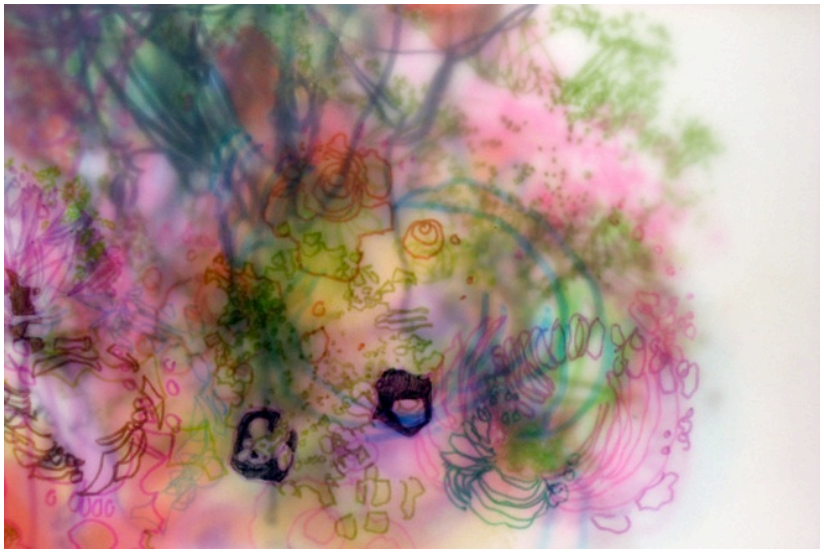
Light Matter



Leslie Bell

There are times, when thinking about all the possible paintings and drawings that could be made, the boundless permutations, I feel like the volume in my brain gets turned on to full. I see painfully bright colors on the insides of my eyes flashing by at increasing speeds. Forms emerge only to mutate, spiral, merge, destabilize and collapse back into the maelstrom. Sitting in front of and staring endlessly at a blank canvas, paper or wall and visualizing hypothetical manifestations is a crucial part of my process. Then comes the transcendental moment of brush and paint hitting the blank surface and potential collapsing into actualization. Impulsively, some zone of interest catches my eye, my hand follows and from there the new form extends metabolically outwards into an infinite number of possible branches, references or relational structures. For me, painting is not exhausted, its history is just a grain of sand on the beach, and its potential is as wide open as the expanding universe.

In 2002, Monica Tap wrote in her essay for the catalogue that accompanied the exhibition "Hungry Eyes"(Dalhousie Art Gallery) about what she saw as a recent resurgence of painting and she argued that a new form of abstract painting had emerged which "maintains vitality by absorbing into itself "impurities from the outside world" (Tap 2). Tap's essay defines this movement as "new abstraction".

In her article "New Tricks For An Old Dog: The Return of Painting" (2003), Linda Nochlin argues that:

> [Clement Greenberg] was right when he declared that painting was developing in the direction of greater and greater awareness of and self-consciousness about the nature of the medium. He was wrong when he maintained that self-consciousness always and inevitably manifested itself as a reduction of means (Nochlin 1).

To her, the new painter is medium-conscious but this awareness “may be manifested in the complexity, richness or even riotous ambiguity of the pictorial structure”(Nochlin 1). Nochlin explains that this cornucopia of possibility and the rejection of abstraction and representation as binary opposites “can be understood as a subset of contemporary hybridity within the context of contemporary painting”

Andrew Benjamin writes in The Journal of Philosophy and Visual Arts that abstraction can be from nature, but it can also be from which has no previous form like mathematical concepts, spiritual ideals and mystical systems. (Tap 4). Within my practice of abstract painting, I am primarily concerned with compositional structure and formal relationships. I find inspiration for my organic sense of form in nature, everything from trees and foliage, seaweed and jellyfish, fungi and cellular structures and the cosmos. However, I see a visual correlation between these references, my visual language and some theoretical models found in scientific fields like quantum physics, chaos theory and cybernetics, science-fiction, as well as philosophy and communication systems, particularly Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's concept of the rhizome. I've also been inspired by the work of other contemporary artists like Matthew Ritchie, Julie Mehrutu, Wagnechi Mutu, Char Davies and Sarah Sze. Through research and practice, my abstract work has evolved into a hybridization of many references sources that represent, as Jorges Luis Borges would refer to it, both the map of the world and the world itself. My goal is to create an abstract universe of complex order that is completely ambiguous in nature and location, being both microcosmic and macrocosmic, representational painting and pure abstraction, rooted in the real and total invention.

Terry Winters, an American painter exhibiting since the 70’s, “has long been interested in the architecture of natural forms.”(Ellis 152). When Winters developed his “Botanical Subject” and his “Schema” series of paintings and drawings, the wider public was just beginning to grow aware of breakthroughs in DNA and Cellular research. Ellis writes that

"[h]is lexicon is constructed from things that are relatively "new" in the sense of our awareness and understanding of them…yet known only indirectly, through scientific aids, they have become an essential part of our contemporary understanding of who and what we are" (Ellis 1).

In Char Davies virtual reality project "osmose', she places a tree at the centre of a universe that a viewer could float through and explore from the subterranean level up through to the sky. This natural ecosystem is in transparent flux and as the viewers slows his or her movement through the world it becomes apparent that it is literally superimposed over a "substratum" of computer data code and a "superstratum" of text taken from works of relevant philosophy and critical thought (Char). Char gives us a universe that, in many ways, is built by latent data. The tree at the middle of it all operates as an obvious reference to the tree of knowledge and is a representation of the expansive multi-connective way Davies communicates her ideas.

As precedence, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari use organic structure of the rhizome as a metaphor for a proposed method of organizing information. In many ways the rhizome is a substance of pure kismet for my painting practice, it is both a theoretical complex system, a proposal for a non-linear, expansive mode of organizing information as well as a natural form that I find appealing on a visual level.

Matthew Ritchie uses the laws of thermodynamics combined with an interest in creation myths as references for his painting practice. His biography on the Art:21 website states that "his artistic mission has been no less ambitious than an attempt to represent the entire universe and the structures of knowledge and belief that we use to understand and visualize it"(Art:21). Ritchie takes an encyclopedic approach, and translates his vision through each media, off the canvas, on the floor and seeming to seep into reality.

Arthur Schopenhauer wrote in The World as Will and Representation that the highest level of the sublime is expressed in the infinite nature of outer space. Linda Nochlin says that, in painting,"[t]he reigning spatial metaphor today is that of sci-fi or the planetarium: a vision of boundless

penetration or energized spatial turbulence associated with the extraterrestrial" (Nochlin 4).

Like Mehretu and Matthew Ritchie, my abstract visual language reads as cosmological in nature. In fact, my interest in quantum physics began with visual appeal. Shortly before entering the Concordia University MFA program, I was watching a television show, (I believe it was NOVA on PBS) which used computer animation to illustrate a lecture on the basics of string theory and the concept that on the subatomic level, the universe is composed of squiggly little strings. The narrator expostulated that these strings could be connected into circles, which could turn into doughnuts, or then extended into membranes. But the vibrating lines and circles I saw on the screen transforming before my eyes were, essentially, the shapes that I had been exploring in my own work. It was at that point that I began to conceive of the mark as the sub-atomic particle, and the composition as the universe it is built from. I began to conceive of my work as extending from the microscopic to the macroscopic. The narrator continued on to hypothesize that our reality is itself a membrane and parallel universes other membranes wiggling around just next to ours. As he described the big bang as the accidental collision of these membranes, the imagery on the screen exploded much the same way my brain did with intellectual euphoria at that very moment. Since then, doughnuts and membranes, have slowly crept into prominence in my practice.

This past spring, I became determined to fight and conquer the dandelions in my yard. As a result, I had become hyperaware of their growth patterns and because of the hours I was spending out there, the yard became my favorite spot to daydream about painting.

At the time, I had been struggling with a problem with my painting-on-glass animation, it was coming out too frantic, too fast, too crude. I wasn't happy with my canvases either, they were too stiff. It dawned on me, in the garden, that I need to touch the paint the same way I touch my houseplants. I visualized my hand, palm up, stroking up the stem of a leaf until the tip of my middle finger reaches the tip of the plant, then it falls away. I needed to pat my paintings and gently send

them on their way with an open palm instead of leading them with my wrist.

Through modeling and computer simulation, chaos theorists found that even the simplest of non-linear systems could result in extremely complex behavior because of what he refers to as "sensitive dependence on initial conditions". (Gleick 23)

In Entropy and Art: An Essay on Disorder and Order(1971) Rudolf Arnheim points out that

> [t]he vision of such harmonious striving for order throughout nature is disturbingly contradicted by one of the most influential statements on the behavior of physical forces, namely, the second law of thermodynamics…that the material world moves from orderly states to an ever-increasing disorder (Arnheim/4).

However, Arnheim goes on to explain indepth through his essay how this entropic movement towards disorder eventually results in a process of reordering. According to Gleick, entropy is initialized by turbulence or the impurities that exist in every open system.

Monica Tap believes that "the material limitations of paint and the flat support offer conditions for experimentation and freedom"(Tap 2). In her own work, she begins by projecting a reproduction of a picturesque landscape painting onto her canvas and selectively and intuitively tracing bits of mark-making. As such the technology of the projection acts as a filter, funneling the visual language towards a kind of confident line that is often a characteristic result of the camera obscura. Nancy Tousley explains that "Tap has developed a system for making paintings, which means that everything she begins with is plotted out in advance."(Tousley 13). The experimental controls include the specific colors used and a fixed number of layers of different projections. Tousley believes that, "Tap initiates a system in order to generate possibility"(13). Working in the dark, Monica's ability to see her progress or judge any kind of conventional aesthetic success is completely removed. What results is a seemingly haphazard build up of lush abstract marks. All meaning resides in the accidental collisions and convergences between the multiple layers of paint, a by-product built into the system.

Like Tap, I have also worked through methodological process in order to advance my visual language and to find new, complex relational forms, particularly with my animation projects. In "Sunshine 1" I have been working with hand drawn cel-animation to develop compositions that grow and disintegrate, permutate, spin and blow apart with the centrifugal force, lie over or disappear behind new drawings. One form flows into another and new compositions can be found within the transitional frames. Also, the sheer amount of drawings necessary in order to create a timeline forces me to continually develop new structures and to chip away at the infinite possibilities available in visual art.

"Tumult 3" is the third in a series of paint-on-glass films. Within theses projects, I've found it possible to work with washes, if not oceans, of water and pigment, capturing it in the chaotic act of osmoses before paint settles into a single painting. What results is a study of the act of painting with the viewer seeing every brushstroke sequentially piled on. Furthermore, both projects involve a sense of movement that evokes atmospheric tumult. They've made me pay attention to more than the leaves, but way the wind blows through them. My new lexicon aside from static structure has become movement, development and transition. As reference, I've been looking at weather patterns and modeling, particularly satellite footage of hurricanes.

Last year, in response to questions and comments I had been receiving about my paintings, I was doing some research on psychedelic art and I came across the term "Entoptic Phenomena" which David Lewis-Williams explains in Inside the Neolithic Mind(2005) is a visual experience that happens behind the eye, or inside the brain. The wikipedia article on "psychedelic art" explains that the depiction of certain visual characteristics of "entoptic phenomena", like repeating circular patterns, is common to all psychedelic art but not exclusive to it. It occurred to me that this entoptic element in my paintings and it's destabilized nature, with the compositions seeming to have only just fused together only to blow apart any minute, as well as the frenetic movement of my animation, is a result of my abstract universe actually being a manifestation of the visual thought process of thinking about painting. Each piece

is not an exclusive, solid object but a hypothetical captured moment of the maelstrom in my head that happens in those heightened moments of thinking about the infinite possibility that lies in painting.

One thing I figured out about myself when I was living on my own in Montreal was that I function better with weekly rituals. For instance, I really enjoyed the routine of taking the metro from Parc X to Concordia. In the morning I would take the train heading east towards Jean-Talon, and at night I would get on the same direction and swing through the Snowdon station, this way I would make a full circle of the city on a daily basis.

On Saturdays, I would take the number 80 bus down Avenue du Parc instead. I would get off at Place des Arts and march down Sainte Catherine, blowing, swirling, and ducking past shoppers and tourists that are in my way, complicating my path.

When I first got on the bus, I'd always sit on the right side, so that I could look out the window and see Mont Royal as we went by. I'd first notice how the light hits the forest and then I would focus my gaze on the inevitable jogger going by. I'd think about the process of atomization and see the jogger running through a field of particles. I'd then picture the landscape built of data, mountain and man both made of the same binary code. Next came string theory, I would visualize a forest of squiggles, the jogger a bend in the in the pattern like a gust of wind shifting tall grass. I would tell myself that matter is energy and see a jogger made of light. In the end, I would be gazing on a world of melting, flowing, paint.

In Corinthians, it says that all matter is made of light.
James Turrell, the American installation artist, believes that all transformative experiences involve light. Light permeates my work, shining through the paint strokes from underneath, making them glow from within. My compositions extend skywards seeking enlightenment, making the light source central. Light is also the last and thickest thing added on the

top of the surface, making it the heaviest object: unbearable lightness. *My work is a matter of light*.

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I saw my color palette on display last spring on a field trip to the Rothney Astronomical Observatory during the "Cosmic Ray Research" Thematic Residency at the Banff Centre. In the room where we were listening to a lecture on cosmic rays, there was a giant poster that spanned the wall depicting the light/wave frequency spectrum, (or the electromagnetic spectrum to be precise). The diagram showed different types of light and sound (from radio to visible light to gamma rays) as they correspond with the size of the wavelength and frequency they transmit on. It was the ultraviolet light, originating from the sun, with its cyan and magentas, which most closely resembled my palette. UV rays are just on the side of non-visible light, radiating at a wider wavelength than visible color. I realized that therein lies a relationship between using the colors of the UV Spectrum and my aim to build theoretical forms that are removed from the natural, visible world. I pictured my paintings vibrating at a faster frequency than everything else.

Furthermore, the lecturer was explaining to us how a block of a specific kind of metal could be used to measure cosmic rays. Cosmic rays are widely believed to be a form of light radiation but our explained that they are actually radioactive particles. Still, listening to him talk about measuring rays and looking at the diagram depicting light and sound as waves, I thought about string theory describing matter as squiggly lines. This led to the question: what is the fundamental difference between squiggles and waves? *My work is light as matter*.

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