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A Breakdown in Boundaries: As Explored Through Abjection and the Language of Abstract Art

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A BREAKDOWN IN BOUNDARIES: AS EXPLORED THROUGH ABJECTION AND THE LANGUAGE OF ABSTRACT ART

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts
Visual Arts

by
Mary Pat Hanley
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Accepted by:
Todd McDonald, Committee Chair
David Detrich
Syd Cross
ABSTRACT

My work places emphasis on the anxiety and allure felt at the possibility of ingesting an object belonging to or displaced from the body through the language of abstract art. It links the fears and fascinations felt in situations of perceived abnormality and bodily aggression, to the objectification, or conversely abjection, of objects through images. I investigate a collapse in division between what the perceived identity of a thing or person is, and what it is not.

Each painting rejects an ideal of beauty as portrayed through stability, clarity, and compartmentalization, and embraces beauty as the interconnectedness of opposing forces, specifically in the relationship between repulsion and allure. The contemporary language of consumer culture is reflected in this body of work by the way time, visual information, and sensory stimulators are overlapped, manipulated, and restructured. The viewer is sucked into the action of the space, the physicality of the paint, and visceral allusions, and upon entering the painting is overwhelmed by information shifting and churning. Without a distinction between elements of the painting to grasp at, the experience itself becomes everything.
DEDICATION

This body of work is dedicated to my parents, Keith and Patti Hanley. You have taught me that to have faith is to have strength. That power allowed me to pursue an idea, which now has life and has become an extension of myself.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to offer a special thanks to Todd McDonald, who never seemed to doubt, and who is always thought-provoking, insightful, and compassionate. I will forevermore ask myself about the “character of the space.”

To my thesis committee, Todd McDonald, David Detrich, and Syd Cross, I thank you for helping me to find the words. Your support has been invaluable.

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To Peter, the Great Mentor, our long talks are still with me.

To Elizabeth, Jillian, Maya, John, and Easton, you kept me laughing and kept me going. I am honored to consider you friends.

And to the soul mates of my life, my fiancée, Brian, and my dearest friend, Julie, I love you.
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When we cannot be delivered from ourselves, we delight in devouring ourselves.

*Emile M. Cioran*
A BREAKDOWN IN BOUNDARIES

Inspired by Julia Kristeva’s definition of abjection, as our “reaction to a threatened breakdown in meaning, caused by the loss of a distinction between subject and object or between self and other,” my paintings investigate a collapse in distinction between opposing forces. Through the abstraction and representation of multiple image sources, I employ this concept in an examination of the simultaneous responses of fascination and disgust, and ambiguity and recognition. Within this body of work, I negotiate a spectrum of abstraction and distortion, relating as much to representation as to gestural painting and color fields. It is important to me that the paintings are in constant flux between image as illusion and image as medium, reflecting the manipulated nature of image construction found in contemporary consumer culture. My intention is to create paintings that become a middle ground between the physical world and the psyche, by shaping a location where the viewer is confronted with a breakdown of boundaries. Moments in my life when I truly feel “alive” exist when my inhibitions deteriorate. At these times, I become vividly aware of the immensity and the vulnerability of my existence. Endless possibility is bound with the seductive risk of losing the confines of “self” to the whole. This work is intended to create a similar experience through the constant flux of visual information within each painting, and also in the way each piece’s energy pushes forward and encompasses the viewer.

In this body of work, biomorphic forms are paired with recognizable objects in a union that uncomfortably bends the boundaries of familiar context. My process is rooted in a constant gathering of images, pertaining to a relationship with the human body, from sources ranging from the Internet, to food photography, and magazines. I desire to
disconnect from the authentic physicality, function, or existence of the object, so that I can more easily deconstruct it for its parts and respond solely to its visual qualities. The distraction of perceiving an object, with all of my senses, inhibits my ability to level all forms to an equal state of existence and ambiguity within the painting. However, images as representations have a lack of specificity that I find more interesting to respond to and manipulate. I continue my process by taking source materials and placing them into groupings based on my perception of the represented objects’ roles or possible identities in the scope of human experience. From here, a painting is formulated based on a theme or feeling I would like to visually explore, abstracting, simplifying, and exaggerating characteristics of each form that I feel draws relationships between the components similarities. The reconstruction of the imagery is motivated by a desire to immediately and aggressively seduce viewers, and once they are drawn in, overwhelm with possibility, requiring a slow digestion of each individual painting. The opposing components within each piece force the viewer to identify relationships, urging associations related to ingestion, invasion, growth, clusters, suspension or floating, and sexuality.

A dislocation between form and authenticity, and the immediate and personal reactions I shape based on aesthetic qualities, has become a part of how I see the world. An image is used to depict an idea. Every image created by an individual involves some form of decision-making, and so is never an objective view on the reality of a thing. Today’s society now makes objects themselves into images, depicting a company’s marketable ideals through this fusion. A product is not where it came from, or how it was produced, or even its materiality, but what it stands for, and every good consumer receives these verbal and visual indicators in a crisp and trendy package. I recognize the way markets shape our responses to
visual stimuli around a standardized aesthetic, and it causes me anxiety, resulting in paintings that both embrace and deny my learned way of seeing. In accordance, my image gathering process and compositional decisions recall the way most people living in consumer societies navigate their culture, by constructing and choosing with the primary purpose of visual effect, and not on preserving the authenticity of the original images utilized. However, disillusionment drives my decisions on how I want the viewer to receive this information. Whereas, markets attempt to simplify information as a means to easy recognition of brand and ideal, I create visual effects that imply complexity and ambiguity. This is not an attempt at answering a sociopolitical question, but a direct way of exploring matter and sensation through eyes informed by a contemporary experience.

Each painting rejects an ideal of beauty as portrayed through stability, clarity, and compartmentalization, and embraces beauty as the interconnectedness of opposing forces, specifically in the relationship between repulsion and allure. I explore this relationship in the painting Superbuffet, in which a seafood medley floats in ascending tiers, the color of each morsel oversaturated and blown out in areas like a cheap food advertisement. The intensity and contrast of the color hooks the audience, its too vivid palette all the more alluring as it shapes the volumes of a tasty shrimp cocktail. The seafood seems to have been designed for presentation, yet there is no platter to ground it within a clear narrative, leaving the viewers without a sense of recognizable context or composure. The medley exists in a visceral atmosphere, amongst the prodding antennae of a much larger, eerily fleshy, living shrimp; it soon becomes clear that there is no distinction between the beauty of the food and the monstrousness of the viscera. The components of this image have a multiplicity that references our psychological experiences in the world, and while popular culture images
leave anxiety surrounding the nature of beauty as residue, my paintings directly embrace the disquieting essence of beauty as severe and indefinable. Although society promotes an aesthetic concerned with set standards of perfection, these paintings seek to find a place where images speak of something more intangible, yet more descriptive of human psychological complexity.

It is in moments of disgust, fascination, and confusion that we become more aware of our own material existence. This experience is a moment of authenticity in a culture removed from many forms of physical confrontation. Forms and substances evocative of life, remind human beings of their animal-nature and mortality. If this form or substance can be ingested or seems unnaturally outside the confines of the body, a reaction of disgust intensifies. Julia Kristeva poses abjection as something we must experience in our psychosexual development, establishing boundaries between self and other or human and animal. She asserts, “We may call it a border; abjection is above all ambiguity. Because, while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject that threatens it – on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger. But also because abjection itself is a composite of judgment and affect, of condemnation and yearning, of signs and drives.” My paintings function similarly, by reflecting a struggle with, and an embracing of, our contemporary “image culture”. The relationships of forms within a piece exist in a state of ambiguity, through the utilization of images as mediation and as connection point to a physical or psychological experience. The viewer is invited into this ambivalence through the push and pull of each piece’s chromatic, spatial, and formal complexity and the overarching sense of a bodily and yet intangible experience.
Every human being has a level of disgust, desire, and fascination with visceral experiences imbedded within them. Contemporary artists such as Marilyn Minter, Damien Hirst, and Cindy Sherman, have furthered this conversation. The super-glossy, photo-realistic quality of her paintings reflect the aesthetic of glamour images, announcing the imagined tangibility of the subjects, arousing both desire and disgust by sexualizing the act of ingesting objects of status. Cindy Sherman illustrates the abject through work such as her 1985 and 1986 object series, which attempts to de-idealize femininity by depicting objects related to fashion items damaged by use, deformed body parts, blood, and vomit. Damien Hirst’s sliced animals float in tanks of formaldehyde, aggressively drawing connections to the viewer’s body through scale, and overwhelming bluntness of anatomical presentation. These artists have used the art forum as an intellectual environment for viewers to interpret work on a level conscious of their intuitive and bodily reactions. In this regard, we are similar. However, formally they fragment the body, directing the attention of the viewer to specific aspects of its function. Whether this function is representing human beings’ relationship with beauty and sexuality, or the precariousness of human existence as seen in bodily fluids and the preservation of death as object, each artist relies on direct illustration. They have left room for an investigation concerning a breakdown between boundaries as investigated through simplification and distortion. My work places emphasis on the anxiety and allure felt at the possibility of ingesting an object belonging to or displaced from the body through the language of abstract art. It links the fears and fascinations felt in situations of perceived abnormality and bodily aggression, to the objectification, or conversely abjection, of objects through images. My paintings reference food or substances that are routinely taken into, or are shed from the body. These substances, though familiar, are manipulated to reveal
psychological layers to both the paintings and our individual patterns of responding to the world.

While most forms appear to be of the body or ingestible by the body, there is a sense of displacement from original and familiar context. They inhabit a new realm where the familiar is coupled with the ambiguous in one joined hyper-reality, where there are no clear boundaries between the beautiful and the abject, and aggression and submission. For example, in the painting *Pleased to Meet You*, rows of teeth nestled within sorely fleshy gums, spawn creatures with hard shells and pliable red insides, intertwining, cradling, and possibly devouring a suspended central chrysalis. The relationship of teeth and the vaginal form of the chrysalis is evocative of *vagina dentata*, and yet a chrysalis is a place of protected growth. This interplay creates a tension that feels precariously dangerous and slightly hopeful through the possibility of survival. The sheer scale of the piece and the intensity of the color palette, dominates the viewer, and yet each form exists in the space as if in communion with simultaneous existence and death. The viewer participates in this experience through proximity, becoming a part of the process, feasting on the painting and becoming enveloped in its jaws.

With a nod towards surrealism, these paintings act as a resolution between dream and waking life. Recognizable forms share relationships and characteristics with biomorphic forms. These bodies are suspended or are moving in space that itself is connected and indistinguishable from the whole. The paintings are absurd in their immediacy with events, time, and subjects meshing and collapsing into and out of each other as dreams can do. They also refer to our visual culture, which seems to have slid into the immediacy of “dream
reality” through images that act as communication, ideal, and identity, carving into the collective mind a sense that everything is tangible at once.

We live in an immediate image culture, with constant exposure to a technologically enhanced ideal of beauty and composure, which feels both desirable and detestable, both real and artificial. The immediacy with which we can access the world through images, and the ease with which aesthetics can be manipulated, is unique to our contemporary dilemma, and is something that I both accept and distrust. Formally, I explore these issues of image construction, loss of authentic experience, and immediacy by creating a sense of instability. This is metaphorically seen in the floating or suspension of forms, the breakdown in distinction between objects and environment, the removal from familiar context and function, and color palettes that seems a little too saturated or surreal.

Every painting alludes to deep spatial environments through a sense of atmosphere and sometimes perspective, but forms and space have been flattened into immediate and overwhelming compositions, through the utilization and simultaneous denial of spatial illusion, built through tools such as, intensity, temperature, and texture. This decision is motivated by a necessity for the paintings to operate on a level of aggression. Instead of appearing to exist behind the picture plane, they hover on top of it, asserting themselves into the space between viewer and painting. Thus, they engage the viewer’s physical responses and psyche, acting in way similar to the bombardment of today’s media frenzy. The color palettes, plastic qualities, and textures of each surface are tools borrowed from the advertisers of our consumer culture, reflecting a surreal or super-real aesthetic that is engineered into everyday objects for enticing aesthetic affect.
The contemporary language of consumer culture is also reflected in this body of work by the way time, visual information, and sensory stimulators are overlapped, manipulated, and restructured. The paintings layer information with an energy that sporadically jumps between the quickness of gesture and the materiality of paint, the flatness of design and the intensity of fields of color, and the illusion of grand space and the intimacy of bite-sized forms. The viewer is sucked into the action of the space, the physicality of the paint, and visceral allusions, and upon entering the painting is overwhelmed by information shifting and churning. Without a distinction between elements of the painting to grasp at, the experience itself becomes everything. Whereas, marketers attempt to sell packaged experience through easily grasped images and clear ideals, this work uses images to locate an intangible and fluctuating understanding that sits closer to the complexity of human experience. My intention is to utilize these tools to simulate “media reality’s” alluring aesthetics and gripping action, in direct relationship with this work’s embracing of ambivalence.

Just as I manipulate the painting’s imagery, scale, spatial illusions, and color palette to imply assaulting situations on the viewer, the viewer visually devours the paintings. This mutual consumption is analogous to many human relationships, whether it is witnessed in roles of artist and audience, market and consumer, mother and child, or lovers. Mutual exchange of aggression and fulfillment by way of ingestion is a component of human life and death. A complicated dynamic is created between the historical nature of painting as object, artifice, and novelty, and the use of compositional tools that encourage a mutually consuming relationship between viewer and painting.
I find that paintings have a distinctive position to offer these observations. As objects that are not truly meant to be reproducible, and are best experienced in actual physical proximity, they sustain a novelty. In our mediated reality where all is image and little is substance, paintings exist in a poignant location and retain a degree of individuality and authenticity. However, paintings are traditionally two-dimensional surfaces, hung on a wall, protected from touch, with limited interaction due to the static position of viewer to object and thus acting only upon the viewer’s optical senses. We cannot lift them to our noses, feel our lips against the surface, taste the juices of the paint, or listen for the groan of the wood straining against the canvas. They could easily become mere images, toting canned ideals, and quick pick-up lines like the superfluous mediations of our contemporary culture. However, in the handling of the medium and in the innovation of crafting an experience, the authenticity of painting can erupt forward from the image’s static location and into the viewer’s emotional and psychological territory.

I use the opportunity they present to create a place where abstraction and representation of nature flow through each other, and all is in perpetual shift. This is the clearest way in which I can understand the world around me, and have a forum where other may be coaxed into an experience of beauty and instability. These paintings act as invitations, beckoning the viewer to relish multiplicity, and moments where the deterioration of inhibitions creates a state of vulnerability and powerful realization in the boundlessness between “self” and that existing outside the individual’s perceived identity.
It Was Here
Growth
Post-Globalization
Pleased To Meet You
BIBLIOGRAPHY


