

LYOTARD'S DANCE of PAINT

Leon Phillips

What to Paint?

I recently experienced a difficult creative block, which led me to switch my painting medium from acrylic to watercolor. For many years I had poured acrylic paint as part of a process-oriented method of making paintings. That is to say, the use of the human hand was minimized, the paintings allowed to “grow” on their own. But I had become bored with this method and felt limited by my technique. My question became: what to paint? At some point I turned to Gerhard Richter’s paintings and Jean-François Lyotard’s writings on the painters Christiaan Karel Appel and Sam Francis. I began to see new possibilities and directions. Taken in tandem, the works of Richter and Lyotard helped me reaffirm my belief in the importance of color and gesture and hence the viability of painting as a medium in a hyperdocumented information age.

Lyotard: Color and Gesture

The two books by Lyotard that I began reading were *Karel Appel: A Gesture of Colour* and *Lesson of Darkness*. The first is a collection of twenty-four essays on Appel, and the second consists of forty-two poetic reflections on the work of Francis. Both books expand upon and extend the examination of painting as a medium during a period when it was eclipsed by other media. Although these two painters differ in terms of their style—Francis’s work is characterized by large, loose areas of color and thin applications of paint, Appel’s by sculptural paint massing and defined shapes—for both, color and gesture are important.

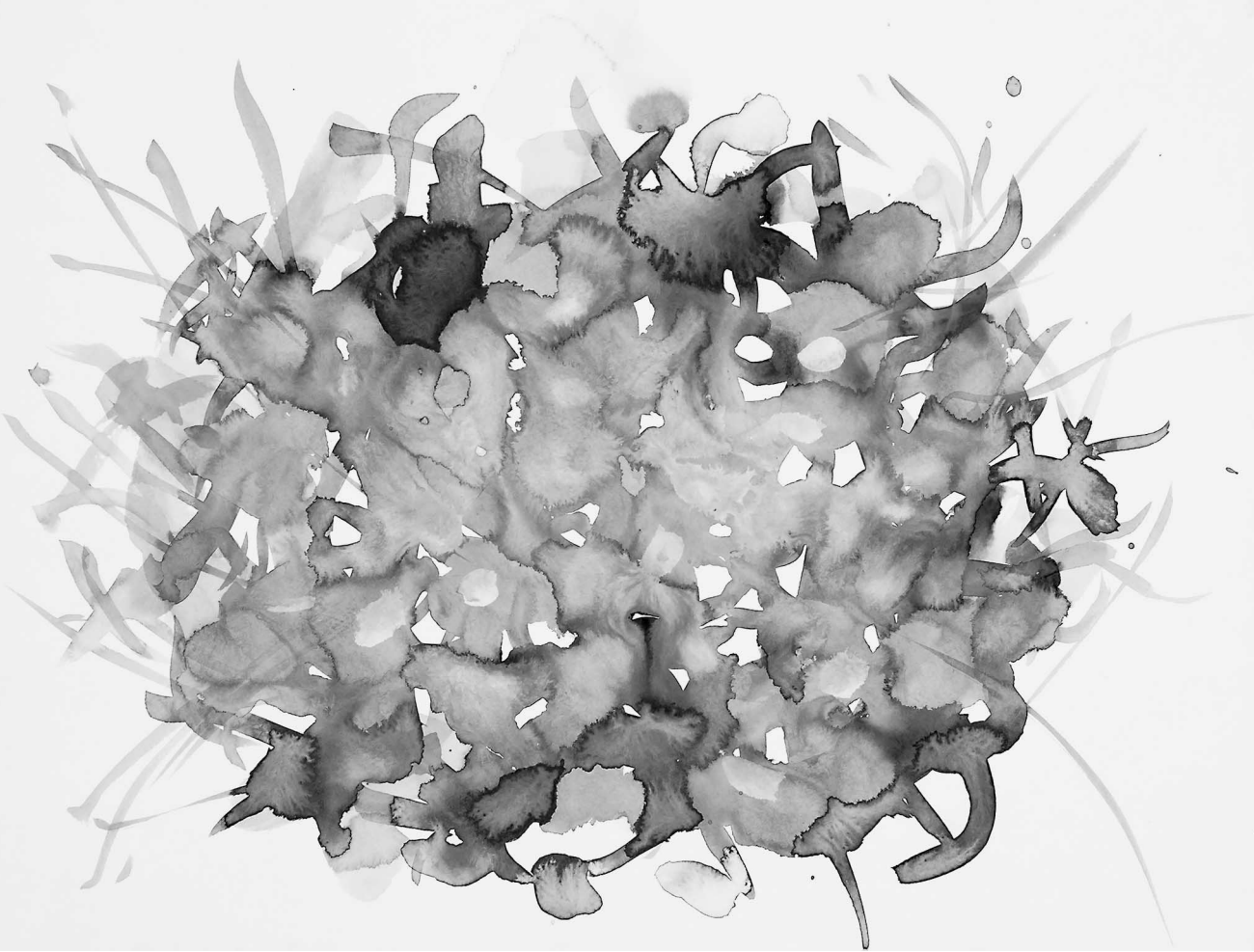


Figure 1 *Nest 1*, 2011. Watercolor on watercolor paper, 15 × 20.5 inches (unframed).

In *Karel Appel: A Gesture of Colour*, Lyotard outlines his concerns about the sublime, chromatic intensity, and the powerful pairing of color and matter. He also continuously refers to gesture, describing Appel's work as an archive of many gestures: "The painter is the first dancer of his work" (Lyotard 2009a: 47). With his reference to the "painter's paw" (Lyotard 2009c: 189), Marcel Duchamp's derogatory term (Tomkins 1965: 24), Lyotard by contrast suggests that the painter-mind inhabits an animal state, the creative process precluding

language and concept. Hence Appel is a large animal laying its paws everywhere (Lyotard 2009a: 43), engaged in the dance of paint taking place at the end of the painter's paw (Lyotard 2009c: 189), while color comes from that "which is there before form and concept" (Lyotard 2009c: 159).

In the dialog between Color and Thought in section 17, "Without Appe(a)l, Trance of Colours and Thoughts," Lyotard best describes what gestural painting can be in two different passages. Color states:

The film on Pollock showed that very well: the dance of the whole body inscribing itself on a flat support, by means of drops of paint. Dance . . . is not mediated by a concept, images, schemas, memories. It is colour itself . . . (Lyotard 2009c: 179)

So according to Lyotard, color, paint, and gesture are equal players in any given painting event, and he petitions the painter to surrender to the physical involvement of the body. To Lyotard, this act of painting is contingent upon a condition of nonverbal creative activity that lies well outside the filters of theory and language through which contemporary art is conventionally viewed and experienced. Furthermore, color and gesture for Lyotard are intimately connected to the physical “matter” of paint. When painting, “colour enters matter as what vibrates,” and it is this “matter-colour”—a “gestural matter”—that comes out of the

artist’s body (Lyotard 2009c: 159, 177, 187). Lyotard goes on to describe color’s physical presence: “Colour itself, liquid-thin or paste-thick . . . dances” (2009c: 179). He asserts that contemporary painters are not lighting technicians like the impressionists, who were attempting to borrow from nature or simulate natural light. Rather, for a painter such as Appel, it is the “chromatic matter” and the “chemical paste” of paint that concerns him (Lyotard 2009b: 71).

In *Lesson of Darkness*, Lyotard examines Francis’s use of color. Lyotard praises the virtue and vitality of color, and in the end he admits that gesture defers to the absolute authority and “giddy confidence that colors have in themselves” (1993: 19). I was initially puzzled by the title: how could Francis’s work be associated with “darkness” given that his pictorial spaces are constructed from light and color? But as I

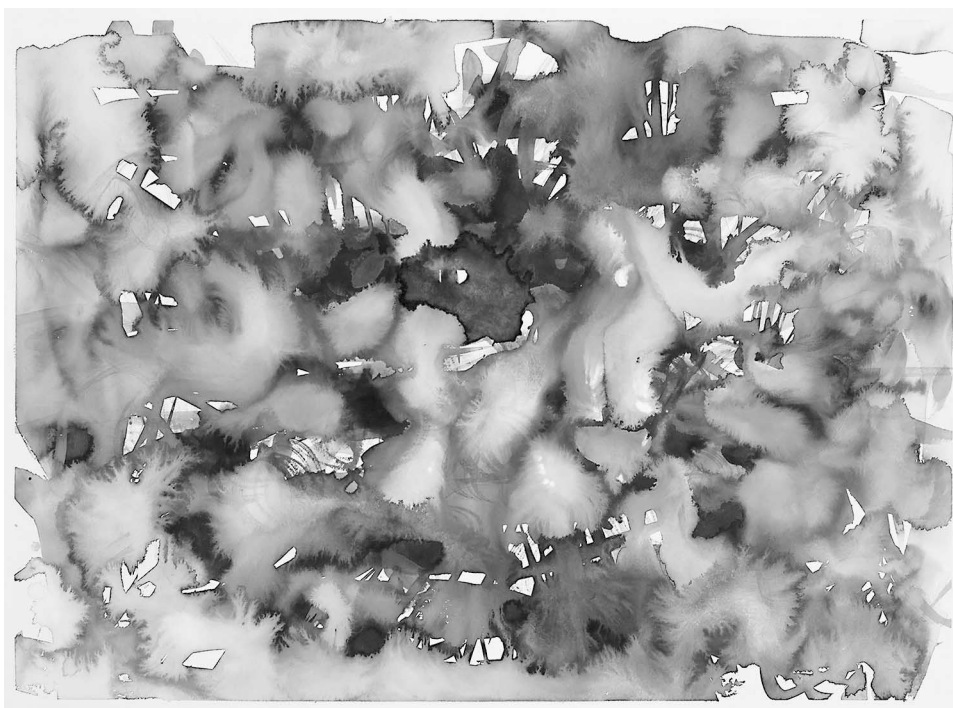


Figure 2 *Expand 5*, 2012. Watercolor on watercolor paper, 15 × 20.5 inches (unframed). Private Collection of Donald Larventz, Vancouver, BC, Canada.

read on, this became clear. In a revealing passage where Lyotard (1993: 13) describes Francis lying ill in the hospital, somewhere “between life and death,” he “was not looking at the effects of light but at the matter of light, *the substance of which light is made*. And he finds that that substance is black.” He believed that the polychromies in Francis’s paintings “emanate from a blind void . . . *vanishing towards Black*” (Lyotard 1993: 11). According to Lyotard, Francis was staring into the darkness of death, and from this came his understanding of light as sublime experience: in the face of awe-inspiring terror came transcendence.

Lyotard + Richter: Painting Looks Good

Richter is no mystic. He doesn’t yearn for the sublime and prefers instead to traffic in the banal with his use of media imagery and mechanical paint applications. But despite that, his abstract paintings and watercolors reflect Lyotard’s concerns; as with Francis and Appel, gesture and color play a significant role. Richter (2011: 10) discovered Jackson Pollock’s paintings at *documenta 2* in 1959 and had dabbled in abstraction as early as 1957. But it took another twenty-five years before he would begin to produce his abstract work (Foster 2009: 118), which now constitutes a large portion of his entire oeuvre. The abstract paintings are characterized by all-over gestures produced by the use of squeegees and controlled chance—accidents that result from the direct dragging and blending of oil paint directly on the surface of the canvas, as well as by the pouring, pooling, and splashing of watercolor on paper.

With his oil paintings, Richter uses a variety of tools to scratch and scrape down to earlier layers in an excavation of paint matter. He often works with a single red, yellow, or blue plus white. His color mixes are spontaneous and privilege the accidental.

His robust applications of thick paint in multiple layers are a manifestation of Lyotard’s notion of color-matter: the painting evolves directly out of an intense exploration of the physical properties and potential of the medium. It is profoundly process-based.

Corinna Belz’s film *Gerhard Richter Painting* (2011) gives us the opportunity to observe Richter at work in his studio. As I watched the film, I found myself thinking that while Pollock’s gestures can be likened to the languid moves of the Jazz Age, the urgency and violence of Richter’s applications reflect the speed of our instant-everything mass communication culture. Richter’s gestures are not the emotive ones of an expressionist revealing unconscious, mythical motivations; rather, they suggest the mechanical gestures of an artist who is carrying out one part in a larger, automated, digitized world.

Richter uses color in a seemingly arbitrary way. Working with primaries and white, he spontaneously lays color on the blank canvas in broad unplanned masses and strokes. He begins with high chroma colors, which, after much scraping and blending, chromatically degrade on the canvas, often into gray. This degradation references the breakdown of photographic imagery after multiple copies and the promiscuous blending and borrowing of imagery on the Internet.

Richter freely acknowledges the importance of chance in his work as it relates to color: in a 1986 interview with Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, Richter (2009: 29) describes chance as “an unconscious strategy that I can use to outwit myself.” Richter (2009: 29) agrees with Buchloh that the arbitrariness of his colors never “appears in neo-expressionism, where the color is always still regulated by aesthetic preconditions, representational functions, and harmonic compositions.” For Richter, color is much



Figure 3 *Expand 10*, 2012. Watercolor on watercolor paper, 15 × 20.5 inches (unframed). Private collection of Eduardo Pereira, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

more than an aesthetic device: it is a strategic tool that operates to prioritize chance. Color and chance are thus coupled in his work.

Richter's gestural use of squeegees to drag the paint across the canvas results in his characteristic blurring. His blurs, as Hal Foster points out, "evoke the speed of an object or the distraction of a viewer; a 'memory image' or the fading-away of the same... all these effects are common aspects of the photographic face of the

modern world" (2009: 123). Richter explains how his blurs allow for two diametrically opposed and simultaneous events, whereby something is shown and not shown at the same time (Foster 2009: 123); he poetically illustrates how in a painting, one thing can be two things: subtraction (not shown) and addition (shown).

In the spring of 2012, I traveled to Berlin to see Richter's retrospective at the Neue Nationalgalerie. I could see that his portraits looked much like photographs with blurred

areas that connoted depth of field and the focusing of the camera lens. But I could also see that his large abstract paintings suggested the presence of the camera lens with their smeared and blurred paint. Later I learned that Richter had admitted, in a 2004 interview with Buchloh, that his abstractions are just as photographically mediated as his other paintings. Buchloh describes this quality, writing that Richter's abstractions "have always had a technical . . . if not to say downright chemical dimension" (quoted in Richter 2009: 173–74), and Peter Osborne (2009: 97) states that Richter's paintings achieve a "quasi-photographic, . . . yet nonetheless painterly, surface opticality."

New Work

I began my study of Richter's work by copying his watercolors from reproductions. This exercise led to the *Nest* and *Expand* series illustrated here. This work began with painterly concerns: How should they look? If I could apply the paint in thick glazes, how could I layer these glazes without muddying the colors? I wanted to set up situations where the paint—the chemical paste that Lyotard describes—could flow and interact on the paper, expressing its chromatic matter. In short, I wanted the paint to express itself.

I used two different mediums, one to speed up the flow of the paint and another to slow it down. Like Richter, I worked with a single red, yellow, and blue plus white, allowing the mixing to occur on the paper. The high pigment loads of watercolor allowed for startling color combinations and intense washes. I threw a great deal of water at the paper, causing it to ripple severely, which facilitated the flow of the paint in different directions. So my paint application and use of color allowed me to get the maximum amount of visual information

down quickly and, as in Richter's work, gave rise to surprising, chance chromatic configurations: as Richter calls it, planned spontaneity.

Color has always been central to my work, but now gesture suddenly came into play as I began to use brushes again after years of exclusively pouring paint. Working with brushes freed me from the limiting and controlling aspect of my pours. Combined with the fluid nature of the medium and the large amount of water I was throwing at the paper, I felt motivated to work faster, moving my whole body in the painting dance that Lyotard talks about. I began to understand gesture as a spontaneous painting act that involves the body as much as the eye in order to get at the paint's "matter-color" (Lyotard 2009c: 177), "which is there before form and concept" (159). In fact, after I have made a gesture, I can tell if it is right by how it feels through my body, almost before seeing it. One day when I was feeling stuck, I began to paint with a brush in each hand simultaneously: a new approach that required even more body involvement. I've always painted with my right hand, so using my left was an entirely new experience that provoked unexpected marks and gestural moves. It felt as if I were involved in a duet with myself.

Into Darkness?

After Berlin, I continued to work on my watercolors. I began to feel that they possessed some of the qualities of a photograph: contrasts of tone and transparency suggested to me shutter speed, focus, and depth of field. The contrasts suggest an image coming into focus or a fading memory. Captivated by these qualities in Richter's work, and then seeing them surface in my own, got me thinking: should I pursue these ideas further and create paintings that possessed the

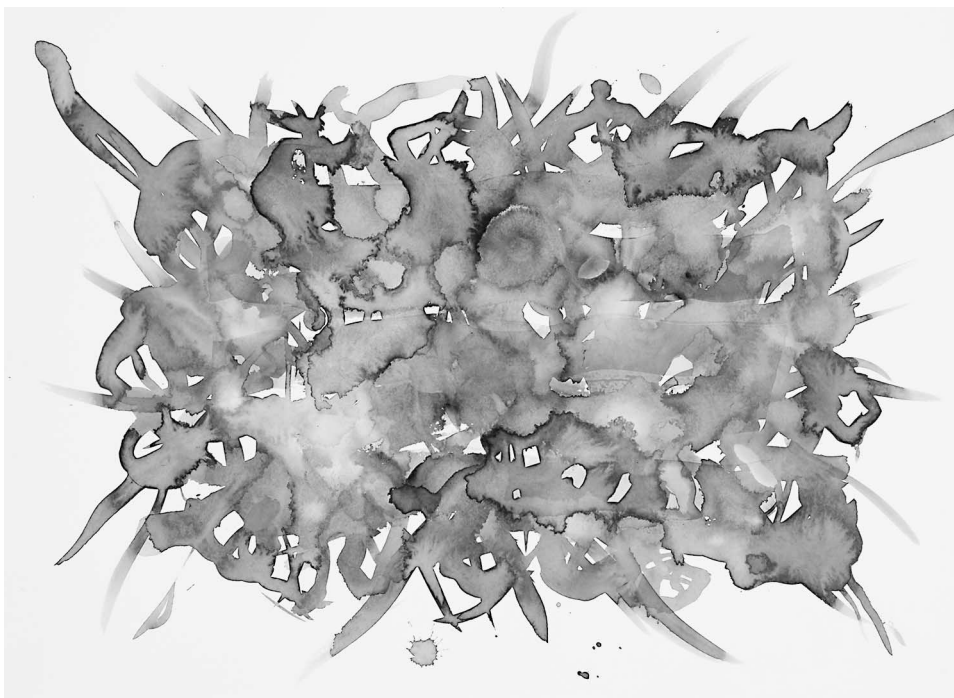


Figure 4 *Nest 2*, 2011. Watercolor on watercolor paper, 15 × 20.5 inches (unframed).

visual qualities of photographs, the blurring effects of focus, shutter speed, or the dramatic contrasts of depth of field?

At the time, I was dealing with my mother's decline into dementia. And while my studio was a refuge from her troubles, I now see that her condition seeped into and manifested itself in my work. The contrasts of tone, transparency, and focus originally employed to communicate depth of space and movement now suggested to me an image coming into focus, a fading memory, or dissolution. In fact, the gestural marks and strokes looked to me, as Foster (2009: 118) has said of Richter's work, like marks made by an expressionist with Alzheimer's.

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Filmography

- Gerhard Richter Painting*. DVD. Directed by Corinna Belz. 2011; New York: Kino Lorber Home Video, 2012.

Leon Phillips is a Canadian painter who was born in the small town of Spalding, Saskatchewan. Raised on a farm, his early experiences were shaped by the sublime expanse of the prairie landscape. He majored in studio art at the University of Saskatchewan, which he attended on scholarship and from which he graduated with distinction. He holds an additional degree in architecture from the University of Waterloo, Ontario. His final project in architecture was included in an exhibition on suburban planning and design at the Mississauga City Hall (Ontario). Phillips was the youngest artist to be given a solo exhibition at the Canadian Consulate in Chicago. His work has been exhibited across Canada and the United States and is included in numerous private and public collections in Canada, the United States, and Europe. Phillips lives and works in Vancouver, where he continues his exploration of color and gesture and issues of perception related to memory and loss.