Wish You Were Clear

MFA Thesis

by

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> In whatever civilization it is born, from whatever beliefs, motives, or thoughts, no matter what ceremonies surround it—and even when it appears devoted to something else—from Lascaux to our time, pure or impure, figurative or not, painting celebrates no other enigma but that of visibility.
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> *Maurice Merleau-Ponty* ("Eye and Mind," 127)

Paintings begin with perception and, although they may privilege some aspects of perception or what is perceived over others, paintings nevertheless derive their vocabulary from the world of images. It is this world of images with which Henri Bergson(1859-1941) theorizes perception and it is the same world with which Jean Jacques Maurice Merleau-Ponty(1908-1961) bases his study of phenomenology. Both philosophers draw different conclusions about perception but agree that it has something to do with the way our brains render material images immaterial. Bergson suggests that the way we perceive the world informs our attitude toward it, whereas Merleau-Ponty argues that the world shapes the subject and that perception is only evidence to that fact. John Dewey(1859-1952) adds a different perspective by proposing that art is an experience in which artists use perception every step of the way. I find the works of all three philosophers particularly relevant to my practice as an artist because they describe how my unique perception of the world informs my painting and how my painting reflects my perception. My paintings, like this thesis, describe not only how I think about the world but how the world thinks itself in me.

Henri Bergson begins his discussion of perception in Matter and Memory by posing the question of whether or not our brains constitute anything more than another image. He quickly eschews this idea with deductive logic. "Eliminate the image which bears the name material world," he explains, "and you destroy at the same time the brain"(Bergson, 4). Conversely, one can destroy the brain but the material world diminishes insignificantly. Bergson describes images as those things with the potential to elicit a physical response. Perception, he explains, begins with sight and ends in movement. In order to illustrate the relationship between perception and action Bergson again proposes what would happen if one were conceived without the other. Without perception, he explains, the body could not gauge its environment adequately enough to produce the movements necessary to navigate it. From this observation Bergson surmises that matter is "*the aggregate of images, and* perception of matter *these same images referred to the eventual action of one particular image, my body"*(8). Bergson then asks at what point and with what faculty of mind does our body choose from among possible reactions to matter. The answer lies in Bergson's discussion of memory and its relationship to perception, or what he calls "conscious perception"(24). In the interest of arriving at a clearer definition of perception Bergson describes what it is not, objective. The ideally objective perception, he explains, is one "that a consciousness would have if it were supposed to be ripe and full-grown, yet confined to the present and absorbed, to the exclusion of all else, in the task of moulding itself upon the external object"(Bergson, 24). But perception, as we shall see, is not wholly objective because it does not exclusively reflect the material world.

In order to show us, however, that perception has more to do with a quality peculiar to the material world than our seeing apparati Bergson draws our attention to the objects we perceive. Images, he explains, exist independently from our perception of them: for example, a chair within our field of vision is not essentially different from one outside it. Although both chairs present the same possibilities, either may obstruct our path or invite us to sit, only the visible chair elicits a physical response. Bergson compares this notion of representation to photography and likens our physical relationship with the world to a photographic screen. This screen acts as a filter by capturing only those things immediately visible. A representation is thus "the measure of our possible action upon bodies: it results from the discarding of what has no interest for our needs, or more generally for our functions"(Bergson, 30). In other words, our perception registers numerous things, each of which may possibly affect our body, but the countless number of possible reactions "add nothing to what is there; they effect merely this: that the real action passes through, the virtual action remains"(Bergson, 32). Virtual actions are simply reactions to representations that never culminate in movement. Real actions occur when the distance between our bodies and the objects we perceive is eliminated and perception coincides with sensation. Sensations are real actions which involve the body's surface. The skin, Bergson explains, "is the only portion of space which is both perceived and felt"(58). What Bergson obliquely calls "affection" is "that part or aspect of the inside of our body which we mix with the image of external bodies; it is what we must first subtract from perception to get the image in its purity"(60).

Bergson concludes that memory is what we add to perception that makes it a unique part of subjectivity. He uses memory to explain why a purely objective

perception can be formulated but never achieved. Bergson believes that memory "constitutes the principle share of consciousness in perception, the subjective side of the knowledge of things"(25). Memory plays an integral role in Bergson's discussion of perception because it not only differs from one person to the next but it also pushes the idea of pure perception further into the realm of fantasy. Bergson explains:

> In fact, there is no perception which is not full of memories. With the immediate and present data of our senses we mingle a thousand details out of our past experience. In most cases these memories supplant our actual perceptions, of which we then retain only a few hints, thus using them merely as "signs" that recall to us former images. The convenience and rapidity of perception are bought at this price; but hence also springs every kind of illusion (24).

A rift develops between the reality of what we perceive and the illusions created by our memory. Indeed, it is this schism around which Bergson constructs an argument for the spiritual, as opposed to material, nature of memory. We might easily part with Bergson here and be satisfied with having suggested that perception is always mediated by memory and that the way in which memory subsumes perception suggests an immaterial quality, but it is important that we investigate how memory influences creative activity in order to understand what happens to perception on its way to becoming a painting.

In his book Art and Experience John Dewey draws a distinction between esthetic experience and anesthetic experience that is similar to a comparison Bergson makes between practical and impractical memories. Bergson describes one aspect of memory as the accumulation of movements in reaction to stimuli which "grow into a habit, and determine in us attitudes which automatically follow our perception of things"(96). Our bodies remember certain reactions with

a view toward utility. These memories inform a useful experience, whereas memories of less useful images, which preceded or followed the more useful ones, also occupy our consciousness. Fortunately, Bergson explains, consciousness organizes these less useful images according to their relevance upon the present. Dewey attributes these less useful images to anesthetic experience. He states that, "in much of our experience we are not concerned with the connection of one incident with what went before and what comes after . . . . There is experience, but so slack and discursive that it is not *an* experience. Needless to say, such experiences are anesthetic"(Dewey, 40). Dewey describes emotion as the distinguishing feature of an esthetic experience because it "selects what is congruous and dyes what is selected with its color, thereby giving qualitative unity to materials externally disparate and dissimilar"(42). In esthetic experience emotion has as much to do with the material as it does with the immaterial quality of perception. An emotion, Dewey explains, is an individual's reaction to the imminent threat or promise an object presents. It is not by coincidence that Dewey should describe emotion in terms like those Bergson uses to describe perception. Both agree that subjectivity is largely defined by an individual's unique reaction to the world in the form of memories or emotions.

Bergson and Dewey also agree that the mediation of perception occurs within the body. In Bergson's model the body begins to internalize perception when it coincides with sensation in the skin. Dewey explains that the artist's intimate contact with materials rehearses this collusion of sight and touch. Due to the physical connections between sensory and motor organs in the body an artist

who endeavors to *re*-present anything visual must of necessity allow perception to guide his or her decisions. According to Dewey, "The doing or making is artistic when the perceived result is of such a nature that *its* qualities *as perceived* have controlled the question of production"(48). Paul Cézanne(1839-1906) made the following comment which reemphasizes the importance of using perceptual skills in the production of art: "There are two things in the painter, the eye and the mind; each of them should aid the other. It is necessary to work at their mutual development, in the eye by looking at nature, in the mind by the logic of the organized sensations which provides the means of expression"("Cézanne's Doubt," 43).

Dewey explains that the connection between the material world of images and the immaterial world of perception is not only physical but also psychological. According to Dewey, recognition is that operation by which emotions and memories enter our otherwise objective perception. We remember that Bergson refutes the possibility of a purely objective perception precisely because of recognition; because we are never free from associating the past with the present and thus we allow our memories to color our perception. Bergson also describes the way memories illuminate present perception with greater detail. This activity begins with "first, an inhibition of movement, an arresting action," but is soon followed by "more subtle movements" which "soon graft themselves . . . and combine to retrace the outlines of the object perceived"(Bergson, 122). Bergson agrees with Dewey's observation that, "Recognition is perception arrested before it has a chance to develop freely. In recognition there is a

beginning of an act of perception"(52). Dewey explains that mere recognition is transcended when perception becomes "reconstructive." He states that, "the act of seeing involves the cooperation of motor elements even though they may remain implicit and do not become overt, as well as cooperation of all funded ideas that may serve to complete the new picture that is forming"(Dewey, 53). In the work of both philosophers recognition lends perception clarity by helping to reconstitute an image. Bergson reiterates the lengths to which consciousness goes in order to fill in what it conceives to be missing from the perceived image: "If the retained or remembered image will not cover all the details of the image that is being made, an appeal is made to the deeper more distant regions of memory, until other details that are already known come to project themselves upon those details that remain perceived"(123). Bergson also points out that memory may go too far in its pursuit for clarification, in which case memory may cloud perception making it less reliable. In cases like these an extra effort is required to push back the irrelevant memory-images from advancing.

Dewey believes that emotions temper ordinary experiences, representing something like a refiner's fire, whereas memory represents an anvil against which materials are shaped to conform to a prior idea. He compares the process of deriving an emotional response from material objects to the expression of juice from a wine press because the material of perception meets resistance from the memories associated with it. Regardless of the metaphor, Dewey's argument raises an interesting question: do the immaterial qualities we attribute to material objects issue from our perception or are they intrinsic properties of the materials? Toward the beginning of our investigation Bergson

implied that perhaps perception has more to do with the objects we perceive than anything else. In order to answer our question it will be helpful to invite a third figure to our discussion, someone whose work endeavors to unravel the mystery bound up in the world we perceive.

Unlike Bergson and Dewey, Maurice Merleau-Ponty approaches a study of perception from the side of the object perceived rather than beginning with the perceiving subject in order to arrive at an analysis of perception. Although Bergson begins his own discussion of perception by proving that the mind is part of a much larger material world, he almost immediately attempts to dissect that world from within the mind's eye. Merleau-Ponty, on the other hand, insists that an investigation of perception must begin with the object perceived in much the same way our existence is preceded by the world. He states that,

> The world is there before any analysis of mine, and it would be artificial to make it the outcome of a series of syntheses which link, in the first place sensations, then aspects of the object corresponding to different perspectives when both are nothing but products of analysis, with no sort of prior existence (Phenomenology, 307).

Merleau-Ponty's conceit is that most philosophers attempt to understand subjectivity by analyzing the subject's perception of the world, whereas they ought to concern themselves with "describing our perception of the world as that upon which our idea of truth is forever based"(Phenomenology, 311). Merleau-Ponty believes that perception is a function of the world and that our image of the world is not simply the result of perceiving it. Both Merleau-Ponty and Bergson agree that the subject cannot always successfully sift from his or her perception those things not immediately relevant to present experience, otherwise perception

"ought to be for ever hesitant and . . . ceaselessly taking apart misleading syntheses and reinstating in reality stray phenomena which [it] had excluded in the first place"(Phenomenology, 307). In Bergson and Dewey's writing consciousness functions as that faculty which brings the practical or associative to the fore of immediate experience in order to "reconstruct" a more accurate perception. Merleau-Ponty argues that this idea of reconstruction places undue limits on the extent and nature with which we integrate perception into experience.

Oddly enough Bergson and Merleau-Ponty arrive by vastly different paths at a similar conclusion about the nature of subjectivity. Bergson concludes that memory, insofar as it contributes to the construction of a unique subject, is spiritual in nature. Merleau-Ponty's comments upon "dreams" and "reality" point in a similar direction. He does not attempt to define these terms but suggests that such a distinction justifies itself as something already present in the world by virtue of our ability to recognize it. He states that attempts by science to explain a disparity between the real and the imaginary fail to be anything but secondary and superfluous. In light of these comments it should come as no surprise that Merleau-Ponty does not consider subjectivity a sutured pastiche of past and present experiences cauterized by emotion but rather an attitude taken toward life by an individual whose unique temperament dictates no other way of living.

Toward the beginning of his essay "Cézanne's Doubt" Merleau-Ponty makes it clear that studying an artist's life does not lead to a better understanding of the artist's work but lends proof of that artist's disposition toward the world.

Art historian Joyce Medina explains that, "rather than being like the impressionist works, which introduce feelings into us, Cézanne's works introduce us into feelings, into his temperament"(96). Cézanne's technique was predicated upon a return to nature like that of the impressionists, but unlike the impressionists his painting was based upon a phenomenological approach to perception. The impressionists painted relationships: colors in relation to surrounding colors, colors and their complements, and the landscape in relation to the atmosphere enveloping it. Cézanne was uninterested in reducing the world to relationships like these. Merleau-Ponty believed, like the philosopher Edmund Husserl(1859-1938) before him, that subjects must not think in terms of their relationships to a world apart from themselves but in terms of themselves defined by the world. "It is because we are through and through compounded of relationships with the world that for us the only way to become aware of the fact is to suspend the resultant activity, to refuse it our complicity"(Phenomenology, 309).

Cézanne did just this by refusing to accept the solutions science offered him. The artist would certainly have agreed with Bergson's comparison of perception and photography. Bergson explains that photography lends perception an artificial fixity by recording one instant in time from one perspective among countless possible points of view. Cézanne observed that, "the lived perspective, that which we actually perceive, is not a geometric or photographic one"("Cézanne's Doubt," 64). It was thus Cézanne's prerogative to often disregard geometric perspective. Merleau-Ponty describes Cézanne's frequent visits to the Louvre and his geological research precursory to painting the

landscape but reminds us that these things only served to acquaint Cézanne with his subject. They remained abstract interpretations to which Cézanne did not subscribe. Medina reveals that Cézanne "directed his studies at the Louvre toward synthesizing within his own experiments impressions he extracted from past works and reactivated in his own"(98). Cézanne's paintings privilege the world *not* his knowledge of it. From this unique perspective the artist once said that, "The landscape thinks itself in me and I am its consciousness"("Cézanne's Doubt," 67). Here lies the crux of what Husserl and Merleau-Ponty call the phenomenological reduction; the suspension of belief in our senses which allows the world to come alive not through those senses but to them. The reduction transforms the world from one which is formed in the subject as the result of sensations into a world outside the subject upon which sensations are shaped.

Apply this to painting and it is not difficult to imagine the world beholding the artist rather than the artist beholding the world. Merleau-Ponty records André Marchand's statement, after Klee(1879-1940):

> In a forest, I have felt many times over that it was not I who looked at the forest. Some days I felt that the trees were looking at me, were speaking to me . . . . I was there listening . . . . I think that the painter must be penetrated by the universe and not want to penetrate it ("Eye and Mind," 129).

Dewey records a similar instance told him by W.H. Hudson(1841-1922):

> The loose feathery foliage on moonlight [sic] nights had a peculiar hoary aspect that made this tree seem more intensely alive than others, more conscious of me and of my presence . . . . Similar to the feeling a person would have if visited by a supernatural being if he was perfectly convinced that it was there in his presence, albeit silent and unseen, intently regarding him and divining every thought in his mind (28).

Despite the difference in intensity between these two accounts their similarity is uncanny. Dewey explains that experiences like these account for an attitude shared by all living beings, an attitude that is dependent upon individual interaction with the world and independent of scientific analysis. He adds that activity must accompany attentiveness in order to render an experience esthetic. "The esthetic or undergoing phase of experience is receptive. It involves surrender. But adequate yielding of the self is possibly only through a controlled activity that may very well be intense"(Dewey, 53). Cézanne accomplished this by tempering his intense feelings with masterful painting.

> As his highly charged emotions empathetically supported and animated his abstractions, Cézanne transcended the dualisms of subject/object and self/world and revealed the rightful location of the subject *in* the object. As Bergson noted, this coincidence of subject and object "is the mind finding itself in things"(Medina, 95).

One artist, however, suggests that the opposite is possible, that one can experience the immediacy of reality akin to that found in perception by disengaging oneself from a subjective response to the world.

Gerhard Richter(b. 1932) provides us with an example of someone whose paintings, like Cézanne's, attempt to reproduce the immediacy of perception but, unlike Cézanne's paintings, do so by suggesting the possibility of a purely objective perception. Richter attempts to disengage himself from the practice of painting in order to draw closer to his idea of reality. His writing is rife with phrases that strike a chord similar to that struck by Merleau-Ponty. Richter writes about surrendering himself to a painting, painting unconsciously or against his own will, and being at a painting's mercy in much the same way the aforementioned figures surrendered control of their rational senses and found that the world became more alive. Richter's paintings represent ways of recouping

some of the credibility he feels painting has lost--lost not by the advent of photography but by the encroachment of subjectivity in the guise of stylization. This is evident in Richter's statement that, "For me some photos are better than the best Cézanne"(Buchloh, 23). Richter argues that paintings which indulge in stylization estrange us from reality. The alternatives he proposes are paintings that look like photographs. Bergson suggests that one way we might make a representation function more like its real counterpart would be to free the representation from its virtual nature. Virtual actions, we recall, do not develop further than having the potential to elicit a physical response.

> To obtain this conversion from the virtual to the actual it would be necessary, not to throw more light on the object, but on the contrary to obscure some of its aspects, to diminish it by the greater part of itself, so that the remainder, instead of being encased in its surroundings as a *thing*, should detach itself from them as a *picture* (Bergson, 28).

Richter proposes how this might be accomplished. Compare the above statement with what Richter has said about what critics call his "blurring" technique:

> I don't create blurs. Blurring is not the most important thing, nor is it an identity tag for my pictures. When I dissolve demarcations and create transitions, this I do not to make it more artistic or less precise. The flowering transitions, the smooth, equalizing surface, clarify the content and make the representation credible (Practice, 35).

Richter attempts to accomplish what Bergson suggests by creating pictures that mimic photographs in appearance but upon closer inspection reveal what are unmistakably paintings. When pressed by an interviewer about why he chooses to paint from photographs Richter once replied, "I needed the greater objectivity of the photograph in order to correct my own way of seeing: for instance, if I draw an object from nature, I start to stylize and change it in accordance with my personal vision and my training"(Practice, 66). He explains that when drawing

freehand we rely too heavily upon our knowledge of things and use a sort of mental shorthand. This lends to stylization because subjectivity is allowed to interfere with perception. Painting from a photograph, according to Richter, allows one to "bypass this elaborate process of apprehension"(Practice, 66). This, however, does not account for why Richter does not simply make photographs. Richter's discontent with photography is not unlike Cézanne's dissatisfaction with the solutions available to him. Richter might agree with Merleau-Ponty who states that, "in order to see the world and grasp it as paradoxical, we must break with our familiar acceptance of it"(Phenomenology, 310).

Richter's practice reflects a seemingly paradoxical attitude toward a paradoxical world. He explains that, "in dealing with this inexplicable reality, the lovelier, cleverer, madder, extremer, more visual and more incomprehensible the analogy, the better the picture"(Practice, 20). Richter is unavoidably connected to his paintings by virtue of his contact with their surfaces and yet he boldly attempts to render something disconnected from ordinary experience, a disembodied perception. Sensation occurs when sight and touch coincide in the skin and, by extension, the same occurs in a painting when the artist's brush makes contact with the canvas. But, unlike skin, Richter's paintings do not disguise a meaty subject. They do not represent a hard won battle wrought on the canvas but are rather content to bear the predetermined result of their author's struggle. Richter's use of representational means in the service of abstract ends translates into an uncommon amalgam of intensity and distance. The results are paintings that, according to Benjamin Buchloh, seem "effortless, yet painted with verve,

with indifference and virtuosity at the same time"(25). Representation, Richter explains, simply provides the "pretext for a picture"(Practice, 37). Richter's discouragement with painting's inability to approach the reality he suggests photography does warrants his attempt to make paintings function more like photographs. Like photographs, his paintings reduce the world to the phenomena of sight, but this is not to say that the power of his work resides wholly in the visible. Richter's paintings succeed as models, and "Models can only ever, at best, achieve a degree of similarity to what they are representing. Thus, for Gerhard Richter every painting is simply another attempt to come close to reality without ever being able to completely do it justice"(Elger, 21).

In the final analysis one cannot ignore Richter's ties to the real world. He paints what he does at a specific time, with a particular training, in a country with a unique history. Critics are quick to point out the fact that despite his best efforts Richter cannot escape the subjectivity involved in the decisions he makes, whether they be the colors in an abstract painting, the number of tiles in a color chart, or the vista depicted in a landscape. Choosing a mode of production like Richter's presupposes that one can divorce him or herself from history and, more importantly, the personal history which, according to Bergson, is programmed into our bodies. Yet a separation from our senses is exactly what phenomenology requires the subject to undergo in order for the world to become more than just another image. Merleau-Ponty, however, assures us that, "the most important lesson which the [phenomenological] reduction teaches us is the impossibility of a complete reduction"(Phenomenology, 310). Perhaps Richter's paintings succeed

precisely because they illustrate their failure to reduce the world to perceptual phenomena and yet they wear their failure so beautifully.

I began painting landscapes with an idea about perception. Like Richter, I too believed that avoiding stylization would help me better distinguish *what* I perceive from *how* I perceive. Richter adamantly privileges *what* is perceived over all else. He states that, "artistic production" is "a matter of the ability to see, and to decide *what* shall become visible. *How* that is then achieved has nothing to do with art or with artistic abilities"(Buchloh, 18). Until now I have largely painted my perception of nature rather than my experience of it. While the two are inextricably linked, the visual perception of a landscape seems more easily illustrated than an abstract experience in a landscape. I am beginning to approach painting as an experience that does not necessarily resemble what I see. What is most important is that my paintings bespeak an attentiveness like that with which I observe my surroundings. In my paintings I hope to communicate both my experiences with the landscape and with the paintings themselves. In Richter's personal notes he questions whether or not a painting can ultimately communicate anything. His misgivings seem to rival doubts even Cézanne harbored, but his despair is displaced by hope when he recognizes the possibility of something happening beyond his control. One of Richter's entries reads as if Merleau-Ponty wrote it himself: "Letting a thing come, rather than creating it—no assertions, constructions, formulations, inventions, ideologies—in order to gain access to all that is genuine, richer, more alive: to what is beyond my understanding"(Practice, 119). In the following passage Merleau-Ponty seems to prescribe the cure to doubts like Richter's and Cézanne's as well as clarify for myself the curious relationship between perception and experience:

> We must not, therefore, wonder whether we really perceive a world, we must instead say: the world is what we perceive . . . . [I]f I tried to find in myself a creative thought which bodied forth the framework of the world or illumined it through and through, I should once more prove unfaithful to my experience of the world, and should be looking for what makes that experience possible instead of looking for what it is (Phenomenology, 311).

For the longest time I have searched for a creative thought like this. I endeavored to make paintings that "bodied forth the framework of the world," my world, as if by some means I could share with an audience not only what I see but the attendant memories and emotions as well (Phenomenology, 311). In the past when I approached a painting I asked myself "What is the least I can do to create an image?" so that the image would be less bound to the materials from which it was created and, in my mind, retain the ephemerality of perception. I neglected to account for what happens when perceptions become physical objects. I've since realized that a painting's success is as dependent upon its material reality as it is upon the immaterial perception from which it draws inspiration. Dewey explains that the artist uses both the material and immaterial qualities of perception in tandem. He states that, "the artist only does with respect to the temporal and spatial qualities of the material of perception what he does with respect to all the content of ordinary perception. He selects, intensifies, and concentrates by means of form: rhythm and symmetry . . . "(Dewey, 183).

My paintings rehearse my search for order within specific perceptual experiences. They begin with landscapes I see every day (see Figure 1). Their familiarity, however, does not give way to indifference. Certain places hold my attention and compel me to look past the context in which I see them. Although my recollections of most of the scenes I paint do not extend beyond a few years, some figure in far more distant

memories. Regardless of what these memories entail, I feel my relationship to the landscape is more a part of the present than the past. According to Bergson, although we may associate memories with our perception, our consciousness organizes these and other associations according to their relevance upon the present. I feel it safe to say that my paintings do not indulge in representation in an illustrative way; they do not illustrate any particular memory or attempt to illustrate memory in a general way. Instead I feel that the paintings describe my present attitude toward these spaces, an attitude which shares something in common with the way I encountered these spaces, or spaces like them, in the past. Dewey explains that artists reproduce those things from their experience that they consider significant:

> If art is in any sense reproductive, and yet reproduces neither details nor generic features, it necessarily follows that art operates by selecting those potencies in things by which an experience—any experience—has significance and value. Order, rhythm and balance simply means that energies significant for experience are acting at their best (185).

The last sentence in Dewey's statement raises a question similar to one raised earlier: do those things to which we attribute order, rhythm, and balance exhibit those properties before we perceive them or are they properties which we ascribe to them? Merleau-Ponty argues that they exist before our analysis and Dewey seems to intimate the same. I find this question particularly salient with regards to composition in my paintings.

Nature represents the embodiment of beauty to which I aspire in painting. Mathematical proportions, like the golden mean, have been found in nature and were once believed to describe ideal beauty in forms predating Greek architecture. Using these proportions as the basis for my compositions represents one way I attempt to reproduce the beauty I find in nature. Until now I failed to understand that painting can invoke

beauty without symbolically alluding to it. Indeed, perhaps a painting must necessarily avoid such didacticism in order to better express what is beautiful. The rectangles continue to provide the basis for my compositions but in the past have been the unwitting victims of a personal desire to imbue my paintings with meaning. I begin a painting with lines which describe the dynamics of a specific rectangle (see Figure 2). In the past, after the paintings were completed, these lines remained like extraneous appendages. Although I still use these lines, I now erase traces of them so that they function less like evidence of my intentions and more like tools used in the creative act. They have become frames through which I look at the landscape when I look with an eye toward painting it. Although the rectangles represent an antiquated way of composing pictures and share more with past notions of beauty than those of the present, my usage represents a relationship with the past that informs the way I look at the present. In the following passage Richter explains his representational paintings in terms of what he calls "nostalgia:"

> If the Abstract Paintings show my reality, then the landscapes and still lifes show my yearning. This is a grossly over-simplified, off balance way of putting it, of course; but though these pictures are motivated by a dream of classical and pristine order—by nostalgia, in other words—the anachronism in them takes on a subversive and contemporary quality (Practice, 98).

He amends this statement in order to say that he doesn't feel the term "nostalgia" should be restricted to discussions of past events but that it can also describe a longing for something in the present. I find my own paintings somewhat anachronistic. They seem to reproduce a sense of longing for something not yet qualified by time.

Despite having some stake in the past, I feel my paintings have a large investment in the present. I have entitled my thesis exhibition "Arcadia" after a city that exists in the present but whose namesake dates back to a time and place where ideal proportions like those described still held the attention of artists. Although none of the paintings depict scenes from Arcadia, California (my birthplace and a neighboring city of Pasadena, where I live and attend school), the landscape lining the freeway through the city inspired me to begin painting landscapes and was the focus of my earlier work. Arcadia's place in the history of literature describes an interesting contradiction. In an essay written primarily to illuminate the origin of our modern misinterpretation of Arcadia, art historian Erwin Panofsky describes how a region in ancient Greece said to be the home of the mythological figure Pan was imbued with otherworldly charm and beauty. This region, praised for its ability to inspire poets and musicians, was actually a barren and rocky place. "It was . . . in the imagination of Virgil, and of Virgil alone, that the concept of Arcady, as we know it, was born—that a bleak and chilly district of Greece came to be transfigured into an imaginary realm of perfect bliss"(Panofsky, 300). The less than civilized circumstances in which Arcadians lived drew indignation from other poets but Virgil sympathized with Arcadia's unfortunate inhabitants. Panofsky explains that, "In Virgil's Arcady human suffering and superhumanly perfect surroundings create a dissonance. This dissonance, once felt, had to be resolved in that vespertinal mixture of sadness and tranquility which is perhaps Virgil's most personal contribution to poetry"(300). Later generations resuscitated the idea of Arcadia in more nostalgic

terms, examples of which include paintings by Guercino(1591-1666), Poussin(1594-1665), and Fragonard(1732-1806), to name only a few. As is bound to happen with historical subjects, the further from its origin that Arcadia was removed the grosser its misinterpretation became. This is no less apparent today when one drives through Arcadia, California and wonders how someone might associate the idea of a supernal place with a suburb in Los Angeles. But perhaps the founding fathers of Arcadia, California were right to name their once fair city after such a paradoxical idea.

Like Arcadia of old, the city of Los Angeles contains a wealth of contradictions. Palm trees have become indicative of the Los Angeles landscape and yet they are not indigenous to California. Imported in order to promote an image of Los Angeles as a tropical oasis, the palm tree curiously brings two very different geographical regions to mind; the desert and the coast, both of which describe the geography of Los Angeles. Smog is another aspect of Los Angeles' paradoxical nature. The bane of existence among most Angelenos, smog and the traffic from which it issues are two of the most often quoted reasons people move from the city. However, the same pollutants and particles of dust that constitute smog not only cloud the air but also lend the sunsets an incredible array of colors. Having grown up in a suburb that receives some of Los Angeles county's poorest air quality ratings, I took the smog's effect on the landscape for granted. Not until having lived elsewhere did I come to appreciate the way the Los Angeles landscape emerges from what looks like fog. I have also come to realize that the smog colors my memory of life in Los Angeles.

The landscapes in my paintings are often interpreted as unrealistic or idealized spaces but terms like "ideal" and "nostalgic" do not adequately describe how I regard them. Dewey argues that the term "ideal" has been cheapened by misuse. He explains that all paintings cannot help but exhibit some form of idealization:

> Through selection and organization those features that make any experience worth having are prepared by art for commensurate perception. . . . For what ideal can man honestly entertain save the idea of an environment in which all things conspire to the perfecting and sustaining of the values occasionally and partially experienced? (Dewey, 185).

Like my perception, my paintings undergo an editing process by which I discard whatever is of little or no use to me. This is why a mist seems to obscure the urban landscape in my paintings. This act of omission, however, does not always constitute a lack of interest. The white ground below the trees and foliage in the painting entitled "(Alhambra)," for example, is not meant to obscure something intimated, but to clarify what is visible (see Figure 3). In order to create symmetry between the areas framing the focus of my attention, the landscape, I chose only to inflect the road. Areas where the brushwork becomes the most concentrated, like the area surrounding the three cypress trees in "(Alhambra)," represent areas where the painting seems to become the most congruent with my *experience* of reality. This does not necessarily mean that the same areas are congruent with my *perception* of reality.

Richter describes his idea of reality in terms of its congruence with perception. This is primarily why I feel my paintings differ so much from his, although at one point I felt the contrary; I once thought my paintings would evolve (un)stylistically along the same lines as Richter's landscapes. Like Richter I work from photographs wary of the predictability that often accompanies stylization. Ironically, Richter's paintings wear

very distinctive styles. Richter's project is more clearly apparent when one takes into account his entire career. Unlike Richter I am not interested in bearing such a project out over a long period of time. Instead I seek to avoid predictability within a single painting. Art critic Linda Singer believes that style attests to the artist's ability to render abstract meaning in concrete form. "Style is thus crucial to understanding the aesthetic impact of the work of art, because it testifies to the human capacity to wrest significances from the world and to transform them into a mode of access and illumination which transcends the particularities of its origins"(Singer, 235). My paintings, like all paintings, originate with perception. It is what I find meaningful in perception and, more importantly, how I choose to render that meaning visible which makes my paintings different from anyone else's. Style is not just the particular way one dresses a surface, it is "a highly articulated instance of the self-presentation of meaning—an achievement, an emergence, a hard won expression" (Singer, 235). This is the definition of style I have come to appreciate. Recognizing what I find worthy to transform from perception to painting was long in coming but still only half the battle. It has taken me just as long to realize how to make a painting using this information.

My current effort represents the best way I know of lending form to my experience of the landscape. Phenomenology has taught me that my idea of truth informs my perception. My paintings depict how I perceive the world in accordance with what I believe about it. The natural world contains a great deal of complexity kept in check by an equal amount of organization. I believe that painting can organize experience in a similar way and I endeavor to prove as much to myself by using nature as both the subject and the basis for composition in my paintings. I attempt to make paintings that

not only recall a sense of the places I see but also recall the process of looking itself. Cézanne's canvases literalize his experience with painting in a similar way. His brushwork and use of color lead the eye across the picture plane in much the same way the artist might have applied them. Medina explains, however, that Cézanne had a deeper motivation than the unity of expression in his paintings. "[H]e strove to go beyond the materializing activities of art making, to realize the creative intention of the art making process, and to paint that process that was as much the concern of his life as it was of his painting"(Medina, 96). My paintings document my own attempts to revisit what I found inspiring in my initial perceptions of particular landscapes. In my paintings I attempt to concretely describe with paint what I can only experience abstractly. Some passages in my paintings surpass the perception from which they originated in the degree that they reflect not only my experience with the landscape but my experience with the painting as well. These passages may seem to bear more confidence than others but are, in fact, those areas where my doubtfulness is most evident. I vacillate between an assuredness and a lack of confidence in my ability to render experiences with paint. The following passage by Merleau-Ponty explains that my doubts are well founded:

> It follows that doubt, or the fear of being mistaken, testifies as soon as it arises to our power of unmasking error, and that it could never finally tear us away from truth. To seek the essence of perception is to declare that perception is, not presumed true, but defined as access to truth (Phenomenology, 311).

In effect my paintings are a measure of my ability to render truth visible. Their success is, of course, fully dependent upon my thought of what constitutes truth in painting. Perception is merely a door I pass through on my search for this truth. Ultimately the truth I seek is not the end result of searching but rather the process of searching itself.

Merleau-Ponty elucidates this point: “The phenomenological world is not the bringing to explicit expression of a pre-existing being, but the laying down of being. Philosophy is not the reflection of a pre-existing truth, but, like art, the act of bringing this truth into being”(Phenomenology, 314). In other words, I paint not in order to render something clearer in my mind or to reproduce a fleeting image from my perception but in order to search for truth by summoning it with each brushstroke.

Figure 1. Alhambra Road, 2000, photograph

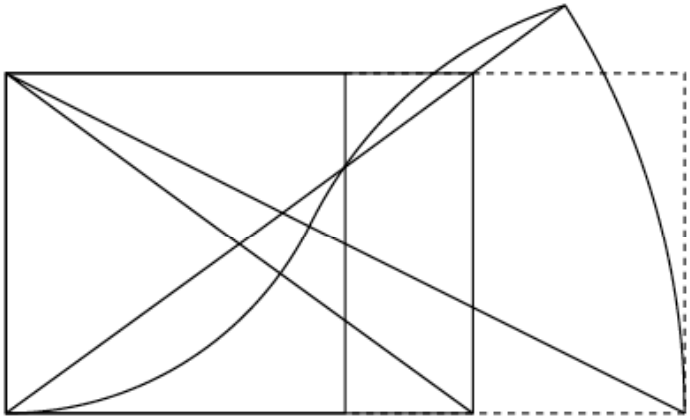

Figure 2. Penton (1:1.376)

Figure 3. *Untitled* (Alhambra), 2000, oil on gessoed paper, 24" x 33"

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