This Site Is Under Construction
A Painting Installation

by

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A thesis exhibition
presented to the University of Waterloo
in fulfillment of the
thesis requirement for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts
in
Studio Art

The University of Waterloo Art Gallery
University of Waterloo
April 17th - May 14th, 2010

Waterloo, Ontario, Canada, 2010

Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners. I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

Abstract

This paper is intended to serve as a supporting document for the exhibition *This Site Is Under Construction* that was held at the University of Waterloo Art Gallery, University of Waterloo, April 17th – May 14th, 2010.

The work explores the ways in which we constitute and mediate our specific place in a space that is constantly changing. It is concerned with notions surrounding how we make and perceive images now in our computerized visual culture and the ways in which we can mark a subjective painting aesthetic and visual vocabulary. The painting installation, "This Site Is Under Construction", investigates the effects of new media and digitization on experiential perception, and the nature of making and re-configuring images. The title alludes not only to the on-line, virtual space of the computer, but also to the physical spaces of building and urban development sites. The subjects for the paintings are spaces in flux – specific locales of construction and building sites that are in-between states of development – placing emphasis on the mechanized devices that fabricate the new structures. The paintings themselves reveal seemingly spontaneous and optically warped immersive spaces; alternative architectural environments which subvert interpretations of two-dimensional and three-dimensional forms of visual presentation and recognition. The work aims to contrast outward appearance and illusionistic staging as it relates to both the picture and its support.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the following people who have been instrumental in the completion of my MFA thesis exhibition:

To the members of my Advisory Committee, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Doug Kirton and David Blatherwick, for their valuable wisdom, commitment and encouragement. I would also like to thank Jane Buyers for her thoughtful and critical comment. Many thanks to Lois Andison, Adam Glover, Rick Nixon, and Jean Stevenson, for all their creative and technical support. Many thanks to Lesley Hartley for her considerate help, patience and benevolence. I would also like to express my appreciation to my esteemed colleagues and the rest of the members of the Fine Arts Department for all their assistance, critical suggestions and discussion throughout the duration of my MFA degree. A special thanks to fellow artist and Mentor David Reed for his caring and generous advice. Finally, I would like to thank my dearest family, my parents Nick and Gloria Capobianco, my siblings Marco and his family, Laura and Christina, my brother-in law Daniel, and friends Byron, Cameron and Joe for all their loving support and guidance.

Dedication

To my loving parents Nick and Gloria Capobianco, and grandparents Vicenzo and Lucia Baldassarra, Angelo and Restituta Capobianco.

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"As distribution of all forms of culture becomes computer-based, we are increasingly "interfacing" to predominantly cultural data - texts, photographs, films, music, virtual environments. In short, we are no longer interfacing to a computer but to culture encoded in digital form."

- Lev Manovich[1]

"Painting now is in a unique position to examine the structures that make our world… I like to think about painting as the most open thing in the world."

- Fabian Marcaccio[2]

This Site Is Under Construction

I remember the latter years of my young adulthood when I was working for my father in the field of construction. I dreaded the fact of having to wake up extremely early to arrive on site prior to the rest of the contractors and general laborers, who would arrive at a decent time and begin the day with ease and fluidity. Be it the languor and apathy of adolescence or the sheer disregard and disconnect from the line of work itself, I always felt inadequate and un-certified. I was never fully trained, nor did I have the expertise and knowledge to think rationally in a space that was more often than not governed by unpredictable forces, chance and intuition. Another factor contributing to my disengagement from the activity and processes of construction was my relationship with my father. As in most cases of family-run businesses, my father and I could not make clear distinctions or separations between our family roles and those of the workplace. My situation was further intensified by the fact that my father came from a tough and curt working-class background, compounded by the fact that he immigrated to Canada when he was 17 years old and bears the thick traces of an Italian regional dialect. Communication between us was often sparse, broken and misunderstood.

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[1] Manovich, Lev. The Language of New Media. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2001. pp. 69-70.

[2] Godfrey, Tony. Painting Today. New York: Phaidon, 2009. pg. 154.

Furthermore, my Italian and recent Canadian ancestry has been greatly shaped by those who have worked and continue to work in industries that employ both physical and creative forms of manual labour. A great number of my immediate family members are builders, construction workers, engineers, tradesmen, architects and designers. I am the only one in my Italian-Canadian family (*first* generation and *new* generation) who lives and works as an artist-painter (although I see this as being another kind of trade).

I was never required to do physical, labor-intensive work– lifting and manipulating equipment and materials, operating heavy machinery or even conducting motorists as a traffic control person. At work, I was unaware of the rules and the limits of my actions. Furthermore, my hands were soft from being a painter and craftsman, my eyes and body constantly wandered away, while my mind dreamt of being in another place – an unreal space. I trained myself to believe that I was never designed nor built to function this way.

Hence, I became a bad builder, suffering from an accumulated and conditioned form of on-site amnesia and bewilderment. I only felt fully engaged and inspired by my father's line of work when I was unproductive. When I was not physically working, I became transfixed by the sight of existing spaces and locations being drastically altered by the powerful and aggressive forces of mechanized technology, and by witnessing the creation of an alternative spatial terrain. The turning over and excavation of ground revealed both striking and appalling modulations of stratum. At days-end or when rain threatened the continuation of the project, the seemingly irregular traces of movement recorded by crude backhoe tracks and tri-axle dump-truck treads produced complex systems of rhythm in the form of patterned reliefs.

Gradually, I became obsessed with looking and experiencing these spaces in-flux, in all their forms and scales. I started to consider the tense relations between my experience working in construction and my practice as an artist, thinking both in terms of formal aesthetics and conceptual process. Slowly I became more invested in seeing and understanding the value of my father's labor, and his holistic role as a machine operator-sculptor-artist. Later I was able to understand that we shared similar working methodologies, a process of deconstructing existing spaces, for the purposes of building or re-assembling future systems of development.

In my work as a painter, I focus on virtual territories in the pursuit of painterly adaptation and image re-configuration. Working with the computer with various image editing programs has greatly altered my understanding of what is possible, thrusting the development of my images into both exciting and unpredictable directions, despite familiar feelings of on-site amnesia and bewilderment. My lack of patience and fluency when engaging with the virtual realms of computer graphics and its encompassing vernacular has prompted a new way of seeing and responding to the complexities of a world dominated by technological vision. My painting practice has been reinvigorated by witnessing the capabilities of these computational technologies and the possibilities for re-imagining alternative spatial terrain.

The sites I am currently building pictorially reference my liminal position: of moving and being in-between places and states of consciousness vis-à-vis the spaces of the real and the virtual. It is through this inability to articulate my specific location between two spaces that a new form of visual order opens up, oscillating between conditions of deconstruction and construction.

I am a multi-media artist working with the mediums of photography, digital art, projection, painting and installation. I explore the relationship between art, and the physically-active visual systems that fuel and facilitate contemporary life and our culture's persistent rationale of speed, power and sensation. The current body of work investigates the effects of new media and digitization on our experiential perceptions of space and place. My attention is directed towards subjects which are spaces in flux – specific locales of construction and building sites that are in-between states of development – placing emphasis on the mechanized devices that fabricate the new structures. I am interested in creating seemingly spontaneous and optically warped immersive spaces; alternative architectural environments which subvert interpretations of two-dimensional and three-dimensional forms of visual presentation and recognition. The work aims to contrast outward appearance and illusionistic staging as it relates to both the picture and its support. I take on the role as an artist-spectator, working and engaging with new media forms of creation from my liminal positioning between the real and virtual, to create a variety of visually expressive pictorial reflections.

Everything that surrounds or projects in front of the viewer is a "bad build", as slick graphic line and bold geometric form painted on canvas or metal is fastened to, or suspended from, crude supports, creating a visually disorienting and aggressive stimulation of the viewer' s senses. There are no neutral conditions, and the painted works themselves reveal visual qualities cluttered by an array of accidentals. Nothing is what it seems and everything is considered to be in an active state of transition. This is the logic that filters through my paintings - emphasizing the simultaneous transfer and demolition of images from one new media site to another, for the purposes of creating a subjective representation of pictorial space and abstract vocabulary. These paintings are visual conceptualizations of an imaginary and constructed type of space, formed by

the merging coded processes of digital automation and physical-handling. These spatial paintings reflect spaces in flux as well my own limited mobility within computerized culture.

Staging complex environments confounds me. I am searching for a balance between new technologies and painting. Can painting compete or coexist with digital visual culture? How does painting reposition itself? How are images constructed and/or processed today? What are the differences between computer space and the space in which our bodies are situated? How is this space defined? When re-imagining and re-mixing images from original photographic source material, I play with the movement and the degree of error from one context to next – constantly toggling and referencing between sites. I am curious to know how the narrowing gap between the interfaces of the real and virtual affects our sense of perception.

How does one begin to describe the new cultural shift and visual language that is currently grabbing hold of us and affecting our everyday lives (whether we are consciously aware of it or not)? How has our notion of space changed? How do we move through it? What is at stake? Contemporary new media theorist Lev Manovich provides a theory of the present age: "Today we are witnessing the emergence of a new medium – the meta-medium of the digital computer…we are in the middle of a new revolution – the shift of all culture to computer-mediated forms of production, distribution, and communication. The computer media revolution affects all stages of communication, including acquisition, manipulation, storage, and distribution; it also affects all types of media – texts, still images, moving images, sound, and spatial constructions."[3] If images now are composed of digital codes and are subject to

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[3] Ibid. pp. 6-19

algorithmic manipulation via the computer, what happens when such images are transferred onto the surface of older analog forms of media creation such as a painting? Furthermore, in our computerized culture how are our seemingly familiar media becoming new? Manovich declares that the uniqueness of new media works, "create the illusion of reality, address the viewer, and represent space and time."[4]

To grasp a better understanding of the ways in which these pictorial spaces are constructed, I feel it is important to distinguish my liminal positioning and active role in-between these parallel worlds as a user-spectator. I attribute the variable nature of my painted works to my specific relationship and participation within a computerized culture full of visual machines. These pictures also reflect my split viewpoint. I work with new media forms of creation in the virtual space of the computer as well as older media forms such as photography and painting in the physical place of the studio, looking to reinvigorate their languages and instill new meaning. The intention in my paintings is to shed light on the philosophical inquiry of, "the sharing of perception of the environment between the animate (the living subject) and the inanimate (the object, the seeing machine)."[5] It is also important as a way of documenting self-observation: the act of seeing oneself in the act of viewing as a defining exploration.

Contemporary artists working with older media forms such as painting have responded to the possibilities of digital visual culture. As artist and digital-painter James Faure Walker asserts, "Digital culture permeates almost everything we come across - the look of TV, newspapers, logos, the way we talk and send text messages, the way we hold cameras, even the way art

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[4] Ibid. pg.8

[5] Virilio, Paul. The Vision Machine. Indiana: BFI Publishing, 1994. pp. 59-60.

materials are manufactured, packaged, and marketed."[6] Lydia Dona's art further addresses the conditions of our technological culture and its influence on shaping identity roles and behavior. "In a world of virtual realities the flow of information within systems is more determinative of identity than the materiality of physical structures. Plugging into the river of information implies recognizing that you are the river."[7] Artist Terry Winters describes cyberspace as, "the place you go when you are on the telephone. It's the informational space out there. It's not immaterial but incorporeal. I'm interested in how to give a picture of these things we cannot see."[8] In further describing his aims and painterly pursuit, Winters says he is amazed by "the seamless space that computers are able to create from disparate bits of information - not modernist collage, but a new and uninterrupted expanse"[9] But, how does one define the structure and organization of the virtual space?

My particular relationship to new media and cyberspace is defined in a number of ways. When moving through different sites digitally remaking or re-presenting an image, I am reminded of my previous experiences of working with my father. The familiar sense of bewilderment washes over me anew. Far from moving through these sites with ease and agility I am caught like a deer in the headlights, completely disoriented and mesmerized by the shape-shifting visual effects and endless possibilities offered by the digital landscape. I explore these virtual spaces on a purely visual level, without a plan or navigational strategy.

In her essay, "Othering Space" Wendy Hui Kyong Chun presents an alternative notion of the

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[6] Walker, James Faure. Painting the Digital River. London: Prentice Hall, 2006. pg.45.

[7] Godfrey, Tony. Painting Today. New York: Phaidon, 2009. pg. 145.

[8] Ibid. pg. 156.

[9] Ibid. pg. 156.

new media user as 'Gawker.'[10] She describes how "Cyberspace, then, offers wet dreams of exploration and piracy."[11] She then presents her concept of this 'passing' user who is affected by the powerful experiences felt when accessing and engaging with discrete data. Chun further builds her analysis on the trajectory established by theorist Lev Manovich in describing how computer users emerge from two major phenotypes: flâneurs and explorers. As Manovich articulates, "both the flâneur and the explorer find their expression in different subject positions, or phenotypes, of new media users."[12] The depiction of Charles Baudelaire's 19th century modern urban figure - the flâneur – the anonymous and leisurely-observing spectator is reconstituted in our computerized-visual culture. The characterization and subjectivity of this historical figure is further re-imagined to account for the ways in which the contemporary user navigates and observes virtual spaces. Manovich recalls Baudelaires' description, "the flâneur is only truly home in one place-moving through the crowd…to the perfect spectator, the impassioned observer, it is an immense joy to make his domicile amongst numbers, amidst fluctuation and movement, amidst the fugitive and infinite…To be away from home, and yet to feel at home; to behold the world, to be in the midst of the world and yet to remain hidden from the world"[13] Manovich then employs Walter Benjamin's description of the flâneur to aid in his interpretation of this detached observer (the contemporary navigator) who moves through and interacts with virtual spaces. "According to Benjamin, the flâneur's navigation transforms the space of the city: "The crowd is the veil through which the familiar city lures the flâneur like a phantasmagoria. In it the city is now a landscape, now a room." The navigable space is thus a

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[10] Chun, Wendy Hui Kyong. "Othering Space." The Visual Culture Reader. 2nd ed. (2003): pg. 247.

[11] Ibid. pg. 246.

[12] Manovich, Lev. The Language of New Media. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2001. pg. 270.

[13] Ibid. pg. 269.

subjective space, its architecture responding to the subject's movement and emotion."[14] Is the same spatial response present in the navigable spaces of the virtual, and if so how is it different from moving through physical spaces in the real? Manovich responds, "In the case of the flâneur moving through the physical city, this transformation, of course, only happens in the flâneur's perception, but in the case of navigation through a virtual space, the space can literally change, becoming a mirror of the user's subjectivity."[15]

The second phenotype of the new media user is the based on the literary explorer – recalling the main characters portrayed in the 19th century novels of American writers, James Fenimore Cooper and Mark Twain. The adventurous western heroes, cowboys and frontiersmen embark on voyages through the physical spaces of nature, rather than the city. Manovich equates this phenotype of the explorer with the game user discovering and charting the vast frontiers of data space. "If the Net surfer, who keeps posting to mailing lists and newsgroups and accumulating endless data, is a reincarnation of Baudelaire's flâneur, the user navigating a virtual space assumes the position of the nineteenth-century explorer…this theme is also reflected in the structure of computer games…in the course of the game, the player has to explore his space, mapping out its geography and unraveling its secrets."[16]

I see myself more as a 'passing'[17] user rather than a casually strolling flâneur or a conquering explorer. I am aware that my subjectivity when using new media forms of creation is often compromised because I am frequently inundated with spellbinding and conflicting visual information. Furthermore, I intentionally thrive on getting lost in an open data sea, of

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[14] Ibid. pg. 269.

[15] Ibid. pg.269.

[16] Ibid. pp. 271-272.

[17] Chun, Wendy Hui Kyong. "Othering Space." The Visual Culture Reader. 2nd ed. (2003): pg. 246.

programmed operating procedures. When it comes to defining my role as a user traversing through virtual space, I belong more to the phenotype of the 'Gawker', or rubbernecker – like the onlooker motorist that slows down on a fast moving highway to inspect the wreckage of accident. As Chun argues, "Rather than the *flâneur,* the gawker is a better model for users…the gawker, caught by the visual forms of the commodities, becomes a spectacle just by standing and staring. The intense specularity of the object at which it gazes enables the gawker to forget its own status as a spectacle."[18] Instead of actively manipulating and engaging with digital language to create seamless blends in the making of a picture's fabric, I am the overwhelmed passer-by, who becomes a spectacle by virtue of seeing potential and amazement in the accident. The images I create are not pre-determined; they result from my acceptance of the accidents that occur in the process of making them. I am not suggesting that I have no control over my use of new media, but I am aware of not feeling comfortable and skilled enough to build coherent forms in my trance-like state.

My way of working can be systematic, analytical and specific, as well as playful and open-ended. I can occupy different roles in terms of planning and execution. I am able to be the demolition expert, the planning and designing architect, and the laborer-craftsman. In production systems that toggle between the real and the virtual, new possibilities are ushered in. The working mandate proposes observing computer processes and imaginary forces at work from one context to another, and encouraging them to interact. The various modes of production collectively contribute to the disorientation, fragmentation and complete transformation of the artificially-constructed picture. This process is also about the movement of a picture from one site of development to another.

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[18] Chun, Wendy Hui Kyong. "Othering Space." The Visual Culture Reader. 2nd ed. (2003): pg. 248.

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My work starts with digital photographs I take of various construction and building sites. I am interested in surveying and documenting these spaces in flux from various positions and angles in and around these sites, along with framing the sequential movements and gestures performed by machines. I find construction sites to be a very interesting subject for contemplation. Not only are these spaces transitional – the idea that they are neither complete nor incomplete spaces – but also they have two different aspects. During work hours there is an anxious energy generated by hard-working crews and heavy machinery in operation. After hours, when the activity stops, these sites become desolate and eerie. The inherent danger in these spaces-in-flux creates in me a sense of unease and agitation, similar to the anxiety I feel floating on the outskirts of our computerized culture, never fully plugging in because of the inherent complexities and speed at which it hurls itself and my discomfort felt while working in the given system.

Many of the photographs I take are of cranes, documenting the calculated movement of the machine when lifting various materials and the dynamic interplay when more than one is on site. The continual movement of cranes in the air generates active changes in the shape of space. My fascination with cranes stems from their massive scale and presence within their staged settings and when seen in the distance. They are mighty and regal structures, seemingly above everything else like shining beacons of industry and power. At night, they act as lighthouses illuminating from high above. Their physical structure is also interesting aesthetically, comprised of sequential units of modulated steel hollow boxes. What is most captivating about these mechanized and industrial forms of technology is that they are built constructions – visual metaphors – in and of themselves. In most cases, when they arrive on site they are delivered in sections and are assembled and erected from the ground up. When they are no longer needed,

they are then deconstructed and transported to other locations. Their transformative cycle of being and becoming is constantly repeated and carried out all over various transitional sites.

The ideological significance of these cranes also suggests a fitting analogy for the contemporary computer. The powerful capabilities and building processes of the crane and the computer are one-in-the same. Though they differ in terms of their physical look, scale and mobility, their rudimentary functions are very similar when it comes to the nature and activity of construction. The crane and the computer are leading mechanisms employed for the building of sites and of new ways of seeing and feeling the world around us. Our society reaffirms the power and spectacle of these iconic machines every day. Without the harnessing power and far-reaching ability of the Tower Crane, urban development sites would come to an abrupt halt. Similarly, without the operating speed and efficiency of computer technology, the current fluid system of exchange between the user and the various integrated networks involving telephone, cable, and satellite links or common applications such as e-mail would be impossible.

The computer screen is the site in which the demolition of the photograph takes place. Through digital editing and compositing I am able to re-imagine and re-construct new pictorial representations of existing spaces which I then use to make my paintings. Once the digital stills are uploaded onto the computer, I select images that seem artificial and poetically banal. I zoom in on specific details of the crane's structure to emphasize its power. I select stills which offer possibilities in terms of the ways in which they mimic the visual processes and effects of various imaging software, such as views obscured by screened fencing, which simulate the digital effects of superimposed layers or distorted images.

I use computer editing programs to reanimate and re-imagine the still image, to create an artificial look that is at once illusionistic and contradictory. I am intrigued by the notion of

shifting appearances and changeability: the multiplicity of modes employed in the re-creation and re-imagination of the same subject. I explore degrees of representation and abstraction, fusing pictorial space from image fragments. Once I have selected a particular image of interest I begin a process of play and reconsideration, making a series of voluntary and experimental moves, acting as though I know what I am doing. Due to my 'Gawker' sensibility, when it comes to treading through the murky waters of Photoshop or various digital paint programs I often arrive at unpredictable results. More often than not, what I had originally intended for the given image, drastically goes wrong. Zooming in, selecting, cropping, merging, flipping and folding – the still image begins to collapse and dissolve into unrecognizable fragments through a series of mixed command prompts in part fueled by improvised, misguided decision making. Instead of reverting back to the previous application or command, I begin to reconsider the structure of the picture, treating it like a site under construction. I demolish and re-build the picture into a constructed scene full of illusion and special effects.

The newly constructed picture, awkwardly tense and strangely complex, is transferred onto the working surface of the canvas or metal by projection, which allows me to continue stretching, bending and warping the image. The projected pictures become a preliminary working surface on which to draw in a physical way, recording a network of spontaneous traces, by overlapping forms onto each other or pressing them up anxiously together. The surface of the painting becomes an active site for compositional visualization of illusionistic pictorial space.

The paintings are active conduits for expressing the variable experiences felt and shaped in the spaces of the real and the virtual. They function as immersive screens or dynamic windows into an imagined world, a world where the pictures project out from the surface plane and are

displayed floating in-between spaces. These paintings reference an illusionistic type of pictorial space that seemingly extends outside the picture plane and towards the spectator provoking their perceptual faculties. Furthermore, these spaces engage the viewer in an experience of on-site amnesia and bewilderment that speaks to the ways in which we constitute and mediate our place amongst the various shifting-spaces found in our computational culture. How is virtual space experienced differently than our normalized space in which our bodies are situated? What happens when we move through these coexisting spaces?

The computer monitor acts as a metaphorical window revealing the virtual three-dimensional worlds within. Lev Manovich traces the origins and significance of the screen in our present computerized culture. "Today, coupled with the computer, the screen is rapidly becoming the main means of accessing any kind of information, be it still images, moving images, text."[19] The structure and dynamics of the screen is rooted in representational conventions and technologies that can be traced back to the Renaissance. The leading visual mediums of painting and cinema during the modern period aid in the description of what Lev Manovich calls the 'classical screen.' These visual forms, "from Renaissance painting to twentieth-century cinema [are] characterized by an intriguing phenomenon – the existence of *another* virtual space, another three-dimensional world enclosed by a frame and situated inside our normal space. The frame separates two absolutely different spaces that somehow coexist."[20] My paintings function as dynamic screens, projecting unnervingly out into the real space of the spectator, questioning the illusionary space that exists on the other side of the screen and its framed support.

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[19] Manovich, Lev. The Language of New Media. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2001. pp. 94-95.

[20] Ibid. pp. 94-95.

The paintings I construct formally reference two different and coexisting spaces: the real (physical) and the virtual (artificial). The real, physical space is referenced via the painting's own materiality: the shape and scale of the structural support, surface paint and application, installation hardware. The virtual, artificial space is registered via means of pictorial display: the dynamic screen's forms, marks and colour. Through conceptual and formal means, I create abstract visual spectacles that represent a kind of "pictorial-wreckage" through the collision and intersection of the real and the virtual, the technical and the material. The image-objects further add another layer of artificiality, allowing for the virtual source to be denied through physical means.

The paintings, custom built and crafted by hand reinforce and contradict the illusionary force of these pictorial spaces. The structures are made from materials typically found on construction sites: 2X4 framing strips, plywood boards and steel sheeting, once assembled they provide a heavy, durable and dense planarity. The scale and shape of these structural supports also references the body. I am interested in creating large-scale works that surround and immerse the spectator in a field of vision, to exert a sense of atmospheric pressure on the body. Large scale works not only heighten the sense of pictorial illusionism, but also dynamically break into the space of the viewer. In describing the monumental scale and tension in the early work of Al Held, Marcia Tucker asserted that, "Held used monumental size as a means of invading the viewer's space. His avowed concern at that time was not pictorial or illusionist space, but real space outside the picture plane."[21] In furthering the discussion of the affect of monumental works, Marcia Tucker employed the philosophical words of Charles Bouleau, "Monumental art requires not only vision but movement. The monumentality...thus allows us and the painting to

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[21] Held, Al and Marcia Tucker. Al Held. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art,1974. pg. 14.

share the same space"[22] Hence, the bigger the structures - the more awkward and obtrusive they become. Similarly, this logic is further carried over in the metal work that has been laser-cut precisely to reinforce the illusionary effect of the given picture. The rigidity and angularity of the cut forms transfers to the overall work, which causes it to seem tenser and sharply defined. My paintings also rely on a horizontal format, as a way to suggest a landscape mode of presentation, a metaphor for the synthetic scope of vision and the interactive logic of virtual space. "With VR, the screen disappears altogether. No longer is the viewer looking at a rectangular, flat surface from a certain distance, a window into another space. Now [they] are fully situated within this other space. Or, more precisely, we can say that the two spaces – the real, physical space and the virtual, simulated space – coincide."[23]

As much as the scale and shape of the structures affect the space of the spectator, the surface presence is also reaffirmed. One surface treatment approach I use is to create a rough and granular absorbent ground in a fluid series of thin, semi-transparent layers. Each consecutive layer is flooded across the surface with a brush. Once the accumulated layers have dried, the surface remains un-sanded, allowing the gritty woven fabric to reveal itself. Another, more preferred approach, involves multiple applications (ten or more), of thick overlapping and multi-directional layers of acrylic gesso which are spread out in even strokes with a palette knife. Each subsequent layer is followed by a process of light all-over sanding. This allows for the next layer to adhere to the previous one. This process is continually repeated and also involves the constant removal and re-application of masking tape along the sides of the frame to emphasize the edge of the picture plane. Repeated layering and sanding results in a final surface reminiscent of the

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[22] Ibid. pg. 14.

[23] Manovich, Lev. The Language of New Media. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2001. pg. 97

roughened plaster look of an Italian Renaissance *al secco* painting, whereby the visible traces of the plaster coats and directional spreads remain visible. The constant re-application and coating of acrylic paint creates a type of surface tension whereby smooth areas are mixed with rough, hard and bumpy imperfections. This discontinuous surface is also evident along the cascading ridges and flaking sides of the painting's edges.

The material and conceptual concerns in my work have important connections to the artists belonging to the Abstract Illusionism movement, including Frank Stella, Ronald Davis, and Al Held. These artists presented innovative forms of abstract work that did not reject illusionism, thus, reinvigorating and thwarting the leading principles and conventions of Modernist painting at the time. As Barbara Rose once commented in 1967, "the most striking feature about the recent work of several leading abstract painters is what appears to be a return to illusionism…a kind of space that depends neither on the flat patterning of light and dark characteristic of decorative art nor on the superimposed veils of color of atmospheric space."[24] These artists further emphasized the artificiality of the picture surface through their specific choosing and appropriating of various materials, which reaffirmed and contradicted the types of pictorial illusionism displayed. In the work of Ronald Davies for instance, the hard, shiny and reflective qualities of his fiberglass paintings, immediately identified the artificiality of the space itself. "The moment we know that we are looking at plastic, we know we are not looking at a space in which a landscape, a figure, a still life, or for that matter any actual object, could exist…that the paintings are made of plastic is central, even crucial, to the definition of a highly developed illusionistic space as not literal or actual but entirely abstract and imagined."[25] Similarly, Al Held

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[24] Rose, Barbara. "Abstract Illusionism". <u>Artforum</u> October 1967. pg. 33.

[25] Ibid. pg.34

established his form of surface tension through the continuous re-application of paint; as a means of accentuating the distinction between an artificial flat surface and the illusion of a projecting space. "[Held's] constant repainting which remains visible in geometric pictures as tough, bubbled, pockmarked irregular surface, reflects the extent to which topological concerns are based on operations which are concrete rather than abstract."[26]

In order to rupture the surface illusion in my work, I often mix competing paint mediums (metallic, fluorescent, acrylic, oil and alkyd) and build collage-like sections of contrasting surfaces. I am also interested in combining and mixing mediums to reflect new media language and conventions, particularly the notion of 'variability', "something that can exist in numerous versions and numerous incarnations."[27] As Lev Manovich explains, "Instead of identical copies, a new media object typically gives rise to many different versions. And rather than being created completely by a human author, these versions are often in part automatically assembled by a computer."[28] In <u>Lifting Site</u> (see fig.1.), multiple surfaces and mannerisms are contrasted in neighboring passages. In one area of the painting the roughened effect of dry brush application, is overlaid with a controlled pour of fluid paint positioned on its side. The surface tension is heightened by the adjacent area, of thick, viscous paint wraps itself around of the edge of the frame. The mixing and contrasting surfaces and mediums simultaneously creates a disorienting visual spectacle and the destruction of the pictorial illusion. The relationship between the physical space of the spectator and the materiality of the picture plane is further reinforced in my work through the employment of installation hardware. Some of the paintings project from the wall, or are hung from above using hanging and bolting materials used on construction sites.

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[26] Held, Al and Marcia Tucker. <u>Al Held</u>. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art,1974. pg.14

[27] Manovich, Lev. <u>The Language of New Media</u>. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2001. pp. 134.

[28] Ibid. pg. 36

Heavy lifting chains along with steel rods and piping flanges provide an appearance of strength that contradicts the sense of illusion in these pictorial spaces. In <u>Crane Patternizer</u> (see fig. 2.), a bulky, rusting white chain holds the plywood support in mid air, emphasizing through its physicality the artificiality of the surface pattern. In other works, the combination of the steel pipes and flanges act to project paintings out from the walls, either entirely or partially at certain angles. The physical support, surface and illusionistic picture together function as a dynamic screen that projects unnervingly out into the real space of the spectator. In pushing the painting forward in space, the back of the screen becomes visible, eliminating the possibilities of illusionism. In <u>Bending Plane</u> (see fig. 3.), the illusionary effect of the picture plane bending inward, along with the lower half of a crane, is further expanded via the projection of the structural support coming off the wall at the same angle. The image`s illusion is simultaneously reconfirmed and challenged via the artificiality of the flat surface and the mimicking of the painting`s physical display.

The concerns and sensitivities belonging to abstract illusionism guides the way in which these constructed spaces come into being. Other motivational strategies originate from painting`s repositioning in response to new media. Though every painting seemingly looks different, they are all unified by the same set of processes. I also attribute the variable nature of the works to my dichotomy as an artist-painter. I am a 'Proceduralist', in the sense that I approach my painting in a carefully precise and analytical manner, step-by-step, always taking into account how all of the combined elements work together. Moreover, I am also inspired by the ways in which new media organizes visual language. John Lansdown describes "proceduralists" as, "[those] interested in the process going on inside the computer as much as the object produced...What

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they were after was the distinctive, creative contribution that happened in the processing."[29] I

also see myself as a saboteur of sorts, constantly mixing, flipping and inverting forms to create

pictorial wreckages - disintegrating the integrity of the picture's representation through

operations of selection and modification, in the manner of a contemporary DJ, creating new

mixes out of pre-existing forms of music. "The essence of the DJ's art is the ability to mix

selected elements in rich and sophisticated ways."[30]

The imagery of these constructed and abstract illusionist-based pictures reference the various

local surroundings of construction and building sites. The paintings are linked together by

content and the crane is transformed into a complex and imagined space for navigation. Not only

have these pictures of cranes been demolished and re-constructed in various new media sites, the

empty spaces that surround their new forms and structures have also undergone processes of

change. In <u>Lifting Site</u> (see fig. 4.), the anxious effect generated by the representation of cranes

and cable pulleys criss-crossing each other in space is further heightened by the independently

organized and articulated spaces in-between. The shallow and negative spaces that lie in-between

the distinct forms are activated and emphasized as separate discrete shapes. The planar surfaces

also function as subject matter and are an important component to these pictures. In <u>Folding</u>

<u>Forms</u> (see fig. 5.), these contrasting spaces are distinctly structured and restricted through hard-

edge means, creating geometric shapes. In <u>Pushing Stream</u> (see fig. 6.), these shapes are more

gestural in nature; allowing for more movement to occur across suggested and open-contour

borders. Colour in my paintings performs two contradictory functions. One is to articulate the

surface textures and patterns of discrete shapes, such as the negative spaces of a crane's

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[29] Walker, James Faure. <u>Painting the Digital River</u>. London: Prentice Hall, 2006. pg. 14.

[30] Manovich, Lev. <u>The Language of New Media</u>. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2001. pp. 134-135.

reconfigured structure. In such cases, the colour emerges independently and competes with the

underlining picture, seemingly existing on the same plane. The other use of colour is a

distracting mechanism, to aggressively disorient the spectator from fully engaging with the

illusionary space within the painting. An assortment of natural and artificial colours are often

mixed and contrasted in one picture. Vibrant fluorescent and reflective metallic pigments are

often pressed up anxiously next to more saturated and muted natural colours and shades of gray.

This mixed palette references both the colours found in the virtual spaces of computer imaging

software and the real spaces of construction and building sites. In paintings that use minimal or

no colour at all, the active rhythm of the graphic line serves to channel the given pictorial illusion

of shifting space.

I attribute the active capabilities of my colour choices with the shared pursuit of an artist such

as Bridget Riley who, "used vibrant colour and pattern to energize the space between the viewer

and the painting: the colours seemed to move off the canvas towards the viewer..."[31] and Torben

Giehler, who paints freely, using day-glow pigments to allude to the scientific vernacular of

satellite imagery. As writer Max Henry describes, "Think of Mondrian on ecstasy: the cerebral in

tandem with the virtual, motion depicted in a vibrant acrylic spectrum alternating between

natural and synthetic colours."[32] In the work of Franz Ackerman, colour is visually dynamic and

aids in emphasizing the complex illusion of his shape-shifting spaces. While exploring the

powerful effects of contemporary travel and tourism, Ackerman is similarly concerned with the

ways in which our understanding of space has profoundly changed in our computerized culture.

"His paintings can be described as the re-creation of urban space, hyper activated by an

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[31] Godfrey, Tony. Painting Today. New York: Phaidon, 2009. pg. 210.

[32] Henry, Max. "Mondrian on Ecstacy." Torbengiehler.com May 2000. March 2010.
   <http://www.torbengiehler.com/Text/mondrianonecstas.html>.

individual subjectivity... the town is re-imagined in terms of pathways, vectors and virulent colour contrasts."[33] My pictures and use of colour is not immediately read as computer generated, which can be attributed to my nature as a passing user, whereas, in the case of Franz Ackerman, his visual references to the computer in his synthetic pictures are deeply imbedded, reflecting his user-status as a fully engaged and dominating explorer.

The final arrangements of abstract forms, dizzying lines and agitating colour evoke screened environments, pictorial representations of virtual, artificial spaces. Similarly, in the work of artist Albert Oehlen, the fundamental notion of what constitutes painting – explorations regarding the processes and limits of representation and reception - are constantly questioned and redefined. "For him creating complex and contradictory spaces has much to do with opposing the rational space in modernism...there is a drama to the works, each element jostling and pushing the other out of the work, asserting a different sense of space."[34] A complex and conflicting space is evident in the painting Cold Rolled Crane (see fig. 7.), with varying perspectives brought into different vector-like forms, achieved by transforming the geometry of the crane's structure into a schematic pattern. The graphic design is captured at two different angles and is reflected on two separate steel cut-out forms. The seemingly arbitrary shapes, are also closely linked, and are cross-sections of a crane that have been cut-out and repositioned to advance and circulate the shared pattern, oscillating from one form to another. The two pieces oddly fit together physically, yet their independent forms and surface illusions are inconsistent in relaying any logical frame of reference.

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[33] Godfrey, Tony. Painting Today. New York: Phaidon, 2009. pg. 210.

[34] Ibid. pg. 219.

The installation for the exhibition, "This Site Is Under Construction", creates the conditions for viewing and experiencing these illusionary image constructions in real time. The title alludes not only to the on-line, virtual space of the computer, but also to the physical spaces of building and urban development sites. The particular 'site' indicated in the title refers to the nature of the image - as being a site under construction, contemporary painting interests are directed towards the re-calibration and construction of pictorial representation. In the gallery space, the representational forms employed in the making of a space within a space are reminiscent of those found on construction sites. Rough framing walls are erected to create a seemingly regular viewing environment or room. Inside, these frames are faced with vertical plywood panels that simultaneously act as display wall inside, while acting as hoarding boards blocking the view from outside. The constructed space is comprised of four display walls, which vary in positioning and attachment. Upon entering the main gallery, the spectator is also overwhelmed optically, as they are blinded by a floodlight positioned high above a free-standing crane tower. This light is strong, considering how all of the gallery lights are poured into the staged development site and the rest of the surrounding ground baths in diffused and reflected glow. The crane is another integral component in the staging of a construction site illusion. Made out of rough carpentry it stands over sixteen feet high, vanishing up above. Inside, the paintings are presented in various ways: hanging directly on the untreated plywood, projecting out from the walls, or suspended in mid-air. In the later case, the illusion of the tower crane is further read as hoisting building material. The painting, Crane Patternizer (see fig. 8.), is positioned in the space, off-centered and hovering above the ground at waist level. Heavy chains are attached at all four corners, which join together and connect to the crane's main cable line. With the paintings projecting out into the space of the spectator, the relationship between the images and the

spectator is intensified. The spaces: both physical and pictorial exert pressure on the body, agitating the spectator. The viewer also becomes a spectacle in this room - the passerby who is caught by the sight of these pictorial wreckages becomes a spectacle just by stopping and starring. From their initial entrance into the main space of the gallery and throughout their circuit around the installation space, I wish to create that shared feeling of 'on-site' amnesia and bewilderment. Thus, the spectator is also encouraged to revisit the site, as a way to retain whatever information is lost in the process of engaging with the paintings.

The installation operates on many levels, and like the paintings, it too transforms and oscillates between conditions of deconstruction and construction. Also, like new media works, the installation addresses the role of the viewer, represents space and 'realizes the illusion.' The organization and display of the installation space can be compared to virtual reality which, "establishes a radically new type of relationship between the body of the viewer and the image…now the spectator actually has to move in physical space in order to experience movement in virtual space…to look up in virtual space, one has to look up in physical space; to step forward "virtually" one has to step forward in actuality…"[35] The notion of a space within a space is connected back to the discussion surrounding the nature of the paintings functioning as dynamic screens, extending and opening-up into an alternative spatial terrain. The installation can also be seen as an inversion of the gallery itself, mimicking the same function through its walls, by exposing its bare architecture. In treating the paintings and the installation, with the same manner and degree of importance has been inspired by Mark Rothko. I share similar desires and aims for strengthening the communication between the work and the viewer. The various ways in which the paintings are configured around the real and virtual space of the

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[35] Manovich, Lev. The Language of New Media. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2001. pg. 109.

installation, combined with the image's conflicted artificial nature – both in terms of surface and pictorial illusion, aids in clarifying the intended experience of the work. In emphasizing the active capabilities of the image-object physically coming off the wall to invade the space of the viewer, the spectator is called upon to respond to their given state and positioning. Based on the shifting conditions for viewing, the passing spectator is urged to keep moving so as not to be caught or struck by the visually disorienting screens. It is through these means that I attempt to re-define my particular identity and place within the spaces of our present computerized culture, and the ways in which I seek to express my subjective painting logic and language.

Figures

Figure 1. Michael Capobianco. *Lifting Site,* 2009, 63 x 74 inches, Acrylic and oil on canvas, (detail)

Figure 2. Michael Capobianco. *Crane Patternizer*, 2010, 54 x 50 inches, Oil on canvas adhered to plywood, (detail)

Figure 3. Michael Capobianco. *Bending Plane*, 2009-2010, 51 x 78 inches, Acrylic, oil and alkyd on canvas

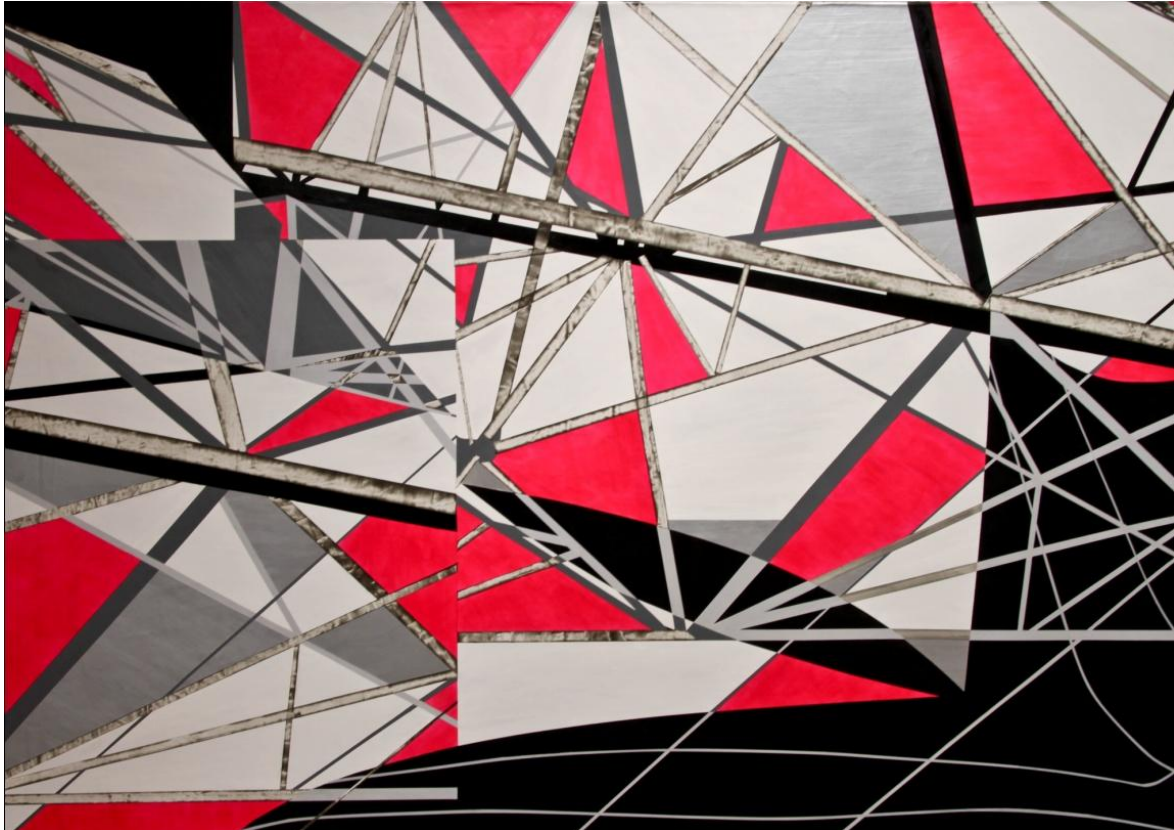Figure 4. Michael Capobianco. *Lifting Site*, 2009, 63 x 74 inches, Acrylic and oil on canvas

Figure 5. Michael Capobianco. *Folding Forms*, 2010, 59 x 84 inches, Acrylic, oil and alkyd on canvas

Figure 6. Michael Capobianco. *Pushing Stream*, 2010, 53 x 85 inches, Acrylic and oil
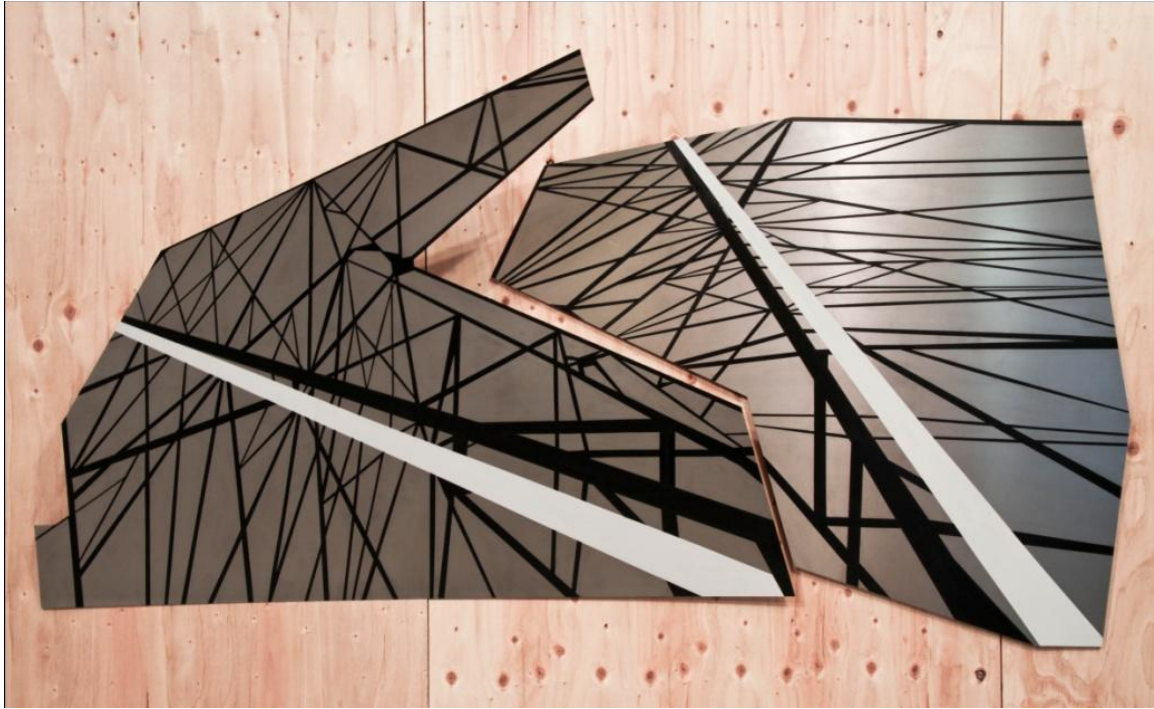on canvas

Figure 7. Michael Capobianco. *Cold Rolled Crane*, 2010, 44 x 90 inches, Oil on steel

Figure 8. Michael Capobianco. *Crane Patternizer*, 2010, 54 x 50 inches, Oil on canvas
adhered to plywood (installation detail)

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