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Space Becomes a Question

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Space Becomes a Question

by

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Report

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Dedication

This report is dedicated to the memory of my uncle, Bill Breashears.

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This work would not have been possible without the support of many individuals, including but not limited to my parents, Lisa Breashears and Mike Johnston; my committee Chair Leslie Mutchler; Dan Sutherland; Jason Urban; and Richard Shiff, who taught me to make smart risks in my work.

Abstract

Space Becomes a Question

Annie May Johnston, MFA

The University of Texas at Austin, 2016

Supervisor: Leslie Mutchler

This Master's Report is a discussion of the ideas, research, and methods I have developed over the course of my three years of study at the University of Texas at Austin. As an artist I am interested in the mundane and the everyday. I use printmaking, drawing and painting in an attempt to visually describe our surrounding environment, specifically interior and exterior objects and spaces. My work ultimately attempts to explore the various ways that I inhabit and interact with the spaces that I occupy.

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INTRODUCTION

After reading Akiko Busch's Geography of Home, I realized a very unique situation concerning my family home. Until the housing crash in 2008, my father had been a developer and architect, and my mother, an interior designer. Before he started working on houses, my father was making things for the home; he owned a custom cabinetry business and made much of our furniture. My own childhood home, which was sold in 2008, over the course of 3 renovations, had been built up from a small single level home to one of three stories and many quirks. The only original room in the house was the tiny bathroom on the first floor. Busch describes and delves into the history of the rooms a larger house would contain, distinguishing between their public and private areas. Our home had always been public. Bedrooms were expected to be kept clean so that company could come and look at them. This tour would cover all the rooms, bathrooms, closets, the laundry room and basement. This was my parent's craft, their interest, and their work. The transformation and creation of the home exhibited their pride in the work that they did, and also served as good advertisements for smaller projects. They have since sold this home and moved into one that they both built before the market crashed. My mother picked out every tile, wall color, cabinet and appliance, she even welded a gate for the entrance. As a child, we would drive around the neighborhood looking at the architecture of homes being built, or those recently finished, and critique them. This activity still continues today. I find myself visiting the same streets with well-designed houses over and over again, and often times we will have to go around the block 2-3 times so my parents can have another look at a particularly interesting house when they come to visit Austin.

All that genetic talent of constructing a three-dimensional object has not been passed on to me. Instead, what has seemed to be present, is an interest in objects, and objects in space. In my most recent work, I re-create the interiors of my studio

apartment here in Austin through the use of color and pattern. Space is compressed, layered and abstracted through skewed perspective, pattern, as well as collage and layering. Mental mapping, psychogeography, as well as everyday and interior objects have culminated in my most recent body of work.

PSYCHOGEOGRAPHY

My interest in the ordinary stems from my connections with mapping and the psychogeography of the city. Psychogeography: in broad terms, it combines exactly what it defines, psychology and geography. This movement, born from Guy Debord, the Lettrist Group, and Situationist International tries to transform the appreciation of urban life, and is an attempt at reporting or describing the effect of place on emotions and behavior. Psychogeography has been used in political strategy, literary movements, explorations of local history, and avant-garde ways of life, and though it has evolved over time there are a few aspects that have remained consistent. Psychogeographers share a fascination with the everyday, and the belief that modern urban life is mysterious and worth exploring. Walking is one of those consistent aspects of psychogeography; the wanderer, the stroller, or the flâneur can venture through forgotten routes, challenging the city planning and the “official” representation of the city. With roots in the activities of the Dadaists and the surrealists, there is also often an ironic humor or sense of provocation and trickery or playfulness that accompanies a flâneur’s reporting of his environment.¹

“What’s really going on, what we’re experiencing, the rest, all the rest, where is it? How should we take account of, question, describe what happens every day and recurs every day: the banal, the quotidian, the obvious, the common, the ordinary, the infraordinary, the background noise, the habitual?... It matters little

¹ Coverley, Merlin. *Psychogeography*. Harpenden: Pocket Essentials, 2006. Print.

to me that these questions should be fragmentary, barely indicative of a method, at most of a project. It matters a lot to me that they should seem trivial and futile: that's exactly what makes them just as essential, if not more so, as all the other questions by which we've tried in vain to lay hold on our truth."

George Perec, *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*²

Psychogeography today is content with the documentation of the everyday; it is no longer heavily involved in political or literary movements. Living in an apartment building in Austin, I find that I miss being able to step out of my residence and feel the energy and life of a city, a city where cars dominate and we are so disconnected from each other. The rise of technology and our obsessive involvement with our smartphones and ourselves has also brought about a change in contemporary psychogeography. Heads bent over blue rectangles, we trod through our environment with an air of disconnect, as we try so hard to connect with those who also live in similarly-shaped rectangles. Today in urban spaces, cars are given the upper hand. Highways, boulevards, and streets dominate our cities, making walking as a means of travel sometimes dangerous. Walking is now seen as an "alternative" or rebellious means of transportation as we have adopted subways, cars, and buses to suit our everyday uses. Will Self recently (2012) wrote an article for the Guardian, *Walking is Political*, in which he describes a woman just off the tube who "like a sufferer from psychosis, [her] conception of reality radically diverges from her environment... her perception of distance is distorted while her ability to negotiate her environment is dependent on systems external to her own mind that, for all their technical efficacy, are as opaque to her as the magical as the magical rituals of a shaman." (Sinclair, pg. 33). For a time, it seemed that technology would bring a greater interest in our environments, and it has to some extent. Our technological society has the ability to visit other countries in photographs and videos and receive news updates almost instantaneously from across the globe. It does seem that people are taking a great many

² Perec, Georges. *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*. Trans. John Sturrock. London: Penguin, 1997. 209-211. Print.

more photos of their meals, drinks, and furniture (a few of the many “everyday” items) but the audience is other social-media-using “friends” and there is little more than a glance or a like on the receiving end.



Figure 1: *Around the Center*, lithographic print on paper, pastel, 20” x 32”, 2014

The mapping that I made in the Spring of 2014 allowed me to commute mentally to Paris, where I lived and worked for a time, feeling connected to a bustling city without actually being there, allowing me to experience the psychogeography of my memory. While living there, my navigation of the city was mostly internal as I did not have a smartphone; but it also meant that I was not forced into walking the blue line that Google Maps would calculate for me, telling me the easiest way to get from A to B. I also discovered that all the maps conveniently located outside the exit from the metro were liars. These maps served as my only reference when trying to meet up with new acquaintances. I was constantly misguided by overemphasized streets or hidden lanes; so I was never sure if the “second left and third right” was actually going to get me there.

Just as someone has decided on which information should be put in or left out in reference maps, I determined the hierarchy of the information in my mapping of the Place de la Bastille, and invented a complicated narrative about the way that my memory recreates the space. My map was constructed, painted, printed and drawn in different perspectives, allowing for a synchronous experience of the map as a whole, or diachronically by focusing on certain areas and following paths.

The colors link to my memories; they are dull, foggy and lack vibrance so I use a palette that involves shades of grey. Some of the greatest and most advanced maps ever made were created on walls; but these rarely lasted for long. They were painted over, destroyed by light, heat or water, or removed completely to put the space to new uses. During neoclassical times, maps were deemed unnecessary unless they gave the viewer accurate geographical depictions. These maps became useless as they often were so big that they had no practical use, and the viewer could only ascertain the details at eye level.³ I feel a connection to these maps in my own work as they exist for a short time and are painted over to allow others to use a shared space.

³ Barber, Peter, and Tom Harper. *Magnificent Maps: Power, Propaganda and Art*. London: British Library, 2010. Print.



Figure 2: *Map #4*, installation of acrylic and ink on walls, 8' x 10', 2014

Transparency and depth were important: I wanted to be able to see through to previous layers, and have them inform and transform one another based on their placement. These layers additionally created different spatial perspectives, generating moments of aerial views or a ground perspective depending on the focus. I found that translucency gave access to the memory of a site, and the history that lies there, whether embedded in my own memory or the generational memories that exist in the space.

Within my maps the new reality is completely useless to the viewer as a diagrammatic reference but essential to one's understanding of my personal view of the space and perceived importance of physical markers, such as buildings and streets. I started drawing objects that live in the prints and in the map, objects that further link the viewer to my memory, and served as a kind of depressingly lighthearted poetry of the space. I find that photographer Frank Gohlke writes best

about why these details are so important, “everything in a landscape has meaning... each thing has its own discrete significance, but that every element of a landscape participates in many networks of meaning, so that asking a simple question about a common object can open up the human history of an entire region.”⁴

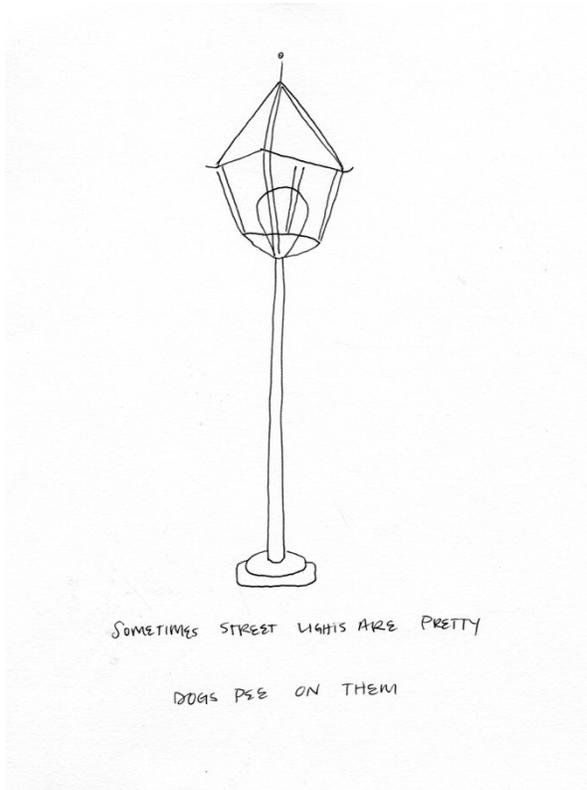


Figure 3: *Street Lights*, ink on paper, 15” x 11”, 2014



Figure 4: *Trash Day*, ink on paper, 15” x 11”, 2014

⁴ Gohlke, Frank, and John C. Hudson. *Measure of Emptiness: Grain Elevators in the American Landscape*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1992. 140. Print.

MUNDANE OBJECTS

Drawings of everyday objects became the main focus in my next body of work. I began to compile drawings of objects as I walked through the cities that I was currently experiencing. My walks were aimless, without plan or direction; they held only one goal, to look. Although I imagine that I gave my whole environment the same level of attention, the objects that I looked at most closely were the items that others may consider banal, boring, everyday, or trash. I drew the objects I found standing up with a pen, one hand holding the small sketchbook while the other skimmed swiftly over the page - capturing only the most necessary and basic information. Mass was generally suggested with line rather than shadow. As I translated the objects from the world around me, they became animated and I began to see how I interacted in the world.

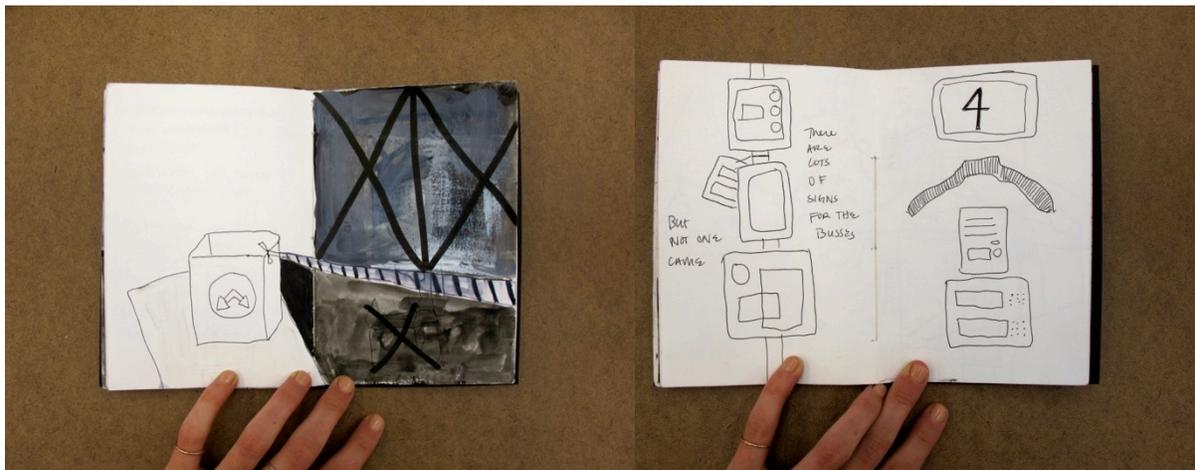


Figure 5: Pages from artist book, *In the City*, ink and watercolor on paper, 5" x 9", 2014

Foreign: coming in or introduced from the outside. I examined this definition when considering my place in the environments I walked through. Having moved ten times in the past eight years, I am rarely in a setting where I am “inside”, at home or familiar with my surroundings. This feeling generated not a fearful or

uncomfortable feeling; rather it promoted curiosity and detailed observation of relationships and form.



Figure 6: Installation shot, *Coming in or introduced from outside*, ink and acrylic on canvas, 8' x 10', 2015

After amassing a collection of drawings, some were then re-translated into “life-size”, the scale that they existed when I encountered them. Paired with large markers, I used my arm to draw the figures at the same speed, causing them to become further distorted due to the quickness and scale. Canvas provides a surface linked to utility and protection like sails and drop cloths, domestic objects; bags, pillows, rugs, curtains, tablecloths, and to the fine art world, which usually exist as a surface for paintings. Each state carries varying level of preciousness and care, and thus allows the viewer to project even more extensive layers of information upon the object’s uses, form or context. Within the studio the objects were repositioned, reformed and stacked. Their abstract forms allowed for a playfulness, which made it

easy for me to move and change the drawings on a daily basis and to keep them open to various possibilities. Each interpretation was different, and each interpretation was correct. They existed in the space between the familiar and the disconnected, all relating to the places that we call foreign.

INTERIOR OBJECTS

While at a residency at the Vermont Studio Center I continued to reflect upon materialism and my own attachment or nonattachment to objects I own. I started by creating trace monotypes of my plants and daily-use plastic items. A trash can, a fan, a water bottle, a chair, and a lamp are among the items. As I was making, I was removed temporally from my apartment, and I was thinking about what I would keep, or what I would throw away as I moved on from my apartment in Austin.



Figure 7: *Rosemary and Chair*, trace monotype on drop cloth, each 26" x 19", 2015

This mental cataloging forced me to consider how I interacted with my objects, how they represented me as a person, and in what state they would exist after they were kept or discarded.

Both objects were painted with the same care and had the same mark, although the colors used were important; the plastic items revolve around a white/grey palette with hints of color, almost like ghost of the object. Plastic is made from petroleum, a substance that is created in the earth through the fossilization of plant life. The white palette I use for the plastic items links to their removal and distance from the colorful plant life that they came from, but they are also non-biodegradable, so white links to the color of bones, or what we leave behind. They are left floating on unstretched pieces of dropcloth, and allow for contemplation of the object, “we might define genuinely beautiful objects as those endowed with sufficient innate assets to withstand our positive or negative projections. They embody good qualities instead of simply remind us of them”⁵ This lack of environment or context is what drove me to create my most recent multi-layered paintings, as I wanted to explore how these positive or negative projections could be influenced by placing them in my apartment, and if they, in turn, would affect the space they were in.

WALLPAPER

Although these objects were the original impetus for my exploration of pattern and space, I no longer need them as a trigger to create my environments. Plants remain an aspect of focus, either as objects within the paintings or as decorative elements in the wallpaper. Houseplants also relate to our human desire to control nature. As captives in our home they completely rely on us for water, sun exposure and

⁵ De Botton, Alain. *The Architecture of Happiness*. New York: Pantheon, 2006. 96-97. Print.

nutrients. Within wallpaper there is also that sense of wanting to control our natural environment. I link the patterns in floral wallpaper to expertly crafted gardens in their rows and circles and to our desire to be involved in our natural environment, but from a safe and warm location. One classic example of an ordered yet maximalist natural environment depicted in wallpaper form is the banana leaf pattern Martinique, created by Don Loper in 1942 for the Beverly Hills Hotel.⁶ Designers have continued to use this pattern for many aspects of the room, allowing us to enjoy a bathroom while enveloped by a tropical environment, without any of the bugs.



Figure 8: Martinique wallpaper, room by 4 Corners International Design Concepts

Artists have designed wallpaper for some time (Carle Vernet, Thomas Couture, Raoul Dufy, Maurice Denis, Dagobert Peche, Henri Matisse, Joan Miro, Alexander

⁶ Bana, Fabrice. "GOING BANANAS: THE BRAZILLANCE & MARTINIQUE WALLPAPERS." *Agentofstyle*. N.p., 23 May 2013. Web. 30 Nov. 2015.

Calder, among others) and wallpaper was seen during the Art Nouveau period as fusing the fine and decorative arts. This interest in wallpaper diminished with the rise of modernist architecture and the disdain for all things ornamental; when writing about a Jackson Pollock show, Clement Greenberg said that amateurs would see Pollock's work as "nothing but wallpaper". As the Duchampian ready-mades began to flourish in the 60s, we see a re-emergence in pattern and design. In 1966 Andy Warhol made his Cow Wallpaper, and the Pattern and Design (1970s and 80s) group embraced pattern and the wall as an element on which to directly work.⁷ When working directly with the wall, the architecture in a sense, becomes the frame. "Large walls are not necessarily needed to present them [wallpaper]: as soon as a panel is hung in a small or narrow room, it creates an illusion of depth and expands the sense of space. And if a room lacks luminosity, these papers introduce light."⁸ More recently, the Fabric Workshop and Museum teamed up with the Rhode Island School of Design and put forward *On the Wall: Wallpaper and Tableau*. This exhibition showcased numerous artists with a goal to challenge "the traditional role of wallpaper as background by presenting tableaus that integrate artists' wallpaper designs with artist-designed furniture, sculpture and artwork."⁹

This disruption of space through patterning that artists employ has also been used outside of the interior; during WWI Norman Wilkinson devised a system of patterns

⁷ Tannenbaum, Judith, 1944-. *On the Wall: Contemporary Wallpaper*. Providence, R.I.: Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, 2003. 11-22. Print.

⁸ Teynac, Françoise, Pierre Nolot, and Jean-Denis Vivien. *Wallpaper, a History*. New York: Rizzoli, 1982. 233. Print.

⁹ "On the Wall: Wallpaper and Tableau." *On the Wall: Wallpaper and Tableau*. The Fabric Workshop and Museum, n.d. Web. 30 Nov. 2015.

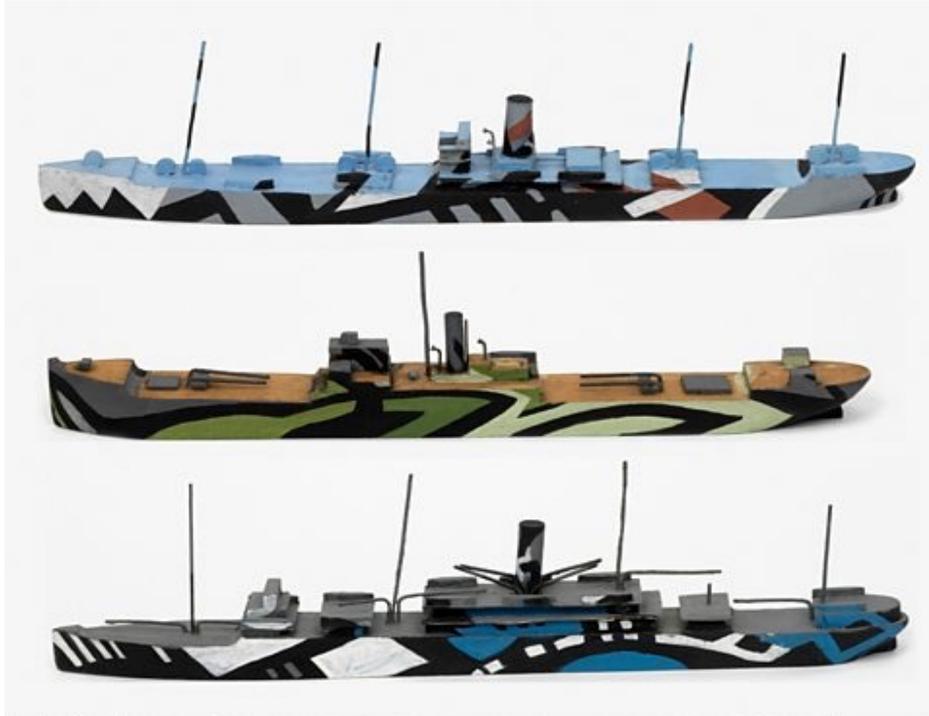


Figure 9: Dazzle camouflage schemes on WW1 ships (© IWM)

called dazzle camouflage that were applied to ships. The bold shapes and colors were meant to confuse those seeking to destroy the ship rather than to disguise it. As a U-boat commander would have only seconds to assess the direction and speed of the vessel they were targeting, the patterning distorted the form of the ship making it difficult to accurately target.¹⁰

Recently, I have been combining my work with hand printed wallpaper. Wallpaper, as it is defined in the realm of daily life, becomes a pejorative term to depict something that is predictable, repetitive, or occupies the background. Yet as I read about the history

¹⁰ "How Did an Artist Help Britain Fight the War at Sea?" IWonder. BBC, n.d. Web. 30 Nov. 2015.

of patterns, people were once cautioned about which pattern to choose for the walls as an incorrect one could cause restlessness or even crazed states of mind.¹¹



Figure 10: Installation view at the Visual Arts Center exhibition *milkvoice*, 2016

I use silkscreen and repeat pattern on painted Tyvek to create an image that can interact with a work that sits on top. The pattern centers on the hallway leading into my apartment. As the pattern is stacked and printed, it echoes the many hallways, doors and floors of a large building and I think about the conformity, isolation and compression felt while living in that space. Wallpaper evokes the domestic space, yet the image shows the public space before you enter my studio.

¹¹ Saunders, Gill, Dominique Heyse-Moore, and Trevor Keeble. *Walls Are Talking: Wallpaper, Art and Culture*. Manchester: U of Manchester, Whitworth Art Gallery, 2010. Print.



Figure 11: *Drain*, oil and acrylic on canvas, 48" x 36", 2016, installed on silk screened repeat pattern on Tyvek, 2016

INTERIOR SPACES

As in my previous work, the importance of creation through memory remains important. The lack of reference photos enables a de-cluttering of random objects from my interior spaces, but then a re-cluttering of the space using pattern and skewed perspective. This aspect is important because I find that a space can have the feeling of habitation with a suggestion of a rug or a chair, and does not need the detritus that we produce to signal a room is being lived-in. When I was drawing

objects from life I found my focus to be much more on capturing the general form of as well as a disinterest in its color, rather than placing it in an environment. This removal of myself temporally engages my memory, and links the renderings of my objects to a more personal interpretation not only in form but also in the way I choose color. I am not as interested in the literalness of an object, rather how it interacts with the rest of the pictorial field, in this case the interiors.

I draw inspiration from many different historical periods. I appreciate the forceful colors and skewed horizon lines of Indian miniature paintings and the flattening of space that 17th and 18th century Chinese scrolls and panels utilize. The traditional woodblock carvings in the 1600s and 1700s that created wallpaper and influenced the advancement of the printing press, as well as William Morris's work as a designer, craftsman, and wallpaper designer in the 1800's influence my thoughts on how to construct my own patterns. The interiors of Bonnard, Vuillard, Matisse and Braque ask me to consider every aspect of my work and whose paintings and drawings teach me how to create space (and how to paint). Feminism played an important role in the Pattern and Design group that started in the 1970s, and their work helps me consider my place in decoration. And I am inextricably linked to the design and decoration of interior spaces through my mother, who made it her profession for many years.

The sense of control that we try and assert over nature in wallpaper is undermined by my color choices and its links to maximalism. There is a connection between the maximalism I use in my paintings and the maximalism writers employ as they "gather, represent, and reform the time's excesses into fictions that exceed the time's literary conventions and thereby master the time, the methods of fiction, and

the reader".¹² Time is an important aspect within these layers. Does a moment that is covered become less important or more important? The layered paintings ask to be considered as a whole piece, and as separate moments. Perhaps the mundane everyday items in the paintings are not entirely inert. I like to think that there is a suggestion of a space in flux; there is a presence and an absence, a partially opened door as a portal for ingress or egress, the absence of humans but also the presence of their activities in a pulled-out chair.



Figure 12: *Couch and Chairs*, oil and acrylic on layered canvas, 71" x 64", 2016

¹² LeClair, Tom. *The Art of Excess: Mastery in Contemporary American Fiction*. Urbana: U of Illinois, 1989. 1. Print.

My color choices often stem from a reaction to the ground that I paint. Through the use of india ink mixed with bright acrylic paint I create a more “natural” or acceptable interior color as a ground, and my secondary move is that of a patterned complementary color. This warm-cool layered progression has remained important in my work, a tool that I link to my printmaking background. The print medium relies on a cultivated knowledge of overlapping color to create space and density. Thin layers of transparent color, mis-registration, chunky drawn marks paired with smooth ones further link to these techniques. I also think of the tactics that writers use “To create informational density, the novelists use multilayered, digressive, and looping structures rather than linear ones.”¹³

Pattern has the ability to flatten an object or a space. Three different kinds of pattern are employed; the stencil, free-handed pattern and commercial textiles. The commercial textiles are decorative themselves, but they are also used to construct decorative items within the work like tiles, rugs and pillows. The patterns hold weight, the accumulation of time, whether it is the time in one space or many spaces. The work leans heavily towards maximalism; a way of making that can question the distinction between form and space as well as the logic of construction. With the layers of pattern the furniture becomes secondary to the history of the room. I strive for a feeling of alienation in the space, a feeling of being overwhelmed, but not confused. The periphery is more important than in a normal interior setting, it is where I decide on the direction of the floor, the slant and distance of the wall and ceiling, or if there is a view into the additional rooms.

¹³ LeClair, Tom. *The Art of Excess: Mastery in Contemporary American Fiction*. Urbana: U of Illinois, 1989. 15. Print.



Figure 13: *Eat in Bed*, oil and acrylic on layered canvas, painted wall, 8' x 8', 2016

In this recent work, collage is used typically in some ways, as decorative elements that are fully glued and incorporated into the piece, while others are breaking up or obscuring the image that was there before. Large parts hang loosely, giving a glimpse of the painting or image being obscured. The collage perpetuates the clash of imagery and spaces and asks questions about what is seamless vs. inharmonious. Unstretched canvas allows for infinite expansion. When I begin I am never sure what size the piece will be, or how many collaged and hanging layers it needs. I am

interested in adjusting the periphery of the painting. The work hangs loose and unstretched, linking them to tapestries or rugs and allows them a mobility.

The point-of-view simultaneously encompasses two perceptions; the first could be a fly, or a surveillance camera on high with a focus on the floor, while the second could be that of an infant noticing the towering walls. The hallways, doorways and mirrors hold a dream-like quality; they are present, but they are impossible to operate; they make the room more complicated and unsettling than before.

...

I would like there to exist places that are stable, unmoving, intangible, untouched and almost untouchable, unchanging, deep-rooted; places that might be points of reference, of departure of origin... Such places don't exist, and it's because they don't exist that space becomes a question, ceases to be self-evident, ceases to be incorporated, ceases to be appropriated. Space is a doubt: I have constantly to mark it, to designate it. It's never mine, never given me, I have to conquer it. My spaces are fragile: time is going to wear them away, to destroy them. Nothing will any longer resemble what was, my memories will betray me, oblivion will infiltrate my memory... Space melts like sand running through one's fingers. Time bears it away and leaves me only shapeless shreds.

George Perec, *Species of Spaces and other Pieces*¹⁴

¹⁴ Perec, Georges. *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*. Trans. John Sturrock. London: Penguin, 1997. 91. Print.

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Vita

Annie May Johnston was born in Carmel, California and raised in Denver, Colorado. In 2010 Johnston received her BA in Psychology and Classics from The University of Colorado, Boulder, and subsequently moved to Los Angeles, California; Paris, France; and New York, New York. Johnston has exhibited nationally and internationally and in 2015 was a resident at the Vermont Studio Center. Johnston received her MFA from the University of Texas at Austin in 2016.

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