

The Gesture and the Drip  
An Exhibition of Paintings

by

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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

*The Gesture and the Drip* investigates our increasing reliance on digital media as a means to encounter and view art works online as photographic documentation. This body of work attempts to place significance on the human gesture in relation to the loss of the human presence that often accompanies digital documentation. The gesture is a reoccurring element that can be traced throughout my thesis body of work. Occasionally, gestures are tactile marks made by my hand and in other cases they are the result of photographic reproduction, silk-screened onto the surface. A paradox is formed between the real and illusion that are interchangeable on the canvas. My paintings encompass authentic and mediated gestures to challenge the visual experience and disrupt a logical reading.

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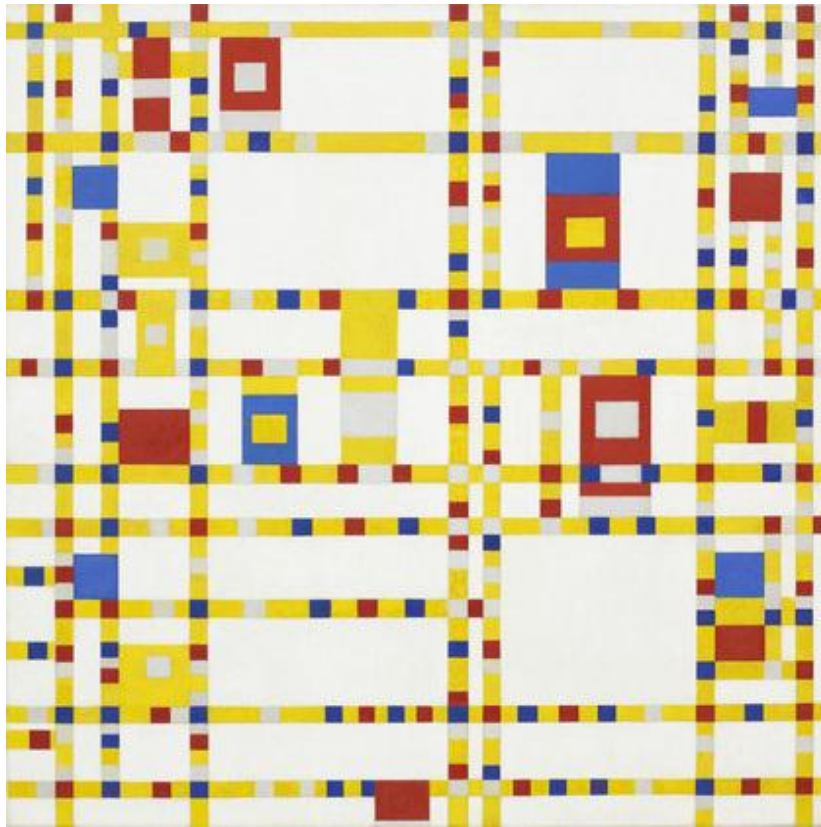
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*“Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be.”(W. Benjamin 3)*

During a recent visit to New York City I experienced Piet Mondrian’s painting *Broadway Boogie Woogie* for the first time. Mondrian’s painting, as illustrated in books and on the Internet, appears to be a flat, graphic painting that has a surface that is devoid of any marks of the hand. This is how I understood the work to be, but standing in its presence I was shocked! This painting did not have the surface I had previously envisioned. Instead, the reds, yellows and blues were thick and layered amidst the white ground. The edges between the colours were not seamlessly straight and mechanical. The once solid paint application on the surface of the canvas has begun to crack, revealing the painting’s progression through time. This experience of Mondrian’s work, in the flesh, marked a fundamental shift in my perspective and approach to painting. It has made me question: what is lost in the process of viewing artworks as photographic documentation? As stated by Walter Benjamin in 1939, the originality of a work of art or a sense of authentic experience is lost in the process of mechanical reproduction. Also, in viewing works of art online one views works sequentially rather than in relation to each other. What is lost is the time spent experiencing a body of work: decisions made by the artist such as composition, colour, scale, and texture are reduced and sometimes eliminated altogether through the flattening of the photographic process. A complete understanding of the artist’s intention is also lost.



**(fig.1)** Piet Mondrain, Broadway Boogie Woogie, 1917, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

In contemporary art practice, visual information is freely exchangeable and immediately accessible via the Internet. As a painter, this open accessibility to information is beneficial however, I strongly believe that our continued reliance on digital technologies will change how paintings are experienced and influence how they are created. While I am reluctant to become immersed entirely in digital media as a means of making paintings, I acknowledge it as a necessity in our current social environment. In the construction of my paintings, I use traditional mark making with brush and hand but I have also come to incorporate mediums and approaches that include both analogue and digital processes. This combination reflects both my apprehension and struggle with the medium of painting in a digital world.



The *Gesture and The Drip* responds to our increasing reliance on technology and places significance on the human gesture (the brush) while at the same time witnessing the loss of a human presence through a mediated gesture (the silkscreen). Gestures and drips are reoccurring elements that can be traced throughout my thesis body of work. Occasionally, these forms are a physical mark made by my hand and in other cases they are the result of photographic reproduction, silk-screened onto the surface of the paintings. A paradox is formed between the mark of the hand and the silk-screened marks as they become interchangeable on the canvas. My paintings consist of authentic and mediated gestures that challenge the visual experience and disrupt a logical reading.

## Abstraction

As a process-based painter, I situate my work between abstraction and representation—painting and photo-based media—the mark of the hand and the mediated mark. The paintings in my thesis exhibition combine human gesture, digital reproduction, screen-printing and digital photography as a means to expand on the language of painting in a digital world.

Abstract Expressionism has been a significant influence on my painting practice, yet I cannot completely align myself with this movement. Art critic Clement Greenberg often proclaimed that Abstract Expressionism had become highly symbolic of high Modernist art. The Abstract Expressionists' approach to medium specificity, authenticity, originality, purity, and 'art for arts sake' lead to an art form that was autonomous and self-referential. Abstract Expressionism seemed to negate anything other than 'purity' in painting. Artists such as, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and Clyfford Still have influenced my painting practice however, I do not think their paintings hold the same weight they once did in relation to our current era. The avant-garde artists' shift from Modernist art forms to new media arts question the function of art within our culture, political critiques, and the status of the art object. This is important because it outlines several possible limitations in Modern abstract painting.

The re-emergence of avant-garde art in the late 1960's and 1970's sought to break the conventions of Modernist abstract painting that had become highly commoditized. Similar to the avant-garde of the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century this new generation of avant-garde artists' made art works that responded to politics, culture

and contemporary society. The use of unconventional materials, collage, and the addition of everyday objects was a way to break down the hierarchy of the art object.

Their use of unconventional materials as well as a shift toward performance art, feminist art practice, video and photography underscored the role of the art object into the object of experience. This critique of Modernist painting and the departure from conventional art practice—starting with Pop Art—ultimately affected abstract painting. This shift transformed abstract painting to incorporate multiple mediums and elements of contemporary life.

Jeffery Deitch stated, in his text *The Painting Factory: Abstraction after Warhol*, that abstraction has become one of the most dynamic platforms in contemporary art. He writes, “Rather than reducing itself to a narrow definition of the medium, abstract painting has reemerged as an area where opposing concepts can invigorate each other...the hybrid has replaced purity of form.”(Deitch, 6)

Painting that had once been seen as reductive has now become an expansive domain because of popular culture and technology. Deitch positions Andy Warhol as a significant contributor toward this shift in abstraction. Warhol’s early prints and his *Oxidation* paintings of the late 1970’s and 1980’s transformed abstraction as a pure art form into an impure product. Warhol confronted high art and popular culture (low art) by challenging the accepted conventions in painting through the process of mechanical reproduction. His use of found imagery, pop icons and photo-based silkscreen printing reflected the indirect experience found in media, television, and photography. His use of screen-printing and elements of chance emphasized the

impossibility of erasing the human hand even through using mechanical means. He chose to print on unconventional surfaces that created works that were not technically pristine prints. Warhol's work was both mediated—through his printing techniques—and direct—the mistakes and other traces of the hand—that undermined abstract painting as a pure art form and ultimately opened up new possibilities in painting.

The gesture has become a dominant painted element in my works and as such, I feel that it is necessary to discuss several contemporary artists who forefront this aspect of painting in their practice. Artists such as David Reed, Fabian Marcaccio (early works), Christopher Wool, and the Provisional Painters all inform my painting practice. While I have been influenced by Abstract Expressionism (the Pollock drip), my use of the gesture is not entirely pure in a modernist methodology. My paintings have come to include multiple ways of executing these marks. The works in *The Gesture and The Drip* are comprised of two series—the smaller, serial paintings on Yupo paper and the large-scale paintings on canvas.

David Reed's paintings have become influential to my work because of how he executes the gesture in painting. Often Reed's paintings consist of a highly worked smooth surface, contrasting and intense colour combinations and the seductive brushstrokes of paint. Central to his practice is the production of a smooth and inscribed surface that emphasizes the application of paint and paint's work. While each brushstroke may take on the appearance of being mechanically reproduced, each is unique and made by the hand. Reed's brushstrokes are the result of working wet on wet; meaning each brushstroke is applied onto a wet surface,

producing an intimate record of the trajectory of the hand as it moves across the surface of the painting. Reed will execute several brushstrokes that in combination disrupt the grid of the painting's field to create a shift between tactile and optical mark making.



**(Fig.2)** David Reed, #620, Oil and alkyd on polyester, 27 x 52 inch. 2011-2012.

John Yau's article *A Painter of Post-Modern Life* positions David Reed between the burden of modernism (abstract expressionism) and postmodernism (the death of painting). From Yau's point of view, Reed's execution of the brush stroke is not a unique record of spontaneity, which references abstract expressionism nor are his brushstrokes ironic or a conceptual critique of mimicking the abstract expressionist mark (postmodern). Reed's paintings follow a specific process of construction and application of paint. His works can be seen as an analysis of the brushstroke. Yau states "His territory is the brushstroke as an image, sign, thing, gesture, repeatable unit, and container all at once." (Yau 72) Often his paintings

move toward the appearance of film or photography due to their over stylized marks on a thin, flat surface that has been manipulated by a squeegee. Here the paintings occupy the space of production and display a sense of immediacy.

One important similarity to my small, serial paintings and David Reed's brushstroke paintings is they both display a certain level of immediacy yet are the result of a meticulous process. Andrew Benjamin notes that David Reed's paintings occupy a certain level of 'here and now' presented by the movement of paint across the surface. Benjamin refers to the presence of the paint's movement as a determining factor in the painting's subject however, this presence of a painted movement is not entirely confined to a sporadic/immediate gesture, but rather emphasizes paint as the central subject. This immediacy of the gesture is in fact the result of labor and production. In other words, the gesture is no longer gestural because it is the result of a specific form of production, which emphasizes the complex temporality of the work.

Fabian Marcaccio's early paintings or *paintants* have also been significant influences on my thesis work. Marcaccio's paintings appear to be sporadic and focused entirely on the painted gesture as an immediate mark. A closer inspection reveals that the paintings are in fact the product of a labored process and the marks are constructed as representations of brushstrokes. His painting practice combines collage, screen printing, and painting that include digitally modified imagery, scanned images, silicon gels and unconventional materials. The process of constructing the brushstrokes with a variety of materials reveals the complexity of the marks and denies any associations to pure modernist painting. Marcaccio's

paintings challenge modernist painting and expand the territory paintings can occupy.

I have recently become interested in a group of artists that have been labeled Provisional Painters by art critic Raphael Rubinstein. Rubinstein presents a group of painters that demonstrate a certain *provisional aesthetic* within their practice of painting. Their works are characterized as having a casual, unfinished and self-canceling aesthetic. They seem to deliberately diverge from what is considered “strong” painting in modern art. Rubinstein states, “I take such work to be, in part, a struggle with a medium that can seem to be invested in permanence and virtuosity, in carefully planned out compositions and layered meanings, in artistic authority and creative strength, in all qualities that make the fine arts *fine*.” (Rubinstein 5) I agree with provisional painter’s critique of pure modernist painting as a means to progress the medium and not to destroy it.

I take in part Provisional Painters to be engaged with the critique of modern painting, which is evident in the works by Albert Oehlen. I think they are distancing themselves from modern abstraction, primarily Abstract Expressionists, by consciously producing works that appear to cross the boundary between good and bad painting. This reduction in quality denies that abstract paintings are only objects with market value. Also, I think they are returning to works that expose certain levels of human characteristics in order to critique current technologies and the impact of digital media on painting.



**(fig.3)** Fabian Maraccio, paint zone 1995.

The works of Christopher Wool also relate to the digital reproduction of paintings. His work reveals how artworks change when they are re-contextualized through reproduction. The experience of viewing a painting in the studio is always different from when the work is put into the gallery. Further, the paintings are then documented, printed, and/or digitized. This dissemination of the original into diffuse multiples ultimately changes how we experience the work. Wool's paintings catalog and emphasize the constant re-contextualization of artworks through a



process of sequencing images to create a visual flow of information. This is important because it underlines the experience of viewing artworks in the flesh. As the artworks are constantly traversing through multiple forms of representation the context is changed and the artists' original intention may be lost. This is relevant to our current culture because I think this re-contextualization of artworks will have a negative as well as positive impact on contemporary painting. The notion of viewing an artwork via a photograph is not a new concept in fine arts practice however, the speed with which images are uploaded is a relatively new mode of dissemination. A recent exhibition by artist George Hoffman underlines the idea that our culture is changing in regard to how images and artworks are experienced, Hoffman states:

... a change in seeing... millions are looking - a lot - at constantly changing images on their TVs, computers and hand-held devices...the world is awash in visual information...this hasn't necessarily resulted in greater pictorial literacy, but it probably has affected the way we look at art, and the making of art. (Hofmann 5)

## Painting

The act of painting can be viewed as a performance of engagement between the painter and the canvas through paint. For me, this involves the intuitive movement of my body employing hand/eye coordination that is predicated on the responsive act of seeing. The power of this process resides in it being experiential, not only in the making for the artist but for the viewer once the work leaves the studio.

It is in this sense that I allude to the search for form employed by the Abstract Expressionists (the Pollock drip), but I extend this gesture to include mediated marks that I print on the surface of my paintings. The works in *The Gesture and The Drip* combine both analog and digital processes as a departure point for painting. For me the gesture functions as a symbol of the artists mark and as a reoccurring form that can be traced throughout my practice. In some cases the gesture is a physical mark made by my hand and in other cases it is a reproduction. This duality between immediate marks and mediated marks underlines the loss of the human presence that occurs in the process of digitalization. The shallow spatial depth I employ also forefronts both the mediated and authentic gestured forms resulting in a conflation of these methods of mark making.

My thesis work can be divided into two different approaches to painting. The first approach includes small-scale paintings that are characterized as immediate, pure in colour and seductive. These paintings allow for experimentation with colour and multiple gestures without being too cautious or overly invested in the aesthetic outcome. These works are composed on small sheets of Yupo paper-



**(fig.4)** Nicholas Breton, serial series #32, oil on mounted Yupo paper, 11x10 inch. 2013.

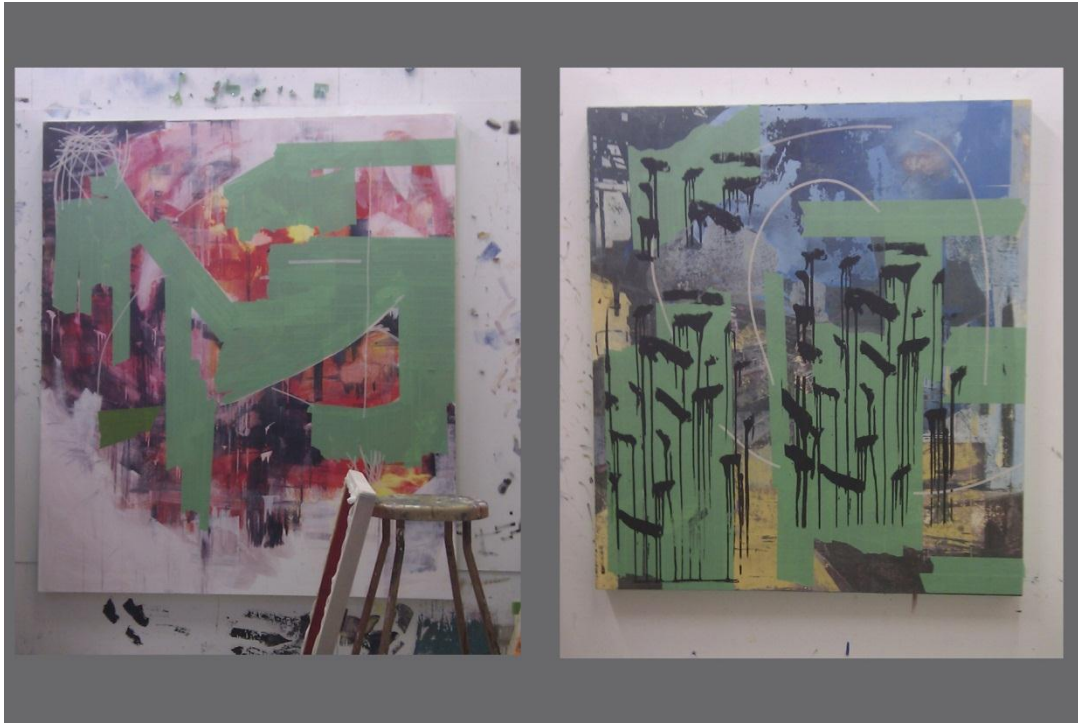
that have been mounted on Birch plywood. The Yupo Paper creates a similar surface to canvas that has been sized with multiple layers of Gesso and sanded to a glass like finish. Visually, these small paintings investigate the play between positive and negative space, abrasive colour combinations, and layering techniques. Certain areas of these works are masked off and oil paint is applied onto the paper directly from the tube. The paint is then manipulated across the surface with a brush, squeegee or razor blade. The small scale of these works focuses visual attention onto the details; they produce a seductive optical experience.

The small moments that happen on the paper influence the large-scale works. The large paintings allow for greater complexity than the small works. Working again on a smooth layer of gesso, my paint application is generally thin and manipulated by squeegees and various soft glazing brushes. The immaculate “fast” surface allows paint to be dragged and smeared across the canvas with ease and the initial under-painting is an intuitive performance on the canvas. I use acrylic paint directly from the tube to lay down a foundational structure. Pitted against the white gesso of the canvas the under-painting is visually irritating, often consisting of acid greens and vivid Cadmium oranges, reds and yellows. Subsequent layers respond to this initial ground and the composition is decided through an active looking and appraising. The acrylic ground is masked off in reaction to the initial painted marks creating hard edges and geometric shapes. The works in progress studio image (fig.5) illustrates this process and shows how the tape is applied to the canvas. After the masking tape is applied I begin to silkscreen marks onto the surface.

My digital process begins with selecting and photographing painted gestures that have been painted by my hand. These images are converted into digital files in Photoshop. Within Photoshop I have the ability to adjust the contrast, lighting and orientation of the marks. With the aid of computer software I am also able to adjust the resolution of the images. As my process has developed, the digitized gestures have begun to carry their own unique set of characteristics. In other words, the once corporeal marks have become mediated. The gesture progresses from being a quick intuitive mark to being a fixed digital representation. Silkscreen printing allows me

to systematically place the gestures onto the canvas and make multiple copies of the same marks however, this process of mark making allows for a suggestion of the human hand. This alluding to the human hand is dependent upon a number of factors in the construction of the paintings – wet on wet, consistency of the paint, the weave of the screen, oil versus acrylic paint and the under-painting – all affect the outcome of that gesture.

The order in which I use screen-printing or brush to make marks on the canvas is varied. For example, in many of the paintings, I print directly on areas that have been masked using tape. Once the reproduced gestures are printed onto the tape I begin to methodically map out the positive and negative space on the canvas through a reductive process of cutting. I use the silk-screened image as a template in the same way that one might use an overhead projector to project an image onto the canvas. However, the printing produces an immediate mark with precise detail rather than a labored tracing—as would result through the use of a projector. Furthermore, the printed marks directly translate the sensibility and aesthetics of the digital file that is different from the mark of the hand.



**(fig.5)** Nicholas Breton, studio works in progress, 2013.

The next step in my process consists of two methods that systematically structure my paintings. While both methods are used simultaneously on the canvas, they are divided by approach and concept. From a distance these gestures visually shift between reading as both positive shape and negative space. The first method has me removing all of the visual information that has been printed on the tape: This results in a gesture appearing through a reductive act—the removal of the tape. The second method uses an approach that results in an ambiguous relationship between the foreground and background marks and surface—the removal of tape around the outside of the printed gesture. This approach produces an inverted stencil that when painted produces a negative gesture. Once the masking process is complete I begin to pair the positive shapes and negative spaces and gestures together in relation to

what is already present on the under-painting. These choices then influence my subsequent colour selection and paint application methods.

My approach to colour consists of multiple ways of perceiving. A large amount of my colour theory and use of specific colour relationships has been developed by mixing colours on the palette and experimenting with colour combinations on the small serial works on Yupo paper. Throughout this process, my use of colour is directly related to the physical application of paint and my reacting to these associations. Once a desired colour combination is achieved on the smaller works, I begin to employ these combinations into the larger paintings.

The painting entitled *The Gesture and The Drip, 2013* (fig.6) is an example of how the gesture functions on the canvas. Each gesture and drip is a trace of a past mark. While these marks are grounded in an intuitive and quick impulse, this impulse is then reproduced and in this way is taken out of its original state. The drips and marks in this sense create compositions that oscillate between disorganized yet systematic patterning. There are a number of elements that reoccur during the process. The hard edges created through my masking process often create a visual cut between organic and inorganic colours and structures. These cuts also mimic the edges created in the screen printing techniques causing one to question which is a mark of the hand and which is a mediated mark. The drips adhere to the logic of gravity as they flow vertically down the canvas. The colour of the gestures and drips are paired with complementary values from the under-painting. These complementary pairs further the ambiguity between figure and ground relationships. As the eye moves across the canvas there is a constant shift

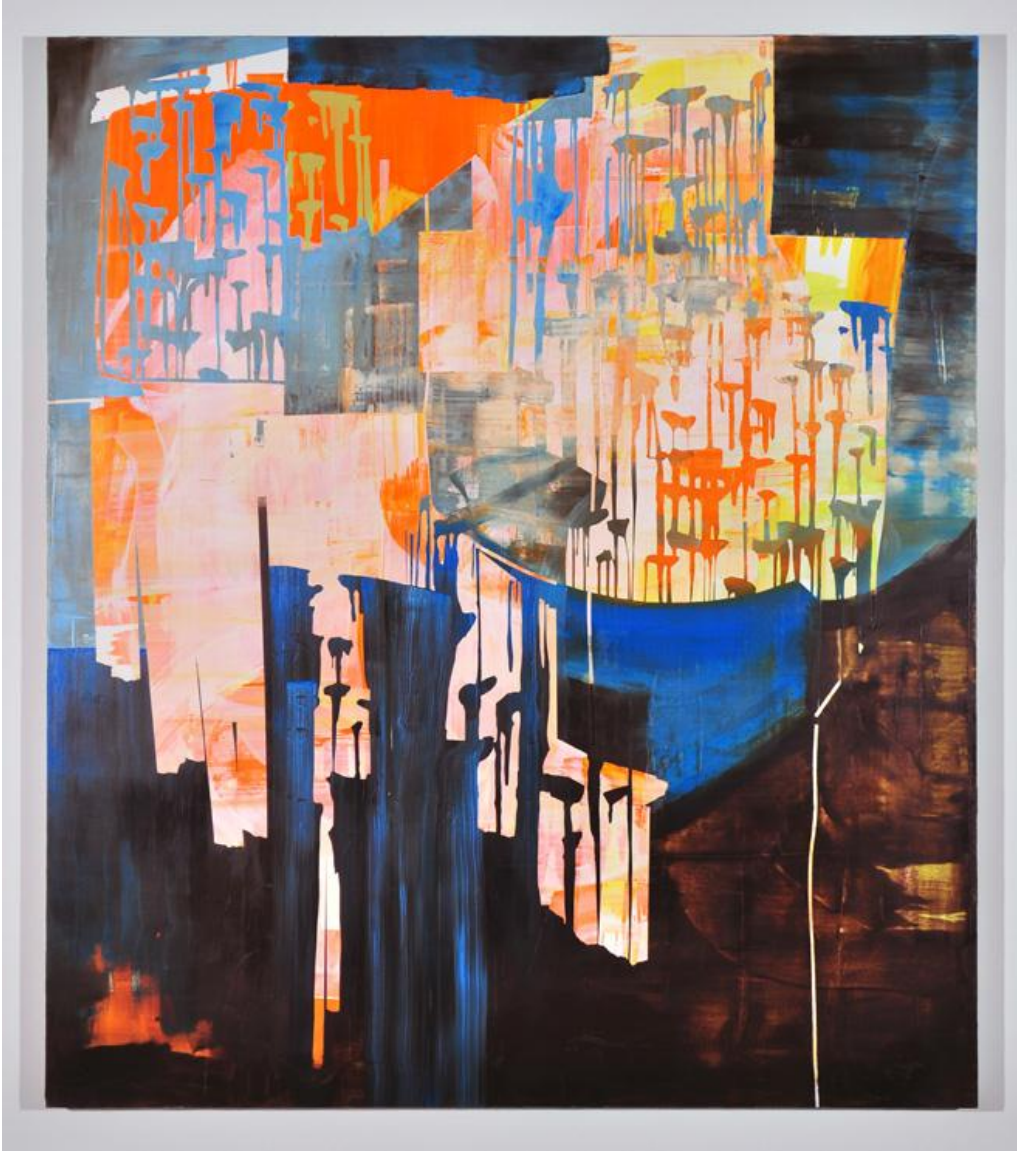
between the ground and the gesture, fracturing the cohesiveness of how one perceives the painting.

The ambiguity in the figure/ground relationship may seem like a simple device, however, there is more to this concept than simply the push and pull between positive and negative space. Mira Schor's essay *Figure/Ground* points to the difference between artists who are compelled to paint using an intuitive response to the act of seeing to those that follow the modernist ideal of reducing painting to its formal elements. With consideration to painting and *Figure/Ground* Schor states”

Between Figure/Ground, there is imperfection, there is air, not an over determined structure of perspectival space, or rigid dichotomy of positive and negative space, not the vacuumed vacant space of painting's end, but the “self-forgetful,” “boredom” of the area that glimmers around paint, sometimes the full wonder of the dual life of paint mark and illusion. (Schor 124) Painting is about creating a terrain in which paint can be perceived through the system of the eye, brain and hand that... flickers in and out of representation, as figure skims the ground, transmitting thought (Schor 124).

The paintings in *The Gesture and the Drip* are all composed on vertically orientated canvases. This format references the body and is designed to subvert the structure of the computer screen. The small and the large works function slightly differently: the smaller serial works produce an optical experience while the large works produce a bodily experience. The large works echo human physicality when viewed in the flesh, but when these works are converted into the digital format there is a considerable shift. When the small works are digitally documented they appear to be highly detailed: the proximity of the camera to the panel produces a better -





(fig.6) Nicholas Breton, *The Gesture and The Drip*, acrylic and oil on canvas, 71x62 inch. 2013.

image because more information is made visible. The large works, on the other hand, appear to become impaired: the distance of the camera is further back and therefore less detail is captured. This observation that occurred through the creation and documentation of my works has led me to consciously consider this shift as a viable departure point for painting. This shift has also influenced how I apply paint on the canvas and the structuring of my layering process.

As the paintings have progressed I have begun to emphasize the shift that occurs in photographic documentation through the materiality of my paintings. In the larger works the influence of the digital influences how I systematically organize the surface of the canvas. For example, *Static Sweep* (fig.7) the most recent painting in my thesis body of work, is composed of several different layers that cut between figure/ground relationships and encompass a relatively shallow spatial depth. Each gesture is the product of digitally reproduced marks that have been modified and printed multiple times on the canvas. High contrast and opposing colour combinations reflect the backlit screen of a computer monitor. The paint application is lean and for the most part pushed through a silk-screen. When the work is seen in the gallery, from a distance, appears to have been digitized; however, upon closer viewing the surface reveals details not visible in documentation.

## Conclusion

The shift toward a digital world is an unavoidable circumstance of contemporary life. While I am reluctant to fully embrace digital media, my paintings attempt to explore the digital as a departure point. I investigate how viewing images digitally changes our experience of painting and alters how they are made. Paintings that are viewed on the Internet are always reproductions and the original work is merely a trace in history. The digital format, because it exists in code and the arrangement of pixels on a screen, erases the direct physicality and materiality of the painted medium and leaves only a trace as it were. Photographic documentation encroaches on painting as artworks that occupy a dual existence in our digital age. The Internet provides a wide visibility to images of painting but undermine that experience. Canadian artist Jordan Broadworth states, “Every flesh and blood work spawns a pixilated and highly itinerate twin. How we read and interpret paintings has changed through the experience of viewing work on-line.”(Broadworth).

An aesthetic experience is coloured by a combination of our visual response to things in the world and how we interpret them. This perception often involves people, objects, events, the real or imaginary and how we place meaning on these “things”. The works in *The Gesture and the Drip* challenges the viewer’s perception while addressing the importance of experiencing and understanding works in the flesh. My paintings are characterized by the relationship of layering, time and the conflation of the printed gesture with an actual gesture. A driving force in this thesis work is the investigation of how the various ways of perceiving a painting

radically change our experience of that artwork. As this century progresses I predict this will impact visual consumption and more importantly, how we understand and interpret paintings.



**(fig.7)** Nicholas Breton, *Static Sweep*, acrylic and oil on canvas, 2013, 71 x 62 inch. 2013.



(fig.8) Nicholas Breton, *The Gesture and The Drip*, University of Waterloo Art Gallery, 2013.



**(fig.9)** Nicholas Breton, *The Gesture and The Drip*, University of Waterloo Art Gallery, 2013.

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