

Possibly, Maybe  
An Exhibition of Painting/Sculpture Hybrid Paint Objects

by

Jessica Massard

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Abstract:

*Possibly, Maybe* is an exhibition of polychromatic, process-based objects made out of acrylic paint. Working with and against the limits of the material, the paint is systematically cast, peeled, and stretched colour by colour transforming it into three-dimensional hybrid forms. The working process I devise is predetermined and regulated, yet the element of chance is integral to the work due to material constraints. I explore the sculptural potential and plasticity of a material traditionally used for painting. While acrylic is a relatively new material, designed to be durable and long lasting, the forms I create out of acrylic paint are vulnerable to climate, gravity, and time and therefore counter plastic's perceived resilience. *Possibly, Maybe* looks within the marginalized and the failed of our everyday, and uses these as aesthetic elements, which can constitute contemporary cultural potential. Through an engagement with the fallibility of plastic, with the hybridity of artistic practice, and the excess, opulence, and decay of the Baroque, my work plays with the paradoxes and relationships between the high and the low, pure and impure, precious and throw-away, which I find are all elements that exemplify our contemporary culture.

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## I. Introduction

So, more than a substance, plastic is the very idea of its infinite transformation; as its everyday name indicates, it is ubiquity made visible. And it is this, in fact, which makes it a miraculous substance; a miracle is always a sudden transformation of nature. Plastic remains impregnated through with this wonder: it is less a thing than the trace of a movement - Roland Barthes

The above quote is taken from the essay “Plastic” in Roland Barthes’ book *Mythologies*, published in 1957. Barthes’ text was written in an era when plastic was still a relatively new, emerging material. At that point in time the possibilities plastic promised seemed endless, and it was used in a range of different products and industries. Despite its boom as the material of the *atomic age*, Barthes identifies some of its limitations, namely its low-grade status. One of his observations was that within the hierarchy of materials, those artificially produced such as plastic fail to surpass the finer, naturally derived materials they often imitated. While for Barthes simulated materials are advantageous in that they make luxury items easily accessible and affordable, their quality remains inferior. For example, a cubic zirconia imitates the aesthetic of diamonds but will never surpass it in quality, and polyester has been created to function as fabric for clothing yet will never surpass the quality of naturally grown cotton or silk. Barthes therefore argues that despite plastic’s valuable everydayness and ease of use,

in the hierarchy of the major poetic substances, it figures as a disgraced material, lost between the effusiveness of rubber and the flat hardness of metal [...] it is a ‘shaped’ substance: whatever its final state, plastic keeps a flocculent appearance, something opaque, creamy and curdled, something powerless to ever achieve the triumphant smoothness of Nature (Barthes, 98).

While these observations are true, the nature of plastic as a flawed, artificial-looking material did not stop its proliferation into all aspects of our lives. In the mid-twentieth

century when Barthes wrote his text plastic was celebrated as an inexpensive, practical, disposable material designed to enhance the quality of our lives by replacing expensive, breakable everyday items such as glass bottles and household goods with something more durable and affordable. This reaffirms his declaration that plastic represents a useful yet lowly material.

More importantly, according to Barthes, the distinction between the high and the low in the hierarchy of materials parallels similar distinctions in society at large. Jeffrey L. Meikle presents a similar argument in *American Plastic: A Cultural History* (1995). In his text, Meikle states that,

the proliferation of plastic coincided with the expansion of the postwar economy. The people of plenty consumed an ever increasing quantity of plastic as they experienced what *Time* referred to as a ‘flood of new products...transforming the American way of life’ (2.)

The transformation Meikle refers to is the dissolution of distinctions between the high and the low. More importantly, what Meikle points to is the birth of the new throw-away culture in the West, which coincided with the economic boom that was dependent on producing more stuff. Meikle further states that,

the expansion of plastic mirrored a civilization that seemed to be abandoning its ideals in pursuit of material goods. To some young people, especially those of the middle class who enjoyed the benefits of the postwar economy, American values seemed superficial, as phony as wood grain laminate or vinyl leatherette (6.)

Plastic therefore had the ability to substitute precious and valuable handmade goods transforming them into easily replaceable, throw-away items of the everyday. Plastic imitations made all sorts of objects accessible to all classes of society because they were easily produced. Paradoxically, even though it democratized the use of objects, the



emergence of plastic also further underscored the separation between high and low culture because of the plastic's obvious artificiality, and its status as a cheap substitute.

The hierarchies mentioned in Barthes' text, developed within all aspects of culture, society, and economy, becoming a major object of his theoretical writing throughout the 1960s. Plastic thus became a symbol of the new modern disposable culture, and Barthes' text on plastic was a metaphor for the pop, consumer culture of the day. I have observed that parallel hierarchies exist within art. Apart from the social and cultural stratifications within the field of art exhibition, collection, and sales, there are deeper hierarchies embedded in the process of art making itself. This is particularly true of artists' materials, and acrylic paint in particular, as it is commonly dismissed as inferior to oil paint, or other traditionally used painting materials. The negative perceptions of acrylic paint as a material are directly related to the status of plastic in our society I spoke of earlier. Thomas J. S. Learner argues in *Analysis of Modern Paints* (2004) that acrylics have received "a fair amount of criticism" both because of their perceived inferiority in terms of their physical properties and because of the low status plastic has in our culture (4.) An example of this attitude is found in Mark David Gottsegen's *The Painter's Handbook* (1993) in which he states that acrylic paints',

popularity is based on their convenience, ease of use and clean-up, and the little known but obvious fact that 90 percent of those who buy artists' materials are hobbyists or 'Sunday painters.' Manufacturers consider only 10 percent of use to be serious artists, and they produce what the market wants with one corporate eye on the bottom line (68.)

Similar narrative can be found in Ralph Mayer's texts on art materials. Mayer was a painter, art conservator, chemical engineer, and paint manufacturer who founded the Artist's Technical Research Institute for artist's materials in 1959. His seminal book, *The*

*Artist's Handbook of Materials and Techniques* originally published in 1940 with several editions is still an indispensable reference to contemporary artists, art educators, and students. In this text Mayer describes the superior quality of oil paint, stating that it “remains standard because the majority of painters consider that its advantages outweigh its defects and that in scope and variations of optical quality it surpasses watercolor, tempera, fresco, acrylic, and pastel” (167.) Both Mayer’s and Gottsegen’s texts support what Learner argues is the perception of the cultural and material inferiority of acrylics. Although according to Learner recent developments in acrylic paint allow the medium to imitate the handling of oil paint more closely, it is still generally believed that acrylics will never surpass the quality of oil in terms of colour, lightfastness, and viscosity (Learner, 4.) Ultimately what happens is that cultural and social attitudes around plastic have influenced the perceptions of acrylics as a painting material.

The derogatory perceptions of synthetic materials are also discussed by Jan Marontate in *Technical Innovation and Modernist Ideologies: Commercial and Artistic Conjunctions in the Appropriation of New Painting Media* (2010). Marontate argues that despite their physical/chemical properties and advantages, the association of acrylic paints with large industry and commercial and commodity culture make it difficult to appreciate them as a part of the institution of high art. Marontate observes,

Symbolically, these materials were undeniably linked with modern industrial society [...] some readings questioned the appropriateness of their use in art because of their association with mass-produced commodities, which was difficult to reconcile with the notions of uniqueness and artistic authenticity (97.)

Part of the difficulty Marontate points to is that synthetic materials dissolve the distinction between high art, with its privileged commodity status, and the materials of

low, mass-produced commercial products. While this impression of synthetic artists' materials began to dissipate in the mid-twentieth century through the work of artists such as Jackson Pollock, Helen Frankenthaler, and Lynda Benglis, the biases against acrylics are based in cultural and class perceptions, rather than their true physical properties still remain.

Initially I became infatuated with acrylic because of its many physical possibilities. The plasticity of acrylic paint allows it to withstand extensive manipulation, and, as I discovered, can be transformed from a liquid intended for painting, into a three dimensional sculptural object. As I was initially trained as a painter, my exploration of the plasticity of acrylic evolved from wall-mounted paintings into the three dimensional paint sculptures. I have come to identify this body of work as hybrid between the tactility and spatiality of sculpture and the colour and material considerations of painting. The process of manipulation of acrylic paint I engaged in aligns with Barthes' statement that plastic embodies the idea of "infinite transformation" (Barthes, 97). My work therefore explores "infinite transformation" of acrylic paint and positions itself in-between the institutions (gallery, museum,) and concepts (aesthetic, beauty, purity,) of high art, and the disposable, low-grade aesthetics, culture, and politics of plastic.

*Possibly, Maybe* is an exhibition of polychromatic, process-based objects made out of acrylic paint. Working with and against the limits of the material, the paint is systematically cast, peeled, stretched, and rolled, transforming it into bulbous, round three-dimensional hybrid forms. This meticulous process results in hundreds of brightly pigmented, cylindrical objects varied in scale, which are then scattered across the gallery floor. The process I devised is cumulative, and the many layers of paint that build up

over time to finally create the shape, also serve as an archive of the hundreds of gestures I use to make them. Through folding a two-dimensional surface, something we could call a painting, is rolled into a three-dimensional object. Through this, I explore both the sculptural potential and plasticity of a material traditionally used for painting, and I also delve into the question of the politics of painting and its historical and social narratives.

The process of continuous rolling of paint is controlled and predetermined; however, the element of chance is integral to the work due to its material constraints. While acrylic is designed to be durable and long lasting, the forms I create with it are vulnerable to temperature, humidity, time, and gravity and therefore counter plastic's perceived resilience. The elements inevitably affect the overall shape and behavior of the objects. As the material negotiates its resiliency with the environmental forces the objects I make with it will slump, torque, and possibly fall pointing to its capacity for both growth and decay. The fallibility of the objects parallels plastic's destructive and detrimental effect on contemporary society and its negative effect on the transformation of our environment. Theorist Jeffrey L. Meikle discusses the effect of plastics quoting the economist and historian Williams Haynes who in 1942 stated that plastic materials would have "more effect on the lives of our great-grandchildren than Hitler or Mussolini [and that] new materials could compel the course of history as greatly as any man" (qtd. in Meikle, 3). Less than a century after William Haynes' statement we are all living his predictions, and my work foreshadows this.

The work in *Possibly, Maybe* is conceptually linked through the material and symbolism of plastic. This exhibition explores the dissolution of boundaries between the

dichotomies of the high and the low, potential and failure, and growth and decay. Plastic is formed through a synthesis of disparate materials, both biological and chemical and *Possibly, Maybe* examines such paradoxical unions to produce a dialogue focused on ideas of hybridity and the Baroque, which, as I argue, have come to represent the ethos and aesthetic of contemporary culture.

## II. Visual Analysis

*Possibly, Maybe* is an installation that consists of hundreds of process-based acrylic paint objects. My interest in the plasticity of acrylic paint has influenced the decision to eliminate natural, earth tone colours and neutrals in favour of synthetic colours as well as 'dayglo' fluorescents. Through employing such colour choices the conceptual link to plastic is reaffirmed in the work. Made of several layers of highly saturated, acrylic paint the exterior of the pieces have an artificial, plastic sheen. These acrylic objects are loosely scattered across the dark, glossy gallery floor, which reflects the bright colours of the work.

The objects in the installation are made through a time consuming, laborious process of repeatedly rolling dried strips of paint colour by colour. As each new strip is added I build with the plastic material, growing it into the three-dimensional paint objects. As a result of the continuous rolling the objects take on an irregular cylindrical shape. Because the colours are rolled in sequence and on top of one another, the exterior of each object is monochromatic, while the top of it is polychromatic and it becomes an archive of the layers and gestures used to create it (fig.1). The choice of colours is deliberately left to chance resulting in interesting colour interactions. Specific patterns and colour combinations are never repeated in the exact same way. The irregularity of the objects in the installation therefore varies in appearance depending on: the colours used, the length of time they were rolled for, and the amount of pressure applied to each new layer of paint. The drying time of each colour is different depending on its chemical properties. The tension created within certain objects as they negotiate their chemical structure

results in an unevenness of shapes, sometimes creating irregular or angular objects, and sometimes concave or convex. This leads to different kinds of interesting imperfections and mutations, as each object is a trace of the person who rolled it.



fig.1 Jessica Massard, *Possibly, Maybe (detail)*, acrylic paint, dimensions variable, 2013

With the help of my friends and studio assistants, I have created hundreds of these irregular objects. Although each one has its own unique character, they all function as a

dynamic installation. The pieces are installed in clusters with the intention that varying sizes and shapes interact with one another. The objects occupy the entire floor of the gallery leaving just enough space for the viewer to move between them, and through the space (fig.2). While the process of building paint objects in the studio is more systematic, and to some extent predetermined, the installation of the work in the space is more dependent on chance. While developing a strategy that would conceptually support the basic premise of the installation I have decided to use a relatively simple tactic of first throwing the objects randomly throughout the space and allow them to bounce and roll off each other, and then position and adjust them further. Ultimately, however, they are left to be changed by time, gravity, and the climate of the gallery as the plastic reacts with the gallery's environment. In the course of the show I expect that the objects will slump, lean or fall, potentially pushing others around and across the floor. The installation is therefore impermanent and constantly morphing just like the plastic that the pieces are made of.





fig.2 Jessica Massard, *Possibly, Maybe* (installation detail), acrylic paint, dimensions variable, 2013

### III. Painting in a Hybrid Moment

My exploration of the plasticity of acrylics initially maintained close ties to painting as a result of my training. While I would employ sculptural processes such as casting and carving, the low relief paintings that resulted from this process remained mounted on a stretcher and canvas to be later installed on a wall. With the structural support of the canvas I found I had too much control over the paint and could anticipate how the material would react, leaving very little to chance. Rather than truly exploring the limits of the material, my earlier attempts created an illusion of a pure acrylic object, resulting in simply decorating a canvas with paint that mimicked sculpture. It was therefore crucial for the work to sever its ties to the canvas, and move away from the support of the wall in order to fully engage its own potential and failure. While the current work is three-dimensional and in that sense sculptural, it is also a natural extension of my own aesthetic/formal interests in painting, as well as my perceptions of contemporary painting practices. For these reasons I situate my work within the notion of hybridity.

The term ‘hybridity’ is commonly associated with particular theories of identity and globalization, for example in the writing of Homi K. Bhabha and other post-colonial theorists. However, the hybridity I refer to in this document points to an artistic practice which merges disciplines. The work in *Possibly, Maybe* is presented as a cross pollination of ideas, materials, and strategies as a way to reinvigorate the medium of painting. I initially attributed the concept of the hybrid to my work as a response to Minimalist writing and art practices of the 1960s. Donald Judd’s *Specific Objects* (1965) was particularly important in shaping my early thinking, since Judd argued that some of

the best work created at that time was “neither painting nor sculpture” but something in between (181.) I was drawn to the sensibilities of the Minimalists, including their position against illusionism, and their insistence on truthfulness to the material. For this reason I began to experiment with the actual physical properties of acrylic paint, rather than exploring its potential for producing trompe l’oeil paintings.

At first I believed that my work aligned with the pure, autonomous painting of the modernist period as championed by the late critic Clement Greenberg, as well as with the purely formal, self-referential work of the Minimalists. In the course of developing my thesis however, I have come to a realization that it is in tension with the purely formal, masculine, and industrially- manufactured work of the Minimalists despite it serving as an initial point of departure. Minimalism refuses fragility and is akin to architecture whereas the success of my work depends on its own fragility. Through manipulating the acrylic paint and working with its fragility and vulnerability, it became clear that this work was not solely an anti-illusionistic exploration of pure material, but that it is also an engagement with the larger intellectual and cultural questions of my time.

In *Critical Perspectives on Contemporary Painting: Hybridity, Hegemony, Historicism* (2003), Jonathon Harris discusses hybrid painting practices. He argues that new media “may be used in addition to ‘traditional’ media such as paint and canvas [...] or as replacement for these methods and materials” (17.) The combination of various media is what signifies hybridity according to Harris. This approach to artmaking gained currency during the late twentieth-century and the practice of crossing, or integrating disciplines has prompted the emergence of hybrid and interdisciplinary works within contemporary art. Presently, artists integrate sculpture, installation, photography, videos,

digital work, and printmaking, etc. into their painting as a way to reinvestigate and challenge the established boundaries of specific disciplines. This is particularly common within abstract and non-objective practices. In *Painting in a 'Hybrid Moment'* (2003) Alison Rowley and Griselda Pollock discuss the term 'hybrid' in relation to contemporary painting stating that the term,

would seem to accept a loss of purity, a kind of mutation. At the positive end of the critical spectrum, hybridisation might be seen as a necessary and welcome cross-fertilization (39.)

It is clear that Rowley and Pollock believe the practice of painting grew stagnant under the modernist concept of 'purity,' and that successful hybrid works can reinvigorate the discourse.

Contemporary artist Tumi Magnússon demonstrates this type of thinking through his hybridization of painting with new media. Magnússon successfully integrates two disciplines to generate new dialogue about the discourse of painting in his 2006 video installation *Seven Leftover Monochromes* (fig.3). In this installation Magnússon engages with the history of colour field painting while examining the materiality of paint through an audio/video installation. Two large video monitors are mounted on opposing white walls of the gallery space with a large speaker installed underneath each. The image on each monitor depicts a monochrome pool of paint filling the entire screen. Periodically a 'drip' sound echoes through the gallery, and a new colour is introduced into the pools of paint on one of the video screens. The new colour drips and bleeds over the preexisting one until once again the screen is filled with a monochrome. A second 'drip' sound permeates the space as the second video monitor displays a new colour bleeding down the screen. These drips and pools of monochromatic paint play on a continuous loop,

colour by colour. Each colour plays for a total of six minutes as Magnússon only includes the first three minutes of the colour pouring, and the last three minutes of the colour drying.



fig.3 Tumi Magnússon, *Seven Leftover Monochromes (detail)*, Digital Video, 2009

Magnússon uses the six-minute time lapse to expose the lush and seductive materiality of wet paint, which traditionally is only experienced by the painter in the studio. It is the artist's intention to demonstrate the materiality of paint while conceptually engaging with the history and forms of Modernist painting, most notably through the references to drips and monochromes. While this work creates an interesting viewing experience in the gallery space, it is difficult to understand the physicality of a material that isn't there. The viewer is only able to engage with a digital video loop on a

large video monitor. In the article *The Plop of the Paint* (2009), art historian Joseph Masheck discusses Magnússon's *Seven Leftover Monochromes* installation stating that it maintains a close relation to painting because, "painting is a matter essentially of colour" (Masheck, n.p). Although Magnússon's work avoids the use of the traditional means and methods of painting, it advances its discourse through an engagement with Modernist tropes and ideologies with regards to painting practices. Magnússon's interdisciplinary approach assists in expanding upon the contemporary definition of what a painting could possibly be.

Like Magnússon Judy Millar utilizes contemporary digital media in order to create her large-scale installation paintings. Millar's work consists of amplified gestural brushstrokes printed on vinyl with a combination of digital printing and manual screen-printing. The vinyl the artist uses is stretched onto large, curving wooden stretchers to create an illusion of brushstrokes, which are supposed to literally sweep through the exhibition space (fig.4). Both Magnússon and Millar can be considered to be working in a hybrid practice as Jonathon Harris defines it. Both use digital technology in addition to, and sometimes as a replacement for painting methods and materials (Harris, 17). It is this type of digital intervention in the field of painting that is most commonly associated with a hybrid painting practice in contemporary art. While I define my body of work as hybrid much like Magnússon and Millar, it differs in that it does not engage with new media such as digital photography and video. The way I see hybridity operating in my work is twofold. Firstly, the pieces are created through a labour-intensive process that combines two traditional disciplines of painting and sculpture resulting in in-between paint objects. Secondly, the work is hybrid in that it utilizes the technology of plastic

paint, which allows it to behave in a way it was not intended. My hybrid practice does not entirely fit Harris' definition in that it does not incorporate digital media, however, it is hybrid in that I combine painting and sculpture as a way to reinvigorate the medium as Rowley and Pollock suggest. Like Magnússon my work maintains a close relationship to painting through its materiality and use of colour, which Joseph Masheck has argued is essential to painting. The lurid colour of my work is visually appealing while its scale and sensuality is much more tactile and sculptural in its sensibility. Rather than acting as windows into space, my work is similar to Millar's in that it leaps off the wall and physically enters the same space as the viewer, while still maintaining a reference to its origin.



fig.4 Judy Millar, *The Rainbow Loop*, Printed Vinyl on Wood Stretcher, 2012

#### IV. The Historical Baroque and Neo-Baroque

Hybrid and interdisciplinary work emerged in the late twentieth century as a characteristic of postmodernism. In *Neo-Baroque: A Sign of the Times* (1992) Omar Calabrese states that the term postmodern has been overused, becoming a catchall term that has “lost its original meaning and has become a slogan or label for a wide variety of different creative operations” (12.) As a result, Calabrese argues that the term is not sufficient to conceptually and theoretically encompass all the aspects of contemporary culture as there are “many important cultural phenomena of our time that are distinguished by a specific internal “form” that recalls the Baroque” (15.) Instead of the term postmodernism he offers an alternative he calls ‘Neo-Baroque.’ Calabrese elaborates that the “neo” in the “neo-baroque” introduces a repetition, return, or re- invigoration of the aesthetic and formal values of the Baroque period instead of postmodernism which seems to reject past cultural forms altogether (15.) Calabrese believes that Neo-Baroque is a more appropriate model for understanding the aesthetic sensibilities of our time because it is more open-ended and allows for more aesthetic and social variation (15.) Many critics and historians like Calabrese view the Baroque not as a movement tied to the seventeenth century, but as a trans-historical state that continues to mirror and influence art and culture (Yoo, 266). I see my work situated in both what Calabrese calls the Neo-Baroque but also in the Baroque proper.

It may seem contradictory to compare an installation of objects constructed out of acrylic paint to the work of the Baroque period, yet, I have come to identify with the original Baroque aesthetics in many ways. These are some of the qualities of the



Baroque aesthetic that I find crucial: hybridity/interdisciplinarity, material excess, and the tension between growth and decay. The work in *Possibly, Maybe* is excessive in material and colour, creates a hybrid between painting and sculpture, and exists in the tension between growth and decay.

I have identified similarities between the notion of a hybrid, interdisciplinary art practice and the dramatic style of the Baroque. The dissolution of the autonomous art practices following modernism is similar to the transition from the Renaissance to Baroque. The Baroque is often referred to as ‘anti-classical’ in relation to the classicism of the Renaissance. In the text *Renaissance and Baroque* (1964) Heinrich Wölfflin discusses the emergence of the Baroque style in relation to its classical predecessor. He states that the style “embraced everything that was neither antique nor of the (classical) or gothic style [...] and that anything unusual or uncanonical was greeted with approval” (23.) Angela Ndaljian expands on this definition of the Baroque in her text *Neo*

*Baroque Aesthetics and Contemporary Entertainment* (2004) stating that,

the baroque was believed to lack the reason and discipline that came to be associated with neo-classicism and the era of the Enlightenment [...] and that it was increasingly understood as possessing traits that were unusual, vulgar, exuberant, and beyond the norm (7.)

Wölfflin argues that during the emergence of the Baroque it was believed that the style was attacking, or degrading the classical style that came to dominate the art and architecture of the Renaissance. This tension between the classic style of the Renaissance and the eccentric style of the Baroque is similar to the tension between my work and the austere and formal practices of the Minimalists.

I also identify with the Baroque in that in this period artists began to use an interdisciplinary approach to their work. Heinrich Wölfflin describes this characteristic of the Baroque stating that the shift that occurred in sculpture and architecture was that they both became ‘painterly’ (31.) By this, Wölfflin means that what was once rigid, logical, and symmetrical in the work of the Renaissance became opulent, gestural and asymmetrical in the Baroque. He defines the distinction between the Renaissance and Baroque architecture and sculpture as a shift from, “the linear to massive, from flat to spatial [...] in the painterly style therefore, all flat areas become rounded and plastic” (31.) The shift in style Wölfflin describes is an aesthetic, formal, and conceptual transformation of painting, sculpture, and architecture as separate entities, into a hybrid of the three, which is most clearly embodied in the opulent Baroque churches. This unity of the arts is most clearly reflected in the work of Gian Lorenzo Bernini. His practice has come to be described as ‘bel composto’ which is defined as a working process that is “based on the shifting among three arts: painting disappears into sculpture and sculpture disappears into architecture to produce a “montage,” a synthesis of the arts” (Castex, xlvi). The bel composto carefully considers the painterly concerns of movement, shadow, and light, while at the same time integrating them into sculpture and strategically places all in specific architectural locations. This unity of the arts embodied in Bernini’s bel composto is demonstrated in his *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* in the Cornaro Chapel of Santa Maria della Vittoria. In this work, Bernini fills a niche of the church with a dramatic, emotional depiction of Saint Teresa visualizing an angel. This work combines carved coloured marble, sculpture, fresco painting, cloud-like stucco, stained glass, and gilding in order to re-create the dramatic scene. Bernini intentionally constructed this

sculpture under a natural light source in order to manipulate light and shadow in the folds of his extravagantly carved fabric. The way the light and shadow play off the ornate details in the fabric creates movement and a painterly effect on the sculpture. As natural light enters in from the window above and glistens on the scene, beams of light hit the carved marble creating an illusion that the saint is moving in front of us. In the text *Architecture of Italy* (2008), Jean Castex discusses Bernini's *bel composto* and his use of visual elements to create a spiritual experience. Castex states,

Bernini puts the figures of Saint Teresa and the Angel above the altar in a niche lit from above where one would expect to see a painting. The figures and architecture are an indissoluble whole, and the vault over the chapel is an illusionistic combination of painting and sculpture [...] Bernini has fused all the major arts-painting, sculpture, and architecture- into a fluid whole, making it impossible to isolate only one of them [...] the parts combine effectively into a single effect so that reality and illusion, life, and artifice, coalesce into a singular experience of the divine (44.)

Interdisciplinary installations were characteristic of the Baroque period and are what drew me to it as an initial way of understanding my own work. The Baroque employed *bel composto* and hybrid visual strategies in order to achieve a sensual and emotional experience for the viewer. This is very different from the calculated and cerebral experience of the Renaissance, which was based in logic.

Further parallels between my work and the Baroque aesthetic can be found in the notions of excess and decay. These Baroque characteristics are clearly demonstrated in the *Vanitas* and *Memento Mori* still life paintings of the period. Such themes were particularly popular in Northern Europe with the Dutch who were flourishing as a result of their strong trade and finances. On the one hand the Dutch paintings functioned as a way to demonstrate one's prosperity, accomplishments, and accumulated goods (Gardner, 567). On the other hand, however, they served a symbolic purpose to warn against

excesses of wealth and pride. The beautiful flowers, food, and material remnants of wealth depicted in the works were standing in for the excesses of this prosperous life. The opulence of the still lives also contained a moment of decay that was to warn against the sin of pride.

Jacob Vosmaer's *A Vase with Flowers* is an example of the type of symbolic imagery I am interested in. The painting depicts a vase full of lavish, vibrant flowers just past their peak and beginning to wither away (fig.5). I find the correlation between Baroque paintings such as Vosmaer's and the work in *Possibly, Maybe* to be situated within this moment of the greatest beauty and its impending decline. Where the two aesthetic ideas found in the Baroque align with my work is in my use of plastic. The construction of the paint objects, which involves meticulous layering of hundreds of thin sheets of acrylic, echoes the decadence of Vosmaer's painting in which he, in a similar way, portrays an over-the-top representation of nature. The plastic, shiny, quality of my paint objects points to their assumed resilience. The impermanence of their shape, however, alludes to the failure of the plastic as a material, and more importantly to the excess and social decay of our contemporary society, which produces an overabundance of stuff.

Plastic is perhaps one of the most significant symbols of the demise and disposability of our culture. Initially designed for its convenience and affordability, plastic had tremendous appeal and promise. Only decades after its popularization plastic has proven to be a detriment to the environment and our health in general. Its creation requires petroleum-based resources, which results in the destruction of vast eco-systems and animal habitats. Its ubiquity throughout the landscape only serves as a reminder of our

shiny consumer culture that may ultimately lead to the collapse of the world as we know it. These themes are mirrored in many aspects of “contemporary visual culture and the rapid succession of creative fashions and trends,” it produces and liquidates (Grunenberg, 5).



fig.5 Jacob Vosmaer, *A Vase with Flowers*, Oil on Board, 33.5” x 24 5/8”, 1618

Just as Baroque emerged from a time of crisis during the era of Enlightenment and the Protestant Reformation and followed on the heels of the Renaissance classicism and

purity, postmodernism emerged in response to a series of crises in the twentieth century.

Postmodernism also reacted against the push for purity of modernist art. In *Baroque Tendencies in Contemporary Art* (2007) Kelly A. Wacker discusses the similarities between these two shifts, stating,

Baroque came out of a period of crisis, the Counter-Reformation, and this context was intimately connected with the birth of Baroque art. As a result, Baroque art can in no way be seen as pure form, simple style. [...] Therefore, if there were Baroque revivals in the twentieth century, then these should be seen within their given context. Postmodernity, appearing as a crisis of modernity at the end of the twentieth century, allows this comparison (51.)

Minimalism took the Modernist notion of purity to the extreme, creating work that “somehow generated and occupied a special sphere, aloof from politics and commerce and above personal feeling” (Chave, 117). In the text, *Neo Baroque!* (2005) authors Micaela Giovannotti and Joyce B. Korotkin discuss how a new sensibility surfaced in art at the beginning of the twenty-first century. This new sensibility emerged in response to the Minimalist and conceptualist aesthetic that dominated the last quarter of the twentieth century. Like Omar Calabrese, these two authors refer to the new aesthetic as the Neo-Baroque. According to them, the Neo-Baroque sensibility incorporated flamboyant marks and lines, dazzling brilliant colour, embellishment, ornamentation and audacious materials (11.) They go on to state that the visually overwhelming work of the Neo-Baroque recalls a period when,

art was more about revering the visual than it was about scrutinizing its own ideologies; a time when formal dialogue was inherent in the work, but had not yet evolved as the predominant factor as it had in modernism (11.)

The Neo-Baroque does not go to the opposite extreme to deny the intellectual experience; it successfully creates a marriage between the senses and the intellect. In *The Neo-Baroque of Our Times: A reading of Umberto Eco's The Name of the Rose* (2010) HyunJoo Yoo discusses the characteristics of the Neo- Baroque stating that it can be defined as using “frantic rhythms, instability, polydimensionality, enforced circuitousness, regulated disorder, planned chaos, etc” (Yoo, 267). Although Yoo’s discussion of the Neo-Baroque is based in the literature of the period, these characteristics are also descriptive of the Neo-Baroque aesthetic in general, and more specifically the objects I create in *Possibly, Maybe*.

## V. Artistic Influences and Contemporary Art Context

As mentioned previously in this document, a lot of my material sensibilities initially aligned with the purist anti-illusionism of the Minimalists. Donald Judd's *Specific Objects* and Robert Morris' *Notes on Sculpture* served as a point of departure for this work in the early stages of its development. I see the work however, in tension with the Minimalists in several ways. In the text *Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power* (1990) Anna C. Chave outlines the defining characteristics of Minimalism and states that,

by manufacturing objects with common industrial and commercial materials in a restricted vocabulary of geometric shapes (the Minimalists) avail themselves of the cultural authority of the markers of industry and technology. Though the specific qualities of their objects vary [...] the authority implicit in the identity of the materials and shapes the artists used, as well as the scale and often the weight of their objects, has been crucial to Minimalism's associative values from the outset (46.)

The characteristics defined by Chave are the ones that I position my work against. Chave is writing about Minimalism from a feminist perspective. As a female artist I agree with her observations that the defining Minimalist aesthetic characteristics are ultimately authoritative and masculine. My work is in tension with such male dominated ideologies, most particularly in terms of my use of materials, production, and scale. The Minimalists utilized strong, permanent, industrial materials such as metal and concrete in order to create objects, which had pretensions to become architecture. My objects are created out of a soft, tactile material, of low quality, which will eventually warp and break down. The objects create a tension between the high and the low as they are carefully hand crafted but out of a plastic material that is disposable and of the everyday.

*Possibly, Maybe* was developed as a series. Seriality is a common characteristic in Minimalism, however their objects are commonly outsourced, machine manufactured,



mimicking mass-production. In contrast my work is painstakingly created by hand, and each object is therefore distinct and unique. The work is created communally with assistants and colleagues all contributing to the making of the pieces. The production therefore becomes a form of a social practice in which my input as an ‘author’ of the work is partly relinquished to others who have, to my dismay, often decided to create variations on the objects from what I have envisioned.

This body of work is further placed at odds with Minimalism in terms of scale. Anna C. Chave quotes Carl Andre as saying, “ I wanted very much to seize and hold the space of that gallery- not simply fill it, but seize and hold that space” (44.) This possessive attitude led most of the work of the Minimalists to take on a monumental scale. In contrast *Possibly, Maybe* engages with the entire space of the gallery through hundreds of small, individually made objects. The scale of my pieces reflects their handmade and intimate quality. Despite the small scale they are able to engage with the entire space of the gallery without taking an aggressive or dominating attitude, which I see as a feminist gesture.

The Post-minimalist, process-based work of Lynda Benglis and Eva Hesse was especially influential in the development of my formal and aesthetic thinking. Both of these female artists developed their practices through an exploration of the synthetic materials that emerged at the time such as latex and polymer (fig.6). They also created works that had a very different sensibility than that found in the work of the Minimalists. Lynda Benglis found synthetic materials advantageous as she created large-scale floor works by pouring artificially coloured latex and polyurethane. While these ‘frozen gestures’ tend to look quite sculptural, interestingly Benglis refers to them as

“fallen paintings” (Richmond, 41). Eva Hesse was also creating work, which utilized synthetic materials like polymers. I am interested in Hesse’s work because the materials she used were often fragile and impermanent. Like Hesse, this has become an important aspect of my work as having realized that the inevitable failure of the material I use is not detrimental to the work but strengthens it conceptually. These female artists forged their way through a male dominated art world through their strong material exploration and sensibilities.



fig.6 Lynda Benglis, *Contraband*, Pigmented latex, 3” x 116” x 398”, 1969

In relation to contemporary practicing artists, this body of work most closely engages with the Tricia Middleton and Lee Bul. These artists create extravagant, excessive works, which incorporate Baroque and Neo-Baroque aesthetics while also signaling decadence, and decay. For example, Lee Bul creates ornate sculptural installations such

as *After Bruno Taut (Negative Capability)*, 2008. The work is visually striking, however it is not crafted out of fine, luxury materials but out of the items of mass-production. “The beads sourced for the installation are mainly cheap, plastic, ornaments—the kind fabricated in Asia and sold at low prices in Western dollar stores” (Shaughnessy, 35). Through the excessive use of the materials, Bul comments on our flamboyant consumer culture (fig.7).



fig.7 Lee Bul, *After Bruno Taut (Negative Capability)*, crystal, glass, and acrylic beads on stainless steel armature with aluminum and copper mesh, with chains made of PVC, steel, and aluminum, 108” x 116” x 84”, 2008

Similarly, Tricia Middleton’s 2012 work, *Form is the Destroyer of Force, Without Severity There Can Be No Mercy*, combines found objects such as tea sets, bottles, artificial roses, and baskets. These objects are then completely covered in pastel purple and teal dripped wax, which creates new forms. At once ornate and organic-looking,

Middleton's sculptures eerily allude to destruction and decay. The materiality of the wax and seductive colours make the work aesthetically pleasing, however the viewer can't ignore the fact that the impermanence of the wax will lead the work to slowly melt and degrade over time creating a post-apocalyptic scene (fig.8). The work of the Neo-Baroque artists such as Tricia Middleton and Lee Bul operate as a type of memento mori or warning for the inevitable consequences of a culture built on consumption and disposability. They engage with both historical Baroque and Neo-Baroque aesthetics and their works function as critiques of our society of the consumer spectacles.



fig. 8 Tricia Middleton, *Form is the Destroyer of Force, Without Severity There Can Be No Mercy*, wax, paint, fabric, household materials, dimensions variable, 2012

Though the methodologies and sensibilities of these artists may seem somewhat disparate, they have all in some way contributed to my critical thinking and engagement

with my own work. A tension with Minimalism has offered a way to contextualize the meaning of my decisions in terms of material choices, scale, process, and installation. My work developed out of an exploration of the plasticity of acrylic paint, which parallels the Post-minimalist, process-based works of Lynda Benglis and Eva Hesse who were utilizing synthetic materials to create strong aesthetic gestures. The tensions embedded in the synthetic, artificial materials are reflected in the conceptual nature of Neo-Baroque artists such as Lee Bul and Tricia Middleton. Neo Baroque works demonstrate the visual splendor and lavishness of the Baroque period, as well as, the inevitable decay through use of plastic, and cheap, mass-produced commercial goods.

## VI. Methodology

The *Possibly, Maybe* installation consists of hundreds of hybrid acrylic paint objects, which are made through a process of rolling dried sheets of low quality acrylic paint. The cylindrical shape of the objects was determined after a process of trial and error through which I attempted to make three-dimensional forms out of the liquid material. Casting acrylic in molds was unsuccessful because the exterior of the paint would dry fast creating a seal that prevented the interior from drying. In order for the paint to dry, it had to be cast in thin sheets, so that it could be peeled off and manipulated once dry. From there, I experimented with various maquettes and studies in order to develop a process that would allow the dried sheets of acrylic paint to accumulate in volume. Tightly rolling the paint allowed the paint to adhere better while increasing in overall volume, which proved to be the most efficient way to transform the thin, fragile strips of paint into a solid mass.

The initial step in constructing these acrylic works is casting the sheets, or skins of acrylic paint. The walls of my studio are covered in plastic sheeting, and using spatulas, putty knives, and trowels the viscous acrylic is spread onto the plastic sheeting in an even layer. Once dry, the paint is peeled off the plastic and cut into a strip. This strip of paint is tightly rolled in to create a thin, solid cylinder of acrylic paint. This cylindrical piece serves as the starting point for the object upon which the additional layers will expand. Strips of paint approximately the same height are cut, and laid flat before rolling around the central point. One edge along the length of the strip of paint is folded over to establish a clean line on the top of the sculpture once it is wrapped around. The strips of

paint permanently fuse to one another and as a result no adhesives are required to bind them. This process is repeated as additional coloured strips of paint are rolled, eventually building the complete object (fig.9).



fig.9 Jessica Massard, *Studio Work in Progress (rolling acrylic paint)* acrylic paint, dimensions variable, 2013

Colour plays a crucial role in the construction of the objects, and this role goes beyond pure aesthetic choices. Certain colours are inherently stronger and more rigid which allows them to better withstand the effects of elements such as humidity and gravity. This rigidity is best demonstrated in titanium white because it is not easily susceptible to environmental conditions and therefore I often use it as an armature to create strength and stability. On the other hand, there are colours that are delicate and infinitely elastic and are more sensitive to external forces. These are most often

variations of reds, yellows, as well as fluorescents. Given such differences in the chemical structure of paint I have decided to make polychromatic objects as opposed to monochromatic objects in order to accentuate the above-mentioned tensions between varying colours (fig.10).



fig.10 Jessica Massard, *Possibly, Maybe (detail)*, acrylic paint, dimensions variable, 2013

Because of the lengthy, repetitive process of rolling acrylic paint, and the amount of objects I had to make my production method shifted and I decided to open my studio to communal collaboration. Although my working method is laborious, it is also accessible and as a result, friends and colleagues have agreed to participate in the process. My



studio space has temporarily been transformed into a communal, collaborative working environment. While this part of the production of my thesis work first developed out of necessity to produce a large amount of objects, I have realized that there is a more important concept in this methodology. I have decided to surrender the control over the shape of the objects to those around me, and in a way also relinquish the sole authority of the work. While I am the only one to determine the colours of the skins as they are cast on the studio walls, the final object is out of my control as several people contribute to their making. Individuals apply different amounts of pressure and tension to the paint, select colours in different order, and create different scale and shape of objects. This has created even-greater variations and subtle shifts in the details of the objects. The material becomes an archive of the many layers of paint used to create them as well as to the many different hands that have created them. As a result, each piece is as unique as the individuals who made them. The surrender of the control has contributed to the work behaving in more unexpected and interesting ways and has further contributed to my thinking and reacting to the history of painting.

## VII Conclusion

And this amazement is a pleasurable one, since the scope of the transformations gives man the measure of his power, and since the very itinerary of plastic gives him the euphoria of a prestigious free-wheeling through Nature. But the price to be paid for success is that plastic, sublimated as a movement, hardly exists as a substance. Its reality is a negative one...

--Barthes, *Mythologies*

Roland Barthes suggests that the once useful development of plastic will inevitably lead to our demise. He points to the tensions of negotiating between the ideas of speed and comfort found in our modern culture, with the physical limitations of our natural world. For Barthes, plastic is a metaphor for the paradoxes of modernity. Plastic is a façade, with which we blanket our everyday existence. Its only purpose paradoxically, is to alleviate stress and make our lives more manageable. While plastic may arguably represent the demise of our contemporary culture, it once represented a potential for a better future. Reconceived however, the pliability of plastic may also symbolically represent a collective effort to remould the present.

Plastic as a metaphor also signals towards the powerful hierarchies in our culture, and art in particular. Though hierarchies of taste exist, and will exist in the foreseeable future, there are always alternative ways of doing and perceiving culture that can enact change. The prevailing cultural attitudes, which favor disposability, point to a culture that is unwilling to address its shortcomings. Art in many ways falls pray to the same conundrum. My exploration of the material, aesthetic, social, and intellectual possibilities of painting attempts to wrestle with these difficult questions by engaging art's possibilities to stir senses, and pose questions. *Possibly, Maybe* is therefore

suggestive of both the infinite potential and the limitless decay that Barthes alludes to in his text. *Possibly, Maybe* looks within the marginalized and the failed of our everyday, and uses these as aesthetic elements, which can constitute contemporary cultural potential. Through an engagement with the fallibility of plastic, with the hybridity of artistic practice, and the excess, opulence, and decay of the Baroque, my work plays with the paradoxes and relationships between the high and the low, pure and impure, precious and throw-away, which I find are all elements that exemplify our contemporary culture.

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