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A Glimpse beyond the real

Bradley Butler

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A GLIMPSE BEYOND THE REAL

by Bradley Butler
THESIS APPROVAL

A GLIMPSE BEYOND THE REAL

by Bradley Butler

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ABSTRACT

This thesis demonstrates my desire to embrace the unknown and examine the boundaries between what is perceived as being real or imagined in my everyday life. This is accomplished through a series of abstract paintings, which utilize peripheral and fleeting images made through a process of intuitive push and pull of paint and drawing media on canvas. In the document surrealism is talked about and linked to my own practice as an artist. The following artists are also mentioned in relation to this series of work: Salvador Dalí, Joan Miró, Willem de Kooning, Pat Steir, and Anselm Kiefer. The compositions that developed balance abstraction and representation to the point where they could be seen as landscapes or purely abstract explorations.
INTRODUCTION

The imagination is a powerful tool and seldom do we ever reach our full potential in using it. The ever-present feeling that there is something happening within and around us that seems to be outside the conscious and logical realm is a notion that interests me. With this body of work, I am attempting to capture a feeling of being on the edge of what is real, while entertaining the idea of the unconscious mind physically spilling out into the world around us. Déjà vu, the spaces between sleep and our conscious lives, as well as the everyday strange occurrences in which we see something that is not there, are concepts I combine in a series of artworks made up of abstract paintings. My paintings convey the feeling we get when something passes our periphery and, when turning to look, nothing can be found. In one sense they can be thought of as landscapes, in another, mindscapes. The main goal of the work is to engage people in questioning the imagery in front of them. Objects seem to surface out of the abstract composition but never quite form into anything tangible. Once something is seen it fades away into abstraction, leaving the viewer constantly searching for an image in the deep layers of transparent pigments. It is my wish to make images that cause the viewer to stop in front of the canvas and lose themselves within it and to make people think they see something when there is nothing recognizable there. The driving force behind this entire body of work is to examine the boundaries between reality and ‘surreality’ by thinking of each painting as a place you could step into or as something that can escape from the canvas itself.
SECTION I: CONTEXT

A: PERSONAL BACKGROUND/EARLY WORK

After graduating from high school I wanted to be a graphic designer and had little confidence or interest in painting at the time so I pursued an Associates degree in graphic design from Monroe Community College. In the time that I spent there and by working (in a print shop) I became a mediocre yet competent graphic designer. I was not able to proceed with the next step of my educational path as planned because I was not accepted into the graphic design program at Rochester Institute of Technology in 2004 when I wanted to transfer. I decided to stay at MCC for another semester to build up my portfolio and to consider my options. Somewhere during that extra fall semester I decided to think about art education as an option and was accepted into Nazareth College of Rochester in the spring semester of 2005. It was there that I enrolled in my first college level painting class in the fall semester of the same year with instructor and artist, Kathy Calderwood. During the course of a semester I realized that there was something inside of me that resonated with the action of painting. I had never felt such a strong connection to making artwork before then and in the ensuing months and years I became a painter.

After graduating with a Bachelors degree in art education I found a part-time job teaching art at an intermediate school and also continued to pursue painting as a serious endeavor.
I developed two major series of paintings that have had a direct influence upon the work I have done as part of my M.F.A. Thesis. The first series entitled *My Subconscious Realm is a Fantasy World*, consisted of six medium-sized (approx. 30” x 30”) paintings that were abstract explorations of my subconscious mind. I would approach the canvas much the same way I do now, laying down colors and allowing one action to inform another. One major difference between then and now is that during that time (late 2005 – early 2007) the paintings ended up being singular and had distinct meanings based on how I would interpret the imagery that developed. The image shown here, is of the painting *Some Kind of Disease*, which illustrates the style and execution that was used in the series. These paintings were much flatter and less atmospheric than my current work, however, there are some characteristics that still appear in my most recent paintings. The use of color is an element that differs between the two series. Back then, the colors were more vivid and pronounced and even though the subject of each painting tended to be dark, the overall appearance was playful and bright. Now my use of color — while still very much a major part of the composition — is almost always consumed by my use of black and white.

My current body of work is physically more closely related to the series I did between late 2007 and mid 2008 called *The Future Consequences of Neglect*. More specifically it visually aligns itself to the abstracted landscapes in that series. The painting *A Day at The*
Beach, 2 shows the increased use of black and white, the introduction of drawing media in combination with acrylic paint, and also an increase in visual texture. This series of eight paintings — four portraits of an evolved species and the four abstracted landscapes — were shown in the lab space at Rochester Contemporary Art Center in Rochester, NY. Here is an excerpt of the review:

The paintings that most interested me were the nearly abstracted, very timely apocalyptic seascapes, for which Butler employed a simple palette of white, red, brown, blue, black, and gray. Skillfully vague hints at ocean and land are absorbed by the kinetic sweep of black in the foreground, and the viewer is left with the sinking inkling of being caught in a crucial shift.

— Rebecca Rafferty, City Newspaper (June, 2008)

Ms. Rafferty summed up perfectly my intentions in making those paintings in that way. I still enjoy using a limited color palette across a number of paintings in a series when appropriate, as a way to visually connect them. The key words in this quote, however, are “nearly abstracted”, one reason being that there is always a very distinct subject in the painting even if it is abstract. My paintings are rarely solely about the action of painting or just about the paint on the canvas. There is always some kind of overall narrative or driving theme that is more important than the fact that it is a painting, “art appears as
a means, and not an end… it is the end and not the means that grants artistic significance”. (Matthews, 1982, xi) The second half of that series was much more illustrative and not as ambiguous, this is a style of painting I still enjoy; however, I realize that it is not as effective as the abstract and suggestive style I now employ.

B: SURREALISM AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO PAINTING

Surrealism, is defined by André Breton in his 1924 Manifesto as:

Psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express — verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner — the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern. (Breton, 1969, 26)

While at the time he considered this to be more specifically intended for literature, it was also a definition adapted for surrealist painters. To paint what is surreal, a person has to be able to look inward. “…For a total revision of real values, the plastic work of art will either refer to a purely internal model or it will cease to exist” (Breton, 1965, 4).

What Breton was saying about surrealism and painting is that a painting cannot just be a retelling of the same old story. A surrealist work of art must come from the inner chasms of the artist and not strictly be a scene taken verbatim out of nature. It also has a great deal to do with the intent of the artist, making sure that they have a pure intention and are not making art solely for personal gain or recognition in a certain discipline. The other crucial element is allowing one’s self to be consumed by an inner voice that does not depend solely on reality, rather it looks both to the real and the imagined equally.
This is a difficult and often daunting task that I am not certain I have accomplished, however, I remain an artist who embraces the surrealist doctrine as much as I can. It is difficult to live up to the demands of the definition of surrealism when considering whether there is an absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern. How can a painter not use the skills that have been developed for years and years? The elements and principles of art and design are so deeply ingrained in a visual artist that it is nearly impossible to ignore aesthetics. It would almost seem unnatural to intentionally throw skills out the window and try to paint as if you never had them. That is why I do not believe you can take Breton’s definition of surrealism too literally when it comes to painting and perhaps that is why his essay on the subject was called *Surrealism AND Painting*, rather than ‘Surrealist Painting’ (as pointed out in the introduction to this seminal document). Rather, I believe that a surrealist painter is a person who possesses the skills necessary to become an accomplished artist and has developed them enough to ‘just paint’; paint as if it is your only way of communicating with someone. When we speak, we do not have to think — too much — about the words that will come out, they just get spoken; and in my opinion, paintings that are based in surrealism happen the same way.

C: THE MYSTERY IN A PAINTING: A CRUCIAL ELEMENT

I have always enjoyed looking at art and, for as long as I can remember in my adult life, I have enjoyed paintings that leave me asking questions rather than getting answers.
While there may not actually be a painting that literally answers a question, there are certainly those that are less mysterious or less ambiguous. I do not consider a painting that lacks a sense of mystery to be unsuccessful based solely on that criteria but I feel that mystery is truly a necessity in any work of art. Presently, I tend to gravitate towards paintings, both in my own artwork and in what I look at in a gallery, museum, or other venue because I feel that paintings often have the power to suggest more to people than other methods of art production. The artists/artworks that have influenced my own work up to this point range in style and execution but almost always possess that sense of mystery that I find to be so essential. Surrealism, abstract expressionism, romanticism, contemporary abstraction, and various other movements or styles have had such a profound effect on who I am as a person and how I fit into the context of the “art world” as a person who makes art. It is often difficult to pin down what has had the most influence over what I am doing at the present moment or what I will do next but it is obvious which artists have collectively informed the work that I do.

When I was kid, surrealism was explained to me as being the work of Salvador Dalí. He was the only person I ever associated with the movement and not until I was in college did that start to change. I admire the work that Dalí created and also admire the way he made such a name for himself, however, I now know that surrealism is much bigger than the work of one artist and also that it is not based specifically in painting. His dreamscapes are definitely one of the first images I can
remember from my childhood art education experience and I am sure they play a part in the formation of my fascination with surrealism. Dalí was my entry into the surrealist context as he was for many people of my generation I am sure. At this stage in my life, however, my interest has shifted on to some of the other key painters of the period.

Joan Miró is a surrealist painter who, to me, epitomizes the movement and what it means to be a surrealist; his work resonates with me and has had a profound effect on my own artwork. Just this year I took a trip to New York City to attend an opening at the Brooklyn Waterfront Artists Coalition; where a painting of mine, *I Dreamed of Paint Last Night*, was selected to be in their first juried show. While my wife and I were there we also made a point to go to the Museum of Modern Art and a highlight for me was seeing works by Miró. The main feature of his work in the MoMa collection, in my opinion, is the ever impressive and contemplative *Birth of the World*, an 8’ x 6’ abstract surrealist masterpiece. Prior to seeing this painting in person,
I had no idea just how closely related my current style of painting is to Miró’s of this time. He completed the painting in 1925; just one year after the manifesto was published and likely at the beginning of the involvement of visual artists in the surrealist movement. The presence that this painting has is amazing and it sits alone on its own dividing wall in the middle of the room. As I approached it, I found myself entranced in the spontaneity of the drips and soft-edged black forms that seemed to be behind them. The activity that is present in the somewhat minimal composition is incredible and, according to Miró, these paintings as well as most others by him were not completely automatic and unconscious exercises. They were based both on intuition and careful calculation as he says,

Rather than setting out to paint something, I begin painting and as I paint, the picture begins to assert itself… The first stage is free, unconscious [and] the second stage is carefully calculated. (MoMa, 1999, 99)

In reading a quote like this from the artist, I know that not only is my work visually similar to his but also that my approach matches his exactly. I employ chance and intuition as much as possible in my paintings, however, I do think about them compositionally at a certain point. Similar to Miró in this respect, I try to strike a balance between the two and access the best of both my intuition and design sensibilities.

Seeing artwork first hand in a gallery or museum helps me to truly appreciate the images that I have grown up admiring and have come to appreciate as great

*Gotham News* by Willem de Kooning | 1955
works of modern art. I was able to see Willem de Kooning’s *Gotham News* last year at the Albright Knox Gallery in Buffalo, NY during the “Action/Abstraction” exhibition that was there. An impressive quality of this painting is that I approached it looking for an image in the abstraction and then became satisfied with the lack of imagery. I believe that this is what happens when your eyes are bouncing from one thing to another, they are trying to see if it is recognizable or not. It is when they settle that you begin to appreciate the non-image and all the small details that make this painting what it is. I found it humorous that I couldn't even find his signature at first but then after a while I could see that he blended it in with the linear elements in the painting and signed it in the top right corner.

De Kooning challenges viewers of his paintings by working the whole surface to the point where everything is active and it forces you to stop and look, instead of just glancing and passing it by. I tend to think of de Kooning immediately when I hear the term “Abstract Expressionism” and even though I enjoy the work of others associated with the movement, he does seem to be a forerunner.

I can see a relationship between my own paintings and the paintings of de Kooning and other masters of abstract expressionism. Growing up in a time when these artists were already considered to be masters of this style of painting seems to validate my own experience with it. The years since the beginning of abstraction and so-called action painting have allowed me to absorb the techniques that were used and put them through my own contemporary lens, which leaves open the possibility of innovation and evolution of abstraction in painting. The way in which these painters allowed themselves to move based on an intuitive push and pull seems to me a way of making something honest and
representative of a subconscious/unconscious experience. The abstract expressionists used automatism much the same way that the surrealists did and in a way can be seen as the next step in surrealist painting. Whether or not this statement would sit well with first generation abstract expressionists or surrealists is not of concern to me because on a certain level the two movements seem to be quite parallel.

The more I think of de Kooning’s paintings in relation to my own the more I can see a striking similarity. I believe that people will approach my paintings the same way I approached *Gotham News,* looking for a landscape/seascape/etc. in the abstract composition. At first we must logically look for “something” in a painting because traditionally it must be visually representative of things we know and have seen before. When we are unsure of what we are looking at we are prone to turn away and give up on the image. It is my responsibility as an abstract painter to make something compelling enough so that a viewer does not turn away confused or feeling that they are being intentionally misled.

More recently, I have been inspired to seek out artists that are still working today who have a style similar to mine. The effect of gravity on wet pigment is something I have explored visually in my work and Pat Steir is an artist who works in a similar manner. Her paintings are usually quite large and many depict a waterfall or cascade that either envelops the viewer or forces them to look twice as if they’d seen a mirage. She sets up environments, which present viewers with an image that is visually compelling and suggestive of water imagery but is not a specific or defined image. Seeing reproductions
of her large paintings and installation spaces, I am able to make a connection to her both on an ideological and visual level and I have even more desire to complete paintings on a larger scale after seeing her work. Some of the larger paintings in my current series get close to the size needed to have the impact of Pat Steir’s work and pushing forward to construct canvases on a larger scale will force me to progress even more than I already have.

Her desire to envelop the viewer and transport them to a different plane of existence through her imagery is something I aspire to. The way she considers art making to be a spiritual experience is also inspiring. She says, “my life is the product of my pictures and not the other way around” (Von Drathen, 2006, 10). You will often hear artists say the opposite; that they make art based on life experience but even before I knew the work and philosophy of Pat Steir, I shared her stance on why I make the paintings that I do. They inform the way that I think and feel about the world around me and my existence within it; for this reason, it is difficult for me to paint a picture of something that has happened in my life and be satisfied with it. However, to paint a picture that will inspire a feeling inside of me and will inform my life in some way comes naturally. In this sense, the art making process is also a spiritual experience for me and it makes me feel alive and connected to the present and hopeful for the future.
Much the same way I see a connection to Steir’s work and the dripping of paint, I can see that I have been influenced by the textures found in paintings by Anselm Kiefer. I discovered his work around the time of my first painting class at Nazareth College and have been a fan of his since then. The way he depicts fields and other naturalistic imagery with such rich and varied surfaces inspires me to do the same with my images. While I come from a different context and am trying to create different kinds of paintings than Kiefer, I strive to develop a visual texture that achieves a similar effect in my work. The surface texture in his paintings is much more tactile than mine; I tend to suggest a rough texture on a flat surface while he usually builds up a physical texture and depth on his canvases. I have done some experimentation with building up a surface on the canvas but tend to leave the surface fairly flat mostly due to a fear of a thicker surface being damaged in transit from the studio to a gallery or other venue. In reading an interview with Kiefer recently, in a book of his work, I read the following, “…these kinds of pictures are always operating between the macrocosmic and the microcosmic”. (Kiefer & Auping, 2005, 173–174) He was
speaking of the work in his retrospective and the relationship his art has to spirituality. At the time, I was searching for the direction I was about to head in with my paintings and it was just before I began producing the main body of work when I read this interview. The idea of a painting existing somewhere between the macro and microcosmic is very intriguing to me and I began to think about making a painting that has a nearness and vastness that compete for attention. Kiefer was more likely concerned with the macro and microcosmic notion as a metaphor for our existence here on earth and our connection to something of a larger spiritual realm, however; his words inspired something in me that would quickly bring my work to a different level.
SECTION II: EVOLUTION

A: ATTEMPTING TO SPLIT REPRESENTATION FIFTY/FIFTY

Starting in the summer of 2009, I was concerned with the idea of mysticism and its possible effects on my everyday life. While I do not pretend to know anything about the precepts of mysticism nor do I pose to be a mystic, the idea of a darker approach to thinking about mysticism intrigued me and I set out to make images that were influenced by this.

The definition of the term I was using was an alternate definition from the apple computer dictionary. It reads as follows: “belief characterized by self-delusion or dreamy confusion of thought, especially when based on the assumption of occult qualities or mysterious agencies” (Apple Dictionary, v 2.0.3 (51.5) 2005–07). Shortly after beginning this journey I realized that the connection I had to mysticism was fairly thin and superficial and I really didn’t want to connect myself to the connotations surrounding it, at least not for this body of work. This was mostly due to the fact that the definition of mysticism, as I saw it, was not the broadest definition and this led to confusion and misinterpretation of my work, even for me.

In addition to a break from this ideology, I also changed the way I was executing the paintings. The first painting that I did from September – October 2009 called Exisiting (and not) portrayed the ideas that I had and was visually pleasing, however, it was not
how I wanted to proceed with this series of work. I was attempting to allow representational imagery and abstraction to occupy the same plane on the canvas. This was very hard to achieve due to the fact that if you have a portion of the image that is recognizable and another part that is abstracted, one part becomes the object and the other becomes the environment. This is certainly not always the case and there are many paintings that can achieve this successfully, however, for this specific painting, I could not fight the urge to render the representational elements as realistically as I could and this created the distinct object/environment relationship. After completing this painting I began another in the same vein, which I abandoned and later painted over. I was really trying to push an idea — that was already paper thin — to be something that it was not. Considering that the physical execution of these paintings was also a problem, it was the best thing that could have happened at that point and I made the decision to pursue work that was fully abstract.

On November 19, 2009 I wrote the following statement: “I am an abstract painter. There is no fighting it anymore. I give in. I believe that it is the most natural way to do what I want to.” (Journal entry 11/19/09) This period of time — during an academic break — was very important to the development of my paintings. I was able to immerse myself fully into
the work for a period of three days, for eight hours per day with little distraction; this helped me to realize what my paintings could become. The turning point can be traced back to the aforementioned time in November as well as a series of discussions with my whole thesis committee (Alan Singer, Tom Lightfoot, and Luvon Sheppard) and also members of the committee one on one. There is one conversation I had with Luvon that sticks out as an important moment in time that pushed me over the edge and into exciting and personally uncharted territories. After talking about the paintings I had been doing (prior to November 2009) he told me that it was all interesting work but it was “too safe”. These two words that he said as he was walking out the door of my studio have stuck with me and have become a mantra for me. The last thing I wanted to do at that point was to make work that dances on the edge of being innovative and exciting but just doesn’t reach through to the other side because of not taking risks.

B: EVOLUTION OF MATERIALS AND STICKING WITH WHAT WORKS

Along with a shift in concept and execution in this series of paintings, the materials I was using also evolved. From the start of my painting career, I have used old window frames as canvas stretchers. The glass would be removed, rough edges would sometimes be sanded and the surface of the wood would be cleaned. This was done for various reasons:

1. There is a guarantee of the frame already being structurally sound, the corners are usually square and the overall condition of the wood is sturdy.

2. The frames are found along the side of the road and are free.
3. For environmental reasons. These windows that were headed for a landfill would now be repurposed and used in the creation of artwork. These reasons for using the old window frames still hold true and I still have a desire to utilize them, however, there are now other concerns that have forced me to stop using them. It can be quite limiting when considering that most standard windows found in someone's home usually range in size from 26 – 34” x 28 – 34” and they are often covered in layers of aged paint which may or may not contain lead. The surface of each frame may vary from rough to smooth and certain edges may be beveled, which throws off the uniformity of a rectangular painting. To overcome the issue of the limited size of the frames, I have bolted two or more together to form a larger painting but even then there is the issue of instability. There is also a certain amount of danger that comes with using window frames. The pane of glass must be removed and sometimes depending on the age, this is done in such a way that allows the glass to come out in one solid piece. When this happens the glass can be used for framing and I have done this to frame drawings. More often than not the glass does not come out so easily and it must be broken with a hammer, this is where safety is an issue. I have been cut by this glass many times, usually resulting in a minor gouge or cut in my hands, fingers, or arms. On one occasion, however, it was a bit worse and I needed to get 5 stitches and a tetanus shot. Taking all of this into consideration, I made the decision to start building my own frames. Buying standard 1” x 2”. pine and mitering the pieces to build the stretchers works much better and allows for a cleaner appearance as well as limitless options for size. While I am going against all of the reasons for using old windows as canvas stretchers, I am ending up with a better quality skeleton for the canvas which in turn results in a more attractive and professional overall finished product.
The paints, brushes, and other tools used in making a painting have basically stayed the same from the start. I use Golden brand acrylic paint and standard, student grade brushes of various sizes. More recently I have added new brushes to the repertoire, buying cheap bristle brushes from the hardware store. These add interest and more variety in mark making and they also hold washes differently than artist brushes. You have to move at a much faster pace when laying down washes with these bristle brushes and this adds to the immediate feeling of the paintings themselves. They create a definite and recognizable brush stroke that is present in most of the paintings and really do interesting things when dragged across paint that is still drying. Another way I have been getting interesting marks recently is by scratching into the canvas. This is something I have done in the past, mostly with my fingernails, but I now use other tools to do this as well. These tools include forks, nails of various sizes, push pins and occasionally my fingernails. I feel that it is important to have marks on the canvas that are made by putting pigment on as well as marks that are made by taking it off.

I have always used acrylic paint and have never had the desire to use oils. I feel that even though my visual style seems that it would benefit from using oil paint, the manner in which I paint would suffer. I use acrylic paint mainly because I enjoy working very fast and I do not want to be bothered by paint that takes too long to dry. I enjoy the fact that acrylic paint mixes with water and if needed can be mixed with various additives to enhance the fluidity without suffering loss of intensity. In addition, I am able to easily blend in other water based media and also if I use something that is oil based — usually
oil stick — it will resist the acrylic wash that is being put on over top of it. Many people who use oil paint complain about the appearance of acrylic because it looks flat or ‘too plastic’ or is just hard to work with. I have never had any of these problems and I believe that part of the reason is because I use a brand of paint that is of high quality and also because of the way I layer washes of color to achieve the end result. Most of the time when I put a wash down on a white canvas, I am doing so in order to preserve the luminosity of the canvas. When layers of paint are transparent enough to allow the bright white to shine through it gives the appearance that it is glowing from within. Even if areas are covered with other washes or even denser areas of paint, this illusion is still possible.
SECTION III: THE BODY OF WORK

A: RESOLVING PROBLEMS AND Moving FORWARD

In the wake of my decision to paint abstract paintings I found myself feeling inspired and energized. The process that I soon developed for working allowed me to complete paintings faster than before and I soon realized that each painting was more successful than the one that came before it. This would obviously not always be the case but in working autonomously and intuitively I learned new things with each painting that I could then use on the paintings that followed. The canvases were slowly teaching me new ways of laying down paint and taking it off. I was reacting to each mark and every drip that came down from the top of the canvas pointed me in a direction, revealing what to do next. By the time I had three or four paintings done, I could see my initial ideas of peripheral and fleeting images showing themselves naturally. Building up the surface of a painting in such a way as to show something that is understated and suggestive of imagery but not defining an image revealed to me that I no longer had to force an image into the abstract atmosphere I was creating because it was already in there. There was no need to put anything representational into the work; a realization through this process is that the subconscious mind has ways of working imagery into the composition without any apparent intention. The result is seen clearly in areas that show themselves after looking at a painting for a minute or two. You see something out of the corner of your eye
and turning to look, it is gone. Left in its place you see just a texture and some varying shades or colors. The mind begins to put these things together to create imagery, causing the painting to be ever-changing depending on who is looking at it and for how long. This does not happen with every abstract painting, it is something that I believe must be worked at and does not come automatically. The argument that many non-artists have, that “my kid could paint that” does not come into play with a painting that possesses this kind of power. The crucial element in any work of art that commands the attention of its viewers is the deep connection the artist has with it. Whether this comes from intuition, careful consideration, or constant practice depends on the artist him/herself.

B: EXPERIMENTS LEADING TOWARD A FINAL DIRECTION

There are four paintings within the body of work that I have completed which I consider to be experiments. While these are indeed finished paintings that I think of as being an integral part of the series, they were also the initial step in this direction. They are not as successful as some of the other paintings. However, they begin to form the visual language needed to engage the more developed compositions. The paintings are appropriately titled Experiments 1 – 4 (Plate 1) and almost all of them were previously other paintings or parts of other paintings that were then painted over. They came about as a way to flesh out visual ideas and were not thought of as anything more. This allowed me the freedom to let loose and allow myself to truly experiment. The results were pleasing and they soon became “paintings” rather than mere “experiments”. I believe the reason this was
Experiment 1 | 2009 *

* (18.5” w. x 34.5” h.) Acrylic, Ink, Charcoal, Conté on Canvas

Experiment 2 | 2009 *

Experiment 3 | 2009 *

Experiment 4 (60” w. x 32” h.) | 2009

Acrylic, Ink, Charcoal, Conté, and Oil Stick on Canvas

PLATE 1
a successful way to make paintings is because I did not feel the pressure of potentially painting a “bad painting”; I was simply using a canvas that was already deemed unsuccessful. Beginning something new on a canvas that is not a pristine white is an experience that does not come with as much pressure and I try to harness this feeling now even when I am beginning a new painting on a blank surface. This is an important thing to consider when looking back on this time of experimentation. At the time, I was searching for ways to break my dependence on representational imagery and, due to this, there was a certain sense of urgency that made the experiments happen as they did. Through the painting of these so-called experiments, I built up a confidence and familiarity with my technique and the results were immediately seen in the work that followed. The depth of each painting was constantly expanding and a more complex abstracted composition was formed.

C: BUILDING THE MAIN BODY OF WORK

I am in a constant mode of experimentation, which is to say that the work I do is ever changing and always in a state of evolution. From the earliest tests on the once-failed canvases that make up *Experiments* 1–4 to the more developed paintings that comprise the thesis show and beyond; all of these paintings have an impact on what I might do next. With that being said, the series of paintings that are complete at the time of this writing are my best attempt at fulfilling what I set out to do in the beginning; which is entertaining the idea of the unconscious mind spilling out into the physical world around
us while attempting to capture a feeling of being on the edge of what is real. The paintings are vague and atmospheric, while at the same time, they are also contemplative and penetrating. They have the ability to change their appearance due to the vague hints of land/sky, dark/light relationships that have developed. There is also a strong push and pull that happens when there is a flat area that is definitely sitting on the surface of the canvas next to a deeper area that suggests a space that seems to go back quite far. There might also be an element that runs through both of these areas, rendering space indistinguishable. Being able to see through to various layers of color aides in this as well; colors will show themselves in places that they were absent from previously. This can be seen in the painting *To Disappear and To Reappear* (Plate 2). Just as the title suggests, things that were once thought to exist on the canvas have disappeared and something else has taken its place. An area that is at first perceived as being black on the canvas now has color that is either showing through or is transparently resting on top. The large black areas that exist in the lower 2/3 of the painting, for the most part, just seem to be cool black fields of color, perhaps even a very dark midnight blue. When the eyes of the viewer are on these areas for a few moments, one begins to notice that there are other colors beneath the top layer of black. Reds, yellows, blues and greens start to show themselves until the shapes that were once thought to be solely black are now something else or perhaps they never were black to begin with. There are similar areas that do this as well and it is mostly due to the layering of transparent pigments. Deciding where to lay more opaque color is done either subconsciously or by instinct, wherever feels most natural to the composition. This painting is the most successful thus far in achieving these transparent or translucent changes in color. While it may not be the painting that has
the most transparent layering, it does so more subtly, which I feel, brings more interest and personal satisfaction.

The size of each painting in this series is very important. I believe that larger paintings — that is, paintings that make you move in order to take them in completely — have the power to suggest an alternate space more readily than smaller works. Mark Rothko said of this:

I paint very large pictures because I want to be very intimate and human.

To paint a small picture is to place yourself outside your experience... however you paint large pictures, you are in it. It isn't something you command. (Berger and Others, 2008,24)

This could not be any more true to me and in one sense it is obvious that a larger image potentially has more power than that of a smaller one, however, it is not the physical size but the presence that a large painting has that gives it such power. Large paintings call attention to themselves in a way that is sometimes impossible in smaller works. With large paintings, you have two ways to look at them, up close and from afar. From a ways back the image may look totally different than when you are right on top of it. The 96” w. x 60” h. paintings in this series begin to suggest a significant presence.

I believe that to truly achieve an awe-inspiring experience for a viewer of this kind of painting, I need to make something that has dimensions of 20 feet or more. There would be no way to ignore a painting that size. To view it from a far distance and up close would be two drastically different experiences. The experience that happens even now with the 96in. x 60in paintings is that from a distance they suggest landscape or seascape and
when you approach the canvas, it becomes an abstract composition.

In the painting *The Ever-Present Feeling* (Plate 4), I come very close to achieving the landscape/no landscape and interaction between abstraction and figuration that I am aiming toward. In the upper region the “sky line” and “horizon line” cross paths and become diffused to the point where you are not really sure where one ends and the other begins because there are various starting points for both. This activity suggests more as far as abstraction is concerned because the confusion of space that happens almost renders the landscape non-existent. The areas that were once “land” and “sky” are now areas of color that merely have planar relationships.

Another major painting in the series, *The Receiver of Things From Above* (Plate 3), differs from the other two major works. The painting is comprised of two canvases rather than three, which makes the finished size 60” w. x 64” h. The other two paintings are made up of three panels, which makes them wider and more likely to suggest landscape. The almost square composition that results in this third painting does not suggest a space that is as vast as the others. The painting is broken in half, almost at the adjoining edge of the two canvases and two masses appear as a result. The one on top seems to be denser while also maintaining subtle changes in depth and the lower portion can be seen as a flat space with two or three possible planes of existence. It continues the trend of a limited color palette that utilizes a great deal of black, white and grey. The strong verticality in the painting gives a definite gravity that is perhaps understated in the other paintings.
I consider the other two paintings in the exhibition to be secondary to the larger works. They do not have as much impact — mostly due to scale — as the three major paintings, however, they are still compelling abstract compositions and they also help to develop more thoroughly, a context for the larger paintings. *Draining Vertically* (plate 6) gives the greatest sense of the effect of gravity on wet pigment out of all the paintings and even from the title alone there is an allusion to this. Similar to *The Receiver of Things From Above*, this painting is also made up of two canvases stacked one on top of another and again a great deal of attention is paid to how the paint crosses from one canvas to another. In this painting the seam of the two canvases is a bit more disguised because it is slightly above eye level and the paint that bridges the gap is applied more smoothly than that of *The Receiver of Things From Above*. The intense blue color in the top portion of the painting along with the dark abyss that devours the lower portion are what make this painting successful. If it were able to hang on one of the main walls in the gallery rather than a moveable wall, I would have liked to hang it higher so that the eye level of the painting was in the blackness and the viewer would have to look up in order to see the wave-like brush strokes at the top. *Up and Downward* (plate 5) is the smallest painting in the exhibition and was approached as if I were examining one portion of one of the larger paintings. It didn’t come out quite as I planned but it was still a success and most likely I wouldn’t have been able to paint the painting if I had tried to force the image to conform to my original idea. The painting has no frame of reference because there is no horizon line that tells you it could be a landscape. In that sense this is the painting that comes the closest to becoming just an abstract atmosphere and not an abstracted landscape.
All of the paintings that I have done are leading me in a direction that will result in the realization of my original intentions and eventually I will fully understand the imagery that I am making. Until then, I am left to consider the decisions I have made thus far and to ask the question; what is important to me in painting these paintings? Why is it important that a painting be ambiguous and have a sense of mystery that makes it hard to define? I believe that making images the way that I have been is the best way for the imagination to be set free and to travel into the unknown. It is beneficial for me as the artist and also for anyone who views these paintings to question the ambiguity and try to find their bearings in the alternate space I create on the canvas. In doing so, a deeper understanding may be obtained of the relationship of the paintings to real life as well as the relationship between the viewer and the painting.

Abstraction lends itself well to ambiguity and ambiguity to mystery. Mysterious undertones in a painting create opportunities for people to ask their own questions about what they see and in turn question their own perception of what is real and what is imagined. The root of my desire to paint fleeting and peripheral images stems from my own questioning of what is perceived as being real or imagined in my everyday life. When a person thinks about life and existence — in general terms — for a prolonged period of time, things that seemed to be factual and fairly well established begin to break down and you are left feeling less sure of what is real and true. This is what I find to be important in the practice of painting and it is crucial to continue doing so in order to find the answers to questions that I do not yet know how to ask. Each painting brings me a step closer to my own understanding of my thoughts and beliefs; however, with each
painting these thoughts and beliefs are expanded upon and turned upside-down and I am left with more questions and a stronger desire to make more images that may or may not provide me with whatever it is I am looking for. This is the reason that I make art, to gain a higher understanding of myself as well as the world around me. Luckily it is the journey and not the destination that I find to be most intriguing.
SECTION IV: CONCLUSION

A: BEING PREPARED AND LOOKING LIKE A PROFESSIONAL

While the actual experience of painting is the most important thing that could result from completing this body of work, there is another aspect to being an artist and that is showing the work to the public. My approach throughout the entire process of developing my body of work shown in the MFA Thesis Exhibition as well as all other aspects of the work besides the actual ‘making’ of the paintings can be summed up in one short sentence, “be as professional as possible”. Having some experience with exhibiting my work in the Rochester area over the past four years, I know the media outlets that need to be notified, where to send my postcards, which paper could potentially send someone to the show to write a review and so on. Having a background in graphic design and printing and being married to a brilliant graphic designer, I have limitless resources to come up with compelling and well-designed ancillary materials to support the artwork. This is one area that many artists do not take advantage of. They assume that since they are visual people, graphic design is inherently one of their skills. This is a fallacy. I know that even though I have experience working in the field and hold a two-year degree in graphic design, I am a fine artist at heart and should rely on an expert to do what they are trained to do, make the art look good instead of compete with it. Allowing a designer to work with you in setting up visuals for an exhibition goes hand in hand with trying to achieve
a professional looking display. Also, working with a photographer to get pictures of yourself as well as images of your artwork is a crucial element in this equation. Capturing your essence as an artist is hard to do with snapshots or pictures taken with a self-timer. I am lucky enough to have a sister who is a budding photographer and is able to document a person in their environment in such a way as to inform people of who they are and what they do, while being visually interesting and entertaining. Photographs such as these coupled with smart design and of course the artwork; make for an interesting and well-rounded total package for an exhibition. Photographs and design materials should not be looked at as a way to make an artist look better than they actually are but should be used to reinforce the fact that the artist is serious and knows what they are doing. Having these elements present at the exhibition in various forms (i.e. exhibition catalogs, wall text, vinyl lettering with exhibit title and artist name, etc.) as well as out in the public eye (i.e. postcards, press-release, event listings) create an overall feeling of confidence in the artwork from the artist and the necessary level of professionalism. By the time opening night rolls around the artist should feel as if there is nothing more they can do to entice people to come to the exhibition and should be confident that the work that is on the wall is the best and most innovative statement they could make at the present moment.

B: OVERALL CRITIQUE OF THE WORK

The five paintings that make up the thesis show as well as all of the paintings and drawings done up to this point in the process are the best work I have done in my career. I think that this is all I can hope for as an artist and even though I will do work that is
less impressive or less successful, I should always have the feeling that whatever I am currently working on is my best work. Approaching the creative process in this way helps to establish the confidence needed to engage in visually compelling work, however, it must also be kept in mind that this is a way of creating a false sense of confidence. Assuming that you are doing good work and believing you are doing good work are two different things and an artist has to be critical of the work being produced while still nurturing it at the same time.

It is often difficult to separate yourself from your artwork and to see it with fresh eyes. That is why I have to rely on the feedback I receive from my peers as well as the general public. To hear that my paintings have impact and that they stop people and make them think, even if only for a few moments, is enough validation for me to know that I am doing something right. The scale of my work ranges in the exhibition from medium sized work to fairly large work and this is a shift for me. I have always wanted to work big and still would like to go bigger but to test the waters with somewhat large scale paintings in this show demonstrates my desire to have impact and to take a risk in showing work that probably will not sell in this area due to its size. I could have shown work that is more readily available for people to hang in their homes or offices but I feel the need to make a statement that has lasting visual appeal and, in order to do this, I needed to paint large pictures.

The themes that arose from people in their interpretations of the imagery was interesting for me and I could not be happier with the way in which people read into the paintings. Most everyone saw them as landscapes, which is something I struggled with during
the process of completing the work but now have come to accept. The fact that people see these paintings as storms rolling in over water, a vast mid-western landscape, or tumultuous seascapes intrigues me and further inspires me to keep working in this manner to see what else can be gleaned from an abstract painting. I believe that the best decision I made with this series of paintings is to pursue abstraction and to push myself in making paintings that explored an intuitive push and pull along with thoughtful aesthetic consideration.

C: HANGING THE SHOW AND OPENING NIGHT

I have had a handful of solo exhibitions and have had to hang all of them myself. Each gallery or exhibition space has its own rules for hanging the work and each space has a method for centering a painting at eye level. I was prepared for this and hanging my show in the Bevier Gallery was a simple task. The one aspect of hanging the work that was difficult was dealing with the space I was given in the gallery and trying to get my larger paintings to fit in the space successfully. The two 96" x 60" and one 60" x 64" paintings were all supposed to hang on one wall and I knew going into the hanging process that it was going to be a tight fit but the paintings needed to be hung in a certain sequence. However, there is always wiggle room and my mind can be changed even if I have strong feelings for something being a certain way. Based on suggestion from the gallery director, Betsy, I decided to add a dividing wall to my space so that the two largest paintings shared the main wall and the almost square painting hung behind the
viewer of the main wall on its own movable wall. This gave breathing room to the whole show and also created a closed-in space for my work that allowed it to occupy its own space in the gallery and differentiate it from others. The only downside to adding this wall was that there was now a bare wall spanning eight feet on the reverse side of the painting I had just relocated. Since all of my other paintings were either too big for the wall or were hanging up in other venues, I decided to frame two drawings and hang them in the show. This was a tough decision to make since I was not considering them for the exhibition. I do feel that it was a smart move because they did inform the audience that I was influenced by nature due to the fact that the two drawings were landscapes of trees. It is interesting to consider that the first works that sold were these drawings which I was not going to include and a painting that I thought was not suitable for this show. This is a demonstration of the fact that often times it is not the artist that can choose what will make the best visual display in the end and being involved in the making of the work can skew your view of what is good and what makes sense together. In the end I couldn’t ask for a more well-rounded exhibition or a better space to have it. Judging from the response I received during the opening reception and the weeks that followed it, I know that I have a future making abstract paintings. I have no idea what my next large painting will look like but I do know that it will be a logical step from the work I just completed.
D: WHERE DO I FIT IN THE CONTEMPORARY ART WORLD
OF TODAY AND TOMORROW?

It seems as if these days in the art world, anything goes and that if you make something there will be an audience for it. Whether or not this audience is the discerning art critic or the weekend gallery attendee seems to matter little in the current artistic atmosphere that we call the “art world”. I often hear talk about the fact that it is “who you know…” and that a good opening and a few important handshakes are just as important as making good work. Having the experience of showing paintings in a number of different venues including galleries as well as alternative spaces, I feel at this point in my career that I am constantly searching for a path that seems to lead to the largest number of people in direct interaction with my work. It is hard to strike a balance between getting someone who will write a review of your work into a gallery and getting people who do not regularly attend galleries to see your work. I feel it is very important not to make paintings that will be seen only in a gallery setting but that are seen everywhere. I have had the opportunity to show paintings in bars, restaurants, cafés, office spaces, storefronts, and on album covers. I am always seeking out more opportunities to show in these alternative venues because you tend to get people from all walks of life to interact with your work. I often feel discouraged when I get sucked into the frame of mind that I am just making art to make money and that I am selling this work just so it will end up in someone’s home or office. While I look at selling my work as a good thing for both financial and career advancing purposes, I also want everyone to be able to see my work. The main goal of painting for me, after all, is to have an effect on people. To make people feel a certain way on a large scale and to make someone have an experience that changes the way that they perceive
something. Even if this “something” seems small and insignificant, it is worth knowing
that the possibility exists that it will happen to many people and it is something I strive for.
On the other hand, if a painting hangs in someone’s home and they are able to see it every
day it will most likely have a lasting effect on them and almost become a part of them.

In my work, I can see similarities to the artists that I admire and to the artists that are
currently working today. It is quite incredible to consider that someone who lives in a
different environment, in a totally different part of the world can have a painting style that
resembles my own. Years of artistic conditioning coupled with a rich history of tradition
in painting worldwide helps to make it this way. I, along with my peers and contemporary,
artistic celebrities alike are all working to maintain and expand the boundaries of this
paradigm. I feel that I have a definite place and a voice in the art world and that, as an
emerging artist of 2010, I will make my way into the openings and after parties where
people are rubbing elbows and I will also have a place in the bars and storefronts where
everyday people are going about their everyday routines. In both instances I will be
present with artwork that has something to say and speaks to my generation, artwork that
entertains the ideas I have outlined in this writing for opening up the mind to expand
the possibilities of what is perceived as being plausible, or real. Showing people, both in
and out of the art world, that retreating inward into the unconscious allows us to do this
and that this activity truly pushes us forward into the unknown. By allowing people to
entertain these ideas that are based in surrealism and seen through a contemporary lens,
I hope to change their outlook on reality and add fulfillment to their lives through my
work. In addition to making large abstract paintings, I plan to write short stories, draw
and paint images that accompany the stories, illustrate and convey thoughts and ideas in other ways including multimedia and video work. As an artist, I enjoy painting and prefer it to most other forms of art at this point in my life, however, I will not limit myself to this alone. I wish to use my creativity and imagination to tap into any available medium whether it is static or moving images, theatre or music. Above all else, I would like to consider my art-making experience to be an adventure. I look forward to evolving as an artist and will be open to all possibilities that will allow for interesting and innovative work that has impact and is able to stand on its own. I can only hope that it will not fade away over time and that my career as an artist lasts as long as I am alive and able to hold a brush.
PHOTOGRAPHS OF ARTWORK AND OPENING NIGHT OF EXHIBITION

PLATES INCLUDE:

To Disappear and To Reappear

The Receiver of Things From Above

The Ever-Present Feeling

Up and Downward

Draining Vertically

and

Exhibition Photographs
PLATE 2  To Disappear and To Reappear (96” w. x 60” h.)  | 2010

Acrylic, Ink, Charcoal, Conté, and Oil Stick on Canvas
PLATE 3  The Receiver of Things From Above (60” w. x 64” h.) | 2010

Acrylic, Ink, Charcoal, Conté, and Oil Stick on Canvas
PLATE 4  The Ever-Present Feeling (96" w. x 60" h.) | 2010

Acrylic, Ink, Charcoal, Conté, and Oil Stick on Canvas
PLATE 5  Up and Downward (40" w. x 32" h.) | 2010

Acrylic, Ink, Charcoal, and Conté on Canvas
PLATE 6  Draining Vertically (26.5” w. x 79.5” h.) | 2009

*Acrylic, Ink, Charcoal, and Conté on Canvas*
Bradley Butler and Sarah R. Butler (wife of the artist), Opening Reception

Wall Text (on podium), Opening Reception

PLATES 7 AND 8
Aerial View (talking with Alan Singer), Opening Reception

Painting Detail, Opening Reception

PLATES 9 AND 10
Framed Drawings, Opening Reception

Painting Detail, Opening Reception

PLATES 11 AND 12
A Glimpse Beyond The Real

The imagination is a powerful tool and seldom do we ever reach our full potential in using it. With my current body of work I am attempting to capture a feeling of being on the edge of what is real and entertaining the thought of the unconscious mind spilling out into the world around us. Deja vu, the spaces between sleep and our conscious lives, as well as the everyday strange occurrences in which we see something that is not there: these concepts are combined in a series of artworks made up of abstract paintings. The paintings convey the feeling we get when something new by our periphery and when turning to look, nothing can be found, in our sense they can be thought of as landscapes, in another... musings. The main goal of the work is to engage people in questioning the images in front of them. Objects seem to surface out of the abstract composition but never quite cross into anything tangible. Once something or even just a spot moves into abstraction, leaving the viewer constantly searching for an image in the deep layers of transparent pigments.

— Bradley Butler

Artist Statement and Painting Detail, Opening Reception

PLATES 13 AND 14
PLATE 15  Studio
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

TEXTS


IMAGES

Page 9  Studio photograph of Bradley Butler by Sarah A. Butler, 2010.


Page 35 Butler, Bradley. *Experiments 1, 2, 3, and 4*. Acrylic, ink, charcoal, and conté on canvas, 2009. (PLATE 1)

Pages 52/53 Butler, Bradley. *To Disappear and To Reappear*. Acrylic, ink, charcoal, conté, and oil stick on canvas, 2010. (PLATE 2)


Pages 60-63  Photographs from opening reception of MFA Thesis Show at the Bevier Gallery/Rochester Institute of Technology. (Plates 7–14)

Page 64  Studio photograph by Sarah A. Butler, 2010. (Plate 15)
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