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Just As It Should Be: Painting and the Discipline of Everyday Life

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Abstract

In this Master of Fine Arts Thesis dossier, I focus on contemporary painting’s capacity to question and challenge the roles and behaviors expected and directed by the social order. I am specifically concerned with the production of a normative subjectivity through the organization and configuration of domestic spaces and objects. Through a Case Study of Belgian artist Michaël Borremans, a Comprehensive Artist Statement of my own art practice, and in examples of my work in the Practice Documentation section, I demonstrate how the discipline of painting can reveal and resist the everyday disciplinary procedures of contemporary society. Through its own expected social role and conventions, painting can be a viable means of exploring these concerns, while offering a method of enacting gestures of resistance and agency.

Keywords

Painting, Contemporary Art, Michaël Borremans, Michel Foucault, Sara Ahmed, Jan Verwoert, Discipline, Bio-power, Agency, Subjectivity
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Introduction

Painting can function to critique and challenge the aesthetic basis of normative social conventions, and to question the visual arrangements of daily life that direct our behaviour and ways of seeing. Through a Case Study of Michaël Borremans’ paintings, a Comprehensive Artist Statement of my own practice, and chronologically arranged examples of my work in the Practice Documentation section, I demonstrate how the practice of painting can interrogate the aesthetic and formal conditions of disciplinary space and the normative behaviours and performances these spaces expect. Through painting, the visual language of daily normative discipline can be interrogated and subverted, and in so doing find a means of enacting gestures of resistance and agency. This thesis document is presented in conjunction with my thesis exhibition *Just As It Should Be* at the McIntosh Gallery, from August 8th to September 5th, 2014.

Through the conditions of its own history, materiality, and social function, painting offers an ideal avenue for investigations into the formal language of social discipline. In my Case Study of Belgian painter Michaël Borremans, I demonstrate his paintings’ ability to intervene effectively in contemporary culture through a formal practice rooted within the historical expectations of his medium. Borremans embeds his practice within the traditional canon of European figure painting, and his paintings evoke the subjects and traditional formal strategies of Velasquez, Courbet and Millet. In the Case Study I show how Borremans uses the conventions of historical figure painting to destabilize the expectations of the genre through surreal and absurd manoeuvres executed
within the medium itself, challenging the salient logic of the spaces his figures inhabit in the paintings and the legitimacy of the roles and behaviours they perform. The murky browns and grays of his palette function to further displace the spaces of the paintings, and lends a sense of austerity that refutes the seemingly productive performances of the models. Borremans subverts the historical conditions of his chosen medium to address contemporary instability and anxiety, using the material and historical confines of painting in order to grapple with the contemporary social order.

Likewise, my own paintings grapple with the conventions and expectations of my chosen medium. The Comprehensive Artist Statement discusses how the material confines and historical expectations of the medium provide an ideal vehicle for my investigations. The disciplinary confines of painting permit the spaces and objects I depict to be placed within an arena of formal criticism, where the aesthetic language of authority and banal discipline can be analyzed and challenged. Through the material and historical parameters of the medium, I can interact with the conditions of contemporary life and disrupt the expectations of these encounters. For me, the practice of painting permits a viable way for approaching and critiquing the order of everyday life, while continuously asserting the aesthetic parameters of that order.

As in the paintings of Borremans, my own work is concerned with the normative roles and performances expected from the spaces of contemporary society. My paintings are sourced from my immediate encounters with daily experience, and interactions with the conventional arrangements of contemporary life. Everyday domestic objects and spaces are painted in order to encounter these objects and spaces in new ways. The Comprehensive Artist Statement, in conjunction with my Practice Documentation,
demonstrates how my formal decisions convey my anxiety with banal normative convention, and work to resist the social aspirations implied through these conventions. I paint familiar domestic objects and spaces in order to question their social function and normative standards.

I argue in my Comprehensive Artist Statement that my painting practice can serve as an effective interaction and engagement with the social order. Like Michaël Borremans’ own questions regarding figures, space, and social roles, my paintings are active inquiries of the norms and values of society, and how they are enacted and enforced. They serve as templates through which this disciplinary function can be analyzed and challenged. My paintings, rooted in depictions of domestic banality, assert the material confines of the medium while offering a formal logic that is strategically disconnected from normative conventions of daily experience. Through my painting practice, I can negotiate the compositional placement of a toilet or the formal depiction of a stove element, without the mandates of optimal function or the prescribed performance of the user. My statement demonstrates how painting can permit a dialogue of aesthetic negotiation with the formal logic of the objects and spaces that we daily inhabit, rather than submitting to the passive disciplinary operations that subtly direct our behaviours. I argue that my painting practice can function as a means of encountering daily life on my own terms and performing according to my own standards. This can itself be a gesture of resistance to the normative performances and behaviours mandated by the arrangements and spaces of contemporary society.

Through the Case Study, the Comprehensive Artist Statement, and my Practice Documentation, I hope to demonstrate not only painting’s ability to meaningfully critique
the formal language of authority and discipline, but also its capacity to interact directly with the formal arrangements that dictate our roles and behaviours. Painting can function to dislodge fixed assumptions about how we perform in society and about how that society should be organized, and can offer new perspectives and aesthetic arrangements. Like Borremans’ work, my paintings are about encountering the social order, and are invested with how behaviour is directed through these encounters. My paintings are an attempt to dislodge myself from normative expectations, and to renegotiate the terms of my interactions with contemporary society.
Case Study

Michaël Borremans reveals and articulates the uncertainty and constraining anxiety of contemporary life through a painting practice embedded in historical convention. The Belgian artist’s paintings appear firmly rooted in the conventional narrative of historical figure painting, yet dissolve into a materially and metaphysically surreal instability that belies the anxious uncertainty of contemporary society. Rendered in an antiquated palette with a virtuosic execution, Borremans’ works fit within a traditional formal vernacular of historical figure painting, yet his subjects subvert and resist the stable logic and order garnered through the expectations of the medium. Borremans deploys the conventional language of figure painting and its formal expectations to meaningfully critique contemporary society, offering an anxious veneer of a static and regulated social order stretched over a void of chaos and absurdity.

The world evoked in Michaël Borremans’ paintings is often surreally fantastical, but anxiously familiar. His paintings are firmly rooted within the historical conventions and expectations of his chosen medium. Indeed, history pervades the subjects of his canvases. There is a sense of post-war austerity to the paintings; a muted, earthy palette with protagonists costumed in the fashion of the 1940s. His paintings are formally tied to the figurative works of artists such as Diego Velasquez and Gustave Courbet. Yet there is a sense of an inherit order within these older artists’ works that situates them within a particular time and place, offering a certain stability that Borremans continuously refutes. His paintings appeal to the past only to destabilize the present. Borremans’ concerns are rooted in a strongly contemporary current—a sense of doubt, of anxiety, and even an
apathetic doom. Above all, Borremans seems to appeal to the formal language of the past, but as a means of compromising the stable historical grounding of the present.

Borremans’ virtuosic skill only serves to offer a template for his surreal breakdowns, much like an immaculately laid dinner table, painstakingly set according to the whims of bourgeois taste, but designed only to be toppled and smashed. The simple, strong composition, fluid and efficient brushwork, and the clean, uncluttered sobriety of *The Trick* (2002), for example, lends an expectation to the painting that becomes violently jarred through the illogical feat performed by the young protagonist represented. Borremans uses conventional formal techniques in order to disturb and upend the logic of the spaces he depicts, achieving a contemporary doubt and uncertainty through his ironic adherence to a stable formal language.

The figures of the paintings are often dislodged from a veneer of stability through the simple but often tricky contextualizing background of the works. Often achieved with a rapid application of a brown or gray stain, the backgrounds are often achieved with a suggestion of casual indifference or unimportance. In this way Borremans seems to take after the legacy of artists such as Velasquez, whose great paintings, such as *Juan de Pareja* (1650) showcase simple, strong compositions, but with an efficiently, absently applied neutral backdrop that allows for a facile resolution of the image, and that places the emphasis more firmly onto the exquisitely painted subjects of the foreground. Yet the backgrounds in Borremans’ work, despite initial appearances, are not a neutral, efficient space but rather a non-space, a displacement from stable narrative, traumatically divorced from a meaningful connection to a determining landscape. With Borremans’ works the effect is deliberate and unsettling, serving to uproot the subjects from a stable historical
framework, or a determining social, political, or historical space. Borremans firmly roots his paintings within a historical dialogue, yet uses these very formal mechanisms in order to spatially dislodge them from any semblance of stable narrative of place or time. Though he employs all of the realist tropes of immersive representational picture making, the spaces of Borremans’ paintings slide into a disconcerting void. The viewer is drawn into the realized world of the picture only to be disconcertingly thrust back out, confounded by the construction of the surface itself.

In *Four Fairies* (2003), four young women stand in apathetic concentration before a simple backdrop of table and wall, each rendered in rapid, easy and casual strokes of paint. Yet the expectation of such a simple formal resolution to the painting is compromised—the contextualizing table that presents the background of the work physically cuts through the middle of the four women represented. It is a violent intrusion that sends the otherwise stable, sober composition into an alarming disorder and instability. The protagonists are not placed within a contextualizing landscape or background, but rather are trapped within the morass of the painted surface, ruefully entangled in its confines. The surface infiltrating the bodies of the actors serves to dismantle the fixed saliency of the figures, troubling the conventional binary of figure-ground relationship, and the Cartesian positioning of the figure within a logical space. Figures are absorbed into their surroundings, defined and determined by their space both narratively and materially within the painted surface itself. The painted background

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becomes itself a site of instability—a surface that can tilt into the perspective of the picture and confound the stable realism of its narrative.

Michel Foucault observed that the development of a stable human subject is a production premised on specific and modern historical conditions, and Borremans’ concern with exploring history through the figure attempts to excavate and annihilate the pretensions of stable meaning centred around the formation of human subjectivity.

Borremans populates his pictures with a sober, even apathetic cast of characters. These are predominantly figure paintings, concerned with the machinations of contemporary life through the engagements of its characters within the materially contained world of the paintings. Even while maintaining realist representational strategies of figure painting, Borremans’ canvases quickly descend into a surreal absurdity that undermines the paintings’ apparently conservative formal devices. Borremans’ figures are always bent on their assigned function, engaged in tasks without evident purpose or motive. This nihilistic world of Borremans’ paintings casts protagonists utterly bereft of meaningful agency, but who are patiently and unthinkingly engaged in actions whose purpose is mandated far from the frames of the canvas. There is a latent and hegemonic coercion evident, as the actors on the canvas perform their appointed tasks with a silent dedication that conveys an unsettling absurdity. The narrative contained within these pictures descends into an uneasy, unsettling absurdity, yet the characters are functioning with a cog-like sobriety and apathy. Concern with social function seems central to Borremans’ project. The labour of these figures is evidently highly ordered and regulated,

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enfranchised by their own quiet compliance in performing the tasks mandated by some unseen authority. They are willing participants in a coercive exercise made all the more unsettling and disturbing by the willing discipline with which these agents perform their work.

In *The Examination* (2001), a man and woman bend over an unseen project, closely inspecting the object of their attention. The man, imbued with the authority of a white lab coat, stands with knife poised, in anticipation of the operation, while the woman stands ready to assist, garbed in a smock and headscarf of a 1940s factory worker. The object of their labour is unseen and incidental. Borremans is clearly concerned with the dynamics of the labour itself that ultimately serves to define the actors of his images.

Likewise, *The Barn* (2003) seems at first a simple painting of a man, garbed in worker’s smock, bent in concentration over his absurd task of ordering the placement of impossibly miniature sheep within the grounds of a surreal barn roof structure. The task is absurd and ridiculous, of no conceivable benefit or even logical sense. The work undertaken might be patently irrational and even surreal, but the quiet dedication and concentration of the protagonist lends a disquieting menace to the painting.

*The Examination* and *The Barn* showcase Borremans’ concerns with labour, reminiscent of Gustave Courbet’s *Stonebreakers* (1849-1850). The backbreaking, painstaking agrarian toil in Courbet’s painting is replaced in *The Examination* and *The Barn* with industrial, bureaucratic busywork. Courbet’s figures are alienated through the brutal conditions of their backbreaking labour. The work is dehumanizing, an exercise
that demeans and degrades the humanity of the figures depicted. For Borremans, by contrast, the sense of alienation comes from the disorienting absurdity of the task at hand, and the complacent dedication the workers invest into their often-farcical work. But far from being dehumanizing, the labour is what defines the figures. The work is destabilizing and absurd, but a contrived facade of salient order is somehow carefully maintained and imposed through the productive complacency of the figures depicted.

Whatever the coercive regulation apparent or implied in his paintings, the protagonists nevertheless apathetically participate in the construction and perpetuation of the very regulations that impose their meaning, however irrational and absurd that world may be. They are responsible for the exact regulation and ordering of life and their environments. In Trickland (2002), female workers assemble a fantastically miniature, if otherwise banal, conception of an ordered countryside, with hedges, tiny farmhouses, and roadways. The female workers toiling in a romantic countryside setting recalls Jean-Francois Millet’s The Gleaners (1857). Unlike Millet’s work, however, the labourers of Trickland toil in an absurdly minute landscape, yet any potential playfulness is overcome by the sober dedication of their labour in the construction of this surreal world, and by the menacing peripheral darkness that seems to preclude any sense of logical, stable real-world escape from this tiny terrain. The romance and earthiness of Millet’s painting is replaced in Trickland by a destabilizing illogicality made all the more disturbing by the quiet commitment of the workers. In Borremans’ paintings the latent disciplinary mechanisms imposed on human subjects in order to serve the complex machinery of

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modern societies is subtly apparent⁴. The protagonists of Borremans’ paintings themselves seem to participate in the activation of the social order that coerces their submission.

Borremans’ still lifes further reflect this tendency to discipline and categorize, and to generate meaning through regulation and order. In 10 and 11 (2006), two dead, small birds are placed on a clinically white backdrop, labeled coldly above with the numbers ten and eleven. Borremans is unconcerned with achieving a scientific or even philosophical insight into living organisms, nor indeed in any philosophical musings on mortality or morality. Rather, he seems preoccupied with how the world is organized, regulated and ordered in order to impose a specific conception of meaning. In Strategy (2008), a series of coloured disks are arrayed in a puzzling configuration that speaks to a complex organization, yet seems to confound any sort of logic in its complexity. The strategy implied by the title is, for the viewer, utterly defeated by an apparent complexity that serves to assert a confounding and absurd logic. Borremans insists on the underlying irrationality of this impulse of ordering and regulation, indeed for the production of meaning itself. His painted canvases are themselves a microcosmic regulation of space, where characters are drawn to generate pleasing cohesion and meaning from the rectangular arena of action. His work evokes the disciplinary operations evoked by Foucault, which serve to “characterize, specialize . . . distribute along a scale, around a norm, hierarchize individuals in relation to one another and, if necessary, disqualify and

invalidate”⁵. There is a deliberate staging of a contrived reality in Borremans’ works, but there is always a point of breakdown, where the careful veneer of order, narrative, and meaning are irrevocably upset. That Borremans can so skilfully deploy the conservative formal language of painting through his painting renders this upset all the more unsettling.

In this painted world of imposed order and regulation, Borremans’ paintings align with Foucault’s conception of the disciplinary institutions of modern societies. There is a discipline in their tasks that exposes a specifically mandated, stable role. There is a saliency of identity, rooted in their socially mandated function. Indeed, just as the backgrounds signal the instability of historical narrative, so the contrived costumes and absurd roles of the figures lend an anxious artificiality to the figures themselves—they are confident in their roles and identities, but the veneer breaks down for the viewer. In Pupils (2001), there seems to be an evident production of figures itself, or at least the perfecting of figures to achieve some sort of normatively mandated identity, capable of optimal function. Indeed, the ‘patients’ seem to be robotic replicas of the workers who bend over them, apparent in the side-parted coifs of dark hair common to both the workers and the patients. This accords with Foucault’s analysis that the modern body of society is no longer simply one that is required to obey, under penalty of the forfeiture of life, but rather is a structure that must be produced to perform its societal role in an optimal way—hence the necessity of a sustained political and cultural project devoted to the formation, normalization, improvement, and maintenance of a body ready to fulfill

⁵ Ibid., 223.
the hegemonic tasks necessary for the functioning of a modern society. As Foucault explains, modern society seeks to enact “a policy of coercions that act upon the body, a calculated manipulation of its elements, its gestures, its behaviour.”

The presumed fixity of identity is interrogated and frustrated by Borremans, who uses the conventions of traditional realist Figure Painting techniques to dismantle the stable premise of these identities he painstakingly depicts. In Automat (2008), a realist depiction of a young woman dressed in a skirt, her back to the viewer, at first appears only as a sensitive painterly representation of a young woman. Beneath her skirt where legs should be, however, is only the floor, and the title informs us of the true identity, or non-identity, of the protagonist. There is an assertion of the instability of identity, an unreliability of representation to offer any salient, authoritative truths of subjectivity.

Foucault observes that “there is also a military dream of society; its fundamental reference was not to the state of nature but to the meticulously subordinated cogs of the machine, not to the optimal social contract but to permanent coercions, not to fundamental rights but to indefinitely progressive forms of training, not to general will but to automatic docility.” Borremans’ Automat disturbs the expectations of figure painting convention, subtly but distressingly replacing a sensitive portrait of a young woman with a depiction of a productive unit that is presumably programmed to perform the roles and tasks mandated by its maker.

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7 Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish, 138.
8 Ibid., 169.
Many of the paintings, through depictions of figures engaged in meaningless or absurd tasks, only offer a fixed identity for the actor depicted, as if this is precisely the information that will provide a salient meaning for the events depicted, however surreal. In *The German* (2002), a middle-aged man impossibly conjures and manipulates a group of red beads. His identity as a national of Germany only further demonstrates the inadequacy of fixed identity when determining meaning and order in society—indeed, his affixed national identity, however arbitrarily assigned, is the only recourse to a stable familiarity in a painting that subverts the pretence of any logical ordering of life.

This destabilization of the identity of his subject is further explored in his paintings of masks. In *Mombakkes* (2007), a shiny, transparent mask menacingly distorts what is otherwise a compositionally conservative portrait. Used in theatre to conceal the identity of the actor, the masks in these painting serve to further annihilate the individuating characteristics of his subjects, and compromise the authority of representation. In *Mombakkes*, Borremans calls into question any latent, authentic layer of a true face—the face that authorizes the formation of a salient identity. The use of these masks further complicates any salience of meaning in Borremans’ conception of contemporary life.

The coercive constraints imposed on the figures of Borremans’ paintings, who are tied down to an apathetic function for some unseen industrial and societal whim, is perhaps best expressed through the material confines conventions found in the discipline of painting. Borremans works within the historically determining tradition of figure painting. The notion of the individual artist, the very apotheosis of salient, heroic individuality, might seem to embody a certain freedom in defiance of regulation and
coercion\textsuperscript{9}. Yet Borremans, working within a materially limited, flat, rectangular surface in accordance with a formal tradition, seems to inhabit a practice of conscious, ironic, but perhaps inevitable, constraint and limitation. Borremans’ practice seems instead to embody the absurd labour of one of his paintings’ own figures. Borremans can interact meaningfully within society as an artist (indeed his works exhibit a sensitive critique of the social impositions of contemporary life), yet his painterly interactions are consciously deployed to exhibit the historical, social, and material regulations imposed on his own practice, and which invariably govern the ideological premise of artistic and social engagement. Through the discipline of painting, Borremans is able to reveal and critique the anxieties provoked by the disciplinary procedures of everyday life.

Michaël Borremans’ paintings deploy the traditional vernacular of figure painting in order to engage with the societal norms and expectations of contemporary society. Firmly rooting his works within a historical framework, the paintings nevertheless become dislodged and displaced from any coherent order or stable narrative. Borremans subverts the traditions and expectations of his chosen medium in order to articulate an apathetic uncertainty and absurdity that informs contemporary life. Precisely because of his adherence to the codes and conventions of a historically determined formal vernacular, Borremans is able to offer a unique and deeply unsettling conception of the present condition.

\textsuperscript{9} Ibid., 24.
Comprehensive Artist Statement

My work investigates the formation of subjectivity through social discipline and regulated spaces, and the possibilities for independent agency from within these spaces. The paintings are sourced from my immediate and direct engagements with daily life. I deliberately choose subjects that are encountered everyday in contemporary experience. A toilet, a light switch, or a kitchen sink are chosen as subjects precisely because of their daily immediacy and contemporary ethos of normalcy. The paintings are representative of routine interactions with daily experience. Through the practice of painting, the formal logic of everyday living can be revealed and questioned, permitting an active grappling with the normalizing arrangements of contemporary life.

Subjects are chosen for their formal simplicity and domestic familiarity. The paintings are usually finished within a matter of hours, the paint applied efficiently, in order to correlate with a real-time encounter. The paintings are usually modest in scale, offering an encounter comparable to daily interactions with the familiar subjects of the paintings. The spaces and objects are rendered faithfully to the models, spaces are logically, if sometimes improbably, arranged, and compositions are determined through an adherence to a sense of clean, uncluttered, and quiet order. The paintings are cropped and composed to flatten the subjects, arraying them for close and anxious scrutiny. There is a compositional sensibility and palette that evoke an institutional or archival authority. Through their composition and execution, each painting serves as an investigation into the formal language of daily and banal discipline.
The paintings comprise my own negotiations with the aesthetic arrangements of everyday life. Through representations of daily experience, the paintings hope to analyze expected sets of participatory behaviours and subtle coercions implied through these banal episodes. With my painting practice, I am concerned with Michel Foucault’s idea of power that “applies itself to immediate everyday life”\textsuperscript{10}, which engineers social coercions and mandates expected behaviours. As Sara Ahmed notes, the spatial arrangements of daily experience insist that life “should be organized in certain ways, in this space or that, for doing this or for doing that”\textsuperscript{11}. The spaces and objects that we encounter everyday are “a way of directing life by deciding what we do with what and where”\textsuperscript{12}. There is an optimal arrangement, an assertion of how things ought to be, of the spaces and objects we inhabit and encounter. The initial gesture of painting is grounded in these immediate interactions with life. The works depict interactions with the architecture, infrastructure, objects, and systems that determine in some way certain expectations of behaviour or function, or that coerce an optimizing participation.

I maintain a realist representational strategy in my depictions in order to reveal and critique the disciplinary function of those spaces. Daily life is arranged in specific ways, according to function or the configuration of certain (but not all) bodies\textsuperscript{13}. These conventional arrangements according to Sara Ahmed are determined to some extent by a

\textsuperscript{10} Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power”, \textit{Critical Inquiry}, Volume 8, Number 4 (Summer 1982): 781.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{13} Ahmed, 160.
social belief in an optimal formal arrangement that expresses a coercive attitude about the way things ought to be. In the paintings I deliberately depict a sense of austerity and an everyday squalor that reflects my own anxiety within these spaces, and my suspicion towards the normalized arrangements of contemporary life. The paintings show the grimy residues of recent use (the oily suds and flotsam floating in tepid dishwater, chipped paint on a wooden bookshelf, or the wet distortions on a bar of hand soap), deflating the implied aspirations of these domestic spaces through the messy banalities of daily experience. The muted palette and glaring light present in the paintings further serves as a refutation of the aspirations of these normalizing conventions. My paintings detail my own fraught encounters with the social order and the status quo arrangements of daily life, and signal my distrust and apprehension with the expectations implied through these arrangements.

The paintings are not merely representations or illustrations of these encounters and spaces, however familiar the subjects might be. Each painting is an active struggle with the expected performances demanded by the spaces and objects depicted, as a means of evoking and challenging the formal language of the disciplinary procedures they imply. As Gilles Deleuze notes, the painter “does not paint in order to reproduce on the canvas an object functioning as a model; he paints on images that are already there, in order to produce a canvas whose functioning will reverse the relations between model and copy”\textsuperscript{14}. There is a dedicated effort to determine, excavate, and ultimately subvert the aesthetic premise of social discipline.

There is an invariable discipline implied through the very material of painting. It is a medium that is beset by contingent conditions of material construction and expectations of spatial configuration. It is a constrained field upon which a limited parameter of painterly arrangements and interventions of color, form, and compositions can be applied and coded in a coherent, intelligible method. As Deleuze observes, “it would be a mistake to think that the painter works on a white and virgin surface . . . The entire surface is already invested virtually with all kinds of clichés, which the painter will have to break with.”\(^{15}\). Painting is materially confined and deeply implicated in history, and each canvas is weighted with the gestures of the canon even before the first marks are made. Painting is a disciplined space, materially imposing parameters of expected behaviour. Through the conditions of its own history, materiality, and social function, painting offers an ideal avenue for investigations into the formal language of social discipline. My works use the inherit material and historical confines and conditions of painting as a means of engaging directly within the analogous procedures of social regulation.

The paintings materially and formally ground my interactions with the social order, as a means of confining the coercion, anxiety, and dislocation of contemporary life onto a formal plane of criticality. The expectations of the medium are not only representative of my own conditioned interactions in the social order, but also function as direct correlations of those interactions. My painting practice can be a direct participation in the aesthetic language of daily experience, and I can work through these encounters

\(^{15}\) Ibid., 12.
within the material space of the canvas. My painterly gestures therefore seek to foreground this production of space, offering potential sites of deviance and resistance from within the disciplined, disciplinary space of painting.

Through the paintings, I am ultimately concerned with the position and behaviour of the figure within specific spaces, even though the figure is not always present as a represented subject. I often paint banal domestic objects, a subject that has a long historical trajectory within the still life genre. Yet as Norman Bryson observes, it is a condition of still life painting to not only expel the physical presence of the figure, but also to “[expel] the values which human presence imposes on the world”\textsuperscript{16}. My paintings assert the human presence in them and are invested in how objects and situations direct and influence human interactions. Each painting depicts a space that demands participation, compliance and complicity within a certain set of mandated parameters of expected performance. The flicking of a light switch or sitting in a particular chair are conditioned performances that are expected through the coercions of a given space. The paintings’ concerns are therefore figurative, and are primarily concerned with the production of the figure and individuality through the procedures of social discipline. In their interventions into the regulated spaces and mechanisms of daily life, the paintings are strategically invested in the formation of subjectivity and identity. Foucault notes that “discipline ‘makes’ individuals; it is the specific technique of a power that regards individuals both as the objects and as instruments of its exercise”\textsuperscript{17}. Power plays a


\textsuperscript{17} Michel Foucault, \textit{Discipline and Punish}, 188.
productive role—it not simply censors deviant behaviours but produces a disciplined and optimal humanity, capable and willing to effectively and efficiently participate within the political, economic and social order\textsuperscript{18}.

Implicit in this project is the status of individual bodies as functional, productive units, capable of competently participating within the expected parameters of social engagement. My paintings are concerned with how everyday objects and spaces shape our bodies according to normative standards. This quiet but assertive aspiration of our material culture aligns with Foucault’s notion of biopower—the production, disciplining, and maintenance of bodies in order to serve the complex machinery of modern societies. Foucault observes that the central consequence of historical production and the development of modern societies has been the disciplining of bodies; flaccid apathy must be transformed into an energetic, healthy, and vibrant corporality that can be harnessed to the demands imposed by advanced modern society\textsuperscript{19}. Sara Ahmed observes that bodies acquire their shape through social convention and normative directions; bodies are “‘directed’ and they take the shape of this direction”\textsuperscript{20}, and are continuously directed towards an optimal configuration mandated by the shape, size, and function of the object and spaces that we daily encounter. By framing the figurative concerns of the paintings through the lens of socially mandated functionality and optimal performance, the work seeks out potentials for autonomous gestures and resistance from within these disciplinary procedures.

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Ibid., 194.
\item Michel Foucault, \textit{Right of Death and Power Over Life}, 259.
\item Ahmed, 16.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
Painting is an ideal vehicle for this investigation through its inherent implication, expression, and production of individuality, and my paintings strategically work from this premise. As Isabelle Graw notes, the techniques and methods that “allow for the fabrication of the impression of the author’s quasi-presence as an effect” defines contemporary painting. Subject formation is paramount, even inherent, to the project of painting. My work confronts this essential attribute of the medium as a means of grappling with the social production of subjectivity, and the disciplinary apparatus that determines that production. Ahmed argues that “spaces are not exterior to bodies” and can function “like a second skin that unfolds in the folds of the body.” Painting can function as such a space, acting not merely as an illusionistic representation but as a site where the enactments of the body and subjectivity can be negotiated directly. The paintings are able to precisely intervene into a disciplined space of subject formation, offering potentials for a critical investigation and subversion of this production. Through this premise, urgent questions of agency and individual autonomy can therefore be addressed and tested.

The action of painting itself might offer a strategic gesture of autonomy and resistance to the optimal performances demanded by contemporary culture. While painting offers a disciplined plane inscribed with its own material and historical burdens, it nevertheless offers a potential gesture that defies the mandates of contemporary high


22 Ahmed, 9
performance culture. Painting can perhaps be a gesture in and of itself that serves as a path of agency and autonomy from a culture that continuously demands compliance and complicity. Jan Verwoert observes that a painting “establishes its own standards of completion and demonstrates why it had to be the way it is,” unlike the mandated expectations of high performance demanded in other vocations. Painting can remain bound to its material discipline and social functionality, but can nevertheless be a vehicle for autonomous gestures, independent of imposed ulterior dictates.

The subject of each painting anxiously grapples with the possibilities of discovering strategies of autonomous performance. There is no universally imposed strategy to subvert the machinations of social discipline in the paintings. Verwoert warns against “craving for an overall solution, a resolute stance, a set of unassailable principles or a foundational politics that would provide us with an unambiguous criteria for determining the right thing to do in each and every future situation” and opens up potential for action through the particular contingents of each encounter. The strategies of my painting practice are likewise dictated by the formal demands of each composition. A painted space that otherwise adheres to the expectations of perspectival order might dissolve into a subtly illogical overlap, or a depiction of an electrical socket might float in front of a wall, displaced from its functional connection. The subject of a painting is often lifted fatally from its contextualizing framework, edited or distorted, or evacuated of its


24 Ibid., 91.
specifically mandated function, or dislodged from its logical fixity. While retaining the formal infrastructure of the model, the mandated performative function of the model (the space, the figure, or the object) is deflated and denied. This “casual uncooperativeness”\textsuperscript{25} towards the expectations of figurative and spatial logic serves as a gesture of agency and resistance.

This strategy of dislocation ultimately serves as a disorienting device. By displacing objects from their positions of functionality or perspectival ordering, the paintings hope to dislodge the subjects from the socially mandated conventions of daily life. The arrangements of objects and spaces can be reconfigured by my own formal judgment and material manipulations, not by optimal functionality or normalized notions of the way things ought to be. Through this strategy, I hope to reveal the conventions and subtle coercions that determine our encounters, behaviours, and bodily configurations. As Ahmed observes, it is only through disorientation that we can notice that we are ever oriented and directed\textsuperscript{26}. Through disorientation, we are offered the possibility to find new directions\textsuperscript{27}.

The paintings are ultimately my attempts to manipulate and affect spaces, figures, and institutions that serve to manipulate and affect my own daily and immediate social experiences. Paintings are sourced from my daily interactions with environments and situations, but relaying these occurrences through painting allows them to be manipulated materially and analyzed formally. I am able to exert my own priorities and concerns

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 92.
\textsuperscript{26} Ahmed, 5.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 158.
independently from the ulterior coercions designated by the social conditions I depict. Through the formal struggle of spatial and material manipulations, I am able to socially engage “by the virtue of unconditional, exuberant politics of dedication”, and not because I am “entitled to do so by the institutions of power”\footnote{Verwoert, 111.}. Even if my formal decisions sometimes correlate to the conventional normative arrangements of the dominant culture, it is my own decisions and the gestures of my own body that create the space, rather than the reverse. The formal strategies of the paintings are therefore gestures of resistance to the very spaces and situations they represent.

The purpose of the project is ultimately to critically understand and subvert the terms of my own anxious participation within arenas of social discipline, and the subsequent active production of a particular conception of optimal, normalized subjectivity. Working within a historically and socially inscribed medium that, almost by definition, propagates a specific formation of disciplined subjectivity in its production, my paintings are able to critically investigate the disciplinary apparatus that mandates behaviour, conditions choices, and defines meaning within the social order. As a medium determined by its disciplinary conventions, painting is perhaps uniquely capable of hosting these investigations, and ultimately offers the potential for subversive decisions. My work hopes to rigorously interrogate the aesthetic and formal conditions of disciplinary space and normalized subject formation, and in so doing find a means of enacting gestures of resistance and agency.
This work is concerned with the social and political production and configuration of bodies. Using myself as a model, *Glasses* fragments facial features and connects them only through the plastic temple arm of the glasses. The painting is grounded in a cold institutional gray in order to imbue a bureaucratic anxiety to the image.
The Square
Oil on Canvas
36 x 36
2013

The Square continues to address my concerns with bodies and their production and configuration in modern societies. In this painting, facial features impossibly emerge from a contrived square space contained within the square of the canvas itself.
This painting is concerned with the anxieties provoked by the prescribed performances directed or mandated by the spaces of contemporary life. In *Circles* a figure is depicted interacting within an impossibly contrived space. The circular disks are flat and are uncomfortably and ambiguously positioned, and confine the figure within an arena that frustrates spatial logic.
In *Squares*, I continued my questioning of the performances and behaviours expected within social spaces. In this painting, a centrally positioned figure is examining a series of ambiguously mounted squares. A square surreally overlaps the figures shoulder, distorting the logic of the space and anxiously complicating the interactive performance of the figure.
*Helmet*

Oil on Canvas
36 x 36
2013

*Helmet* addresses my concerns with the roles or behaviours expected in contemporary society. The figure is depicted with an expression of acute discomfort wearing an orange hardhat. The flat, rapid brushwork of the hardhat contrasts with the more sensitive portrayal of the figure, further provoking a sense of anxiety towards the figure’s seemingly arbitrarily assigned role.
Hand Phone
Oil on Canvas
36 x 36
2013

This work continues my interest in the formation of subjectivity through social spaces and objects that direct us towards certain behaviours and roles. The phone reaches up to obscure the facial features of the figure, while the arm that holds it is flattened and subtly disembodied.
Room
Oil on Canvas
48 x 48
2013

*Room* depicts an empty domestic space adorned only with the standard infrastructure of modern society. These fixtures are surreally dislocated from their logical connections, upsetting the logic of the space and undermining the authority of the standard, normative arrangements of domestic life.
This work is concerned with the behaviours and performances that are directed by the domestic arrangements of everyday life. *Lightswitch* depicts an arm reaching out with finger extended, in a contrived interactive gesture towards a light switch. The space and the arm it contains are subtly dislodged from a sense of logical order.
Car Seat
Oil on Canvas
36 x 36
2014

*Car Seat* depicts a leather car seat, with the sheen and glamour of an advertisement. However, the cramped composition, the steering wheel that collapses the space, and the confining seat belt imbue the painting with a claustrophobic anxiety. Though the figure is absent, *Car Seat* speaks to the confining coercions that direct and mould behaviour and bodily configurations.
The Stove
Oil on Canvas
24 x 30
2014

The Stove depicts a stovetop sourced from my own apartment and part of my own daily experience. Through this and later works, I am concerned with painting familiar domestic spaces in order to renegotiate the terms of the interactions these spaces demand. The stovetop depicted is aggressively flattened in the composition, and arranged according to my own formal decisions dictated by subjective demands of the painting, rather than by the optimal function of the fixture. Through this strategy I can reveal and question the formal language of normative authority implied in the domestic arrangements of everyday life.
Dishwater
depicts my kitchen counter and stainless steel sink after cleaning a full load of dishes. The clean, stable, almost modernist formal configuration of the space contrasts with the black, oily water swirling with suds and detritus. Through this and other works, I hope to reveal and critique the normative aspirations implied in the material arrangements of domestic spaces through a grimy depiction of everyday living.
Hairband
Oil on Canvas
16 x 18
2014

Hairband depicts the top of a head in profile while wearing a plastic hairband. The composition is subdued and conventional, and is rendered in a soft muted palette. This quietude is challenged by the bright yellow, thickly applied streak of paint that describes the hairband. Through this material investigation, the roles and standards that sustain social norms and expectations can be questioned.
Soap Dish
Oil on Canvas
18 x 24
2014

Soap Dish describes a marble bathroom countertop, a round sink and a bar of soap on a small dish. Though the objects are familiar, their configuration is improbable, and determined through a compositional strategy informed by the formal construction of the painted space, rather than the optimal arrangement of a functional bathroom counter. The clean and shiny order of the space is disturbed by this subtle illogicality, and undermined by the pallid, wet, much-used bar of soap.
Wristwatch
Oil on Canvas
12 x 14
2014

*Wristwatch* is a painting of my own hand oriented to reveal a blue-green watchstrap. The image, like many of the paintings, conveys a sense of a diagnostic or bureaucratic scrutiny. The hand is depicted as a lifeless lump of flesh that serves as a vehicle for a device designed to impose a regimen of time-discipline on the wearer. The watch-face is obscured, revealing only the confining strap of blue-green that compliments and activates the pink and beige flesh of the arm and hand.
Box
Oil on Canvas
24 x 24
2014

Box depicts a partially crumpled cardboard box on a brown tile floor. This work is concerned with the formal organization of space, in both domestic arrangements and in the material arena of painting. The pictorial strategies of Box mirror the organization of space and the categorization of objects that the subject embodies.
**Dresser**
Oil on Canvas
24 x 30
2014

*Dresser* conveys through a contrived compositional strategy how bodies are directed and configured through the spaces and architecture of everyday life. The normative, disciplinary procedures of banal space are artificially revealed and emphasized through the spatial arrangement of the painting—the body of the figure is arranged to achieve an aesthetic balance with the placement of the dresser.
Toilet
Oil on Canvas
24 x 30
2014

Toilet depicts a familiar fixture in everyday life, oriented on the canvas according to my own formal decisions rather than the functional demands of the subject. The sordid banality of the toilet contrasts with the clean formalism of the painting. The practice of painting offers a way of negotiating with this space on formal terms distinct from the normative operations of a toilet that demands a specific bodily configuration and function.
Doorstop
Oil on Canvas
14 x 18
2014

Doorstop depicts the banal discipline found on a familiar tile floor. The configuration of the tiles and formation of the doorstop permit a cohesive and balanced composition, while the scratched and swirling patterns of the tile surface is reminiscent of modernist formal techniques. The painting is concerned with the formal language of everyday discipline, and how that language might be revealed and subverted though the practice of painting. Painting permits an active negotiation with the formal conditions of the space, rather than an anxious submission to the subtle coercions the space demands.
Bibliography


Curriculum Vitae

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Post-secondary Education and Degrees:

University of New Brunswick
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2001-2005 B.A.

NSCAD University
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Selected Exhibitions:

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Michael Gibson Gallery
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2014

Split Film Filament
ArtLab Gallery
London, Ontario
2013

Fresh Paint/New Constructions
Art Mur
Montreal, Quebec
2013

Fade Out
Ingrid Mueller Art and Concepts
Fredericton, New Brunswick
2012
**RBC Canadian Painting Competition**
Art Gallery of Alberta, Art Gallery of Hamilton, The Power Plant
Edmonton, Alberta; Hamilton, Ontario; Toronto, Ontario

**Backgrounds**
Ingrid Mueller Art and Concepts
Fredericton, New Brunswick
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Joseph-Armand Bombardier Canada Graduate Scholarship
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Teaching Assistant
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RBC Canadian Painting Competition Catalogue, 2011