campbell showcased the last 50 years of seminal painters in Vancouver BC. McIntosh had four large canvases in the show, the paintings each encompassing fields of imperfect triangular forms. McIntosh's paintings reveal sophisticated colour relationships along with evidence of the painter's process. Consequently, thinly painted areas wherein mineral spirits drip downward, reveal painted over shapes, while vibrant, muted and metallic coloured opaque forms interact with one another. There is a sense of the artist working toward a final composition as areas of the work seem wiped out and covered up while subtle protrusions crisscross beneath the top layers of paint; the end result demonstrates an equal measure of colour and form. As a native Vancouverite and undergraduate of Emily Carr University where McIntosh heads the painting department, I had several opportunities to speak with her about her work. She explains that during the process of painting she often takes risks painting in shapes and colours that may or may not work together; if it doesn't work she paints over areas of failure and commits until the painting is resolved.

McIntosh's work has resonated with me since 2006 and informed in some ways my own thinking in the studio. In particular, I allow chance and failure to exist within a painting rather than implementing aims toward perfection at the onset. I'm also interested

in colour and shape interaction in a similar way to McIntosh. I enter the making of a painting with a general idea, a sketch based on a play of light which is often enough to get started. By at least beginning the painting and trying out an idea I am able to see in full scale how colour and form is either working or not. Many times I will rework a painting several times. In the painting *First In Last Out*, I knew from the beginning that the painting would be comprised of a row of transparent vertical bars veiling a field of precarious geometric shapes, albeit I was unsure if the painting would simply lean toward an all-over thinly painted application, or perhaps a fusing of thick and thin paint. It was not until I painted in the under-layer—a pattern of brown and green triangular shapes covered by transparent brush strokes—I arrived at the idea of painting in a thick brown-black opaque field to counteract the more thinly painted areas of transparency (fig. 6). This process demonstrates that painting for me, is not only about observations in the world translated into pictures, but the resulting formal game of colour and shape interaction that takes place while in the studio.

Author and art historian Whitney Davis's essay *How to Make Analogies in a Digital Age* looks at artists that reference and mimic the effects of digital technology in their art. Davis refers to Nelson Goodman's *Languages of Art* published in 1968 to support the argument that "analogue symbol systems such as vision, natural language and the arts can compare systematically and often favorably with the definiteness and repeatability attainable with computing machines" (71). This past summer I visited Kasey Caplan Gallery in New York to see Garth Weiser's newest paintings. Weiser is an artist whose works appear as if they are made mechanically. In a 2011 review Anne Doran who writes for *Art in America* eloquently describes the work as "pieces that feature a raised all-over moiré pattern that looks more machined than handcrafted (Doran, *Garth Weiser*)."



(fig 6.) *First In Last Out*, 2012, 71" x 60"



Upon viewing the work closely it appeared that Weiser had dripped and spattered paint on linen grounds in order to create an abstract under painting. Overtop of the abstracted surfaces he taped-off evenly spaced crisscrossing grids using fabric paint. The finished works resemble the rippling of “watered silk” or “knotty pine”, and function as optically engaging surfaces that increase in intensity the further one stands from them (Doran, *Garth Weiser*). Weiser’s paintings display an intersection between mechanical, digital, and analogue technologies, where the artist’s hand works to mimic digital systems— an impulse Whitney Davis characterizes as a prominent tendency in contemporary art.

Weiser’s paintings proved for me the possibility for painting to intertwine the mechanical (machine-made) and the analog (handmade). I was particularly engaged with his integration of organic and hard-edged forms; an expressionist under painting set against overlaying linear arrangements that suggests the optically based paintings of Bridget Riley and Angela Leach. Furthermore, what struck me was the post-modern idea of integrating the languages of Expressionism and Op Art within one pictorial field. In my work I employ a grid-like minimalist pictorial space that shares a dialogue with painters like Agnes Martin or Piet Mondrian. I am interested in breaking down the confines of the minimalist grid in two ways. The first strategy is to eliminate the exactitude of perfectly straight lines by always relying on my hand to draw the paint across the canvas; my hatched formations present themselves as near perfect and laborious configurations, however they demonstrate the gesture of an imperfect hand. The second strategy is to simultaneously expose and veil the noise of underlying layers. When viewed from a distance my paintings can appear as though made mechanically and with precise measurement; however, upon closer inspection the subtle interplay between

thick and thin paint reveals the presence of the hand and more complex surface depth.

## **Conclusion**

Painting is a slow and meditative process a vantage point from where to make sense of the world that I explore. As an activity lodged in solitude painting provides a place for individual contemplation and reflection. The works described in this support document are largely autobiographical, thus tracing my explorations of the night world of light.

By engaging in the writing of Gilles Deleuze and Maurice Merleau-Ponty it has been made clear to me that through the provocation of the senses, human beings have the ability to perceive the object world beyond the confines of vision alone. Merleau-Ponty describes experience as “a process of gradual clarification and rectification.” I relate Ponty’s statement not only to my studio practice and the gradual emergence of a painting over time, but also to making sense of the visual and audible world around me. The night in all of its unseen light and color, the noise is seemingly quiet, yet persistent and unrelenting.

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