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RELATIVES

by

LEEZA NEGELEV

Under the Direction of Serena Perrone, MFA

ABSTRACT

More than ever, our lives take place online—a hyper-privatized network posing as a commons. In exchange for convenience, information, and sociality, our attention is pulled in countless directions by companies harvesting behavioral data and compelling engagement through addictive technology. At best we become disaffected by overstimulation and repetitive, preference-based content. At worst, we become hostile. My current work leverages the aesthetic potential of attention. As a counterpoint to the anesthetizing quality of virtual life, my paintings rely on the sensate. In my exhibition *Relatives*, I experimented with two types of attention. One decisively developed subject matter through long stretches of concentration. Another allowed pictorial space to develop relationally, in response to my materials and environment. In ceding some control while maintaining an active interest, I had an empathetic response to the materials

and resulting object. Empathy, then, is one of the aesthetic possibilities of an unhurried, sense-based observation.

INDEX WORDS: Attention, Aesthetics, Martin Buber, James Joyce, Painting, Internet

RELATIVES

by

LEEZA NEGELEV

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in the College of the Arts

Georgia State University

2023

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2023

RELATIVES

by

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May 2023

DEDICATION

For my family, who gave me more than was possible.

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David: you've taught me more about relationships than anyone else. Your big heart and constant support made this possible.

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1 INTRODUCTION

I tried each thing, only some were immortal and free. (Ashbery 163)

More than ever, our lives take place online—a hyper-privatized network posing as a commons. In exchange for convenience, information, and sociality, our attention is pulled in countless directions by companies harvesting behavioral data and compelling engagement through addictive technology. At best we become disaffected by overstimulation and repetitive, preference-based content. At worst, we become hostile. My current work leverages the aesthetic potential of attention. As a counterpoint to the anesthetizing quality of virtual life, my paintings rely on the sensate. In my exhibition *Relatives*, I experimented with two types of attention. One decisively developed subject matter through long stretches of concentration. Another allowed pictorial space to develop relationally, in response to my materials and environment. In ceding some control while maintaining an active interest, I developed a sense of empathy towards the materials and resulting art object. Empathy, then, is one of the aesthetic possibilities of an unhurried, sense-based observation.

My recent work presupposes that mutuality is possible between myself and anything to which I devote my full attention. This mutuality is rooted in observation that eschews control in favor of curiosity and single-minded interest. Where algorithm-mediated interactions are designed against failure, my brushstrokes chase after entropy. This way of working is firmly rooted in sensory experiences which command attention to my immediate surroundings rather than a virtual space.

Sixteen years ago, I read Martin Buber's *I-Thou* and *Meetings*, and found in them a potent description of my relationship with God and art, translated into a secular, poetic language.

Like Buber, my first religious education was in Orthodox Judaism which left me at odds with a vengeful, punitive God. Although I was taught that God was everywhere, my time with him was confined to three daily prayers and some blessings in between. My actual religious life belonged to the mundane; a tree in my neighborhood that consumed my interest fully, a long conversation with a friend, and notably, when painting or sculpting clay. Buber described this state as *I-Thou*, and its counterpoint as *I-It* (Buber 56-57). Both are essential aspects of human experience. One allows us to “see the world in a grain sand” and the other divides the day into hours (Blake 117). I will always be grateful for the way Buber’s worldview offered me a framework through which I could understand the aesthetic possibilities of attention.

In this worldview, *I-It* is the quality of daily life which requires us to filter phenomena through preordained taxonomies. It’s the way we innately maneuver objects and people into a productive, means-driven orbit. This is the state in which I research my materials, tinker with their physical properties, and evaluate a work according to formal concerns. *I-Thou* is when, “turning in tenderness and laboring in concentration, we are greeting reality and joining hands with it” (Wodehouse 21). This type of attention is relational; myself and what is in my perception are caught in a web of *betweenness*. Although the taxonomies remain, they are incorporated into an expansive view of the whole and its parts. Evolving my creative choices from this relational attention was one of the main preoccupations of this thesis show. In the following pages I will offer literary, philosophical, and psychological sources that support and inform this approach to artmaking.

2 PAYING ATTENTION TO PAYING ATTENTION

The relation to the You is unmediated. Nothing conceptual intervenes between I and You, no prior knowledge and no imagination; and memory itself is changed as it plunges from particularity into wholeness. No purpose intervenes between I and You, no greed and no anticipation; and longing itself is changed as it plunges from the dream into appearance. Every means is an obstacle. Only where all means have disintegrated encounters occur (Buber 63).

One of the most important things that can be said about “thou” is that it *isn't*. In Buber’s original German text, he uses the term *du*, a pronoun used for a mother, beloved pet, and God. Buber worked closely with his first American translator and selected “thou” to highlight the possibility of finding God-in-relation, but Buber’s was a “God of the marketplace,” not a king on high (Baer). Like the Chassidic Jewish tradition that inspired him, Buber’s writing addressed the latent holiness in the ordinary stuff of life. Unfortunately for English speakers, “thou” makes us sneeze from so much accumulated dust. Yet, if the *du* of Buber’s philosophical shorthand is meant to conjure those closest to us, then we learn something essential about the banality which produces this attitude called *I-Thou*. For Buber, and for myself in the studio, addressing my work as *You* means paying attention to what appears to be entirely familiar.

It's easy to insist that what's familiar is worth noticing. It's much harder to pay attention. I remember the languid hours of a childhood day with equal parts anxiety and longing. The weeks were packed full of undigested moments. Each new or not-yet-routine experience warranted my interest because the world was mostly unknown. As I grew older, I started to anticipate the rhythms of a year and its seasonal shifts. The strata of life became predictable, and

I internalized the expectations of each discrete layer. I was desperate to learn about the world so that I could exercise some control over it.

I assume this is what is meant by the expression *growing up*. Buber, ever the skeptic, wants us to question it. He coined the term *I-It* to describe the way the contents of daily life so easily become objects for our use (Buber 83). On a Sunday, I might call my friend, drive somewhere, and go to bed. It's possible to relate to all these experiences and their accompanying materials (phone, car, work, road, bed) as objects I act upon, or a means to an end. In this scenario, my interest in each object only extends if its function is interrupted or I see something unusual. To take the example to an extreme, it's certainly possible to treat my phone call like a task on a to-do list. Buber readily admits it's this same capacity for discrete, goal-oriented behavior that makes survival tenable. But what happens when *I-It* becomes our primary way of looking at the world? What do we miss?

As a child I was curious to a fault. I worried the adults around me by engaging in long conversations with strangers, ignored "No Trespassing" signs, and rummaged through the contents behind any door. Spying into the apartments next door to ours was almost as entertaining as cable TV. The urge to snoop wasn't helped by the company I kept. I was raised by three generations of cagey Soviets. Emigration to the U.S. did not erase the trauma of government surveillance and religious persecution. I can imagine how essential secrecy was when they applied for refugee status at the same moment when the USSR was quietly jailing dissenters. The way I heard it years later, my family left Uzbekistan without informing a single neighbor, friend, or employer beforehand. Secrets seemed to be essential to Soviet-Jewish survival, and as a child it only compounded my curiosity.

Being a first-generation American transformed my curiosity into something useful. My family's culture and speech are rooted in the Jewish diaspora of Soviet-occupied Uzbekistan, a world far removed from what was then daily life in Brooklyn and Boston. If I wanted to speak English correctly and act American, I had to look, listen, and smell for clues. As any bicultural person will tell you, cultural and linguistic assimilation is rooted in vigilant observation. As I grew older, this kind of outward scrutiny became tedious. I turned inward, reflecting on what I noticed and why. Reflexive curiosity proved to be a gateway drug that led to my exploration of several late nineteenth century philosophers, with Martin Buber standing out among them.

Buber's writing gave me permission to value observation that wasn't always a means to an end, a relational attention that can occur between people and anything we come across. In the Old Testament book of Genesis, God speaks, and this speaking is what creates an entire world. Buber wrote that he wants his readers to speak *You* to whatever is before them (Buber 92). In doing so, the moment of address becomes an ever-unfolding generative act.

Despite my inborn desire to engage with the world, with each passing year it became harder to stay genuinely curious. The older I became, the more I observed the routine cruelty in human relationships. My younger self responded with outrage, but as time went on, I accumulated responsibilities and expectations that seemed to inoculate me against feeling or noticing much. Now, I ignored the homeless people I used to talk to (*I had places to be*). I stopped thinking about the exploitative labor that produced my clothing (*I wanted to look presentable*). Examining the world closely unveiled a sea of ethical concerns and interrupted what appeared to be progress towards a successful life. Moreover, those moments of attention to my surroundings were swallowed by anxiety about wasted time and the urge to be continually productive.

At sixteen, I found that I could rarely take a moment to observe the world around me unless I had a cigarette in hand. Those slow measured breaths offered me exactly what I was looking for: a moment to do nothing. Yet it was that pause with no purpose when the whole world seemed to draw near. Perhaps this is what the poet T.S. Eliot alluded to in *Four Quartets*:

For most of us, there is only the unattended
 Moment, the moment in and out of time,
 The distraction fit, lost in a shaft of sunlight,
 The wild thyme unseen, or the winter lightning
 Or the waterfall, or music heard so deeply
 That it is not heard at all, but you are the music
 While the music lasts. These are only hints and guesses,
 Hints followed by guesses; and the rest
 Is prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action.
 (Eliot 44)

Over two decades later, I find myself in a world where this *nothing* is even harder to find. Moments that stretched aimlessly in conversation, solitude on a walk, or a lull at work are now filled with a never-ending virtual scroll. My recent efforts in the studio made a concerted effort to approach *nothing*. I wanted to know what I could make by focusing a guileless interest on what was directly in front of me.

Around age sixteen, I made my first piece of art that I loved. The experience terrified me. Before this piece, I'd made a pile of female nudes and landscapes that imitated some of my favorite artists. I enjoyed emulating the art I saw in museums, but my canvases felt lifeless as soon as I finished them. Then one came along that was different than the rest. One night, I hastily arranged myself on my bedroom floor with lined notebook paper, a brush, and black ink. When I started moving around the paper, I let myself work without stepping away to evaluate. This was easier to do because I wasn't trying to make anything figurative. Since I knew precious little about abstraction, I also didn't compare the marks to any ideal. I simply decided to trust the materials to do something *with* me, rather than trying to do something *to* them.

After some time, I realized I hadn't consciously looked at the work in a while. Or perhaps more accurately, my eyes had been in my hands. When I finally stepped back and looked critically, the painting looked back. Not with eyes—there was no face to peer out of—but something in the jumble of paper and paint now asserted itself independently. Was it some idea I had? Something that had been buried in my subconscious? Plausible enough, but I knew it wasn't true. Buber described it thus:

This is the eternal origin of art that a human being confronts a form that wants to become a work through him. Not a figment of his soul but something that appears to the soul and demands the soul's creative power. What is required is a deed that a man does with his whole being: if he commits it and speaks with his being the basic word [You] to the form that appears, then the creative power is released and the work comes into being (60).

At the time, I hadn't met Buber. I had no philosophical or artistic framework to explain what had happened, but I couldn't forget the quality of attention that subsumed all my senses while painting. That "absolutely unmixed attention" seemed to generate its own electricity, a complete circuit between myself and the tools I was using (Weil 106). The result was a painting I loved, but what really interested me was the intensely reciprocal process which had produced the object.

When I walk into my studio, I'm often shocked at how empty the room feels. Attention transforms the stale air into something vital. But how do I get there? In this room (and its sister-room, which lives in my mind), I begin by noticing what I notice. I observe my body and its sensations. I capture the room I'm in and the objects piled up in it. These are side-by-side with the memories, desires, and fears that preoccupy me. Sometimes boredom gnaws at me; my

movements are heavy, and every brushstroke is a dead-end. I'm pawing uselessly in the dark one moment and in the next, a pulse of interest leads me out of thinking and towards the materials themselves. Now the pigment, water, paper, and brush pull me forward without effort. In these moments, my gestural responses are brighter than discrete thoughts.

The painter Philip Guston described this experience:

A painting feels lived-out to me, not painted. That's why one is changed by painting. In a rare magical moment, I never feel myself to be more than a trusting accomplice. So the paintings aren't pictures, but evidences – maybe documents, along the road you have not chosen, but are on nevertheless.

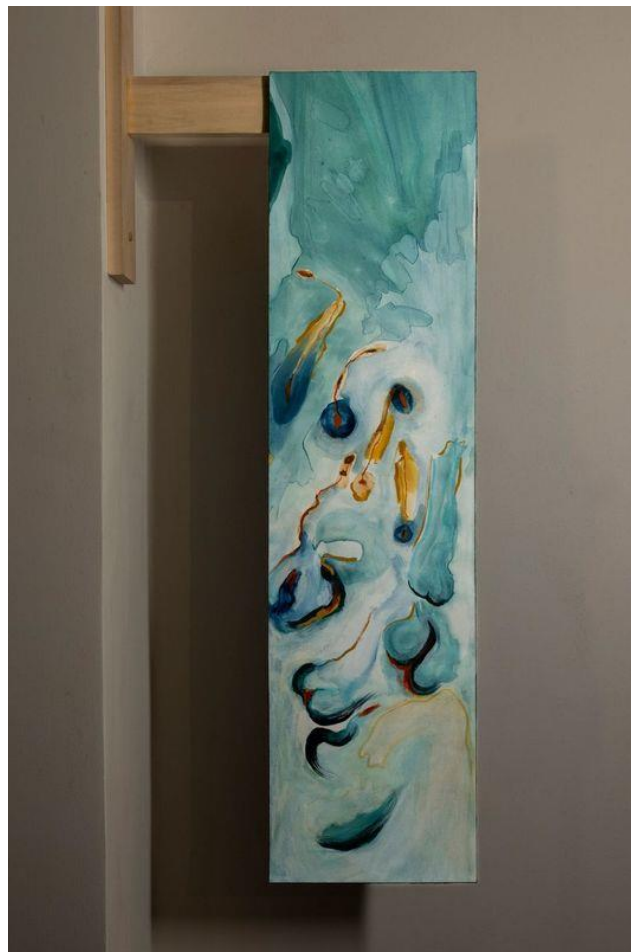


Figure 2.1 Leeza Negelev, Installation View 1

Of course, these moments don't last. When I physically and mentally step away from the painting, my perspective is utilitarian, historical, and sharp-edged. When I'm no longer involved in the totality of the experience, I analyze the formal elements in the painting. This object-focused attitude which Buber described as *I-It* is also essential to my work. It punctuates the relational moments with complex problems of line quality, color, texture, space, and value. These are the moments when the artists and art critics I love are in the room with me, debating loudly about my next move.

In the show, *Relatives*, several pieces focused exclusively on formal concerns. For these, I determined the outcome of each object with authority right from the start. I used them to complete the larger installation, and I describe the specific ways they each accomplished this goal in a later section. Ultimately, this document devotes more space to describing my relational approach because it's the focus of this exhibition. In the end, both approaches rely on formal analysis; one is rooted in it outright, while the other uses formal concerns as a necessary rest stop.

Relational attention is challenging, so I make painterly decisions which evoke a feeling of mutuality as I work. Like my predecessors in abstraction, I position my support on the floor or flat on a table, which interrupts my reading of the painting as an art object. Sensual pleasure is another incentive for an interest in the present: I choose pigments that entice me to look for long periods of time. In the show, *Relatives*, I selected three dominant hues (Prussian blue, alizarin crimson, and a warm green) and created a series of paintings with each one. This visual constraint settled my eyesight as the marks grew wild. Painful sensations were another catalyst. Occasionally, a pinched nerve in my back would command all my focus; this changed my physical posture, which in turn altered the marks I made. Pleasure and pain are far from the only

sensations I observed, but extremes are easier to locate in our vernacular. In the studio, intelligibility is impossibly brief, and sensation becomes another substance akin to pigment, water, and paper.

In *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, the philosopher Gilles Deleuze takes up Antonin Artaud's concept of a "body without organs" to describe the way sensate experience resists systematic organization. Deleuze is critical of phenomenology (and psychoanalysis) because it's limited to the position of the individual (39). Where organs suggest the integrity of an organism, sensation implies otherwise. Feeling expands beyond organ function, in part, because sensation is so thoroughly enmeshed in what is outside our skin. Language may try to concretize experience but sensation flickers, spasms, and scrawls across borders. This problem is best exploited by poets and is especially challenging for medical professionals, who interpret highly subjective accounts of sensation to treat patients (Walsh).

When painting *with*, my body doesn't feel like a singular organism experiencing sensation. As Deleuze describes it, the body has "thresholds or levels. Sensation is not qualitative and qualified, but has only an intensive reality, which no longer determines within itself representative elements, but allotropic variations. Sensation is vibration" (39). My nerve endings may not extend past my fingertips, but when I paint, I live inside the grating texture of chalk pastel on paper and the wet gouache as it digests pastel dust.

Sensate cognition is often devalued as irrational and feminine unless it's contextualized by cultural forms which are already feminized and devalued: poetry, folklore, and the arts. On the other hand, daily life often seems designed to confound sensual understanding. We can only sense what is proximate; but the rhetorical power of neoliberalism is aspirational and future oriented. American consumerism sells what is out of reach; a car commercial tells a story about

the boundless freedom of the road, while a clothing company promises model looks and sex appeal. It's easy to see how chasing an impossible outcome might be psychologically harmful to the individual, but how does the pull from our immediate reality function politically? In a later section entitled, "Breaking Up with My Algorithm," I'll address this question directly.

Paying attention is a discipline. I have over thirty years of disappointment in what this world has become; some days the last thing I want to do is look, let alone feel. As T.S. Eliot wrote during the time between two world wars: "Go, go, go, said the bird: human kind/ Cannot bear very much reality" (14). My phone woos me with a thousand opportunities for escape, each one designed to produce the just-right affect that will compel my interest. Even without the pull of a screen, there is a compulsion toward productivity that makes it easy to propel myself forward blindly towards a goal. Yet despite the very real challenges, the moments of unmixed attention are the ones that remind me of what is good, worthwhile, and human.

3 FEEL THEM FULL

My favorite moment in a romantic comedy is the one before the first kiss. By this point the audience has learned that it's our heroine's particularities of speech, her rare Regency-era feistiness, or quirky humor that have ultimately attracted the love interest. We know this because the film has set out to show our two main characters observing each other. Whether through stolen glances or haughty glares, they can't seem to look away or stop thinking about each other. When the kiss finally happens, it's because these two can't keep their distance anymore. *It's showtime*. On a good day, I approach the act of painting like a heroine the moment before her first kiss. I want to go from timid curiosity to a full-blown magnetic pull that can't be stopped. I want the terror that comes from untried romantic feelings, that very real possibility of total humiliation. That sense, described by the painter Cecily Brown, that you could "lose it all" at any moment (Martin). On a good day, I'm enticing my materials into a relationship, and at a minimum, I'm proposing an affair.

A reasonable person might ask how any material or environment can respond or relate if it isn't sentient. Humans easily anthropomorphize inanimate objects, from childhood toys to ships. Beyond providing a useful metaphor, I don't anthropomorphize my materials. I also don't ritualize or deify my studio space. It would be easier (though not simpler) to explain my artmaking using quantum physics. Scientists Albert Einstein, Nathan Rosen, and Boris Podolsky published the first paper on quantum entanglement in 1935. It stated that quantum particles from distinct entities could be intimately connected, even across vast distances (Calvin). These quantum particles can become so deeply correlated that they behave more like one whole unit rather than individual particles that have become linked (Calvin). How's that for romance? Building on this research and the work of Niels Bohr in particular, contemporary theoretical

physicist Karen Barad coined the term *agential realism* to unite ontological, epistemological, and social discourse with the discoveries of quantum mechanics. Barad asserts that observable phenomena is not a subject acting on an object, as classical physics suggests, but intra-action that produces phenomena dynamically. They write:

[T]he universe is agential intra-activity in its becoming. The primary ontological units are not “things” but phenomena—dynamic topological reconfigurings/entanglements/relationalities/(re)articulations. And the primary semantic units are not “words” but material-discursive practices through which boundaries are constituted. This dynamism is agency. Agency is not an attribute but the ongoing reconfigurings of the world (818).

As a species, we are prone to exaggerating our separation from the world-at-large. The dichotomy implied by the concepts *civilization* and *nature* epitomizes this. Likewise, we often casually describe humans as the primary actors in a passive world. From childhood onwards, my lived experience has provided salient moments of contradiction, and in no place is this more apparent than when I’m in the studio. Regardless, it’s still much easier to see myself as the star of the show—interrupting the possibility of a reciprocal experience. In the paintings developed for this exhibition, I experimented with subduing this instinct by making some practical decisions about my materials.

Watercolor paper is the obvious choice for any water-based pigment as it’s sized to absorb more liquid than most papers. Where watercolor paper allows me to remove unwanted paint easily, the Bristol vellum I used locks in the pigment immediately and inconsistently. Relying on a process that is erratic and permanent forced me to take a collaborative approach.

Although any type of paper will have an active chemical response, for these paintings, resistance proved to be a more legible reminder of mutuality.

In many of the pieces, I combined watercolor, gouache, acrylic, and chalk pastel. These are texturally unique mediums. Gouache has a flat, velvet appearance when applied thickly in layers. Watercolor and diluted gouache offered delicate transparencies, while chalk pastel pulled out old marks, turning the paper into a palimpsest. When used in a spare, thin line, the pastel reminded me of the potential for erasure by an errant movement of my hand. In contrast to the fragility of chalk, I also used heavy-bodied acrylic and oil stick which sat on the paper like thick pudding. The variety of textures and sounds, and the sensations they elicited all increased my ability to sense a feeling of kinship with my materials.

Shared feeling, or empathy, is typically seen as the domain of humans and non-human mammals. The English poet, John Keats, once wrote to a friend that he could inhabit the reality of a billiard ball, and I've often found my own senses projected towards inanimate objects and people alike (Hebron). In its everyday usage, empathy is often understood to mean feeling what another feels, or "walking a mile in her shoes." Where sympathy implies intellectual distance, empathy is a shared affective experience—it's what happens when barriers break down and our perception of another is heightened. On paper, this sounds improbable. Our experience is so singular, how can we feel *exactly* what another feels? Yet most of us know what it's like when we're inside another person's experience.

Not long ago, I found out that my good friend's mother had died. I didn't know her mother well, but I imagined what my friend was going through and felt extremely sad for her. A couple of days later I took a plane north for the funeral and it was a very different experience. Being physically with my friend, surrounded by mourners, and the familiar smell of the funeral

home allowed me to feel *with* her, rather than *about* her. This is an extreme example, but I've experienced this difference countless times. Auditory information often produces sympathy, whereas sense-based cognition produces a shared affective experience. In this recent exhibition, my decisions were based on the same principle. In directing my attention fully to my materials and environment, I was able to feel an empathetic response towards all the objects involved.

4 BREAKING UP WITH MY ALGORITHM

In *One-Dimensional Man*, Herbert Marcuse outlines how real needs become false ones in an affluent industrial society. False needs are those freedoms and pleasures that seem to *make life worth living*. We identify with them and rely on them—meanwhile they safeguard profitable exploitation.

Marcuse writes:

The distinguishing feature of advanced industrial society is its effective suffocation of those needs which demand liberation—liberation also from that which is tolerable and rewarding and comfortable—while it sustains and absolves the descriptive power and repressive function of the affluent society. Here, the social controls exact the overwhelming need for the production and consumption of waste; the need for stupefying work where it is no longer a real necessity; the need for modes of relaxation which soothe and prolong stupefaction; the need for maintaining such deceptive liberties as free competition at administered prices, a free press which censors itself, free choice between brands and gadgets (7).

Consider the role of cars, which provide so many personal freedoms, not least of which is getting us to work so that we can afford food and shelter. Although they poison the air we breathe and are the leading cause of our death (outside of natural reasons), we relate to cars like cherished friends (CDC). The “repressive satisfaction” Marcuse describes above effectively deters genuine freedom, which might entail a life in which our livelihood isn’t tied to a life-threatening vehicle (7). In the end, the best we can do is slowly minimize their destructive tendencies—but can any of us imagine living in a world without cars?

Along these same lines, communication in its most basic form is essential to our survival and flourishing—and certainly freedom of speech must be a requirement in any democratic society. As with other basic human activities, our propensity for innovation has advanced human communication almost beyond recognition. We have an unprecedented number of platforms with which to connect with an unprecedented number of people. Yet this freedom, and the satisfaction and novelty it provides, is also what makes it difficult to address the exploitative function embedded in these technologies.

I remember a time before the internet—before the knowledge that I could find anyone and anything at my fingertips in mere seconds. What was once a novel pastime is now a fully-fledged need. Few of us could imagine relinquishing the access to information and community we've been granted online. Online spaces offer a social and political freedom that's denied in most institutions where people gather in large numbers. Schools, workplaces, religious organizations, and nonprofits are inherently hierarchical and pedantic—they're rarely spaces where individuals can speak completely freely without consequences. The best of them carves out an alternative to the norm, but these are few and far between.

All of us have had our behavior and interests policed by paternalistic organizations, but those who are historically underrepresented have more to lose. For example, children of color have been disproportionately funneled out of schools into juvenile detention centers for decades (Heitzig 20). A system supposedly designed for learning and community not only silences but incarcerates its members. Likewise, people who identify as LGBTQIA+ have long had to hide or minimize their identity within schools, workplaces, and religious organizations. This is to say nothing of the millions of people with disabilities who are completely excluded. The freedom of expression (and relative anonymity) afforded online has been significant for countless groups.

Despite this freedom (or because of it), the dialectic Marcuse described in *One-Dimensional Man* applies here as well: freedom of expression online is also the mechanism that enables companies to surveil our behavior, compel our attention, and then direct this attention wherever it is most profitable to corporate interests.

For years, our biggest concerns about the internet seemed to be about wasted time, or the proliferation of hate groups—yet it’s becoming increasingly clear that these are the least of our worries. Recently, a highly advanced artificial intelligence program, GPT-4, was made publicly available in the form of ChatGPT. In response to this advancement, “1,000 technology leaders and researchers signed an open letter calling for a six-month moratorium on the development of new systems because A.I. technologies pose ‘profound risks to society and humanity’” (Metz). Geoffrey Hinton, known as the “grandfather of A.I.,” recently stepped down from his position at Google so that he could speak candidly about the dangers posed by the technology *he* helped develop (Metz). The industry leaders who signed the open letter (Hinton included) are calling for a six-month pause on all A.I. systems greater than GPT-4. For the authors, this six-month pause should be used to organize regulation at the government level, “safety research,” methods of distinguishing between authentic and fake content, and “well-resourced institutions for coping with the dramatic economic and political disruptions (especially to democracy) that A.I. will cause” (Future of Life Institute).

It's easy to discount this call for action as hyperbole, yet even before GPT-4 hit the market, Russian hackers used Facebook to try to sway the outcome of our election (Kelly and Samuels) and the military of Myanmar used Facebook to instigate ethnic cleansing (Mozur). Although Facebook (now the social media conglomerate known as “Meta”) has faced numerous legal disputes, ultimately, it’s business as usual for everyone involved. Although I’m hopeful that

the requests in this open letter are taken seriously, I know that historically, meaningful restrictions on dangerous technological advances (such as guns and nuclear weapons) can be vague and difficult to enforce.

Every year, billions of dollars are spent to keep us clicking via highly addictive, dopamine elevating technology (Greenfield 30). Nobody spends that much money without expecting results. Unfortunately for us, the results are increasingly morally ambiguous. In his recent book, *The Chaos Machine*, New York Times reporter Max Fisher “quotes Facebook’s own researchers as saying ‘our algorithms exploit the human brain’s attraction to divisiveness,’ leveraging that flaw to ‘gain user attention and increase time on the platform’” (Parkin). Although there is an enormous amount of connection to be found online, most of these spaces don’t just distract, they actively promote hostility and increasingly, they are tools of misinformation and warfare.

When seeking connection online, our pathways are almost limitless: email, text, social media, the direct messaging apps within social media, WhatsApp, and Zoom (and these are just the ones I use most). With WIFI connecting almost every square mile, we can now work and socialize from anywhere, at any time. Once again, Marcuse words ring true: it’s not the number of things we can choose that defines our liberty, “but *what* can be chosen and what *is* chosen” (7). Frequently, what I’ve chosen is a life of endless distraction. Rather than concentrating on one thing for any amount of time, we now toggle between many things, typically not focusing for more than three minutes (Klein). Studies have shown it takes approximately twenty-three minutes to fully return to a productive state of focus once we’ve switched gears (Schramm). I don’t need to tell you that this equation doesn’t make sense.

The most popular communication platforms spend billions to test and perfect the conditions that will keep users engaged longer. Unsurprisingly, the psychological principles used by developers are the same ones used in casino slot machines. By keeping behavioral rewards such as likes, comments, and followers unpredictable, we are compelled to check our phones incessantly (Haynes). This technology is so effective that the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* is currently considering internet addiction as a diagnosis (Besser).

On a broad scale, my social interactions online are inconspicuously determined by algorithms automated to direct my attention to an economically lucrative end. Real life connections are now the only place where a conversation can occur without a for-profit entity guiding its course. German scholar of media studies and literature, Roberto Simanowski explains algorithms in the following way: “If A then B. The ‘if-then’ chain can be complex and may even be able to produce new ‘ifs’ from ‘thens’ in several consecutive steps. But we are always dealing with a finite number of steps that result, finally, in a certain output of information from a certain input” (50).

An algorithm isn’t a living thing, but it imitates our tendency to do more of what we like. For example, some of my paintings used a lot of Prussian blue gouache. I showed the pieces to my thesis committee, visiting artists, and friends: all of them had a different response or non-response to this color. Observing how others reacted to the work changed how I understood my own choices. I still felt my deep-seated love for Prussian Blue, but now I had some new ideas.

Online, this same situation plays out differently. Many of the algorithms that direct us online respond to input narcissistically: “If Leeza likes Prussian + blue + paint then let’s show her some more.” Now I’m seeing ads and posts from friends that include Prussian + blue + paint in some form. This example is banal; however, it becomes alarming when Facebook and

Instagram's algorithms prevent me from seeing any feeds that share contradictory political views. These algorithms stave off failure based on a very superficial definition of connection: *my interests*. In the process, I lose contact with divergent points of view. The consequences aren't merely the so-called online political echo-chamber. It's the ability to listen, relate, and respond to a perspective that doesn't already mirror my own.

Predictive text and predictive A.I. comb our behavioral data to anticipate our thinking. This technology can propose words in a text message, an address in Google maps, searches online, and friends on social media. As these mundane activities are increasingly becoming the dominant substance of daily life, what will it mean for the way our brains respond to each new circumstance? These tools aim to make life easier by constantly offering suggestions, but it means we take an ever-more passive, inattentive position. With the recent development of ChatGPT, the level to which A.I. can think for us has just exploded. I believe these small moments of assistance are helpful (and at times, desperately needed), but they prevent active engagement. Maybe I'm wrong, but I'm not worried about robots taking over the world. I'm more concerned about the way these innovations promote apathy in an exploitative capitalist economy. Rather than asking myself what needs to happen, I increasingly say yes or no to a predetermined data set and hope for the best.

Predictive text is not that far off from the limiting habitual behaviors that dictate all our decisions. Human cognition relies on predictive thinking—when we listen to someone, our brain is constantly imagining their next word (McCarthy). Racism is an extreme example of the negative impact our habits of thinking can have. Racist thought patterns and behavior happen automatically, and they rely on cognitive predictions about other people based in centuries of misinformation. In the studio, I have the same ability to function on autopilot. These are habits

I've learned over a lifetime; my posture, a certain vocabulary of marks, the colors I rely on most, the things I know about painting and the many things I don't. It's hard to escape the choices we don't choose. They make and unmake us daily. Yet I've decided to try to do just that, both in the studio and in my relationships with other people. It requires slowing down so that I can identify my expectations. I'm practicing something that is becoming increasingly rare. As the late art critic Peter Schjeldahl wrote, I'm "stalking surprise" (Grimes). Although online experiences feel full of the *potential* for novelty, their predictive A.I. and algorithm-based technology promote a narrow landscape for human connection and experience. By contrast, the paintings created for *Relatives* tempted catastrophe to find something unknown.

If empathy is engendered by slow attention, hostility benefits from our cursory interest. Our engagement with content online (which is still primarily written) is frequently brief and surface level. We don't read, we scan, and since so much of the content geared towards me is repetitive, my reading is not only surface level, it's disaffected (Klein). More than audio or video engagement, reading uses significantly more brain activity. It also produces a stronger empathetic response because our brain is doing the labor of imaging another person's experience. While our attention is subsumed in the activity fully, we actively recreate what the characters are feeling as we read (Klein). Is it any surprise that trolling is so prevalent when we consider most of us are barely reading what others are saying in the first place? Moreover, the lack of physical presence and the sheer number of people in any social space produces a feeling of anonymity and separation from those to whom we're speaking. If empathy is, in part, a response to sensate cognition, then the opportunities for it online are scarce.

My studio practice cannot help but respond to the world I live in, and by all appearances, it's increasingly a world divorced from the compassionate potential of human relationships.

Painting *with* my materials offers me a pathway between intellection and aesthesia, a place where my actions are responsive rather than prescriptive. This commitment encourages a psychophysiological empathetic response, which I believe is an essential function of aesthetic perception more broadly.

5 WILD SPRING. SCUDDING CLOUDS. O LIFE! DARK STREAM OF BOGWATER . . . EYES OF GIRLS . . . HOUP-LA!

Painting with the aim of mutuality often means not being completely in control of the process. Similarly, when we experience empathy, we are both active and passive. It's a generative moment in which we reproduce the experience of another inside ourselves, but to do so we must sit back and observe. Like conversing casually with a friend or reading a novel, this recent body of work required activity without a predetermined end goal. As Keats wrote in a letter describing his concept of Negative Capability, a poet needed to be "capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without the irritable reaching after fact and reason."

I noticed that working this way imbued my brushstrokes with a sense of decay and dissolution. The paintings in this exhibition are rife with marks on the brink of illegibility, and this transitory, provisional style gives the paintings a living quality. The pieces in this show point to their materials and the paper's surface. In making the paintings free-standing and arranging them the way people might gather in a room, I hinted at their active role in the installation.

Within the chaos of the marks used, I felt a rhythm or pattern of behavior emerge. Sometimes it was based in formal elements, but frequently it was something I couldn't easily name. For Deleuze, the organizing principle of any painting is the *diagram*—the way each artist resists the clichéd figurative possibilities on a blank canvas, but manages a kind of integrity nonetheless. Guston described being "a trusting accomplice," but as usual, Deleuze sounds wilder: "[T]hese marks, these traits, are irrational, involuntary, accidental, free, random... They are traits of sensation... And above all, they are manual traits" (82).

Emphasizing the manual is a useful way of describing my interest in the material quality of the mark. Where artists such as Francis Bacon or Van Gogh rely on the diagram to create a catastrophe of figuration, abstraction (and *art informel* in particular), take this to an extreme. The

entire work becomes a diagram (Deleuze 85). Deleuze describes this as painting that “subordinates the eye to the hand, it imposes the hand on the eye, and it replaces the horizon with a ground” (87).



Figure 5.1 Leeza Negelev, Installation Detail

In the work for this recent show, I develop moments of depth, forms with integrity, and occasional outlines, but they are outweighed by seismographic marks that describe my own movements more than an optical space. Making work this way requires an empathetic interest in small and slow developments. Although these developments may be traits of sensation, they are not thoughtless. They dodge an ingrained figurative impulse and at the same time, articulate what is interstitial and animate within a two-dimensional space.

Describing this art historical transition from the optical to the manual, Deleuze writes:

If we seek the precursors of this new path, of this radical manner of escaping the figurative, we will find them every time a great painter of the past stopped painting things in order to “paint between things.” Turner’s late watercolors conquer not only all the forces of impressionism, but also the power of an explosive line without outline or contour, which makes the painting itself an unparalleled catastrophe... But with Pollock, this line trait and this color-path will be pushed to their functional limit: no longer the transformation of form but the decomposition of matter, which abandons us to its lineaments and granulations. The painting thus becomes a catastrophe-painting ... Here it is no longer an inner vision that gives us the infinite, but a manual power this is spread “all over” from one edge of the painting to the other (86).



Figure 5.2 Turner, Joseph Mallord William. *Sunset*. 1845, Tate, London.



Figure 5.3 Turner, Joseph Mallord William. *A Harpooned Whale*. 1845, London, Tate.

When I'm subordinating my eye to my hand, there is always a specific kind of pause that occurs. The attention to the manual draws my interest to a painterly gesture on the paper that clarifies the whole work. The moment is typically sudden, and whatever I've observed is trivial. It's simply a movement within a constellation of movements that offers me an understanding of what the painting is *about*.

Here I rely on the way the writer James Joyce organized one part of his aesthetic universe. His concept of literary epiphany captures the gestalt of my experience. My introduction to Joyce's notion of epiphany comes from an early, unpublished manuscript called *Stephen Hero*, which later became *A Portrait of the Artist as Young Man*:

A young gentleman was leaning on the rusty railings of the area. Stephen as he passed on his quest heard the following fragment of colloquy out of which he received an impression keen enough to afflict his sensitiveness very severely.

The Young Lady — (drawling discreetly) . . . O, yes . . . I was . . . at the
 . . . cha . . . pel . . .

The Young Gentleman — (inaudibly) . . . I . . . (again inaudibly) . . . I . . .

The Young Lady — (softly) . . . O . . . but you're . . . ve . . . ry . . . wick
 . . . ed . . .

This triviality made him think of collecting many such moments together in a book of epiphanies. By an epiphany he meant a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of speech or of gesture or in a memorable phase of the mind itself. He believed that it was for the man of letters to record these epiphanies with extreme care, seeing that they themselves are the most delicate and evanescent of moments (Hayman 637)

We know that Joyce took these words to heart. In his lifetime, Joyce collected seventy-one epiphanies which he wrote down as singular, meticulously observed moments (MacDuff 3). While some eventually made it into completed literary works such as *Portrait*, Joyce saw them as valuable in their own right. In *Ulysses*, Stephen muses: “Remember your epiphanies written on green oval leaves, deeply deep, copies to be sent if you died to all the great libraries of the world, including Alexandria?” (Joyce, “Ulysses]” 37). Richard Ellman claim Joyce really did ask his brother to send his epiphanies to the libraries of the world after his death, so we might assume Joyce is parodying himself here. Nevertheless, author Sangam MacDuff notes that Joyce continued using epiphanies all the way through to his final work, *Finnegan’s Wake*.

Author and academic, Morris Beja notes that these epiphanies are characterized by their suddenness and “irrationality.” What is revealed is often inconsequential (Beja 75). Reading Joyce’s epiphanies in their raw form, I’m reminded of the provisional marks that are so prevalent in my paintings. Rough textures and disappearing territories visually dominate this work. Just as

Joyce was captivated by the possibility of transcendence in the vulgar and ordinary speech and actions of those around him, I often feel that my hand is searching for an equivalency in broken lines. Marks that appear inconsequential point me towards the materiality of the paper and pigment. Much the way Joyce's epiphanies lacked a narrative context, I've found that when optical possibilities are diminished, the painting doesn't refer elsewhere.

To read Joyce's epiphanies is to muddle through fragments of encounter or observation with no beginning or end: they are profoundly cursory. The use of ellipses between short phrases is striking—we are literally meant to read between the lines. For Joyce (and Buber), God's presence was hidden, but immanent in all things, available if we only pay attention. Just as Buber was a proponent of the "God of the marketplace," (Baer) Joyce's God was "a shout in the street" (Joyce, "Ulysses" 32). They described a world in which the everyday moments between people and things are worth encountering and preserving for aesthetic purposes. In my own work, the gestures that produce my irregular lines and disintegrating forms are the moments that clarify the entirety of the creative endeavor.



Figure 5.4 Leeza Negelev, Installation View 2

6 FORMAL FEELINGS

When painting, I move between two directions. One is a totalizing, relational attention that relies heavily on aesthesia. The other evaluates formal concerns rooted in the Western European tradition of art production. Both attend to the immediate physical properties of the painting itself, but to very different ends.

My earliest art education was unapologetically formalist. The academic and art critic Edmund Burke Feldman defines pedagogical formalism in the following way:

It is the doctrine that the ultimate focus of aesthetic attention and critical meaning is, or ought to be, organization and presentation of the visual elements of works of art: line, shape, color, texture, mass, space, volume, and pattern (Nochlin, 1974). Thus, aesthetics becomes the science of discerning how forms and formal relationships acquire expressive power, how they generate emotion and signify meaning, and why they are symbolically potent. Thus, the history of art is a history of the evolution of formal relationships and of art-related decisions that have caused them to change over time. Thus, art instruction consists of teaching students to create forms, understand decisions that produce formal relationships, discern formal choices in the art of others, and apply lessons of form in their own artistic expression (122).

Although formalism was a distinct movement in the history of art criticism, it was the unexamined vernacular for all my early encounters with art. Now, as an adult about to graduate an MFA program, I've observed how this language persists with a thick layer of self-consciousness. Its terms are frequently qualified as outdated, essentialist, and overly prescriptive, even as they remain the primary content of many undergraduate art programs.

The critiques of formalism are many and they are incisive. Outlining them all here is beyond the scope of this work. Suffice to say, formalist aesthetics are dominated by European and American white men who aimed to establish an ahistorical, objective understanding of aesthetic perception. Any theoretical framework which purports to exist outside of history will unconsciously favor the value systems of the ruling elite. Nevertheless, as an artist, I rely on formalism the same way I rely on everyday speech: as a coarse but direct tool. Just as linguistic conventions belonging to nondominant groups are devalued as pidgin or slang, I've observed the way my formalist education privileged a distinctly Western vantage point.

One pervasive example is the way we describe space. Discussions around linear perspective are oriented around a static, individual viewer who stares directly at the picture plane. Yet outside of the Western canon, this is not a standard assumption. If the substrate is a scroll (as in traditional Chinese scroll paintings) the viewer is expected to physically move. If the substrate is a human body experiencing a cultural rite, as in traditional *Uli* painting by the Igbo people of Nigeria, our entire concept of viewership is upended. Perhaps *because* my cultural context is based on white, Eurocentric visual mores, I find formalism useful. Although I'm searching for those rare moments when (in Guston's words) the painting is "lived-out," I've found it valuable to have an aesthetic *lingua franca* from which to evolve my own painterly dialect.

Before I ventured into any art classroom, my parents made museum visits mandatory. I pored over sculptures from Greece and Rome; rich paintings of Dutch noblemen against lacquered black cracked with age; El Greco's gaunt friar, and Christ in every possible evangelical scene. John Singer Sargent's work figured heavily in my painterly unconscious as the Museum of Fine Arts Boston contains the largest collection of his work. Next door, the

Gardner Museum's namesake, Isabella, is immortalized by his iconic portrait of her. Sargent dominated my aesthetic worldview with his commitment to compositional harmony and to truth in representation (Bodkin 258). Though it was the emotional quality of El Greco's friar and the dramatic flair in Sargent's pale Isabella that drew me in, I absorbed the vocabulary embedded within them. The paintings I memorized relied on a hierarchy of forms, linear perspective, and the expressive power of *chiaroscuro*. Looking at these paintings didn't teach me the skills, but they encouraged very specific visual expectations. These expectations now arise when I paint—there to be entertained, rejected, or mutated.

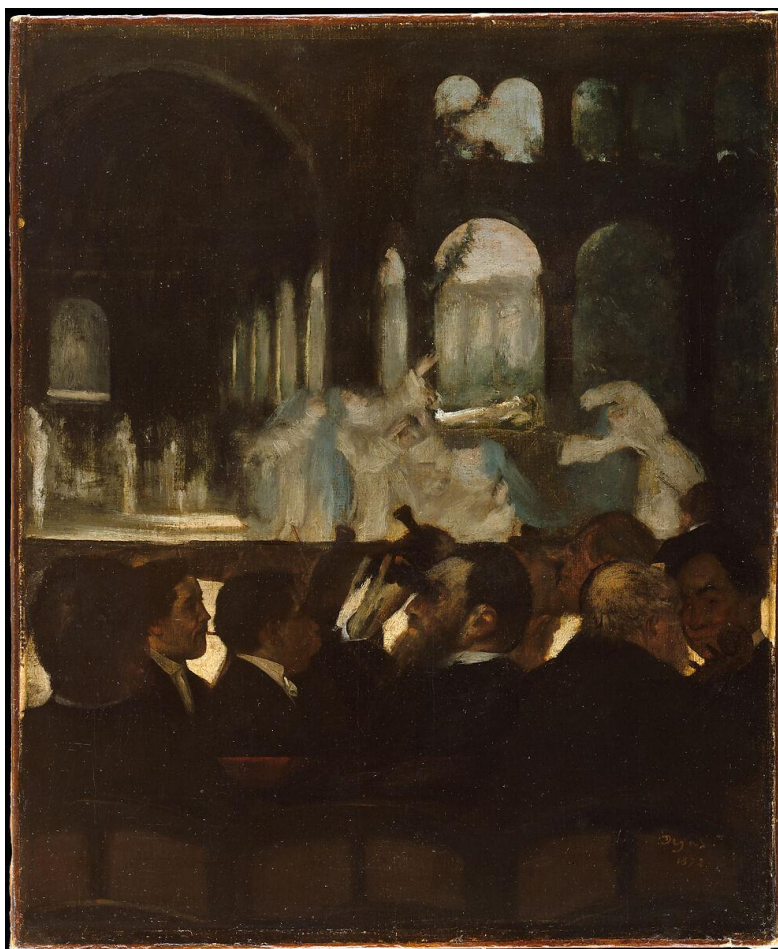


Figure 6.1 Degas, Edgar. *The Ballet from "Robert le Diable."* 1871, The Met, New York City.

Edgar Degas's use of value in his theatre scenes has always captivated me. The anticipatory darkness is rendered, in part, by constricting the range of lights and darks to the lowest end of the scale. The lightest tones are primarily for the performers, who glow under the spotlight. In my painting (below), *A picture containing*, I used the same technique to focus on the area that defines the composition for me—the pink key-like form in the left middle and its relationship to the larger pink form next to it.

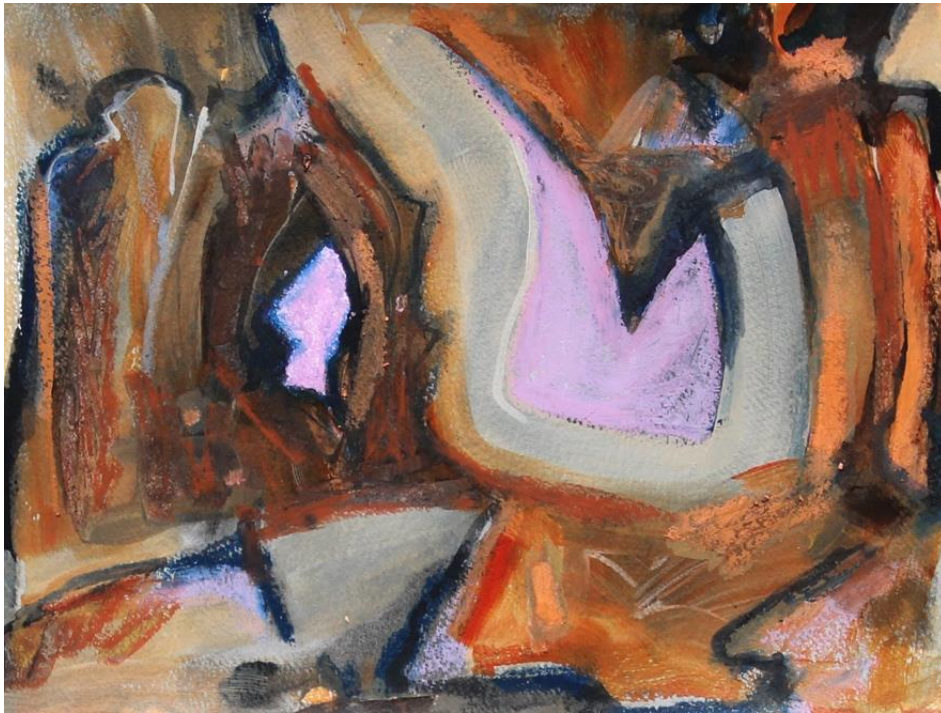


Figure 6.2 Leeza Negelev, *A picture containing*, 2021, Courtesy of the Artist.

Three of the pieces in my thesis exhibition were developed for the express purpose of influencing the atmosphere of the installation. When walking around the gallery, these pieces stand out from the rest: two are painted with a flat green color and are dominated by uncharacteristically sharp-edged forms. The third is a piece of hand-felted raw Gotland wool, suspended from the ceiling. I needed places for the eye to rest in a gallery full of nebulous, chaotic paintings of varying sizes. The flat applications of paint combined with highly contrasted

organic forms offered exactly that. Similarly, the wild texture of raw, dark wool interrupted the sea of flat planes and right angles.



Figure 6.3 Leeza Negelev, Installation View 3

In committing to rectangular forms for all the pieces, I felt myself directly engaging a legacy of traditional Western easel painting. My choices resisted the implied constraints with free-standing, vertically aligned work, installed away from the gallery wall. At the same time, this gaggle of paintings were chock-full of ninety-degree angles, pulling me back into a productive tension with tradition. Using raw wool—an unruly, bodily material—in the same rectangular format served to exaggerate this tension further.



Figure 6.4 Leeza Negelev, Installation View 4

7 FORM AND EMPATHY

Stephen Daedalus serves as Joyce's loosely autobiographical protagonist in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. In *Portrait*, Stephen spouts off a secularized Thomist version of aesthetic formalism that aptly describes how I've been trained to look at and understand art.

Stephen establishes that the artist must first perceive a thing in its wholeness (*integritas*), separated from all forms. Having done so, he is free to analyze it:

You pass from point to point, led by its formal lines; you apprehend it as balanced part against part within its limits; you feel the rhythm of its structure. In other words the synthesis of immediate perception is followed by the analysis of apprehension. Having first felt that it is *one* thing you feel now that it is a *thing*. You apprehend it as complex, multiple, divisible, separable, made up of its parts, the result of its parts and their sum, harmonious (Joyce, "Portrait" 215).

Stephen's aesthetic theory is rooted in a structural idealism that the contemporary art world has all but renounced. Tellingly, Stephen's first requirement of aesthetic perception is seeing an object as whole in and of itself. The idea that an art object can be fully perceived and understood apart from its cultural, linguistic, or social context is nearly heretical in the contemporary art world. The legacy of the Enlightenment is a world defined by rationality, empiricism, and the individual. These new values disrupted Western society's unilateral belief in an all-powerful, all-knowing God. In time, essentialist doctrines in art and literature received similar scrutiny, laying the groundwork for a post-structural (relativist) approach to cultural discourse and art that we now take for granted.

Critiquing the dichotomy between formalist aesthetics and relativist concerns, the English psychologist W. Ray Crozier and historian Paul Greenhalgh sound out each position if pushed to the extreme:

[L]et us say that when an individual contemplates an object, he or she is neither unconsciously reading an ideologically constructed text (relativist view) nor worshipping before a god (formalist view). Yet, when either position is pushed to its extreme, this is exactly what is implied. It is equally clear that both positions have powerful elements of truth in them. If we are going to persist in attempting to construct a model that includes aesthetic value, relativists have obliged us to think along new lines—they have to be accommodated. Their exposure of the hollowness of most formalist positions remains a significant achievement. At the same time, the sheer weight of evidence cannot allow us to easily dispense with the Aesthetic Dimension. Relativists do not have the conceptual tools that would allow them to recognise an aesthetic difference between Picasso's *Guernica* (1937) and a bill poster. (Crozier 84)

Crozier and Greenhalgh propose a third option, what they call the *Empathy Principle*. They insist our experience of an artwork (and I'll argue the creation of one as well) is always understood in relation to our intellect *and* body. When we look at an artwork, we organize complex information into an immediate and unified perceptual event. “[We] receive sensations of scale, weight, colour, density and mass—all of which are instantaneously measured against the body” (Crozier 85). While this is happening, we are also evaluating the artwork's cultural context, how others might perceive it, and how it was made. Whether the artwork has recognizable imagery or not, it may refer us to memories of the symbols present or the materials used (Crozier).

For Crozier and Greenhalgh, this is also what occurs when we interact with a person. We observe how they look, what we remember about them from the past, what we are learning right now, what they are saying, what they smell like, and how large or small they are in comparison to us. And in the end, all of this is “collated and formed by the viewer into an event.” Although we know the art object is inanimate, we evaluate the same elements. In other words, the artwork becomes a person, and in becoming a person, we feel empathy towards it. In the end, our understanding of art has less to do with objective facts about the object’s manufacture, symbolism, or general appearance, and more to do with the relational event that takes place when we stand before it or make it (Crozier).



Figure 7.1 Leeza Negelev, Installation View 5

My exhibition, *Relatives*, offered an exaggerated take on Crozier and Greenhalgh's no fuss summation, drawing the viewer's attention more directly on the relationship between themselves and the paintings. The first task, then, was to imply the paintings' ability to relate. Upon entering the gallery, the most obvious element is that most of the works on paper are mounted to wood stands and arranged at irregular angles throughout the room. The paintings faced each other as though in conversation, turned away in disagreement, and some met eyes across the room. They flirted with subjectivity by standing at a height and width that (mostly) approached human scale and had narrow wooden feet awkwardly protruding backwards. Those seeking to view the paintings had to orbit around a pre-existing crowd. To focus on the space between the viewer and the painting, I organized the free-standing works to mirror a room of people. Although this effect wasn't fully captured in the photos below, during the exhibit I watched visitors turn, pivot, bend, and arch their backs to see the entirety of the installation.

Viewer positionality was further exaggerated for several flexible, felt-backed pieces. One was positioned behind the wool centerpiece, three were suspended from individual boards and extended like a real estate signs high up on the gallery wall, and another was a low-lying green painting, draped over a wooden bench. In addition to once again bringing attention to the viewer's body, I wanted the paintings to have a visibly soft quality. Most of the paintings and drawings I've seen in my lifetime are mounted and stretched against a hard surface or framed with wood. Mounting the paper paintings to a thick felt gave them a lank and delicate integrity. These pieces were far less fragile mounted on felt, but now they had a tangible weight in my hands and a depth that conveyed tactility.



Figure 7.2 Leeza Negelev, Installation View 6



Figure 7.3 Leeza Negelev, Installation View 7

The pieces that explored sense-based attention and empathy most dramatically were the raw wool and a draped green painting in the center of the installation. The green painting amplified its physical presence by giving only part of its weight to a short bench on the ground. While the free-standing paintings were confidently upright, this green one was only partially supported. In highlighting its precarity, I felt my own empathetic interest expand. Viewers said it recalled a kneeling penitent, a woman on a fainting couch, and a corpse.



Figure 7.4 Leeza Negelev, Installation View 8

In a more dramatic way, the wool piece in the back of the room pulled visitors to the sensual. Over the course of the exhibition, I watched as people smelled, touched, and hugged it, remarking that it felt both human and animal. While some wanted to pet it (and did) others were repulsed by its lived-in hairs. It was gratifying to hear some of the intensely physical and emotional responses people had to the space. Several people I didn't know remarked that they felt "more fully themselves" in the space. I didn't understand this sentiment at first. Without any symbolic imagery, what were viewers identifying with? Upon further reflection, I realized that this response wasn't about identity. Perhaps it was simply that I created a space about relationships. Sometimes the knowledge that we are tethered to the world offers more freedom to live fully than an aimless independence.

8 CONCLUSION

My exhibition, *Relatives*, was an opportunity to examine a lifelong preoccupation with attention. Somedays, I wanted to gnaw off my own foot in frustration, and on others it was a boundless pleasure. My job was not to turn away in boredom or chase after a high. Rather, I pursued a slow, sense-based attention to the present, allowing these efforts to acquire mass and volume.

My favorite poets and writers are the ones who turn language into material. They give a poem nerve endings to taste and touch. In doing so, the poem transforms what is prosaic and painful into a hymn I want to repeat again and again. I use their aesthetic perception to make sense of a world that is cruel so much of the time. One such poet, W.B. Yeats, digests his bitter feelings thus:

Sailing to Byzantium

That is no country for old men. The young
 In one another's arms, birds in the trees
 – Those dying generations – at their song,
 The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,
 Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long
 Whatever is begotten, born, and dies.
 Caught in that sensual music all neglect
 Monuments of unageing intellect.

An aged man is but a paltry thing,
 A tattered coat upon a stick, unless
 Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing
 For every tatter in its mortal dress,
 Nor is there singing school but studying
 Monuments of its own magnificence;
 And therefore I have sailed the seas and come
 To the holy city of Byzantium.

O sages standing in God's holy fire
 As in the gold mosaic of a wall,
 Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre,
 And be the singing-masters of my soul.

Consume my heart away; sick with desire
 And fastened to a dying animal
 It knows not what it is; and gather me
 Into the artifice of eternity.

Once out of nature I shall never take
 My bodily form from any natural thing,
 But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make
 Of hammered gold and gold enamelling
 To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;
 Or set upon a golden bough to sing
 To lords and ladies of Byzantium
 Of what is past, or passing, or to come.
 (95)

There are many ways to leave the world behind, and I've devoted many of these pages to describing some of the methods prevalent in my time. In Yeats' poem, the speaker is looking for an escape. In a sardonic tone, he tells us he doesn't want the humiliations of a mortal body to impede his spiritual existence anymore: "sick with desire/And fastened to a dying animal/It knows not what it is; and gather me/Into the artifice of eternity." The speaker of the poem casts judgement on the sensuality of the world, which he associates with youth—he would rather be like Keats' *Grecian Urn*, whose frozen inhabitants live in perpetual spring. So he goes to Byzantium, a place where he can live forever.

Although this poem was written in 1927, the sentiment is familiar to me. Whatever distractions and false needs we might manufacture out of money, A.I., sensuality, or religion, the impulse is likely the same: it's hard to pay attention. I understand the undercurrent of derision Yeats' ageing speaker feels towards the sensate when he says, "Caught in that sensual music all neglect." Our senses describe the proximate, which frequently includes routine exploitation, indignity, sickness, and death. Sometimes the best solution we can manage is a careless and distracting sensuality. Other times, anything that dulls the senses will do.

Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;

Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs,
 Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;
 Where but to think is to be full of sorrow
 And leaden-eyed despairs
 (Keats 76)

In *Ode to a Nightingale*, Keats inhabits the experience of a bird that lives beyond human misery. Much like Yeats, he addresses the challenge of being human by contemplating something beautiful and good beyond our world. For Keats the longing to be with the nightingale is sincere, whereas Yeats' desire for Byzantium is tinged with sour irony. At the end of Keats' colloquy with the bird, reality seeps back in. The speaker asks: "do I awake or sleep?" For the speaker of Yeats' poem, the answer was to run away to Byzantium, a place symbolizing an epicenter of spiritualism in Europe (Tearle). For me, (and likely for Yeats) Byzantium is a fantasy. I don't believe in the purity of art, so the speaker's longing to become eternal like something made by "Grecian goldsmiths" seems about as real as the freedom described by a car commercial. There is no way out of leaden-eyed despairs. Many years ago, I read the philosopher, Simone Weil, who offered me a way forward:

The poet produces the beautiful by fixing his attention on something real. It is the same with the act of love. To know that this man who is hungry and thirsty really exists as much as I do — that is enough, the rest follows of itself. The authentic and pure values — truth, beauty and goodness — in the activity of a human being are the result of one and the same act, a certain application of the full attention to the object (108).

The aesthetic perception I've described here is not a viable escape—rather, it's a way of drawing close to life in all its forms. My exhibition, *Relatives*, was an opportunity for just that. Increasingly, our methods of connection online seem to pull us further away from any sensible reality, exposing us to the whims of unchecked corporate monopolies. Virtual engagement offers

unprecedented social and informational freedom—but the price is our attention—that flickering substance that ultimately comprises a life. For Weil, “attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity” and I’ve found this to be overwhelmingly true (Papova). I’m grateful to have focused my artmaking on attention; I made work I’m proud of, and I strengthened a muscle that had grown weak. More importantly, it drew me towards the tender underbelly in all things. All I can do now is continue.

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