On Ground

Matthew Brown, The University of Western Ontario

Supervisor: Glabush, Sky, The University of Western Ontario

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Fine Arts degree in Visual Arts

© Matthew Brown 2021

Follow this and additional works at: https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/etd

Part of the Fine Arts Commons

Recommended Citation

https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/etd/7719

This Dissertation/Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by Scholarship@Western. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Thesis and Dissertation Repository by an authorized administrator of Scholarship@Western. For more information, please contact wlswadmin@uwo.ca.
Abstract

In supplement to my Masters of Fine Arts thesis exhibition, this dossier includes an extended artist statement, a transcribed interview with Nanaimo based abstract painter, Jonathan Forrest, and documentation of artwork produced during my studio research. The extended artist statement engages with loss, transition and incidence as these themes pertain to my art making process and its intersection with a personal tragedy that occurred part-way through my graduate studies. The statement is written in a retrospective style that acknowledges my own struggle towards an acceptance of loss and examines the evolution of my paintings during this period.

Summary for Lay Audience

In supplement to my Masters of Fine Arts thesis exhibition, this dossier includes an extended artist statement, a transcribed interview with Nanaimo based abstract painter, Jonathan Forrest, and documentation of artwork produced during my studio research. The extended artist statement engages with loss, transition and incidence as these themes pertain to my art making process and its intersection with a personal tragedy that occurred part-way through my graduate studies. The statement is written in a retrospective style that acknowledges my own struggle towards an acceptance of loss and examines the evolution of my paintings during this period.
Keywords

colour, incidence, transition, borders, boundaries, spirituality, evaporation, loss, painting, art, abstraction, Jonathan Forrest
Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my advisor, Sky Glabush who has been incredibly generous to me throughout this degree. Sky has become a valued mentor and friend.

There are many amongst the Visual Arts faculty and staff that deserve a sincere offering of thanks. Kelly Wood, David Merritt, Patrick Mahone, Christof Migone, John Hatch, Kim Moodie and others, thank you for your time and interest.

I would like to thank all those who supported my wife and I in the wake of our family’s tragic loss. Many people, including many in the Visual Arts Department, offered us their assistance and encouragement during this difficult time and it has been deeply cherished.

Most importantly I would like to thank my wife, Bethany. I could not have completed this degree without your unwavering love, support and encouragement.
# Table of Contents

Abstract ii  
Summary for Lay Audience ii  
Keywords iii  
Acknowledgments iv  
Table of Contents v  
Introduction 1  
Chapter 1: Extended Artist Statement 3  
Works Cited 14  
Supplemental Reading List 15  
Chapter 2: Mining the Possibilities - Interview with Jonathan Forrest 18  
Chapter 3: Practice Documentation 32  
Curriculum Vitae 47
Introduction

In supplement to my Masters of Fine Arts thesis exhibition, this dossier consists of three main chapters; an extended artist statement, a transcribed interview with Nanaimo based abstract painter, Jonathan Forrest, and documentation of my studio practice as it developed over the course of my MFA candidacy at Western University.

The working process that I developed to make paintings during my studio research was as follows: I folded paper into shallow trays in order to contain liquid. Water was then coloured in batches using a dilution of acrylic paint and water and poured into the paper trays. Colours mixed unrestricted in the trays and the water was allowed to gradually evaporate. Once the water was dissipated and only the pigment remained, the paper trays were unfolded, flattened and hung on the wall.

The exploration of colour has been a primary motivation for this work and the use of water to delay and mediate the application of paint to substrate has been an integral part of my studio process that has been shaped by my interest in spiritual relationship and the stillbirth of my son that occurred partway through my first year as a Masters in Visual Arts degree candidate. Chapter one of this dossier includes an extended artist statement that engages with loss, transition and incidence as these themes pertain to my art making process and its intersection with the tragedy that occurred during my studies. The statement is written in a retrospective style that acknowledges my own struggle towards an acceptance of loss and examines the evolution of my paintings during this period.
Chapter two includes a transcribed interview with Nanaimo based abstract painter, Jonathan Forrest, and presents a conversation that gravitates towards some of the formal elements of abstract painting, process and colour exploration. My interaction with Jonathan Forrest proved to be an incredible source of inspiration regarding these topics.

Chapter three compliments the previous two chapters by illustrating the development of my art practice over the past two years through photo documentation of selected works.

I would like the reader to note that the extended artist statement component of this paper includes ideas regarding spirituality and religion that are highly personal and subjective. I do not wish to impress my religious opinions on the reader, nor am I trying to convince the reader of their validity. I also recognize that the concept of God is not considered fixed or static and has become quite fraught in an academic context. However, I believe that it is an important concept to look at in considering my studio development during a time of personal tragedy and in an effort to communicate my own understanding and questions surrounding these events, I have opted to use the singular “God” and not something more abstract like the divine, the mystical, or spirit. I ask that the reader consider that the aspects of my artwork that I will discuss in spiritual terms are of a personal nature and that my religious views are presented simply as a means of engaging reflectively and honestly with the artwork I produced during a time of significant loss.
Chapter 1: Extended Artist Statement

At the outset of my graduate studies, I had originally intended to explore prayer and how it might be expressed or reflected through an art practice. Looking for a place to begin, I considered that the invisibility of God was an important aspect of the spiritual relationship that is embodied in prayer and that exploring this ‘invisibility’ through a visual medium might be an interesting place to start.

I began looking at images of the divine in Western art and quickly found that illustrational imagery seemed inadequate for describing a God who was not only invisible but was also theologically understood to exist outside of time and space. It also seemed to me that the nature of illustration was such that any time a depiction of a person or an event was set down on paper, it automatically relegated itself to the past-tense which ran contrary to my interest in exploring present-tense relationship. In many of these illustrations God seemed like nothing more than an antiquated piece of art-history, not the living and present being whom I was interested in exploring.

In an effort to exploit the apparent problems I was encountering, I began to utilize these images anyway, fragmenting and collaging them and making drawings from them (see Chapter 3: fig. 1). As I worked I was thinking about visual cues that might infer that which remains unseen; things like reflections, voids, edges, and simulacrum.

About six months into this way of working, my wife who was eight months pregnant at the time, sent me a text while I was in the studio telling me that her physician couldn’t find our babies heart beat and that she was being rushed to the hospital. Within an hour, we were shown
an ultrasound of our son, confirming that there was no longer any heart activity. Twenty-four hours after that, he was stillborn. My wife did skin to skin with him, we held him for a time, sang him some songs, and then held a small memorial service for him two weeks later.

The studio became a different place for me after that. My reasons for being there changed. I could no longer keep up with the academic demands of the program and so I pushed all of that aside, along with all the drawings I had been making until that time. I needed a quiet space apart from the rigour of school. I needed a space to be still, to be alone, and to engage in some activities that were detached. The studio became a site for this. I began to pour pigmented water onto paper and to sit and stare at the colours as they bled across its surface. I would stay there for a while or return home and wait for the water to evaporate so I could see what kind of trace was left on the paper when it was dry. While there were of course other impulses informing the decisions I made at that time, I began pouring colour in this manner more or less so that I could simply look at colour. Making “art” suddenly mattered very little to me. I now see this change in attitude towards art making as a valuable life lesson and one of the gifts my son gave to me.

It also seemed necessary to change the position in which I was working at that time, to stop facing the wall and to move to the floor. The floor was a site on which both myself and my work were more willingly subjected to gravity and grief. The drawings based in religion that I had been making prior to his passing were left hanging on the wall, unfinished and out of reach. From this posture, things began to open up.

After some initial trials to see how various pigments and paper types would respond to each other, I decided that I was loosing a lot of pigment by letting the coloured water run over
the papers edges, so I began folding the paper itself into shallow trays to contain the liquid (see Chapter 3: fig. 4,5,6). A fold is a weakness, a wound running along the entire length of the substrate. A fold is a doubling over, a bend that leaves a scar. A fold is a condition that forces one thing to become something else. A fold is an awakening, showing an object in the second dimension that there is perhaps a third.

As I produced more of these paper trays, small pools of colour began to accumulate at various points across my studio floor. Inside these pools were tinted reflections of the paper’s architecture jutting upwards and downwards, above and below the surface of the water. Sometimes I would sit and stare at my own reflection in the water. I could see myself in ultramarine blue, brackish green or soft pink - really any hue that happened to be in the containers. Here I began to discover that colour could be cosmetic. It could disguise harsh realities. But colour was more than a mask I could pull on, altering my countenance with an other-worldly shine. It also seemed to have psychological depth that moved beyond materiality. The coloured pools that I stared into in the midst of my grief were like deep mirrors drawing me inward but simultaneously keeping me out. As a mirror conjures an illusionistic depth of space that appears enterable but remains an adamantine surface continuously bouncing a viewers gaze back out, I believe I saw in those reflective depths, a desire for that which cannot be gained. If it was the guise of colour I wanted then the colour itself embodied a sense of unattainable desire perfectly. Colour is not something one can keep. Even if I had plunged myself into the pools in an attempt to capture the colour, I could never have attained the colour in a more intimate or deeper way. It would have surrounded me on all sides but it’s soft glow would have always remained outside of me. Moving towards it would have only pushed it further away.
We had no idea why we lost our son, other than the reasons the medical community had to offer. Based on my understanding, I knew that God was not the cause of my son’s death. But if this was so, why didn’t God keep him from death in the first place? Instead he passed through our lives like vapour. Reason was no help in struggling through these questions. Only the acceptance of “I don’t know” kept resonating. This was the way to move forward.

It took time for the water to evaporate out of the paper trays. The waiting was important. It gave me time to do nothing. Folding paper, mixing colour and pouring water was enough and there was a quiet rhythm in it. I set up the conditions for the work and then let chemistry and physics take over as the various combinations of pigment, water, and gravity would ultimately determine the kinds of marks that would appear on the paper’s surface. I was finding ways to distance myself and relinquishing some control of the process was, at least in part, a response to my life circumstances outside the studio and a way of letting them in. My son’s death showed me how complete my inability to control anything in life really is.

Gradually I realized that time had become a key component of my working method. It enabled the evaporation process and forced me to patiently wait to see the affects that each ‘colour pouring’ event might reveal. As I waited I began learning how to avoid seeing moments of doing nothing as lost in the name of ‘productivity’. I found that sometimes life demands moments of nothing while other processes are allowed to work in the background. I became more aware that time is never lost, like water, we simply take on various shapes as we pass through it.

The trays always looked beautiful when they were full of liquid on the studio floor. As mentioned earlier, there was a striking luminosity and depth in the polychromatic pools. But this
manifestation, being only temporal in nature as the completed works were destined for paintings
traditional purlieu, the wall, marked a transitory station that, for me, evoked some sense of loss.
However, had I attempted to keep this beauty permanently, my efforts would sooner or later have
come to nothing as the eventual evaporation of an un-replenished body of water open to the air
was inevitable. Just as a flower blooms for a short time and then withers, the loss I was forced to
face in my own life fervidly impressed upon me that all of life is transitional and temporal, no
matter how short that life span might be.

I found a relevant counterpart regarding the temporality of art and life in the artist Eva
Hesse who tragically died of a brain tumour at the age of thirty-five. In a documentary, a friend
of Hesse’s recalls a memory of when three or four of them were sitting around a table and the
artist was describing her work. She said that it was ephemeral, and that she wasn’t concerned
about it lasting. A lot of the materials she was using were rubber, plastics, resins and fibreglass,
things that she knew might heavily degrade over time. But she didn’t care about them breaking
down. She thought, ‘let the museums worry about longevity’. All Hesse cared about was having
the impact now! To illustrate her point for her friends, she picked up a glass and threw it into the
fire place letting it smash and told them, "that’s how my work is.”¹ Hesse’s philosophy of art
objects as things of immediate impact and temporal beauty echoed the fleeting nature of life that
I was forced to struggle with in my own experience and indeed, Hesse’s friends and family
would have struggled with as well after her untimely departure. Hesse’s was a life of exuberant
impact that was far reaching and that resonates clearly to this day.

¹ Eva Hesse, directed by Marcie Begleiter (2016; Films We Like, 2016).
Once the pools had evaporated completely, I would then unfold the paper trays, pressing the two planes back into one. This way I could see the results of the now settled colours and the trace of dissipating water more clearly as the paper was returned to its original planar state. The unfolding was an opening up to new possibilities and simultaneously testament to a stage of the paintings life that had now been spent. In an interview with Michael Blackwood, the artist Philip Guston once remarked, “There’s something death-like about a painting finished.” When an artist completes a painting and hangs it on the wall, this transition marks the exhaustion of one thing and the opening of another.

I discovered that there was a shift in how the sides of the paper trays functioned when moved from the floor to the wall. While folded on the floor, the sides of the trays acted as boundaries meant to contain water within. A boundary delineates an edge that is not meant to be crossed. When unfolded, the sides no longer acted as boundaries but were transformed into something more like planar borders surrounding what used to be the tray floor (see Chapter 3: fig. 4, 5). A border marks the transition between spaces, but unlike a boundary, it may be crossed. In the case of the paintings, once they were placed on the wall, this was demonstrated perhaps most obviously in terms of an optic freedom as the eye could traverse the various borders contained within the paintings without hinderance (see Chapter 3: fig. 9).

It is my understanding that human beings exist within boundaries of various kinds, the most pronounced of which is often material. Because these boundaries are not meant to be crossed, leaving them behind is usually only realized through some form of transformational death. To paraphrase a passage from the Bible; before a plant can grow, a seed must first fall to

---

the ground and die. The seed must, of course, die in the sense that it breaks and disintegrates before the potential held within its shell can be released. In death, something must yield and be left behind to decay. Perhaps death (and there are various kinds that may be experienced at different times in one's life), is like the unfolding and flattening of the paper - rather than a destruction, it is actually an opening up that turns boundaries into borders and makes the crossing into something else possible.

Once the paintings arrived on the wall, the aforementioned borders present in these works were most clearly defined by shifts in hue (see Chapter 3: fig. 9, 13, 14, 15). It is worth noting that colour itself embodies a transitional space where both borders and boundaries may be considered. Earlier I mentioned that colour has a depth that seems to move beyond materiality. In an exposition on colour from his book, *Expanded Painting: Ontological Aesthetics and the Essence of Colour*, Mark Titmarsh quotes Kenneth Maly saying that colour, “is always at something like a boundary, it can never cross that boundary, even as it is always moving ‘across’ the boundary.” To my understanding, the boundary that Maly is referring to is one of materiality. To clarify this statement Titmarsh suggests that at some point, “colour casts an ontological light rather than an optical presence, moving closer to the dynamic of thought and away from the physiology of vision.” This suggests that colour is capable of moving beyond the object that it covers, not physically or even optically, but psychologically - to the mind of the beholder. To better understand this idea, I have spent time looking at the colour of various objects, wondering

---

3 John 12:24


if the colour isn’t actually an entity separate from the object that binds it. This has become a kind of mental conundrum for me and perhaps has proved the Maly quote to me, at least in the sense that colour can be difficult to apprehend. In addition to the evaporating water that remains an integral element of my working process, this way of thinking about colour functions as another reminder that there are things in life that will continuously slip beyond our grasp.

Originally, I began investigating colour more intentionally due to a dissatisfaction with my own approach to colour use in my oil paintings. What I found is that a great deal of possibility opens up when the desire to ‘use’ colour is relinquished with the realization that colour itself is a material worthy of exploration. As Jonathan Forrest remarked during my interview with him, colour is at its best when it is allowed to be itself.6 By stepping back and allowing a dilution of pigment and water to act according to natural laws, not only did I begin to approach color as a worthwhile subject in its own right, on a metaphorical level I was able to establish a heightened appreciation of colour as a fluid phenomenon. This fluidity can be experienced optically as, to the eye of the observer, colour is capable of shifting and changing as it moves through time and space. A look at Joseph Albers classic text, *Interaction of Colour*, will quickly remind us of that fact. In his introduction to this work, Albers states, “In visual perception a colour is almost never seen as it really is - as it physically is. This fact makes colour the most relative medium in art.”7 This relates nicely to the idea that colour is simultaneously observable and elusive. In her article, *Amphibian*, Tauba Auerbach suggests that, “there’s an

---


extent to which one can measure [colour], reason about it, and communicate about it, but colour is so visceral and slippery that it always seems to outstrip logic and language”. She then goes on to demonstrate that the various models created throughout history in an effort to create a more complete colour mapping system, are to-date, inefficient. Auerbach states, “The visible spectrum has variously been drawn as a line, a plane, and a solid, all of which come up short in some capacity. Either the distribution of hues is too regular, entire variables such as saturation or value are omitted, or the models account for retinal responses while neglecting neurological processing. The most accurate ‘color spaces’ - three-dimensional models for color - are unruly or inelegant”. Beyond the visual diagrams that have been created to categorize and better understand colour, there is another system for mapping colour that is equally errant, if not more so; language. Concerning language, Mark Titmarsh aptly points out that despite the various linguistic groupings for colour designed so that we can communicate about it more effectively, in reality, “there are no breaks in the rainbow”. One colour always bleeds fluidly into the next and contains a multitude of variants throughout each transition. David Batchelor mentions in his text on colour, that while Sir Isaac Newton was experimenting with prisms and refracted white light, Newton considered dividing the rainbow into five distinct colours, but in the end chose seven colours in keeping with the seven notes of the musical scale. This helps to explain why the colour indigo was tucked in between blue and violet. But why did Newton choose indigo and not

---


another colour somewhere between yellow and green or perhaps green and blue? Batchelor also points out that, “Russian, we are told, has two words for blue. That is to say, Russians appear to deal with blue in roughly the way we deal with red and pink. Certainly, what we call light blue is optically as distinct from dark blue as pink is from red … and yet our language allows no such independence for bits of blue.”

Both Newton’s scientific process and the widespread cultural differences in how we speak about color, (Russian and English being only one example of many), show us that there is a great deal of subjectivity in colour naming and that colour itself is not readily domesticated. As Auerbach points out, colour is slippery, and as Maly suggests, it appears to continuously cross boundaries whether they are qualitative or psychological. The sense of mystery surrounding colour has for me resonated on some levels with the departure of my son. Staring into colour is sometimes like staring into an other-worldly abyss that leaves me wondering at the new territory to which my son’s transgression of material boundaries has taken him.

It took me months before I could fully concede that our son had made his crossing and that he wasn’t coming back. Reason really had nothing to do with this. This was the internal struggle of release. I will never stop wishing we could have held him longer. I believe he had a good life, albeit excruciatingly brief. He went directly from the comfort of his mother’s womb, to the arms of his true mother and father, into a cloud of colour and light.

Eventually we celebrated our son’s first birthday. As part of our remembrance we chose to release a few biodegradable balloons. Like evaporation, his passing was a disappearance but

---

12 Batchelor, *Chromophobia*, 90.
not an obliteration. When liquid turns to vapour, the visible turns invisible and drifts off to somewhere else.
Works Cited

BOOKS / ARTICLES


DOCUMENTARIES


Supplemental Reading List

The following bibliography lists select sources that were not mentioned in my extended artist statement that I consider to have been important to the development of my studio research.

BOOKS / ARTICLES


ART EXHIBITION CATALOGUES


DOCUMENTARIES


Chapter 2: Mining the Possibilities - Interview with Jonathan Forrest

The original interview was conducted over the phone and took place on September, 03, 2019.

Jonathan Forrest and I spoke just as he was arriving back home to Vancouver Island having closed up his rural Saskatoon studio for the winter. Forrest spends most of his working time in Nanaimo, but for a couple months every summer, he pilgrimages back to the Prairies, the place where he got his start as an artist. Here he continues his work in a church turned studio about an hour outside Saskatoon.

Forrest found his roots in abstraction in the early ‘80s, a time when the art form was at the height of its unpopularity. For those of us looking at abstraction now, there is something to be gained by paying close attention to an artist who, in his youth, chose abstraction when it was being rejected by his generation, and who has continued pushing the genre now for nearly 40 years. Jonathan and I spoke at length about many of the formal aspects of his work including geometry, colour, paint, and process, amongst other discussion surrounding his place within the discourse of abstract painting.

I was first introduced to Forrest’s work through an exhibition of his paintings titled, ‘Light and Matter’ which was held at the Michael Gibson Gallery in London, Ontario, 2017. Forrest’s most recent body of work has been exhibited under the title, ‘Material Resonance’ at The Gallery / art placement Inc., in Saskatoon, 2019.
**Matt Brown** - You tend to use very basic geometric shapes in your work. Rectangles especially have featured prominently throughout your practice. Even when you have allowed the shapes to become a little more eccentric in the past, they still maintain a very basic sense of geometry - clean lines with clean straight edges and angles. What is it that draws you to these basic geometrical silhouettes?

**Jonathan Forrest** - Well, my tendency is to think of geometry as a means to an end. It's a useful tool to get started in making the painting. I'm actually not really that interested in geometry. If I think of early geometric abstraction that was somehow trying to allude to a sort of utopian ideal - a kind of a new way of living, that kind of thing, that’s really not what I'm interested in. My take on it is more practical - simple shapes in order to show off the other stuff like colour, painterly incident, layering, transparency, etc., which is what I'm really interested in.

**MB** - So the shapes support the painting in a similar way that the canvas supports the painting.

**JF** - Yes exactly. It's a support element, even though there's a contradiction there because the first thing you see is the geometry. And as we were speaking earlier of looking at images online, that's the big thing that people see online. When I'm showing images to people, if they see them on Instagram or if I'm sending images out to a gallery or whatever, usually the first thing they see is a kind of geometric structure. I'm aware of this contradiction in that to me the paintings aren't actually about that. They're about the subtler things that you really don't see unless you're actually standing in front of the painting.
**MB** - Right, like how the colours layer over one another for example.

**JF** - Yeah. If you haven't seen the work in person it's very hard to even grasp what the thing is. It's sort of misinformation in a way, seeing an image of it. It's funny that what most people take away from images of my work is the geometry, to me that's the least interesting part. It's sort of like a landscape painter who’s using the landscape to explore other things like light.

**MB** - There is an interesting dialogue in painting regarding the gap between painting and sculpture and some painters have gone after this more than others. There are more overt examples but even something like Lucio Fontana’s cuts allude to this sort of thing. I couldn’t help but think about this when I was looking at some of the raised surfaces on your paintings. Do you ever think about painting in sculptural terms?

**JF** - I’ve seen sculpture shows that have just knocked my socks off because they are so ‘there’. I mean it’s almost hard to look at painting after that because those are objects that have such presence in space. And the immediate impulse is ‘I’m going to make sculpture’. But it’s not what I do. There is a desire to have that sort of physical impact, a kind of ‘there-ness’ with painting. And I mean sometimes I have leaned in towards a sort of relief - extremely thick paint - surfaces coming off the canvas, but I actually don't think you really need to go that way.
MB - Right like in your case your paint slabs as they have been called, don’t make the painting any more or less sculptural.

JF - I think in my mind it did at the time. In retrospect it was an avenue to explore but I'm not sure I really got any closer. I approach all paintings as very particular distinct objects. With Forrest Bess or Nozkowski’s work whom we talked about earlier, you know they still function as objects.

MB - Very early on in your painting career you worked with a lot of muted colours and then around the year 2002, which was about the time you attended the Triangle artist workshop in Brooklyn, your colours popped and became much more vivid. What caused your colour sensibilities to shift so dramatically?

JF - In the tradition I came from, the classic Jack Bush painting was a kind of a dull mottled ground with colours put on top. So I thought, what if I start off with a bright yellow ground or a lime green ground or something that seems really ridiculous and then that's what you were responding to. It was sort of an intentional thing to throw a wrench into it.

MB - So a way to throw yourself off balance a bit.

JF - Yeah, over the last 20 or 30 years it’s been a continual effort of trying to throw things in to get away from myself and from what I know. But at the same time building on everything that I
already know, if that makes any sense. It's like you have a history, you have experience and you
don't want to ditch all that. But at the same time you want to somehow approach painting as if it's
a new thing. Otherwise the predictability of it quickly becomes boring - for me and for anyone
looking at the painting. There are times when you get on to a way of working, you figure it out
and you just keep doing it. Then at a certain point you wake up one day and think, I gotta just
shake it up. I just can't do that anymore. And it’s not that it was bad work, it's just known and
predictable. Most of the things I’ve tried have been to trip myself up a bit.

**MB** - Is it almost like trying to unlearn what you already know about how to paint?

**JF** - Yeah. It's unlearning it in a knowledgable way.

**MB** - Are your colours improvised or planned ahead of time?

**JF** - It's pretty much improvising. There are habits that I have and preferences for certain colours
and colour combinations but there's really no theory behind it. I'm looking to do something with
the colour that holds together as a painting but that is surprising to me. It's intuitive, but it's not
really chance or random. It's more intuition based on experience and somehow trying to say
something with the colour.

**MB** - Is it even possible to use colour non-improvisationally?
**JF** - Sure! And it's terrible! I know a lot of painters who have reasons behind every colour that they've chosen and it's boring. A lot of colour painting is like that where it's too obvious the kind of logic behind it.

**MB** - Can a painting ever completely fail or just fall apart on you?

**JF** - Well this sounds strange but with this newer group of paintings, they're all complete failures until the end. Really it's just a layer of paint on canvas and then another layer of paint on canvas and then at some point one layer goes down and it somehow clicks. So in a sense they're all failures until they're not. It's sort of a lesson to me and a reminder about trying to keep things open and not to be so judgmental. For years I've said that I'm not judgmental in the studio, that I have to suspend judgment, and that's easy to say but really hard to do when you're a month into a group of paintings and saying to yourself, this is all just a bunch of garbage! And yet I've experienced so many times that in half an hour a painting can turn from being terrible and then it just somehow clicks. I'm trying to embrace that journey more I guess. You have to keep trusting that if you can just keep working on it and keep it open somehow, it'll go somewhere.

**MB** - I remember hearing Philip Guston say in a documentary there was a colour he just didn't really understand. I think it may have been blue or green. I can’t really remember which. Per Kirkby talked about disliking the colour green and yet he used it all the time. Do you have any colours that you find particularly troubling?
JF - No. Not really. I just know I get into habits and then it's always about breaking the habit. If a painting is a very particular object, a colour is a very particular colour. So the more it is itself, the more it's working.

MB - You’ve always been interested in the physical properties of paint. What is it about paint that you like so much?

JF - I think it goes back to my early formation as a painter and the time I got into painting. I was looking at painters who were involved in abstract expressionism which is very much about responding to the materials and having the materials almost lead you or be a catalyst in how the paintings appeared. But also it was a coincidental time in the mid 80s when the paint companies were developing things like gel, heavy gels, metallic paint and interference paint. The mid to late 80s was when that all came out. Before that when I was in school, even in the first year or so, I was adding stuff to the paint to thicken it up etc. and this was just prior to when you could actually go out and buy stuff that did it. Golden was at the forefront of developing all that and it sort of hit like a gaudy fashion came over painting. You could almost do a show about this because when Golden came out with metallics, everybody threw in gold and silver and it was like this awful kind of glitzing up of everybody's paintings for about a year and then everyone got over it. It was almost like a kind of drug that went through the painting community and then it was gone. After that people used it appropriately or whatever or stopped using it and went on to other things. I guess I’m of two minds about the whole medium thing. On the one hand I'm
fascinated with paint. I love paint. I love the cookery of paint - the mixing of things, adding this and that. I love not knowing what's going to happen.

**MB** - Sort of like a kind of alchemy.

**JF** - It’s much closer to a sort of alchemy than a recipe. It's sort of trying to eke out something by some magical combination that you don't know yet. So there’s a big part of me that's like that, but there’s another part of me that says it shouldn't become a paint fetish. I know painters who make work almost as an illustration of a product line of Golden paints. It’s like, because I use this material with these additives mixed in therefore it must be art. So there's a kind of fetish thing that happens and it’s a bit weird. And I’m saying that when I’m totally into all the paint myself but in the end paint is just a neutral material to make something out of.

**MB** - What about oil versus acrylic? A lot of painters who’ve been trained in an art school often have a hang up about switching from oil to acrylic like it's a kind of sin or something. Have you ever experienced anything like that? I know you've been working with acrylic for a long time.

**JF** - I learned to paint in acrylic. I basically grew up using acrylic paint. So it’s not like I had a background learning to paint in oil and then switched to acrylic. Not that long ago, around 2011 or 2012 I bought a whole bunch of Williamsburg oil paint and hid out in my studio and just tried to figure out oil paint for about six months. There is a kind of snobbery around oil paint - that ‘real’ painting is oil painting. And I can see their point because if you stacked up the evidence
most great paintings are made with oil paint. There is something very attractive about oil. I just have a long history of using acrylic paint so it's kind of in my bones. I know how to use it. So part of the reason for trying to switch to oil was again throwing a wrench into it. I figured, I don't know what I'm doing with oil paint so maybe something will come out of that. But then it has a whole other history to it so I almost felt as if I was emulating a past or something. Whereas acrylic sort of has a bad name. It’s sort of looked upon as a poor man's oil. It’s ‘plastic-y’ and all these sort of negative terms are associated with it. But in a way that's freeing. Oil is so nice just as it is it almost can't help but be attractive. But acrylic is awful as it is, you really have to do stuff with the paint - it’s like a journey to actually get the paint to work. So if you can get it to work in acrylic it's sort of an earned painterliness instead of an assumed ‘out of the tube’ painterliness. I'm suspicious of things that are signs of authenticity and oil paint is one of those things. It’s a kind of immediate sign that this is authentic real painting. And to me authenticity should be earned, not just taken off the shelf.

**MB** - When a lot of focus is put on one thing, often the opposite of that thing is highlighted in its omission. With so much focus on physicality and materiality in your work, does the immaterial ever factor into how you think about your work?

**JF** - On my painting table I have these tracks on the sides so I can do a very even pull of paint. I run strips of plexiglass across it so it's a very even, very mechanical pull of the paint and there's two things that happen that pop into my mind. One is things like air and space come into it which is a weird thing when you're actually dealing with cans of paint and a mechanical way of
extruding the paint onto the canvas. The other thing is painterly touch. I would look at these new paintings as really embracing a painterly touch even though at first blush they look like they're mechanically made. It seems to contradict. You could look at it as a hands off kind of approach and with a slight twist of thinking it's a very hands on painterly approach. My feeling making the paintings is as direct an approach as if I were standing at an easel with a paint brush and putting on oil paint.

**MB** - I haven’t seen your recent paintings in person, but the group of paintings that came before, ones I saw at Michael Gibson Gallery, the absence of the hand is really apparent.

**JF** - The works that Michael has would be the closest to that - hands off and more of a fetish finish, almost like it's a formed piece of plastic there. And you know in a way that's the problem with those paintings and that’s why I moved away from them. These newer paintings were more about the other kind of accidental things that could come out.

**MB** - When you see the paintings and don’t know your process, there is an immediate sense of mystery surrounding how the works at Michael Gibson Gallery might have been made.

**JF** - Yes and I’ve got mixed feelings about that. The danger of the type of paintings that Michael has is that it becomes a bit of a trick. On the one hand that's kind of entertaining and almost a way into the work. I think of old Renaissance master paintings and with a lot of these there is also a bit of a magic trick. The realism and the three dimensional illusion is kind of a magical
thing. I'm sure at the time it was amazing if you didn't know the process behind it and there's something very attractive about that. But then you start to get deeper into it and there's good paintings and bad paintings. There are other more important things that ultimately give the work substance.

**MB** - Many material painters who have attended an art school have had to at some point go through a process of leaving the image behind. Did you go through a process like this yourself?

**JF** - Not really. I did my BFA in the late 70s early 80s and I guess in the first couple of years I would have been painting still lives and models and that kind of thing. But I really didn't feel any deep connection with that. The first thing that I felt a real connection with was seeing in particular Jack Bush's work and starting to paint in a manner like Bush and Bob Christie and people like that. That was my first painting experience that actually really resonated with me. Since then I have been an abstract painter. It stuck with me.

**MB** - The early 80’s was when abstraction was on it’s way out. Did that ever bother you?

**JF** - Exactly! (laughter) It’s not that it never bothered me. I totally knew that was happening. I also knew that what I was interested in was a bit old hat by then. The other people that I knew in school and shortly after school were absolutely moving on to different things. Video and all sorts of other approaches to art were way more in the forefront. And even if it was painting it was more about neo-expressionist painting. They were much more current in terms of what was going
on at that moment but none of that stuff really resonated with me. Intellectually I could understand it but it always came down to, when I'm on my own in the studio painting, what was entertaining to me was more important. Also I sort of ended up through coincidence having personal connections with the previous generation or two of abstract painters. - painters like Bob Christie. But in terms of being a young artist, it wasn't cool to paint abstractly. And it wasn’t cool to look at the painters that I was looking at. People like Kenneth Noland or Jules Olitski. They were very much what people were against. That was the generation to knock down.

MB - These days abstraction seems to be making a come back and a lot of people who are working, ‘abstractly,’ are trying to shed that label. Probably because it’s a term that’s associated with modernism, but it’s also been used pretty obtusely to describe a really broad range of painting. Do you consider yourself an abstract painter and do you mind the label?

JF - I don't mind the label at all. It’s a handy description if somebody asks what kind of painting I do. I guess I can understand why people would want to ditch the associations of the past but to me it doesn't really have any baggage. I enjoy the whole history of abstraction. That’s definitely what I'm coming out of and it’s nothing to deny.

MB - What do you envision as the ideal life for one of your paintings after it leaves the studio.

JF - Well the ideal life for a painting is when I move it upstairs and I put it in my dining room. I put it up there to live with it and it reveals itself over time. The opposite experience of that is
going into a gallery and looking at a painting. You go into a gallery and it's this sort of weird ‘museumification’ of the painting that happens. It’s controlled lighting, controlled space, and you just sort of stand there and stare at the painting and move on. Having said that I love going to museums and galleries. It's the only way you can really see most paintings, but what I enjoy about looking at my own painting is actually living with it over time and in changing light; raking sunlight, very diffused light, dim light, etc. A painting reveals itself very quickly if you can live with it like that, particularly painting that has a kind of physical substance to it. It's very hard to see that kind of painting in neutral lighting and just stare at it.

**MB** - Do you have any artists you're paying particular attention to right now, historical or contemporary?

**JF** - Yeah there's always lots of people that I'm thinking about and looking at. Every once in a while somebody like Thomas Nozkowski pops up that I am very interested in. But in terms of long term interests, I am fascinated by Matisse and all of his work. There was a show, probably about 10 years ago, that I saw a number of times in New York called, Radical Invention. It was about a particular time period in his work, around the first world war, where he sort of flirted with cubism. I'm fascinated by that time period, I would say it was really the height of painting. And it’s the oddest time for his work. That show that I saw, and that time period of his, sustains me, you know, long term. I keep coming back to that. But then there are other people, I’m even thinking of Jules Olitski’s work. There's a time period in the 70s that was a high point of his that I very much associate with the work that I'm doing now as coming out of that. Like somehow I'm
tapping into a sensibility from my early days when I was influenced by that time period in Olitski’s work. I think of painting as this ongoing conversation with the past. As I'm painting I’m thinking about other paintings, I’m thinking about discovering other artists work, old and new, and it's almost like filtering it all through the painting process. It's almost like a way of understanding it.
Chapter 3: Practice Documentation

All images belong to the author.

Fig 1.  
*Sanguine Mirror*, 2019  
Conte on paper in two parts  
30 x 88 inches

Several historical paintings of the crucifixion of Christ are used as source material for this drawing. These are found on the internet and printed. Various elements are selected from these source images and reproduced in drawing. These elements are translated onto two separate sheets of paper so that an appearance of reflection is generated between the two halves of the work. The reflections, however, are inconsistent and imperfect. This drawing is an exercise in considering the divergent nature of translation and simulacrum.
Fig 2.

*Melting Block 1, 2019*

gouache on paper

30 x 22 inches

Pigment and water are poured into a mold and frozen. The ice is then removed from the mold, placed on paper, and allowed to melt. Governed by the laws of physics, the ice creates its own semi-autonomous trace on the papers surface as it dissipates.
Fig 3.

Melting Block 7, 2019

gouache on paper

30 x 22 inches
Fig 4.

*Untitled 2, 2019*

Acrylic gouache on paper

26 x 20 inches

Paper is folded to contain a dilution of pigment and water. The water is allowed to evaporate over time leaving deposits of pigment on the papers surface and the trace of its own dissipation. The creases at the corners and edges of the work reveal the folding process used to create the painting.
Fig 5.

*CMY, 2019*

Acrylic gouache on paper

26 x 20 inches
Fig 6.

*Orange/Pink*, 2019

Acrylic gouache on paper

26 x 20 inches
Fig 7.

*Primary Channels, 2019*

Acrylic gouache on paper

26 x 20 inches
Fig 8.

*Untitled 3, 2019*

Acrylic gouache on paper

26 x 20 inches
Fig 9.

_Solar Eclipse, 2019_

Acrylic gouache on paper

26 x 20 inches
Fig 10.

*R/P B/Y*, 2020

Acrylic gouache on paper

26 x 20 inches
Fig 11.

_Ultraviolet, 2020_

Acrylic gouache on paper

56 x 43 inches
Fig 12.

*Primary Channels, Yellow/RB, 2020*

Acrylic gouache on paper

78 x 59 1/2 inches
Fig 13.

*Y/R/B, 2019*

Acrylic gouache on paper

45 x 39 inches
Fig 14.

*Dark Purple/BGY, 2019*

Acrylic gouache on paper

45 x 39 inches
Fig 15.

*Green/OR, 2020*

Acrylic gouache on paper

45 x 39 inches
Curriculum Vitae

Matt W. Brown
b. 1988 London, ON

Education

2021 MFA, Western University, London, ON
2014 BFA, NSCAD University, Halifax, NS

Selected Exhibitions

2020 (solo) *Ask Ellis*, McIntosh Gallery, London, ON
2019 *what we might become*, Artlab Gallery, London, ON
   *selsun blue*, Artlab Gallery, London, ON
2018 Fringe Gallery, London, ON
2017 *Common Goods*, Forest City Gallery, London, ON
2016 (solo) *Seti I Dondi George*, Corridor Gallery, Visual Arts Nova Scotia, Halifax, NS
2015 (solo) *Paintings*, Kings Wharf, Dartmouth, NS
   *Silver & Gold*, Eyelevel Gallery, Halifax, NS
   (solo) *And You Will Be a Mother, Mary*, MacPhee Centre for Creative Learning, Dartmouth, NS
   *NSCAD Studio Residency Exhibition*, NSCAD Port Logia, Halifax, NS
2014 (solo) *Paintings*, MacPhee Centre for Creative Learning, Dartmouth, NS
   *[All Together Now]*, StreetFunke, Halifax, NS
   *NSCAD 2014 Graduation Exhibition*, Anna Leonowens Gallery, Halifax, NS
   (solo) *No Possessions*, Anna Leonowens Gallery, Halifax, NS
   *Venor/Optimum Talent Open House Show*, RBC Waterside Centre, Halifax, NS
2013 *Starfish Awards*, NSCAD University, Halifax, NS
   *Halifax Figures*, The Nova Scotia Archives, Halifax, NS

Residencies

2015-16 Kings Wharf, Artist in Residence, Dartmouth, NS
2014-15 NSCAD Community Studio Residency, Dartmouth, NS

Awards and Scholarships

2018-20 Western Graduate Research Scholarship, Western University
2018-19 Western Graduate Travel Grant, Western University
2018 Faculty of Arts and Humanities Chair’s Entrance Scholarship, Western University
2014 Gerald Ferguson Bursary, NSCAD University
   BMO 1st Art Nominee
Masters of Tomorrow Art Auction Nominee
2013 Laure Jeanne Arsenault Watercolor Bursary, NSCAD University
SUNSCAD Bursary, NSCAD University

Publications, Reviews and Press

2019 Aidan Curran. ‘MFA students’ ‘selsun blue’ confronts issues with communication head on,’ The Gazette, Western University, Feb. 6, 2019.

Selected Collections

Kings Wharf, Halifax
The Venor Group, Halifax

Teaching Experience

2020 Western University: Graduate Teaching Assistant to Kim Neudorf, SA 2620A “Introduction to Painting”, (online)
Western University: Guest Instructor, Watercolour Workshop for Prof. David Merritt, SA 3611 “Drawing”, (online)
2019-20 Western University: Graduate Teaching Assistant to Tricia Johnson, SA 1601 “Foundations of Visual Arts”
2018-19 Western University: Graduate Teaching Assistant for Tricia Johnson, SA 1601 “Foundations of Visual Arts”
2015 MacPhee Centre for Creative Learning: Arts Project Instructor, Dartmouth, NS

Public Presentations and Other Professional Experience

2020 Preparator, Satellite Gallery, London, ON
2019 Public Critique with guest, Crystal Mowry, Artlab Gallery, London, ON,
Artist Presentation, Artlab Gallery, London, ON
2015 Artist Presentation, Bridge Centre for Arts & Technology, Dartmouth, NS
Creation of live artwork in affiliation with King’s Wharf, Viva City, Fusion Halifax, Halifax, NS

2014  Assistant Curator, Venor/Optimum Talent Open House Show, RBC Waterside Centre, Halifax, NS
Artist Presentation, Anna Leonowens Gallery, Halifax, NS