

Electronic Thesis and Dissertation Repository

8-22-2022 1:00 PM

At Dusk

Michelle Paterok, *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

© Michelle Paterok 2022

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



Part of the [Painting Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Paterok, Michelle, "At Dusk" (2022). *Electronic Thesis and Dissertation Repository*. 8745.
<https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/etd/8745>

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 wlsadmin@uwo.ca.

Abstract

In supplement to my Master of Fine Arts thesis exhibition, this dossier is composed of an extended artist statement, photographic documentation of artwork, a transcribed interview with artist Ben Reeves, and a curriculum vitae. These components contextualize the motivation and research that inform my studio work in painting. The extended artist statement describes the personal and theoretical foundation of my Master's thesis project—a series of paintings collectively titled *At Dusk*, which documents everyday interior space in order to explore the invocations of colour, light and atmosphere. The interview with Ben Reeves provides insight into his artistic practice in painting, elucidating the ways in which the artist uses the medium to examine his perception of everyday surroundings.

Summary for Lay Audience

In supplement to my Master of Fine Arts thesis exhibition, this dossier is composed of an extended artist statement, photographic documentation of artwork, a transcribed interview with artist Ben Reeves, and a curriculum vitae. These components contextualize the motivation and research that inform my studio work in painting. The extended artist statement describes the personal and theoretical foundation of my Master's thesis project—a series of paintings collectively titled *At Dusk*, which documents everyday interior space in order to explore the invocations of colour, light and atmosphere. The interview with Ben Reeves provides insight into his artistic practice in painting, elucidating the ways in which the artist uses the medium to examine his perception of everyday surroundings.

Keywords

Ben Reeves, blue, contemporary art, interior space, memory, oil painting, painting, perception, phenomenology, twilight

Acknowledgements

A special thank you to the following individuals who have supported me throughout this process:

To my advisor, Professor Sky Glabush, for challenging my preconceptions about painting and for your guidance along the way. I am a better artist for having studied with you.

To Professors Tricia Johnson and Patrick Mahon for the opportunity to work with you as a Teaching Assistant. I feel so lucky to have learned from such wonderful educators.

To the Visual Arts faculty and staff, and especially Professors Christof Migone, David Merritt, and Soheila Esfahani for engaging with my work and the thoughtful discussions in our seminars. To Jessica Woodward for all the good times in printmaking despite the state of the world. To Ivan for always making me laugh. To my peers: Anahi, Rebecca, Masha, Brianne, Sam, Derek, Philip, and others—a big thank you!

To Ben Reeves for kindly participating in an interview for the written component of this thesis. I am grateful to have had the chance to meet you and learn more about your practice.

To the staff at McIntosh Gallery for your assistance in organizing, coordinating and installing my thesis exhibition: Dr. Helen Gregory, Brian Lambert, and Abby Vincent—I appreciate your hard work.

To parents, Tara and Gary, my sister Maria, my Aunt Laurie and Uncle Iain for your unwavering support and encouragement over the years.

To Mallory Frederick for being the best art critic.

To Bob for your modeling services.

Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Summary for Lay Audience	ii
Keywords	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
Table of Contents	v
Introduction	1
Chapter 1: Extended Artist Statement	3
Bibliography	15
Supplemental Reading List	17
Chapter 2: Practice Documentation	18
Chapter 3: Interview with Ben Reeves	34
Curriculum Vitae	46

Introduction

In supplement to my Master of Fine Arts thesis exhibition, this dossier aims to give context to my paintings and the research that informs their creation. It consists of three main chapters: an extended artist statement, photographic documentation of my thesis exhibition, and an interview with Vancouver-based painter and professor at Emily Carr University, Ben Reeves.

The first chapter of this dossier is composed of an extended artist statement that extrapolates on the personal and theoretical context from which my Master's thesis work is generated. In this artist statement, I outline the questions I engage with in my studio practice and the various sources that inform the way I contextualize them. I explore painting's relationship to perception as articulated by phenomenologists; how painting, though confined to a static frame, might visually express time's passage; and lastly, I reflect more broadly on painting's role in our current ecological situation.

The second chapter, Practice Documentation, includes images of selected work created during my MFA candidacy with a focus on the work presented in my thesis exhibition, *At Dusk*, at Western University's McIntosh Gallery from August 11th to September 10th, 2022. This body of work is the culmination of my studio practice's development over two years in the MFA program.

The third chapter is a transcribed interview with painter Ben Reeves, presenting a conversation we had in the summer of 2021 that explores the artist's studio practice. Among other themes, we discuss the development of Reeves' career; painting as a tool to represent perception and memory; the connection between material and 'content' in painting; and the various questions and problems invoked by the medium that have kept Reeves engaged with it

over the past three decades. Our conversation was very generative for me and provided a large source of inspiration in my own practice, informing the ways I created the work for my thesis exhibition over the following year.

Chapter 1: Extended Artist Statement

My current studio practice in painting centres on the following questions: How is space experienced subjectively, and what are the affordances of painting in representing these experiences? Next, what is the enduring relevance of the medium and what role can it play in addressing the environmental urgencies of the present moment? In this comprehensive artist statement, I aim to bring together various philosophies and perspectives—theoretical and studio-based—that have informed my current artistic practice. First, I will draw on phenomenology and ecological philosophy to address these questions, articulating the contemporary salience of painting's inherent potentialities. I will examine these ideas through the lens of other contemporary artists' work, considering the influence of these artists on my own painting practice. Finally, I will articulate the ways these sources inform the specific material and aesthetic concerns employed in the creation of my graduate thesis exhibition, *At Dusk*.

Painting is a means of understanding my experience of the world. The medium's capacity to represent subjective experiences is the foundation of my art practice and grounds related lines of inquiry. Through the process of painting, analogies are created for experiences that resist description, that cannot be fully understood or otherwise accessed. I use painting as a means to document encounters and experiences in my everyday life. Most of the work loosely begins from photographic references or drawings made onsite which are abstracted and interpreted through the process of painting. I usually use a reference to create the initial structure of a painting, and work from memory to complete it. This process is equally important to me as a 'subject' of the work as any particular object or scene. I am less interested in what specifically is represented than how it is represented—my goal is to reflect on and express a particular emotional

atmosphere of an experience. This is where the evocative capacities of colour and gesture—and the intentionality of their execution—become central to the work.

This ‘emotional atmosphere,’ while explored through personal imagery, is shaped by our current collective historical context. In his 2018 book *Being Ecological*, ecological philosopher Timothy Morton argues that our current historical moment is haunted by a sense of unreality. “Being in a place, being in an era, for instance an era of mass extinction,” Morton argues, “is intrinsically uncanny.”¹ This is the lens through which I try to reimagine my subject matter, coupling this ‘uncanniness’ with a sense of premature nostalgia for what may no longer exist in the future.

I am particularly interested in exploring the personal dimensions of time’s passage—using my own experience as a means through which to reflect, more broadly, on how it feels to move through the world today, with these seemingly incomprehensible anxieties as an undercurrent in everyday life. In an effort to counteract this anxiety, I search for the poetics in my everyday experiences—gesturing towards finding beauty in that which might be otherwise overlooked.

Representing Perception Through Painting

Phenomenology provides a useful orientation through which to consider the relationship between perception and its representation. Through investigating “phenomena—appearances of things, or things as they appear in our experience, or the ways we experience things, thus the meanings things have in our experience,”² phenomenology centres consciousness as experienced from the subjective or first-person point of view. This theoretical consideration of consciousness

¹ Timothy Morton, *Being Ecological*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018), 49.

² David Woodruff-Smith, “Phenomenology.” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2018 Edition). Accessed July 18, 2022. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archivessum2018/entries/phenomenology/>.

and subjectivity includes perception and thought as well as the related processes—memory, emotion, and imagination, among others.

The historical connection between the disciplines of phenomenology and painting began with Maurice Merleau-Ponty's work *Cezanne's Doubt*. In his analysis of Cezanne's unique post-impressionist style, Merleau-Ponty argues that the way Cezanne depicted the world through his paintings mirrored the cognitive and sensory act of perception. Merleau-Ponty posited that perception is active, as it is "subtended by an 'intentional arc' which projects round about us our past, our future, our human setting, our physical, ideological and moral situation"—in this "arc," some phenomena are privileged over others, which "stylizes" the act of perception and grounds it in "experiential perspectives that arise from embodiment and our own personal history."³ Cezanne accomplished this through depicting a 'pre-reflexive perception' in his work. The capacity of painting to depict pre-reflexive perceptions is one of the key means through which it is able to connect to—and thereby affect—viewers.

Though written in 1945, *Cezanne's Doubt* provides a perspective that continues to be salient today in our age dominated by the ubiquity of photographs. Merleau-Ponty writes about the capacity of painting to represent perception faithful to a "lived perspective":

By remaining faithful to the phenomena in his investigations of perspective, Cezanne discovered what recent psychologists have come to formulate: the lived perspective, that which we actually perceive, is not a geometric or photographic one. The objects we see close at hand appear smaller, those far away seem larger than they do in a photograph. (This is evident in films: an approaching train gets bigger much faster than a real train would under the same circumstances.) To say that a circle seen obliquely is seen as an

³ Maurice Merleau-Ponty. "Cezanne's Doubt." *Sense and Non-Sense*. Trans. H.L. Dreyfus and P.A. Dreyfus. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1967. First published 1945), 4.

ellipse is to substitute for our actual perception what we would see if we were cameras: in reality we see a form which oscillates around the ellipse without being an ellipse.⁴

This capacity of painting to represent perception as it is ‘lived’ is one of its key affordances and one reason I feel the medium has enduring relevance today. Further, the process of painting itself offers an embodied way through which to reflect on ideas. In her 2015 book *Painting Now*, curator Suzanne Hudson writes, “Painting, too, is capable of manifesting its own signs, not merely as ‘process’ but as embodied thinking. To say this is neither to reassert the preeminence of painting nor to avow its uniqueness, but to claim that painting has become more, rather than less, viable after conceptual art, as an option for giving idea form and hence for differentiating it from other possibilities.”⁵ This kind of “embodied thinking” presents innumerable visual problems to solve and opportunities for growth—in technique and in concept.

While perception is grounded in embodiment and personal history, this is not to say that perception, as well as emotionality, are only subjective—rather, “they let us discover something that belongs to the objects,” as Christian Lotz explains in *The Art of Gerhard Richter*:

The threatening quality of a tiger will not be discovered through observation alone; instead, this quality is a correlate of our fear of the tiger. Accordingly, we understand something *about* the tiger when we establish a psychological or, more specifically, a fearful relation to this animal. It might seem to be rational to run away when a tiger approaches us, but we are only able to run away because we have sensed the fearful quality in the tiger through our fear. Consequently, feelings such as fear and anxiety are not beyond reason or “irrational”; rather, they belong to our full understanding of our

⁴ Merleau-Ponty, “Cezanne’s Doubt,” 8.

⁵ Suzanne Hudson, *Painting Now* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2015), 25.

world, which includes nature. Similarly, the experience of landscape paintings that we describe in terms of moods or “tones” is not simply an expression of a subjective moment; instead, we should look at these characteristics as characteristics of the landscape itself, so that landscape paintings are able to reveal these qualities to us.⁶

The idea of a painting revealing the qualities of its subject is useful to consider in addition its capacity to depict subjective experience as elucidated by phenomenologists such as Merleau-Ponty. In my own practice, I ask: how can I use painting as a means of understanding my surroundings? In the following section, I will explore how I use painting to reflect on the qualities of the interior of my current domestic space and the poetics that might be found therein.

Poetics of the Everyday: Space, Blue, and Time’s Passage

In my recent paintings I have been particularly interested in capturing the quality of evening light in a domestic space—the small apartment I rented throughout the second year of my graduate program. Each painting created for the show explores an area or inhabitant of this space: doors, windows and mirrors; hallways, desks and tables; the resident cat. Much has been written about the poetics of domestic life—in the domain of aesthetics, perhaps most famously by philosopher Gaston Bachelard in his 1958 book *The Poetics of Space*. In the book’s introduction, Bachelard writes:

If I were asked to name the chief benefit of the house, I should say: the house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace [...] Therefore, the places in which we have experienced daydreaming reconstitute

⁶ Christian Lotz, *The Art of Gerhard Richter* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015), 185.

themselves in a new daydream, and it is because our memories of former dwelling-places are relived as daydreams these dwelling-places of the past remain in us for all the time.⁷

What kind of daydreams might be evoked by our current historical moment? In writing about this work, it is hard to avoid mentioning that it was generated while I was largely isolated at home during the Covid-19 pandemic. During this time, the apartment took on a particular atmosphere: home was simultaneously safe and stifling. Quotidian scenes of doors and windows, as thresholds between interior and exterior space, became saturated with meaning. Bachelard touches on this too, which feels as relevant today as it was when it was written more than half a century ago:

How concrete everything becomes in the world of the spirit when an object, a mere door, can give images of hesitation, temptation, desire, security, welcome and respect. If one were to give an account of all the doors one has closed and opened, of all the doors one would like to reopen, one would have to tell the story of one's entire life.”⁸

During this time, it was hard not to imbue meaning in or ways of reading the space around me even if I did not actively search for it.

Further, twilight and its many invocations hold particular significance in this work. The French expression “entre chien et loup,” or “between dog and wolf” in English, denotes a time where the quality of light creates a context wherein one cannot differentiate between a dog and a wolf—whether we feel safe or threatened, whether our surroundings are familiar or unfamiliar. This reflection on the conditions created by light’s subtle shifts and nuances is one way through which Morton’s idea of the uncanny can be expressed. There is a tension between reality and

⁷ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), 6.

⁸ Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 224.

unreality invoked by the looming change to come—a sense of transition and anticipation that speaks to the anxious tenor of the present time.

The palette I've employed in the work relates to this idea. Most of the paintings are comprised of varying shades of blue rendered in a limited range. In addition to blue's seemingly obvious status as the colour of a twilight sky, I am also interested in its capacity to evoke a particular mood within a painting. While the invocations of colour are of course culturally determined and not inherently fixed, many have nevertheless attempted to define them. In his *Theory of Colours*, Goethe wrote about blue, "As the upper sky and distant mountains appear blue, so a blue surface seems to retire from us. But as we readily follow an agreeable object that flies from us, so we love to contemplate blue—not because it advances to us, but because it draws us after it."⁹ Contemporary writers such as Rebecca Solnit have echoed and expanded on this idea. In her essay, *The Blue of Distance*, Solnit writes:

The color of that distance is the color of an emotion, the color of solitude and of desire, the color of there seen from here, the color of where you are not. And the color of where you can never go. For the blue is not in the place those miles away at the horizon, but in the atmospheric distance between you and the mountains.¹⁰

If a window or a door functions both practically and poetically as a threshold from one space to another, the colour blue has a similar function as that which punctuates the distance between places. Solnit suggests that this 'desire'—the distance or the threshold—might be embraced:

We treat desire as a problem to be solved [...] though often it is the distance between us and the object of desire that fills the space in between with the blue of longing. I wonder sometimes whether with a slight adjustment of perspective it could be cherished as a

⁹ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Goethe's Theory of Colours*. Trans. Charles Eastlake. (London: John Murray, 1840), 310.

¹⁰ Rebecca Solnit, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* (New York: Viking, 2005), 25.

sensation on its own terms, since it is as inherent to the human condition as blue is to distance? If you can look across the distance without wanting to close it up, if you can own your longing in the same way that you own the beauty of that blue that can never be possessed?¹¹

In creating these paintings, I have tried to embrace this question, gesturing towards finding beauty in fleeting daily moments that might otherwise be overlooked.

This effort is succinctly expressed through the idea of *mono no aware*, a concept in Japanese philosophy that refers to an awareness of the transience of things. *Aware* translates as sorrow, compassion or pathos, while *mono no* attributes this awareness to things of the world. This sensitivity to ephemera is related to the notion of *mujō*, “which claims that no thing in the world is permanent, that all things, both beautiful and painful, must inevitably pass away.”¹²

For Motoori Norinaga, a scholar of Japanese literature who brought the term to the forefront of the Japanese aesthetic tradition, *mono no aware* is “a nostalgic concept, shot through with a sense of loss.”¹³ This concept informs my approach to rendering subjects. The fundamental impermanence of experience, through the lens of *mono no aware*, is “simultaneously an invitation to lament and to celebrate: everything is fated to disappear; however, transience only intensifies the beauty of things: if man were never to fade away like the dew of Adashino, never to vanish like the smoke over Toribeyama, how things would lose their power to move us.”¹⁴

¹¹ Solnit, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, 25.

¹² Mark Meli, “Motoori Norinaga’s Hermeneutic of *Mono no Aware*: The Link between Ideal and Tradition.” In Michael F. Marra (ed.), *Japanese Hermeneutics: Current Debates on Aesthetics and Interpretation*. (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2002), 60.

¹³ David Bordwell, “Ozu and the Poetics of Cinema.” (Ann Arbor: MPublishing, University of Michigan Library, 2004), 28.

¹⁴ Donald Keene, “*Essays in Idleness: The Tsurezuregusa of Kenkō*.” (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), 7.

Many contemporary painters have made work relating to this idea, even if not explicitly referencing *mono no aware*. The work of American painter Lois Dodd is one example. Over the course of her career, Dodd has created a body of work dedicated to a close examination of her everyday surroundings: the interior of her apartment; flowers in her garden; dilapidated buildings in her neighbourhood; self-portraits of her at the easel rendering these things. In her work, subject matter and viewpoint become seamlessly merged. Her body of work in its totality can be viewed as both a meditation on careful looking and seeing as well as a rumination on time's passing. John Yau writes in his essay on her work, *Every Day is a Good Day*:

Dodd neither laments nor rails against the passing of time. Rather she records and even celebrates it through attention to light and shadow. By being open and vulnerable to time passing, Dodd infuses her paintings with a gravity and depth of feeling that few artists achieve [...] in her diverse oeuvre, Dodd shares something with John Cage by celebrating those moments where seemingly nothing is happening [...] the artist links color and light to not only a particular time and season, but also to something more elusive—her mental and emotional weather.”¹⁵

The “mental and emotional weather” felt in Dodd's work is something I also hope to depict in my own. Just as important as the particular subject, the atmosphere, mood, and viewpoint create a depth of feeling in the work. Yau writes, “Seeing evidence of entropy all around her—falling windowpanes and weathered clapboard walls—she doesn't pull back from what the evidence tells her, doesn't try to deny what she knows to be true, which is that time

¹⁵ John Yau, “Every Day is a Good Day,” in *Lois Dodd: Catching the Light*, ed. Barbara O'Brien. (Kansas City, MO: Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, 2012), 16.

cannot be stopped.”¹⁶ In this way Dodd’s paintings exemplify a way of careful looking and considered representation of daily life, coupled with a sense of pathos towards time’s passage.

What Does it Mean to be Making Paintings Today?

The question of painting’s relevance is one that has long been levelled at artists and preoccupied critics. For many artists, it is fundamentally an existential question: what is the purpose of our studio work—what does it do? Other artists would argue that the spirit of asking what painting “does” is misplaced—painting should not be expected to serve a function: the purview of fine art should not include utilitarian concerns.

According to Morton, “the experience of art provides a model for the kind of coexistence ecological ethics and politics wants to achieve between humans and nonhumans.”¹⁷ It does this by allowing us to coexist and be affected by another entity—the art itself. To address the environmental urgencies we are facing, according to Morton, it is necessary to pivot to an alternative worldview that de-centres the human and privileges connections with nonhumans:

We could talk about our current historical phase in many ways: entering an ecological era, learning how to cope with global warming, and so on. But what all these labels have in common is *transitioning to caring about nonhumans in a more conscious way*.¹⁸

In Morton’s words, “art isn’t just decoration. It’s causal. *It does something to you*. [...] An artwork does something to you, so if you think that only lifeforms can do things to you, this is a weird and challenging fact.”¹⁹ The notion of art as “causal”—affective—may first bring to mind the idea of art as social practice. Much recent discourse in contemporary art has highlighted the

¹⁶ Yau, “Every Day is a Good Day,” 20.

¹⁷ Morton, *Being Ecological*, 41.

¹⁸ Morton, *Being Ecological*, 119.

¹⁹ Morton, *Being Ecological*, 128.

concept of a socially engaged art that aims to invoke social or political change through collaboration or participatory elements. The “causality” to which I am referring may be found in this kind of art, but I argue that it exists in a subtle and perhaps unexpected iteration in the experience of art more broadly, including objects such as paintings:

Art is actually a tiny but still recognisable fragment of the kind of larger world, the mostly nonhuman world of influences and designs that go beyond us and violate our idea of who ‘owns’ what and who is running the show, such that causality seems to have something animistic or paranormal about it. It’s not a glue that falsely fixes bourgeois dichotomies such as subject and object. I’m talking about a subject that is a dangerous toxin to anthropocentrism and mechanical causality theories and the law of noncontradiction and default utilitarianism.²⁰

In its assessment of art’s role in addressing the pressing environmental questions of our time, *Being Ecological* provides artists with reasons for optimism in their studio practices. Further, in addition to describing art’s role, it provokes questions about art’s responsibility to the work of science and the ways in which art might productively contribute to interdisciplinary discussions.

Returning to the question of the relevance of painting, Richter suggests that it has often been a matter of faith. What keeps artists in their studios is faith in the meaning in their work.

According to Richter:

One has to believe in what one is doing, one has to commit oneself inwardly, in order to do painting. Once obsessed, one ultimately carries it to the point of believing that one might change human beings through painting. But if one lacks passionate commitment, there is nothing left to do. Then it is best to leave it alone.²¹

²⁰ Morton, *Being Ecological*, 135.

²¹ Lotz, *The Art of Gerhard Richter*, 70.

This “passionate commitment” Richter describes is often held onto tenuously in a society characterized by valuing “default utilitarianism,” as put by Morton. In *Being Ecological*, Morton articulates the use-value of art not in utilitarian terms, but as a philosophically salient model with urgent relevance in addressing the environmental and societal questions we are facing. This allows us to productively rethink the role art might play reframing our understanding of our relationship to the environment.

In a 2011 interview, Richter was asked what he felt the purpose of art was. He replied, “For surviving this world... [Art] has the measure of all the unfathomable, senseless things, the incessant ruthlessness of our world. And art shows us how to see things that are constructive and good, and to be an active part in that.”²² In creating this body of work and considering these questions, I feel I have come to understand Richter’s statement.

²² Sheena Wagstaff, *Gerhard Richter: Painting After All*. (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2020), 21.

Works Cited

- Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1958.
- Bordwell, David. *Ozu and the Poetics of Cinema*. Ann Arbor: MPublishing, University of Michigan Library, 2004.
- von Goethe, Johann Wolfgang. *Goethe's Theory of Colours*. Trans. Charles Eastlake. London: John Murray, 1840.
- Hudson, Suzanne. *Painting Now*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2015.
- Keene, Donald. *Essays in Idleness: The Tsurezuregusa of Kenkō*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1967.
- Lotz, Christian. *The Art of Gerhard Richter*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. "Cezanne's Doubt." *Sense and Non-Sense*. Trans. H.L.Dreyfus and P.A. Dreyfus. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964. First published 1945.
- Meli, Mark. "Motoori Norinaga's Hermeneutic of Mono no Aware: The Link between Ideal and Tradition." In Michael F. Marra (ed.), *Japanese Hermeneutics: Current Debates on Aesthetics and Interpretation*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press. pp. 60-75, 2002.
- Morton, Timothy. *Being Ecological*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018.
- O'Brien, Barbara, John Yau, Alison Ferris, and Lois Dodd. *Lois Dodd: Catching the Light*. Kansas City, MO: Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, 2012.
- Solnit, Rebecca. *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*. New York: Viking, 2005.

Smith, David Woodruff. "Phenomenology." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Accessed July 18, 2022. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archivessum2018/entries/phenomenology/>.

Wagstaff, Sheena. *Gerhard Richter: Painting After All*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2020.

Supplemental Reading List

The following bibliography includes sources not directly referenced in my comprehensive artist statement but that were nonetheless important in the development of my studio research.

Andersson, Karin Mamma, and Ann-Sofi Noring. *Mamma Andersson*. Stockholm: Moderna Museet, 2007.

Crowther, Paul. *What Drawing and Painting Really Mean: The Phenomenology of Image and Gesture*. Abingdon: Routledge Press, 2019.

Garrels, Gary, Russell Ferguson, and Vija Celmins. *Vija Celmins - to Fix the Image in Memory*. San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2018.

Jarman, Derek. *Blue*. New York: Overlook Press, 1994.

Kahrs, Johannes. *Lonely Long Meaningless Way Home*. Zürich: JRP/Ringier, 2006.

Nelson, Maggie. *Bleuets*. Seattle: Wave Books, 2005.

Noda, Tetsuya, and Robert Flynn Johnson. *Days in a Life: the Art of Tetsuya Noda*. San Francisco: Chong-Moon Lee Center for Asian Art and Culture, 2004.

Richter, Gerhard. *Text: Writings, Interviews and Letters 1961-2007*, London: Thames and Hudson, 2009.

Tuymans, Luc, and Ulrich Loock. *Luc Tuymans*. London: Phaidon, 2004.

Wong, Matthew, Julian Cox, Nancy Spector, and Winnie Wong. *Matthew Wong: Blue View*. Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 2021.

Chapter 2: Practice Documentation

Figure 1.
Living room window, 5:18 pm
Oil on canvas
24x31"
2021



Figure 2.
Living room window, 5:52 pm
Oil on canvas
24x31"
2021



Figure 3.
Desk
Oil on linen
30x40"
2022



Figure 4.
Orchid
Oil on linen
11x14"
2022



Figure 5.
Bathroom Mirror
Oil on canvas
36x48"
2022



Figure 6.
Waiting
Oil on linen
14x18"
2022



Figure 7.
Bedside Table
Oil on linen
11x14"
2021



Figure 8.
Two Cups
Oil on linen
11x14"
2022



Figure 9.
January Window
Oil on canvas
48x60"
2022



Figure 10.
February Window
Oil on canvas
48x60"
2022



Figure 11.
At Dusk
Oil on canvas
48x60"
2022

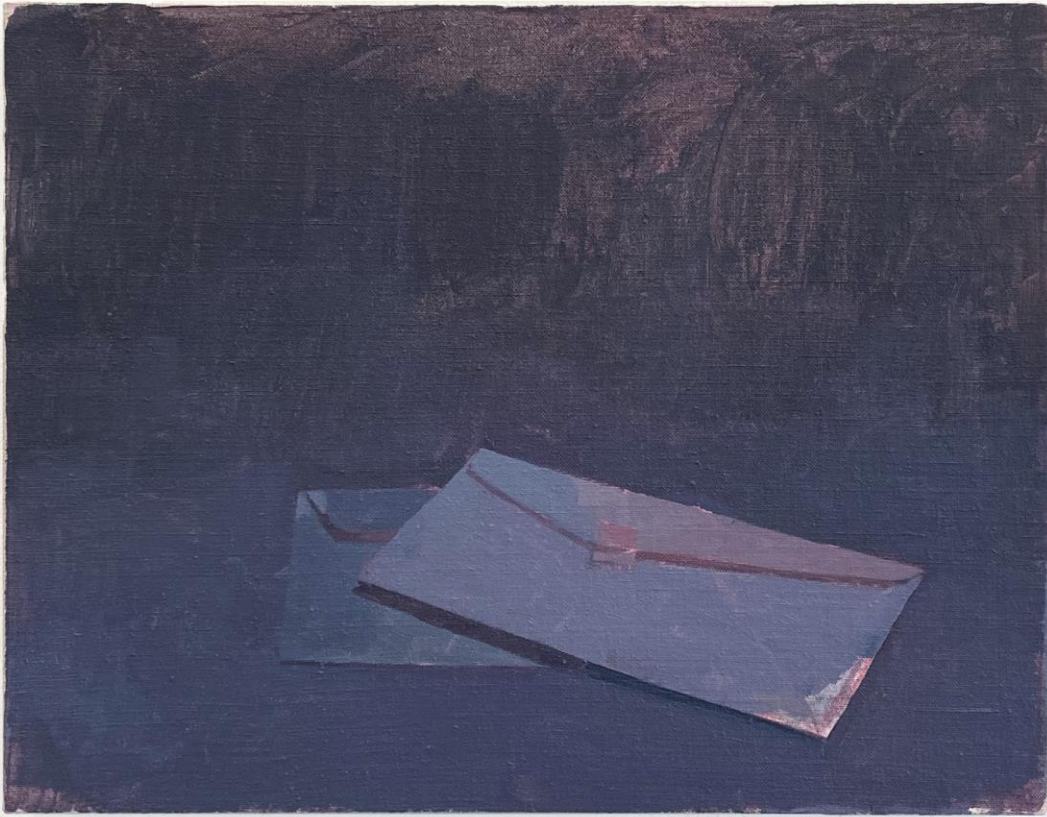


Figure 12.
Mail
Oil on linen
14x18"
2022



Figure 13.
You Were Looking Out
Oil on canvas
48x60"
2022



Figure 14.
Three Doors
Oil on canvas (Diptych)
96x60"
2022



Figure 15.
Installation View, McIntosh Gallery
Photo by Anahi Gonzalez



Figure 16.
Installation View, McIntosh Gallery
Photo by Abby Vincent

Chapter 3: Opening Up Perception

An Interview with Ben Reeves

Ben Reeves is a Vancouver-based artist and educator working primarily in the medium of painting. Throughout his career, Reeves has approached the medium of painting from a multitude of angles, investigating both its conceptual and material capacities. Thematically underpinning this ongoing research is his concern with representing perception: through painting, Reeves seeks to “open up” the moment of perception, inviting us to reflect on visual and emotional phenomena we might otherwise overlook. His work, generally grounded in figuration, is highly evocative. In his most recent series, entitled *Valley Nights*, Reeves transforms everyday scenes of a Vancouver suburb into sensitively rendered, dream-like environments. Revealing and obfuscating visual information in layers of both thin washes and thick impasto, the compositions depict a world that’s simultaneously familiar and destabilized. In the following interview, Reeves discusses his practice, thematic interests, and enduring relationship to painting as a means of understanding the world.

Michelle Paterok: Could you provide some background information about yourself and your practice?

Ben Reeves: My practice has always been centered on drawing and painting—painting in particular. When I was a younger artist, as a student at UBC doing my undergrad, I wouldn’t have called myself a painter. Though of course as a student it’s always useful to explore and play with other things, it also wasn’t really advantageous to label yourself as a painter, so I just called

myself an artist. I worked in a way that I thought was a more conceptual mode: even when I was using paint, there was a certain kind of conceptual distance involved—somewhat calculated, I guess. It might have been because of the climate at the university at the time. Painting was going through another one of its many deaths, so it wasn't the most fashionable thing to be doing. But it's become clear over the years to me, looking back, that I've been a painter all along. After I graduated and was working as an artist, my work did tend to interrogate the medium of painting sometimes in a more conceptual way. To play with it, examine it, exaggerate aspects of it. But over time, it's been more and more steadily becoming entrenched in using paint as a kind of medium—an avenue—to explore and reflect on the world. A lot of the work earlier in my career that was in some ways dissecting painting or interrogating aspects of it shows up still in my current practice, but in a much more fluid way, engaged with using paint as a way of thinking about the world. But at the same time, it still does hold for me that as I'm using this paint as a medium to explore the world in different ways, it always seems somewhat necessary for me to be interrogating the medium through which I'm reflecting on things. So, I'm always studying painting at the same time as I seem to be utilizing it to think about things more generally.

MP: What about painting has interested you to such an extent that you've spent your career dissecting it?

BR: I'm so inside of that question that it's hard to have perspective to have a clear answer to that, but there are a couple of things immediately come to mind. One is that as a young kid, I was always drawing and painting, often being applauded for my technical abilities. I was the kid in the class that could draw and paint things that looked the way they looked in the world. I was

rewarded for that and, as a result, it became wrapped up in my identity. As much as that was useful as a foundation for the career I've developed, it's also been something I have had to actively work against my entire career—because the kind of more conventional modes of realism that I was employing that I would get applauded for were not necessarily the most interesting things to do with painting. I still sometimes wrestle with these impulses towards these more conventional choices: it's still in back there somewhere wrapped up in my identity, so I need to be consciously working against that in order to open new spaces. As a kid, drawing and painting is similar to any kind of child's play. For example, when a kid is playing with toy trucks or whatever, they are thinking through scenarios in the world to navigate and understand things. And for me, even at a very young age, drawing and painting was a place to do that. It seemed to be useful in that way, and that's how I still employ it today.

Another thing that's long fascinated me is that paint is material stuff: it has a physicality—it's part of the physical world. So even as I might be using paint to depict and reflect on the world, I'm pushing around this material stuff of the world right in front of me. There's a way the materiality of paint yields certain understandings of what I'm thinking about, because it *is* the world. Paint is ground up minerals and oil. You know, the colour ultramarine blue—I always used to think that ultramarine meant “bluer than the ocean” or “bluer than the sea”—but actually, the name comes from “beyond the sea”—because that's where lapis lazuli was mined in Afghanistan. So it actually referred to a physical location in the world, because it's a physical resource—a mined resource from the ground. Because paint has that kind of physicality, it yields understandings about the world to me. It also resists certain understandings, so it complicates things and frustrates things in useful ways.

MP: That's an interesting point about the physicality of paint. Recently I've tried digital painting on an iPad, and I found that I was just not interested at all in the digital surface—though I'm not exactly sure why. There is something satisfying about pushing this stuff around.

BR: There's the physicality of it—how it relates to the body. The body of the maker and the body of the viewer—there's a kind of tangible connection. And there's how the painting is an indexical surface to touch. You don't need an impasto to convey this kind of tangibility—a drain or a wash, solvent or pigment just draining down the surface is a very tactile and tangible surface. It has an immediacy in its own way. There's also a kind of romance with the older forms of painting—iPads just haven't been romanticized yet.

MP: You mentioned the tension, particularly as a young artist, between being rewarded for your skill versus doing something you think is more interesting. What does “more interesting” mean to you?

BR: That's a hard question to answer—it's always kind of fraught and complicated. I think there is a certain way of setting up a picture, which is somewhat conventional in terms of Western kinds of picture-making—this idea of the illusionistic window. It comes with a whole set of problematic ideologies, and we see this playing out in the world today. There is a certain way this illusionistic window separates the viewer and the artist from the subject matter of, say, the landscape or the depicted space, as though we are not part of it—like we are separate from it.

Rosalind Krauss curated an exhibition in the '60s and spoke about this in the catalogue—in the Western depiction of a landscape, even if there is a figure or something in the space that's being depicted, there's a sense that the space is continuous behind them and that if they were to move, there wouldn't be a gap or a hole. They are independent of the space. And it's reinforced by that idea of the window that puts us on one side. It's as if the world is complete without us and we are actually being posited as being complete without the world. It's a kind of Cartesianism that is really entrenched in Western picture-making—"I think, therefore I am," to use that kind of shorthand.

That separation—rather than finding ways to construct pictures or representations of things that might suggest more of a reciprocity or a relationship, that our identity is bound up with where we are, and what interactions we're having with other people and places and so on. The alternative to that would be trying to figure out ways of picture-making that open up that kind of reciprocal space—that space of relationships. That's one example of what is "more interesting" to me. I'm not sure how much my work does to redress this situation, but one of the things I've been really interested in is the threshold of the painted surface of the picture plane. That's also tied up with my interest in the physicality of paint, because on the viewer's side of that picture plane threshold, into the imaginary space of painting, then it becomes a depicted space—and I love that. I think my work is still bound up with this illusionistic window, but I'm still thinking it through: the picture plane as well as the space the viewer is in, and how the painting materially might be simultaneously in all of those places at once, or it crosses back and forth, depending on your attention.

MP: I think that's something unique about your work. I'm thinking about the *Smokers* series you did a number of years ago, where the material quality of your paint was very evident, but the materiality functioned in an illusionistic way as well.

BR: Those are great examples of what I was just trying to talk about. There's a weird kind of believability. Those grey blobs of paint are not believable as smoke at all in a certain sense, because they're almost grotesque—like big, gloopy blobs of paint. But they are believable. My interest when I was first making them was to use the material to almost undo the depiction of the portrait—like vandalizing the portrait by smearing this thick grey paint across the surface. It was liberating in terms of what I was talking about before regarding being praised for when things “looked right.” I was constantly trying to open up space beyond that orientation, to use painting differently from that. To destroy that kind of attention, or that kind of thinking about space, with this other gesture. The weird thing about it was that when I was looking at them, it did kind of destroy the portrait—but in the process it asserted a different way of thinking and being as a painter that was exciting to me in the moment. In another moment, those blobs of paint seemed to float in front of the portrait—they were true to materials and flatness of the surface, and it was all just paint—so they kind of destroyed the portrait space. At the same time, they seem to drift and enhance the space of the portrait. Weirdly, because they seemed to be physically floating in front of the sitter, they actually felt more real than clouds of smoke—more than if I had painted them carefully and illusionistically. In one way or another, I keep thinking about and investigating that strange moment—that kind of moment of the threshold of painting, of the materiality of painting, and how it can transform into things that it is not.

MP: Was it in creating that series that you developed that interest, or has it been longstanding throughout your career?

BR: I think it's been there for a long time in different ways. I had an earlier series where I was just drawing brushstrokes. Obviously, that's an incredible flattening out of the visual surface, and in a way that was the other side of the coin. I remember watching a documentary on the Group of Seven on CBC Television as a kid where the camera zoomed in on a tiny detail of a painting of the Rockies, and the physicality of the paint became so interchangeable as the mountain rock that it was depicting, that made the rock so tangibly real. Clearly that's been playing in my head since I was really young.

MP: There is so much content within that interplay between the tangibility of the materials and the illusions they produce.

BR: And also, just stepping back into that conversation we were having about the illusionistic window of picture-making—that's associated with certain ideological positions about the world. There's a lot, conceptually, intellectually, going on there, if you really attend to it. For example, just making a painting of a pear on a plate is an incredibly complex set of intellectual decisions. Most of us don't really stop to think about that too much, but I think that's a really rich space.

MP: This is something that didn't register to me in a meaningful way until recently. As a younger artist, I always felt I needed to find a particular subject, topic or cause—that the work needed to be explicitly 'about' something in order to seem relevant or valid. But

really, there is almost infinite content just in careful observation or otherwise attempting to record your experience.

BR: It's all about how perceptions are culturally coded. And I don't know about you, but typically paintings never go the way I plan them to. I might start with an idea, but as soon as I start executing it, the material doesn't quite behave the way I expect or want it to. My body doesn't quite do what it's supposed to do; my brushes, my tools aren't quite what I anticipated them being exactly. There are a whole bunch of different agencies intersecting there that interfere. They interfere in a positive way, but they really complicate the picture-making. One of the things that's really significant there is that while it's a very intellectual endeavor, it's also a very physical, bodily endeavor. There's also a rich cultural, historical knowledge and memory that comes into play constantly. Whenever you make a mark, you're thinking of so many painters before you and you're unconsciously positioning what you do in relation to how you understand their practices.

MP: Part of the reason I feel so attracted to your work is that in looking at your paintings, it feels like you've rendered an internal, emotional experience that obviously one can't see in 'reality.' Of course, it's your own subjectivity, perception and mediation of the world, but at the same time, something relatable and communicative. Are you actively trying to mediate an internal experience when you're working? Or otherwise, what role does perception play in your work?

BR: On one hand, I am very interested in that space of perception. As I understand it, so much of what happens when we're perceiving things in the world is unconscious. Our brains are constantly working to resolve a picture—say, visually—or resolve an understanding of whatever we're experiencing. When visual information enters our brain, our visual cortex decides how to decipher it. There are actually something like nine times as many pathways going out from the top of the visual cortex as there is information coming in. In other words, we get a very small amount of information, but our brains are very good at thinking they know what we're seeing—resolving a picture out of it. So much of our experience of the world is based on how we already understand it to be. In my work, I like to challenge the resolution of the image, so that it's kind of on that cusp of resolution and falling apart. My thinking around that is that it's, in a way, trying to open up the feeling or the experience of how that perception unconsciously happens in the brain—to make it something we're more aware of when we're looking at the world.

MP: Painting then becomes a tool to open up this experience that we might otherwise take for granted. Does memory tie into this as well in your process?

BR: Even in terms of that perception that happens in less than a millisecond, all the time, it's how we've learned to perceive things. That involves our memory—personal and cultural; how we've been trained and how we've experienced things before—so it's constantly with us. In any current moment, I'm bringing this larger history of memory with me. As painters, we talk about all of this baggage we drag with us that we constantly have to deal with. Even if we're making a painting of the pear on a plate like I mentioned before, we're constantly dragging, fighting,

negotiating with all this stuff—and that’s another reason the pear on a plate is complicated right away.

MP: Thinking about engaging with how to depict memory and perception brings to mind Cezanne and other post-impressionist and impressionist artists in whose work these ideas were at the forefront. What are your thoughts on working in this kind of art historical lineage? How might we use some of these same questions they were asking to inform a more contemporary line of inquiry?

BR: I’m really interested in those painters and what they were doing, but from today’s perspective, how do you activate and open that up again? Those painters might be associated with a space of privilege, for example—which is something that can be interrogated now. I think that also, a lot of the theories around colour and light that the impressionists were employing—and even in phenomenology texts such as *Cezanne’s Doubt*—they were written in a way that assumes a kind of neutrality. Particularly with the impressionists and the colour theories they were using, they assume a kind of objective way of engaging with the world. They used these seemingly objective, scientifically-framed colour theories. And now, I think that there’s more awareness that things are always political, things are always bound up in different subjectivities, different cultural histories—these things aren’t universal. So then, what does that mean now, if we look at the impressionist division of colour and so on? How would we tackle that differently now? These are things I’m currently rethinking.

MP: I had read in a previous interview that in your series *Valley Nights*, the paintings are of imaginary spaces that borrow heavily from where you live. I was curious, when you're in the studio making them, to what extent are you imagining and working from memory, versus using photo references or drawings?

BR: Some are completely imagined—I just invent them as I go. Or I invent a drawing and use that. Sometimes there will be details of something that I use some photo references for. In the past, I would set up a whole composition with a photograph—it would start with the photo and follow a path from there, but I haven't done that for a while. I might use some photo resources just to get certain details not to stand out awkwardly. Or, I might take a reference like that, draw it, and then make a painting from the drawing. I try to make sure that I'm using it in a way that is important for me and for that painting. Photographs in particular are tricky—it's very comfortable and pleasing and easy just to follow the photograph—going back to what we were talking about earlier regarding being rewarded for pleasingly rendered pictures. If I'm not really careful, I'll just start doing a photorealistic painting. So, I deliberately try to interrupt that.

MP: My process used to heavily rely on photo references, but recently I've been thinking about how to some extent, the photo becomes a kind of trap—because I sometimes feel so limited to representing what is already there. I can get lost in quagmire of rendering details and forget my initial intentions for the painting, forget what really wanted to communicate—the big picture.

BR: That's exactly what I mean. I want to make sure I'm using information in the way that I need it, rather than being dictated to by the photograph. I've heard Jeff Wall say this more than once—as a photographer, when he's walking down the street and encounters a situation that would make a good picture, the first thing he does is not take a picture. I took from that, when he said that—that he would walk away and keep the idea of the image in his mind in the way that it felt important to him, and then he would rebuild that image in his own terms, so that he's not bound by specifically what he observed in that moment. It's something I keep in mind in my own work.

After thanking Reeves for the conversation and his time, the interview ended here after approximately an hour and a half.

Curriculum Vitae

Michelle Paterok

b. 1994, Edmonton, Canada

Education

- 2022 MFA Visual Art, Western University, London, ON
- 2016 BFA Art and Design, University of Alberta, Edmonton, AB
- 2013 Ritsumeikan University, Kyoto, Japan (Japanese language course)

Solo and Duo Exhibitions

- 2022 *At Dusk*, McIntosh Gallery, London, ON
- 2021 *Night on Earth*, Satellite Project Space, London, ON
- 2020 *Darkness, Light, Wind then Silence*, Kosho Temple, Himi, Japan (in collaboration with Tomo Endo)
- 2018 *Unauthorized*, Vorres Museum, Paiania, Greece (curated by Caterina Pizanias)

Group Exhibitions (Selected)

- 2022 *Annual Juried Exhibition*, Latcham Art Centre, Stouffville, ON
- 2021 *Distance Makes the Heart Grow Weak*, ArtLAB Gallery, Western University, London, ON
- 2020 *Be Here, Be There*, Forest City Gallery, London, ON
- 2020 *Nengajo-ten*, Nanto Fukumitsu Art Museum, Nanto, Japan
- 2019 *Himi City Annual Art Exhibition*, Fureai Centre, Himi, Japan
- 2019 *The Art Thing*, HOUSEHOLD Gallery, Himi, Japan
- 2019 *Copper Prints*, Mikando Gallery, Tonami, Japan

- 2017 *Schmoozy*, Latitude 53, Edmonton, AB
- 2016 *Denouement: Bachelor of Fine Arts Graduation Show*, FAB Gallery, Edmonton, AB
- 2016 *Fresh Prints*, SNAP Gallery, Edmonton, AB
- 2016 *Annotations*, Rutherford Atrium, University of Alberta, Edmonton, AB
- 2016 *Frame of Reference*, Milner Gallery, Edmonton, AB
- 2016 *Bridging Encounters*, Latitude 53, Edmonton, AB
- 2015 *Artist Showcase*, Sugarbowl, Edmonton, AB
- 2015 *The Marginal In Sight*, Rutherford Atrium, University of Alberta, Edmonton, AB
- 2014 *The Book as a Weapon of Change II*, Rutherford Atrium, University of Alberta, Edmonton, AB
- 2013 *The Book as a Weapon of Change*, Rutherford Atrium, University of Alberta, Edmonton, AB
- 2013 *i see you pan*, Latitude 53, Edmonton, AB

Public Art

- 2017 Commissioned Mural, Room at the Top, University of Alberta Students' Union Building (in collaboration with Agata Garbowska)

Residencies

- 2018 Vorres Museum Residency, Paiania, Greece

Grants and Awards

- 2021-22 Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) Joseph-Armand Bombardier CGS Master's Scholarship, Western University
- 2021 Lynne-Lionel Scott Scholarship, Western University
- 2021 Western Graduate Travel Grant, Western University

- 2020-22 Graduate Research Scholarship, Western University
- 2020 Visual Arts and New Media Individual Project Grant for MFA Studies, Alberta Foundation for the Arts
- 2020 Faculty of Arts and Humanities Chair's Entrance Scholarship, Western University
- 2018 Visual Arts and New Media Individual Project Grant for Vorres Museum Residency, Alberta Foundation for the Arts
- 2018 CIP Travel Grant, Edmonton Arts Council
- 2016 Samuel James and Augusta Kreye Deans Award, Department of Art and Design, University of Alberta
- 2016 Nomination for BMO 1st Art! Invitational Student Art Competition, Printmaking Division, University of Alberta
- 2015 Elizabeth Ann Burgess Award in Contemporary Art, Department of Art and Design, University of Alberta
- 2015 Roger S. Smith Undergraduate Researcher Award, Faculty of Arts, University of Alberta
- 2015 Non-Academic Staff Association Student Award, University of Alberta
- 2013-15 Jason Lang Scholarship, University of Alberta
- 2013 Prince Takamado Japan-Canada Memorial Fund Travel Award, Prince Takamado Japan Centre, University of Alberta
- 2012 Alexander Rutherford Scholarship, Government of Alberta

Professional and Volunteer Activities

- 2021-22 Teaching Assistant, Intermediate and Advanced Print Media, Western University. Instructor: Prof. Tricia Johnson
- 2020-21 Teaching Assistant, Introduction to Print Media, Western University. Instructor: Prof. Patrick Mahon
- 2020-21 Contributing Editor, TBA Journal, Western University

- 2020 Research Assistant to Dr. Helen Gregory, McIntosh Gallery, Western University
- 2018-20 Assistant Language Teacher through the JET Programme
Toyama Prefectural Board of Education, Toyama, Japan
- 2018-20 Exhibition and Event Planner, Toyama Artists' Group, Toyama, Japan
- 2015 Program Intern, E4C's ArtStart, Edmonton, AB
- 2015-16 Vice President, University of Alberta Visual Arts Students' Association
- 2014 Student Representative, University of Alberta Visual Arts Students' Association

Conference Papers and Presentations

Paterok, Michelle. "Reflecting on Frequency in Neuroscience and Visual Art." NRD 2021: Western University's Neuroscience Research Day (NRD). Society of Neuroscience Graduate Students, Western University, London, ON. 2021.

Publications and Catalogues

ArtMaze Magazine, Issue 28

The Walrus, Special Winter Edition, 21 December 2021

Distance Makes the Heart Grow Weak Exhibition Publication, ArtLAB Gallery, Western University

Toyama TRAM Magazine, 2020 Spring Edition

Denouement, Curious Arts Online, 26 April 2016

Denouement Exhibition Catalogue, University of Alberta Department of Art and Design, April 2016

Annotations Exhibition Catalogue and Collaborative Criticisms, University of Alberta Department of Art and Design, April 2016

Collections

Students' Union, University of Alberta, Edmonton, AB

Contava Inc., Edmonton, AB

Edmonton Exchanger Ltd., Edmonton, AB

Members' Print Exchange, Society of Northern Alberta Print Artists, Edmonton, AB