

painters

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*Michael Chow
Leon Phillips
Massimo Bollani
Jay Pingree
Francesca Brivio*



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TUBES
 magazine

*the editor and back room staff
 wish our readers a prosperous and
 very happy 2023*

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*the amazing art
 of Mr Chow...*



“Painting Beyond Image”

an artist's perspective written by the painter

Leon Phillips



Painting as Presence

We live in a hyper-mediated world saturated with images. Social media and online platforms have amplified the quantity and speed that we interact with images -

- images that are reductive in scale and material. These are images that can be said to exist solely as images or, as Hal Foster states, images that exist as algorithmic data meant only to be seen by other algorithm, machine-seen images with “machine vision” (Foster: page 108).

There are a number of currents running counter to the image pressures of the digital world, new philosophies such as relational aesthetics, new materialism, and Object Oriented Ontology.

All of these modes of enquiry challenge accepted models for being in the world; they place the non-human on equal footing with the human and question Cartesian dualisms and anthropocentric models.

These enquiries have influenced contemporary art and led to new forms of painting that have absorbed other media such as sculpture, installation, and performance art.

image left:

Artist working at The Daugavpils Mark Rothko Art Centre in 2021.
Photograph: ©Santa Suhanova.

In this digital and discursive climate our modes of creating, circulating and discussing images are being challenged and expanded. The question I am interested in asking is this: what is it about a painting that makes it a unique type of image? For many years, Robert Irwin, the Californian, Light and Space artist, refused to have his paintings photographed because he believed that a photograph captured the image of the painting but none of its presence (Weschler: page xv). For Irwin, the photograph was an inadequate means to communicate the vital quality of presence in painting.

His 1960s Disc paintings fully embody this notion; with their simple convex shapes, achromatic palette and reliance on situational lighting, these painting-objects seem to dissolve onto the gallery wall into pure presence.

Presence is that unique quality that sets paintings apart from other types of contemporary images. Pursuing this quality led me to discover how it amplifies perception by provoking engagement with our bodies. What are the ineffable attributes and situations in contemporary painting that promote presence? Renewed and expanded painting embraces colour, materiality, process and relational aesthetics to provoke a bodily response in the viewer.



Colour as Matter

Painting-presence can be revealed through the material dimension of colour at the molecular level of pigment properties. These properties are responsible for creating light in a painting, light that is essential for communicating presence. As an artist, I was taught to think of colour in terms of its visual components of hue, value and colour, sometimes augmented by considerations of temperature (whether a colour looks hot or cold). Artists that employ chance in their work reveal how colour as matter has agency. Gerhard Richter's abstract water colours and large-scale squeegee paintings illustrate this painterly approach where colour, through the gestural application of paint, provokes maximum chromatic chance and combination.

When I switched from acrylic paint to watercolour in 2013, I devised a system of work that encouraged chromatic chance. I worked flat and used large quantities of water which caused the paper to severely warp, creating a painting-scape. This topographical surface allowed the pigment, freed from its binding medium, to "do its thing." I observed that certain colours floated around in the water and others sank to the bottom of water pools. Pigment identification revealed to me material qualities of colour, such as pigment particle size, oil content, and opacity. Until I made my water colours and came to this realization, I had only considered colour in terms of its visual aspects of hue, chroma and value; now, my colour ontology was expanded to include material qualities that are essential to obtaining light in a painting.

I discovered that colour can be employed for structural rather than decorative purposes. I came to understand that the different physical behaviours that I was observing in my water colours in their wet state resulted from differences between organic and inorganic pigments.

In *Expand no.8* (Figure 1) this material activity is illustrated by the light blue shapes contrasted with the darker turquoise shapes. The light blue blobs were made from inorganic and opaque paint mixed with inorganic water colour paint. The inorganic pigment being heavier sank to the bottom of paint puddles and dried into solid, opaque shapes. The turquoise shapes were composed of inorganic modern pigments and weighing less, floated to the surface of paint puddles, travelling to the edges and drying into coagulated contours.

Jiggle #3 (Figure 2) also illustrates the material agency of colour at the micro-level of pigment property. The smaller and lighter purple shapes with dark blue-violet edges were made by laying brush loads of organic pigment into the watery surface; these floated to the edges of painting puddles as the water dried, creating dark "blooms" and allowing the white of the paper to glow through. The yellow and white gestural shapes were composed of inorganic, heavier pigment that settled and cohered into the opaque light blue, white and yellow gestural shapes that seem to hover above the surface. The deep blue gestures were "constructed" from modern, organic pigments that are transparent and "glowing."



above : Figure 1. *expand #8*, watercolour and gouache on paper, 38 x 52 cm - 2012.
below: Figure 2. *Jiggle #3*, watercolour and gouache on paper, 96.5 x 113 cm - 2017



Gesture and Being

In gestural paintings, the hand of the artist is often self-evident, amplifying a sense of the artist being present in the work, another expression of presence that can contribute to the sense of a painting being bodily and "auto-generative" (Graw: page 153).

Aleatoric devices, combined with the haptic, amplify this sense of "self activity" (Graw: page. 110).

In such works, brushes become components of a colour delivery system in league with the artist's body. They are no longer inert tools but a dynamic medium through which the pigment is transmitted.

Swirl #8 (Figure 3) is typical of my work. It is drawn colour and a choreographic record of my body's movement. The brush has become an extension of my sensory system. Maurice Merleau-Ponty similarly observed an analogy between movement and image in painting.

He described Henri Matisse's gestural drawing and painting as dance-like and the image as a "frozen residue" left by a "manual ballet" (Gell page 95). When I work, the gestures visualize and record the movement of my body

"When I work flat and low to the ground, I am engaged with my body by leaning over and into the painting.." (page 12 photograph).

Science offers a possible explanation for the dynamic at work in gestural painting. In 1990, researchers discovered mirror neurons. These are brain cells that respond equally when we do a particular action or when we witness someone else do that action. (Winerman: page 48). This neural event is a sympathetic reaction to movement. Is this what is happening when we look at gestural work? Perhaps we are feeling in our brains the action of the other. This confirms the notion that the painting is more than an image; it is an active "being" that can provoke the semblance of bodily action. Is this one of the ways that painting seems to "speak" to us or a way that we "feel" it?



Figure 3. Swirl #8, gouache on paper, 74.9 x 104 cm, 2020.



Figure 4 Loopy #13 122 x 152cm oil on canvas 2021

Self-Acting Painting

Paintings composed of intense pattern are typically seen as merely decorative surfaces which privilege image; but richly patterned images, which rely on motif, interval and repetition, can also exude presence, their animated quality making them seem "alive" and "self-acting" (Graw: page. 179), as with gestural works. These are attributes that we would typically associate as human-like and are responses that contribute to the sense of a painting's being rather than merely being seen.

Optical art of the 1960s, and Celtic and Islamic designs are examples of paintings that phenomenally convey a sense of "liveliness" or auto-production as they can appear to be self-active or "...the cause of..." themselves (Gell. page 42). Gell describes the perceptual operation that might be at work here: the eye identifies the motif and then moves across and around the image connecting the motif as it is repeated; this internal perceptual process of moving and connecting is then externalized onto the object and phenomenally experienced as movement (Gell: page 77).

I am thinking here of Bridget Riley's Wave paintings from the 1970s that appear to be moving and projecting off the painting surface in a holographic presence. Colour operates actively in this process of animation and presence. Shapes of colour exert visual force against each other, as they ".....whirl around, hover, clash, and fragment...." Engaged in complex relationships they seem to have their own sources of energy (Gell: page 43), as illustrated in my oil painting Loopy #13 (Figure 4).

Here the gesture is composed of a repeated loop motif and a visibly expressed, single brush width. The gestures move with a "consciousness" or "awareness" of the bounding edges of the image, lending the work the sense of "self-awareness" and liveliness. This liveliness contributes to the sense that the painting has grown by, or made, itself. (Gell page 42)

Expanded Painting: Relational Fields

Expanded painting that has absorbed other media, sculpture, installation and performance, is "off the wall," active, and relational. The perceptual movement visualized in gestural painting spills off the canvas, inhabiting and activating exhibition environments, as in the large painting environments of Katharina Grosse. Such works actualize presence rather than merely describing it in an "extra-perceptual" (Joselit p. 132) manner.

In recent years, I have explored how to get my work off the wall. I approach the studio as my canvas: when I paint, I cover all studio surfaces with wall and floor coverings that record the painting process.

I consider how these materials (floor coverings, paint pans, wiping papers) that capture colour (marks such as drips, splashes, and footprints) can be preserved as artefacts of the painting process. In Figure 5, Swirl #5 is displayed with painting pans, along with floor and wall coverings. Here, the painting as labour spills off the wall and invades the gallery space.

The installation elements are integral to an embodied experience: the viewer can move around them in the gallery space literally engaging their bodies in the act of perception. By emphasizing labour and materiality these painting installations encourage an extra-aesthetic looking at art that is not only visual but also physical, one encountered through the body as much as the eyes or brain.

Situating paintings in installations externalizes painting as medium and identifies them as part of a network. The painting, no longer an inert object hanging on the gallery wall, is an active and participating member in a relational ensemble prompting the viewer "...to consider more clearly the relationship between humans and things." (Graw: page 265). In his essay "Painting Beside Itself," David Joselit cites Jutta Koether's *Hot Rod* (2009). Her painting (a monochromatic reworking of a Nicolas Poussin work) is mounted in the gallery space, on "legs" positioned partly off of a platform or "stage."



image above: Figure 5.
Studio installation Swirl #5.
Oil on Canvas.
148cmx178cm.2020

Embodied Perception

Koether performed under and around this mounted painting (Joselit page 126). The performative, installation and anthropomorphic aspects of the work activate the painting in the space; the painting overflows into its environment blurring the boundaries between its inside and outside (Graw page 265).

Ed Moses, the abstract Californian painter, said that certain Renaissance paintings activated him in a "physical way" (AD article p. 194). This is the special "feeling" that I am after. People have told me that they can "hear" or "smell" my paintings, or that they are compelled to touch my works. Aside from the synesthetic, these responses indicate that the person is being activated in a physical way, experiencing "embodied perception."

Presence is a vital force in any genre, mode or operation of painting. I am reminded of the first time I saw Vincent Van Gogh's work as a young man and how the image seemed to come through the "picture" or "window" of the painting, transcending mere description by embodying the sensual bodies of that depicted.

Or, when I came into our living room and saw my mother (who had dementia) staring at one of my paintings. After a moment she whispered, "That painting's so soft. It's here, right here," as she waved her hands in front of her face.

Presence-laden paintings might be described as "porous" (absorptive of surroundings), "sticky" (parts of them come off the image and "into us"), or "bodily" (they rely on embodied and relational practice) (Vincent page 11).

All of these attributes result in direct phenomenal experience when we experience the physical pleasures of looking. Although we might catch glimpses of a painting's bodily "self" in photographs or online images, the bottom line is that an image only becomes a painting when it envelops you in presence.



Leon Phillips working at the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity, 2020.
(Photo credit: Kyla Jacobs)

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the magical abstract art of Massimo Bollani

