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The Paint Gap

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The Paint Gap

by

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Report

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May, 2010

Dedication

For my mother, my father, and my brother.

Acknowledgments

I would like to dedicate these following pages to Sarah Canright, Melissa Miller, Bradley Petersen, Michael Ray Charles, and Richard Jordan. I am indebted to them all for their support, humor, and candor.

May, 2010

Abstract

The Paint Gap

Samuel Alcibiades Dahl, MFA

The University of Texas at Austin, 2010

Supervisor: Sarah Canright

Underlying all my work is a tension between the painter and the builder. I love to paint. I love the lie inherent in paint: that it can make a picture plane masquerade as light, space, or recognizable place with recognizable figuration. I love how paint—particularly oil paint—can rest in gloppy piles, how it can drip, splatter, spread, or how it can squeeze out of paint tubes in long, stringy beads. I love how paint changes how we see an interior space or a three-dimensional form. Yet I also love building things—usually out of wood—measuring and cutting, fastening things together—all to serve a function or solve a problem. In every studio I have had, there has always been an arms race between my fine art supplies and my tools. My work during my three years at the Department of Art and Art History at the University of Texas at Austin has undergone some dramatic changes. In large part this paper will elaborate and evaluate the trajectory of these changes. Yet, in spite of these changes, the competing impulses to paint and to build have remained constant. This report will leave unanswered the question whether these two impulses can or should be reconciled, kept separate, or whether one should be sacrificed in favor of the other. The artist writing this report does not know at this point in time, and cannot hope to answer this question without making more work in a new

context. This report instead will reveal how I arrived at the work I am making at the time of writing this report, and why I regard this new body of work as being about the “paint gap.” I define the “paint gap” as the distinction—mild or strong—between paint itself and the object or surface upon which paint is applied.

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SHAPED PAINTING THEN AND NOW

Early on, before I even sought an MFA, I stopped painting on the rectangle. My subject matter was still-life objects. The decision to paint upon a non-rectangular surface was perhaps made naively, for it was initially driven by my subject matter and image composition alone, not specifically by formal concerns with paint itself and its relation to the form of the support. The arrangement of these objects, the composition they created, determined the shape and contour of the painting.¹ Rather than merely occupy a painted space, I wanted my images of objects to be a space. Divorced from context—a background I regarded as unnecessary—the images and shapes of these objects formed their own context. Each shaped painting of objects resting upon their own mirrored images was its own self-contained world. The symmetry of the composition and the lack of four ninety-degree corners gave the image an added emphasis.

If the shaped painting, *“bottoms up,”* is representative of the work and thinking I was doing upon entering UT’s MFA program, then *“two terrains”* and *“collision”* represent the direction my work and thinking are pursuing upon concluding the program. They stand as bookends to this particular period in my development as an artist. What do these distinctly different works have in common? What editing had to occur in my process and subject matter to lead me to make *“two terrains”* and *“collision”*?

To answer these questions, it is worth listing the essential elements of the work I made prior to this MFA program, such as *“bottoms up,”* in order to understand how my

¹ It is pertinent to note that I started painting on non-rectangular surfaces in 2003, but these were still “frames,” some triangles, trapezoids, and other irregular quadrilaterals. By 2005, my images were becoming the space rather than merely occupying it. It was in 2006 that becoming the space was fully achieved, when I had image rest upon mirrored image.

work and process have changed in the past two-and-a-half years. These elements include:

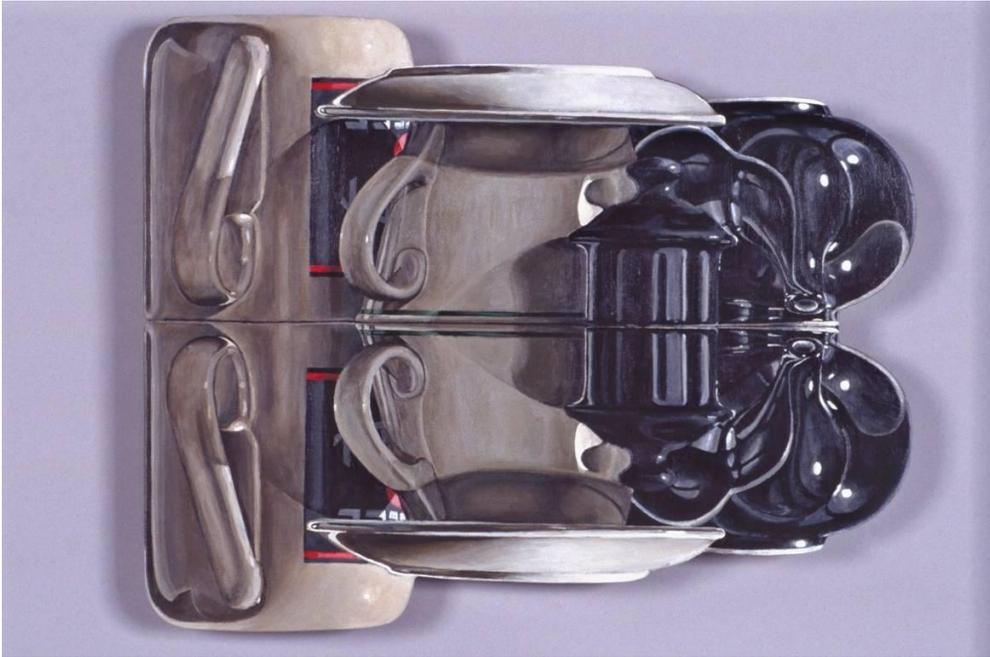


Illustration 1: “bottoms up” 2006

1. Thin application of acrylic paint, rendered image.
2. Symmetry; horizon line = line of symmetry by which the images of objects “rest” upon their mirror images. Line of symmetry therefore transforms the objects into a new, combined form of image and mirror image.
3. Objects were chosen by very subjective criteria: “personality” or by some other anthropomorphic label. Social connotations of objects ignored. Objects were on some level figures to this artist’s eye.
4. Images of recognizable objects stripped of all context but the one they create in relation to one another, floating on a blank white wall.

5. Shape of the support determined by the contour of the image of the objects.
6. Single light source, dramatic lighting. (Painted shadows do not correspond with shadow cast by the support.)
7. $\frac{3}{4}$ inch-thick support (Medium Density Fiberboard or MDF) set off of the wall, so that the image casts a shadow upon the wall.
8. Two stage process: 1) determine image and shape with drawing and photography, and then cut board to required shape and sand/round/refine edge; 2) prime with gesso and then paint upon board. No cutting or shaping of board occurs after painting has begun.

The bodies of work I have produced in the past two-and-a-half years correlate with the evolution of this list as its elements changed or were discarded altogether.



Illustration 2: “collision” 2010

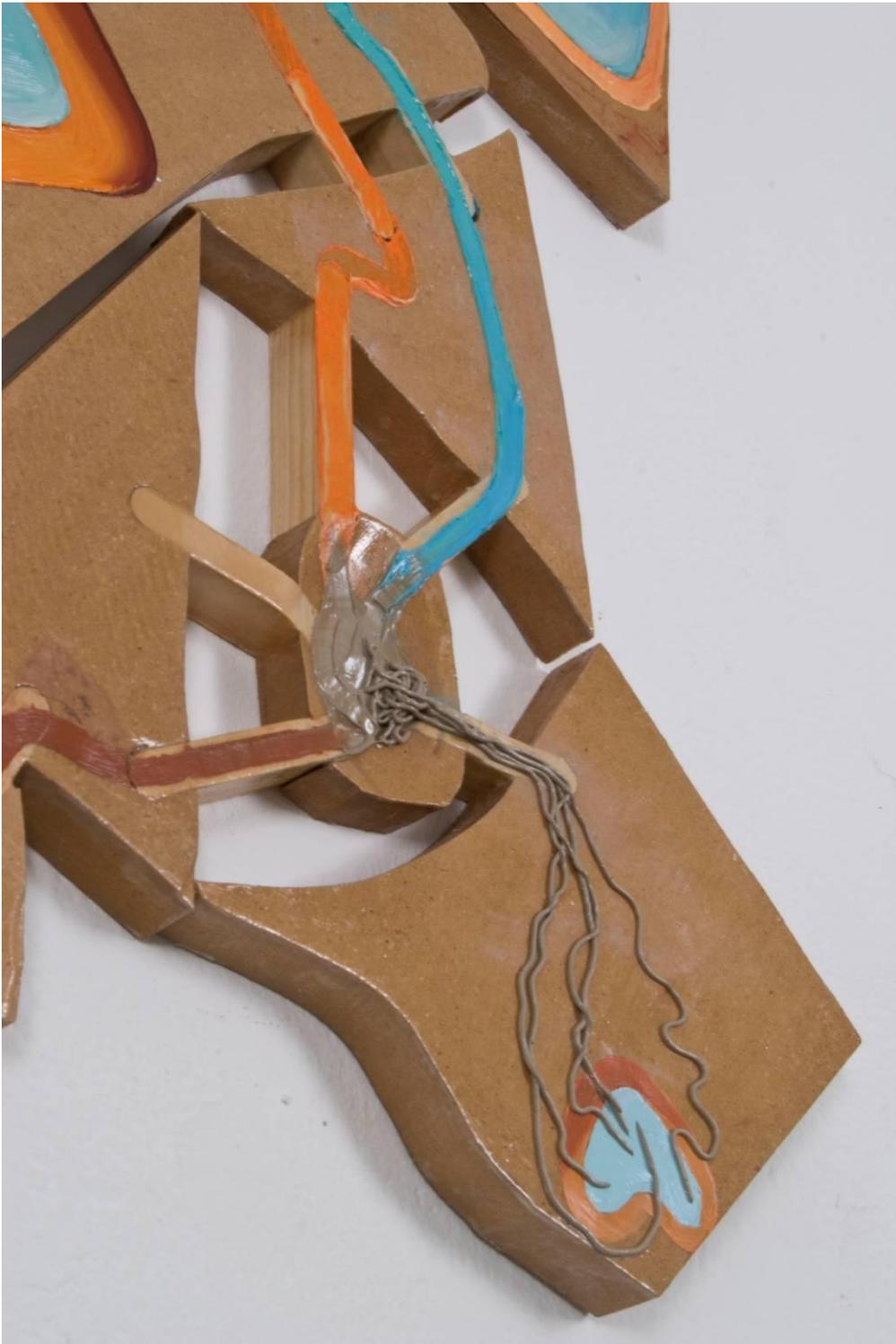


Illustration 3: "collision" (detail) 2010



Illustration 4: "two terrains" 2010



Illustration 5: “two terrains” (detail) 2010

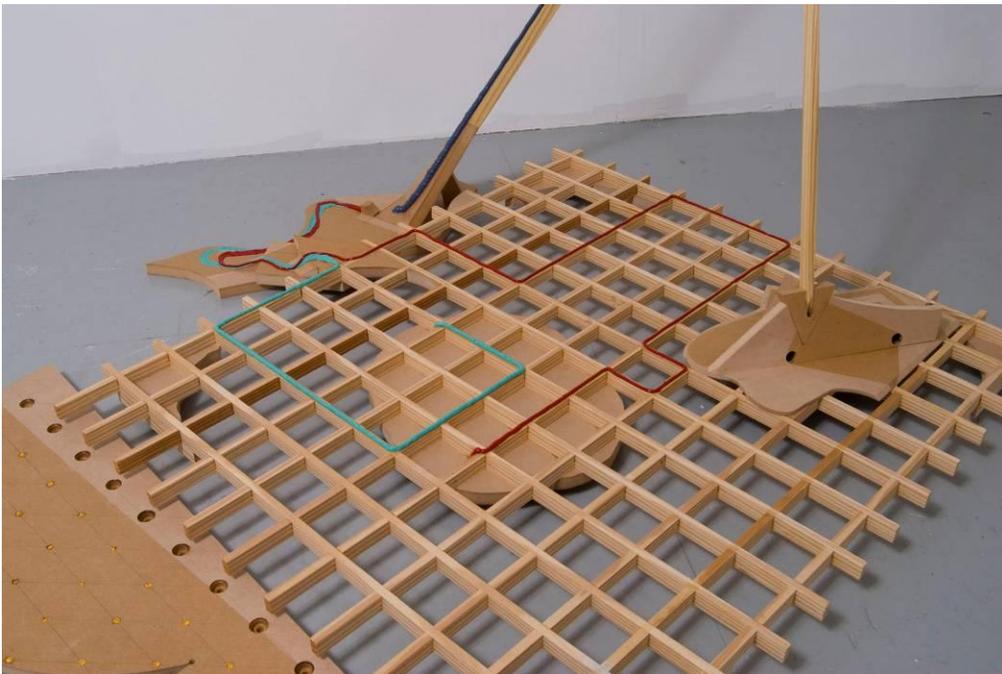


Illustration 6: “two terrains” (detail) 2010

THE CHANGES IN MY WORK AND PROCESS

My paint medium changed. I started working with oil paint again,² and because oil paint takes longer to dry, it can be moved around and shaped more easily on the paint surface than acrylic paint. It is more vibrant in color than acrylic paint, and it can be mixed more readily. Learning to master oil paint again, I began to question and reevaluate my impulses to render an image. I started to think about paint itself in a way I never had before. Because acrylic paint can dry so quickly, I never felt inspired to build paint up thickly or to be very expressive with it, or to spend a lot of time mixing a more nuanced palette of colors. My return to oil paint forced me to rethink *everything* about painting including, why.

Background—a painted environment—returned to my paintings and has remained throughout most of my work thus far.

Symmetry was one of the first critical elements on this list to be discarded. It had occurred to me that more than one line of symmetry could occur in a shaped image, which would make the image kaleidoscopic. Yet, as is evident in “*dismantle*,” fracturing an image in such a manner proved too predictable, like a geometry proof laboriously rendered in acrylic paint.

I still wished to make shaped imagery. Having dispensed with lines of symmetry, I still remained interested in what a line of symmetry had succinctly done simultaneously: fracture an image, *and* combine recognizable objects into new forms. I started taping, tying, screwing, or gluing together disparate objects to make forms that were vaguely figurative [Illustration 8]. Such still-life homunculi were initially the painting references

² My studio from 2002 until 2007 was a magnificent space in an 18th-century grist mill, but effective ventilation was impossible without major renovation that my landlord was unwilling to undertake, so I was forced to switch from oils to acrylics for the duration.

they were intended to be for “brick,” “light,” “wires,” and “switch,” but I eventually realized that they were also works in their own right.



Illustration 7: “dismantle” 2008



Illustration 8: assorted “still-life homunculi” 2008



Illustration 9: "brick" 2008



Illustration 10: "light" 2008



Illustration 11: “switch” 2008



Illustration 12: "wires" 2008



Illustration 13: Egg Cartons I 2008
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Rather than depict fracturing in the image, I chose literally to fracture the surface of the painting support and have a painted image span an assortment of shaped boards arranged together on the wall, with parts of the wall, and even the many nails that supported the boards upon the wall, being a part of the composition. The shapes of the painted boards that make up “*brick*” and “*light*” are silhouettes of the still-life homunculi or the objects that made up the homunculi within each painting. Departing from the still-life homunculi, the shaped boards of *Egg Cartons I* are the silhouettes of eggshells containing an image of egg cartons. “*Switch*” and “*wires*” do not have so literal an association between the shape of the boards and the subject matter, but the fracturing effect of the boards is more aggressive. In “*light*,” *Egg Cartons I*, “*switch*,” and “*wires*,” I painted the sides of the boards with neon acrylic colors, so that color shadows could be cast onto the wall between and around the boards, and so that portions of the wall could be integrated more into the composition of each piece as a whole.

When making work like “*brick*,” “*light*,” *Egg Cartons I*, “*switch*,” and “*wires*,” I had preserved my two-part process of building and preparing the boards before painting them. Paint never touched board before cutting, priming, and arranging upon the wall was complete. Band saw never touched board once it had a painted surface. Yet it is worth noting that I started spending more time with the first phase of this process—building—than I had with all my previous work. Rather than predetermine all the shapes of the boards and their final arrangement upon the wall, I began to compose more and more with a band saw and other wood-working tools. I thereby allowed the building process to inform all of these decisions about shape and arrangement. By contrast, the painting evolved in part in accord with how I, as the person applying the paint, reacted to the assortment of boards and gaps between boards. Nonetheless, there was always a

predetermined image—of objects—painted from observation and intended for the arrangement of boards.

This creative fumbling yielded a series of works that begged a number of questions: Why objects? Why still life? Why shaped boards? Why many shaped boards? Why paint? Why cut first and paint second, and not paint first and cut second? Editing was the only way to resolve most of these questions.

Ultimately, despite my peculiar affection for and attachment to inanimate objects, I had to concede that still life and objects were confusing matters in my work. It had been these objects that had inspired me to make shaped paintings in the first place, for purely compositional reasons having to do with their arrangement in an image. Now I had begun to question in my work the relation of a painted image—a painted space—to the form of the painting support itself. (I had not yet distilled this question even further: paint itself in relation to the form of its support.) Space, shaped painting, paint itself--these mattered more to me than still life and objects.

A new body of work emerged from my decision to drop objects from my content. I took an interest in negative spaces from the everyday, or the spaces in between things. These spaces are at the same time mysterious and banal, overlooked, and unstable--unstable since their contours and shape are utterly contingent upon the vantage point of the viewer and upon the static or moving forms around these spaces that give them definition. I obsessively started collecting negative spaces—drawing them from observation, lifting them out of some photograph with Photoshop, or defining them by scribbling over with pencil all the parts of a photograph I didn't want the viewer to see. I took a morbid interest in negative spaces in photographs of people in violent, perverse, or horrifying situations—the banal, strangely shaped negative space of a patch of grass or sidewalk bearing silent witness to a murder, a massacre, or a mating happening all around

it. These peculiar shapes in nature in the everyday at the every-moment were far weirder and far more interesting than any I could invent for myself. “*Russet/red between,*” “*blue/green between,*” “*diagonal between,*” and “*tile between*” were among the first new shaped paintings (on the same $\frac{3}{4}$ inch MDF board as before) I made about these negative spaces.



Illustration 14: “russet/red between” 2009



Illustration 16: “diagonal between” 2009



Illustration 17: “tile between” 2009

These works are as much paintings as objects mounted on the wall. At this point, I had begun painting more thickly with oil paint. Particularly with the smaller works such as “*russet/red between,*” “*blue/green between,*” and “*diagonal between,*” the paint application from the edge to the center of the shaped board takes on a crucial role.

The “between” series of paintings represented in Plates 12 through 15 are relatively flat painted spaces containing very little recognizable information about the negative space itself, much less the missing context of that negative space. The contours suggest some of the missing context—an outline of a human face or a human body—but the significance of the painting’s contour is easily overlooked. This means the work has two possible reads: a purely formal interpretation hinging upon a lack of recognition of the contour’s content, and/or a formal interpretation colored by the knowledge that the painted space is a representation whose external context will remain a mystery. To make work based upon such overlooked negative spaces, how ignorant should the viewer be of the missing context of these negative spaces? Is it important for the viewer to know the context around the shape, or is it enough for the viewer to know that there was a specific context about which they can only speculate? Or are the missing context and my own criteria for taking an interest in and selecting a negative space--or is even the negative space itself as a space derived from observation--beside the point?

To try to answer these questions, I made a few more pieces, but I chose instead to paint deeper, more recognizable painted spaces. “*Pool*” and “*red poppies between*” are the best examples of these particular paintings, and they were both the most instructive. They make clear with a recognizable painted space what is less clear in the flatter-space work, that there is a fundamental lack of integration between the painted shaped image and the form and “objectness” of the shaped support itself. That both had come from the same source—a negative shape/space I had observed—was not quite sufficient to unite

the two. Divorced from the original context, the shape and the image each acquired an equal emphasis that managed to cancel the other out.



Illustration 18: "pool" 2009



Illustration 19: “red poppies between” 2009

I therefore decided to stop painting from observation altogether. With this simple but rather fundamental decision, the very act of painting became an entirely new experience for me. No longer interpreting with paint a photo or an object or space that I could observe, I was now completely inventing with paint. I became more calculating with my color choices and with how I applied paint to a surface, even though I also became somewhat more awkward. I saw the shape and surface of the support itself with new eyes: it was no longer just a means to “support” a shaped image, but a surface of possibilities and challenges that paint could come to grips with.

This latest major editorial change to my process yielded two distinct paths my work has traveled that have occasionally intersected. To keep these two paths straight, I label one as “painted spaces given shape by what we ignore” and “terrains for paint.”

The work I dub “terrains for paint” is my primary concern now, but the other path deserves description.



Illustration 20: “a painter’s last thoughts aloft” 2010

“PAINTED SPACES GIVEN SHAPE BY WHAT WE IGNORE”

My thinking about painted images on rectangles has evolved since the beginning of my program. The latest expression for why I do not make rectangular painting is as follows: We live in a world that is conditioned by the very powerful, very functional convention of the rectangle, a form not found in nature. To see a painting that in some way ignores this convention is a relief, and a reminder that we do not see with four 90-

degree angles at the periphery of our vision. When we "look" at one thing, we ignore so much around it. What we ignore literally gives shape to what we are looking at. With this reasoning in the back of my mind I began to make work such as "*a painter's last thoughts aloft*" and "*stitch.*"



Illustration 21: "stitch" 2010

When I leave parts of the shaped support blank and unpainted, I see these moments as "stops" standing in for the parts we ignore when we see a space—the blurred figures in the foreground and middle ground when the movie camera brings into focus the

background. The edge of the support surrounded by the blank wall is now but the messy periphery of one's vision.

The blank spaces—the neutral, brown, uniformly-grained, unpainted parts of the MDF board—are obviously not ignored by the viewer, but are important compositional moments of “unpaintedness.” These moments punctuate the overall shape of the painting, they punctuate the deep landscape or more confined interior spaces I do paint, and they add a sense of mystery to the spaces I do paint. The colors around these unpainted moments determine optically whether these moments advance or recede in space. How much I leave unpainted is determined intuitively. How much I do paint is also determined intuitively. All these intuitive decisions are made in response to the board or boards I decide to start out with.



Illustration 22: “terrain” 2010

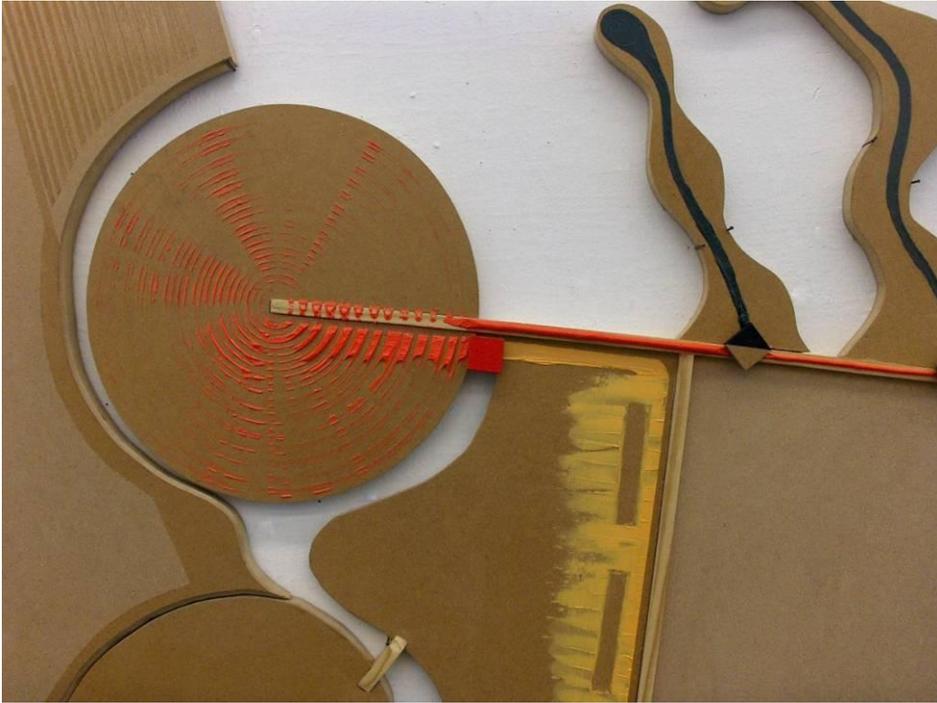


Illustration 23: "terrain" (detail) 2010

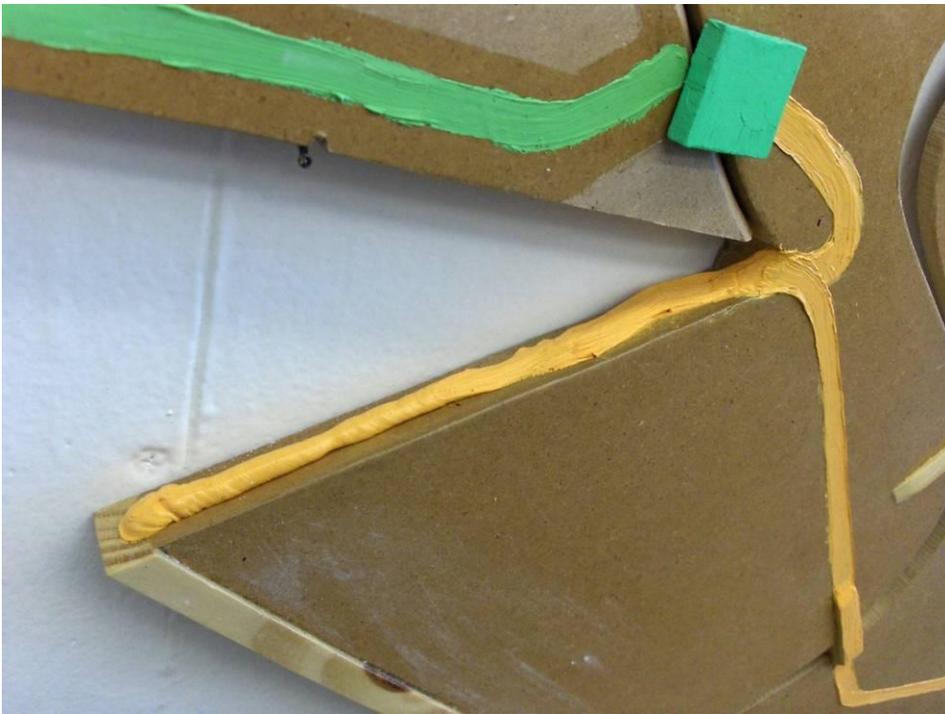


Illustration 24: "terrain" (detail) 2010
26

“TERRAINS FOR PAINT”

Unanticipated consequences can be wonderful things, for they can reveal exciting new paths to explore. The unanticipated consequence of my deciding not to paint from observation, but to let the shape of the MDF board tell me what to do with the paint, came in the form of a rather simple question I asked myself one day: “Can I make a bridge for a brushstroke?” I had been staring at two MDF-board-shapes I had cut, and at the space in between them (the wall), and I yearned to have a brushstroke of paint to jump the void between the two. It was then that I realized that paint *itself* could be imagined as an actor, a player with a personality reacting to the terrain, obstacles, pitfalls—the *environment* of the structure made out of MDF board. If the paint was an actor—a figure of sorts—that meant the shaped boards could act as model terrains. Indeed, viewers have in the past made associations with maps and landmasses when looking at my work. Not only did my view of paint change, but my view of the MDF boards had changed as well. There were new possibilities for how the paint could interact with the shaped board. Multiple levels, gouges (filled or unfilled with paint), paths taken, paths not taken, tunnels, and bridges blossomed in my mind. As I have in the past with objects, I assigned different personalities to colors, to brushstrokes (long and short), and to thick beads of paint straight from the tube or forced through a confectionary tip. Paint might be like an explorer or a hero that could renew or “solve” the problems of a problematic MDF shape.

In essence, I have brought *duration* into my work. By building a “bridge for a brushstroke” or creating an MDF terrain that dictates how and where I apply paint, the viewer is asked to view the paint as it is subject to *cause and effect* by the environment of the boards. Rather than just see lines of paint—painted with a brush or squeezed out in a long bead—of various colors standing in relation to each other all at once, I ask the viewer to *also* follow these lines with the eye and witness how they playfully change color or change shape when they enter a hole, cross a bridge, disappear under an MDF plane, or inexplicably shift from an observed space into a perceived painted space in the picture plane. “*collision*,” “*two terrains*,” and “*terrain*” (illustrations 2 through 6, and 22 through 24) are my first forays into exploring with paint, MDF panel, and wood this idea of duration. In “*collision*,” blue and orange lines of paint depart their painted spaces to collide and “mix” to form neutralized grey tendrils of paint that menace a solitary painted orange and blue space in the lower-right corner of the piece. Beads of paint—paint squeezed through round confectionary tube openings of various diameters—traverse MDF surfaces and follow wooden “roads” and “bridges” in “*two terrains*” and “*terrain*,” and change color when they enter and exit holes in the board or travel out of sight underneath raised levels of boards.

Yet having paint merely “follow” a path or enter and exit openings in the panel is not a broad enough vocabulary to work with. I want the MDF terrains to take an even more active role in the application and shaping of the paint itself—become more a part of the painting process. Illustrations 25 through 28 are documentation of recent studies that contain “moves” with paint and board, upon which I will build in new works. I

experiment with holes in the board by filling lots of them with paint, to form a gradient of color that seems to “sit” below the surface of the board. Some holes have tiny pegs (made out of the same MDF board) that fit these holes. These pegs can be both a stamp to leave paint marks on the surface, and a plunger to squeeze the paint out of the perimeter of a plugged paint-filled hole.

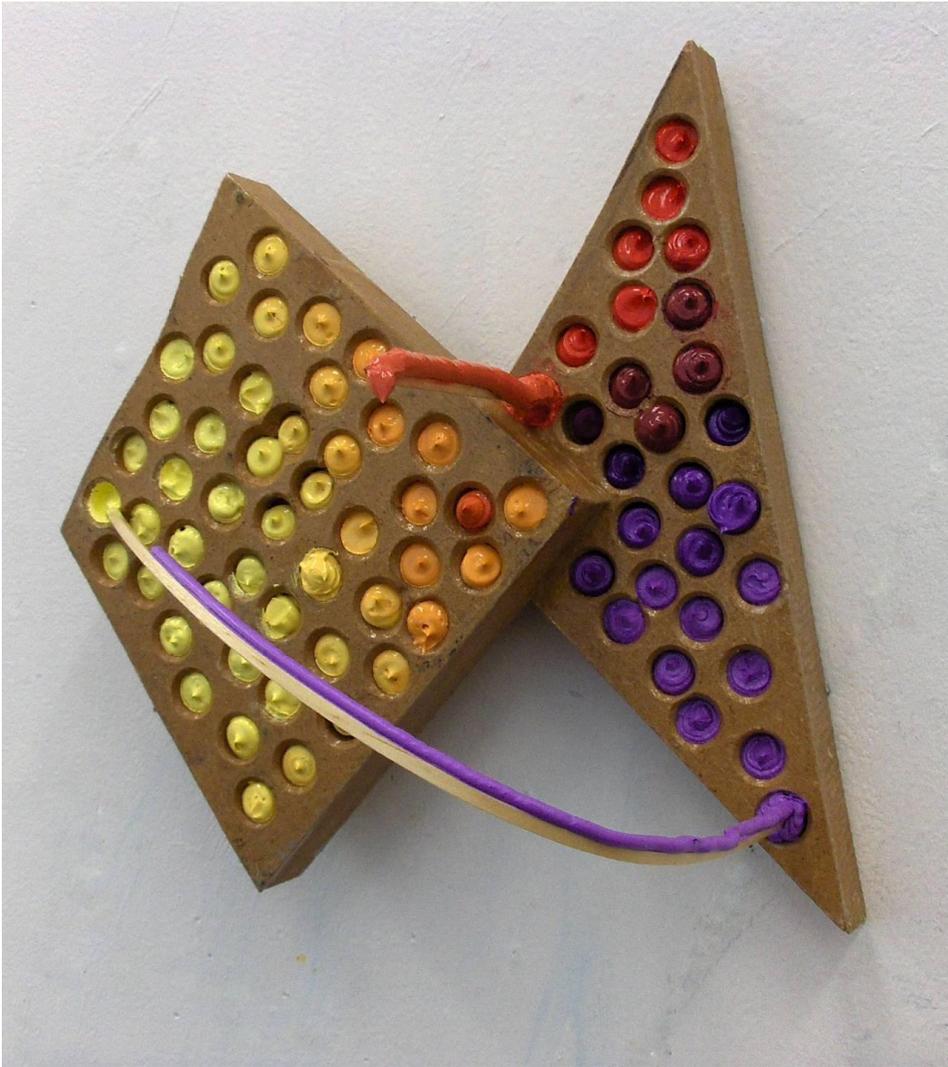


Illustration 25: MDF/Wood/Paint Study #1 2010



Illustration 26: MDF/ Paint Study #1 2010



Illustration 27: MDF/ Paint Study #2 2010



Illustration 28: MDF/ Paint Study #3

2010

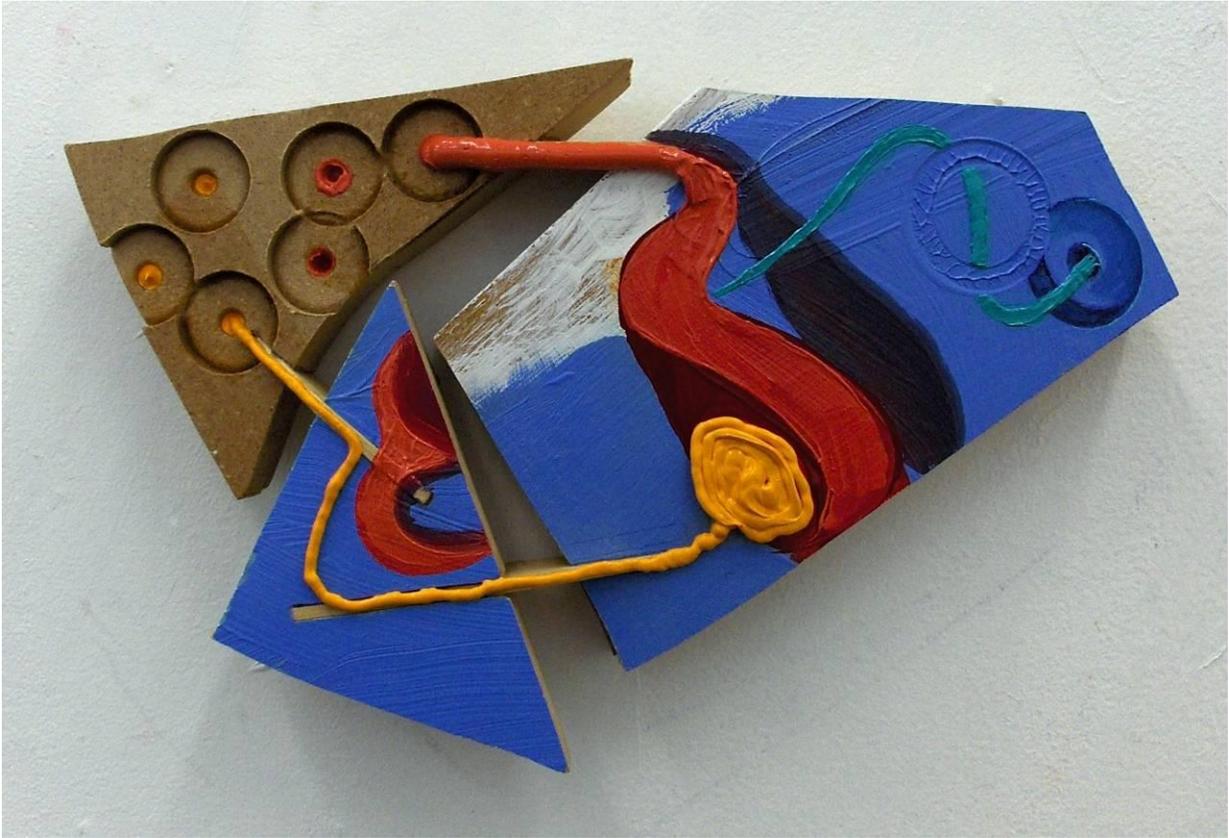


Illustration 29: MDF/Wood/Paint Study #2 2010

I also explore in these studies more uses for the transparent priming medium³ that I apply to the MDF boards before I can use oil paint. I have learned to adjust the value of the priming medium, and therefore the value of the board's surface itself, by mixing into it minute quantities of colored inks. I partition the surface of the shaped boards into smaller shapes of varying values—the lightest value being the unprimed board surface—but also to determine where the oil paint can go and not go upon the surface.⁴ How I adjust the value of the primer determines whether I create an illusionistic, perceived

³ Two layers of Golden Acrylic GAC 100, plus one-to-two layers of Golden Acrylic Self-leveling clear gel.

⁴ Oil paint saturates unprimed MDF or wood in a rather ugly manner that is not very archival.

space that the oil paint can “enter,” or a flat, observed space—a surface upon which oil paint just rests. By having features of the MDF terrain shape the paint directly, and by varying the values of the primer, I create a play between perceived space with paint, and observed space supporting paint. One kind of painted space creates expectations, which I contradict with the other kind of painted space. This is the arena within which I want to make work.

THE COMPANY I WOULD KEEP

Consistently with all the shaped works that I have made, Elizabeth Murray’s shaped paintings have been my influence and an implicit challenge. More recently, the vast, painted, interior and exterior architectural spaces or vast, painted installations of Katarina Grosse have had a real impact upon my thinking. I am impressed by how, with swathes of brightly colored paint, Katarina Grosse changes the viewer’s perception of space surrounding giant structures, interiors, or enormous piles of dirt. Yet the question—a critique even—that shadows my work, and, I believe, even the work of Elizabeth Murray and Katarina Grosse is: why paint? Why do the structures upon which we put paint require paint?

The answer to these questions lies in the very thing that prompts them: the gap⁵ that exists between paint and the surface and/or object to which it adheres. This gap can be narrow or wide. A stop sign, to arbitrarily choose an example, has a very narrow gap

⁵ By gap I mean the relationship between surface and/or thing, and paint, and by how much or how little a distinction is made between the two.

between paint and surface, i.e., we do not see a stop sign and think: a steel octagon mounted on a post, with red-and-white paint depicting the word “stop.” We see the stop sign as one, whole and complete, seamless object that denotes a traffic law. A painting upon a rectangular support also has a narrow gap built in by long history and convention: we expect an image to be rectangular, so we therefore do not give much thought to the form of the canvas or board underneath unless the artist chooses to draw attention to it. Departing from the rectangle, this gap automatically widens for a painting.

In general, how paint is applied to a surface--in the context of a work of art, a wall, a building, or an object--determines the expanse of the gap. Depending upon the context of the surface, the width of the gap is influenced by whether the paint masquerades as a perceived space, or the paint is but a part of an observed space. If the gap is too wide, then the paint perhaps becomes unnecessary. Although Marcel Duchamp famously rejected painting as a practice, Duchamp would undoubtedly recognize this gap I have described as his “infra-thin” or “infra-mince”—the name he gave the slippery gap that was the arena for *Fountain* and his other ready-mades. This gap and how wide or how narrow one chooses to make it *is* the arena within which I make work. It is my “infra-thin.” It is also the arena of Elizabeth Murray and Katarina Grosse. Elizabeth Murray maneuvers within this arena solidly from the vantage point of the painter. Katarina Grosse maneuvers in the same arena more from the vantage point of the sculptor and the installation artist, but she maintains a strong painter’s sensibility. I lean towards exploring this gap as a painter, but I feel the pull of the builder. I place myself somewhere in between these two artists, but where exactly I fit will require me to

make more work that explores duration, and a push-and-pull between an observed space and a perceived space with paint.

WHAT'S LEFT?

In the end, my process remains as two-staged as it was with "*bottoms up*," but it has become central to my work in a way it never has been before. Indeed, it is the only surviving element from the original list of elements of my old work at the beginning of this report. That my process is the survivor accounts for the dramatic change in my work, my shift from making a painting like "*bottoms up*" to a very sculptural "painting" such as "*two terrains*." My process has evolved in that it utterly governs the final image and form of any work I make, rather than acts as a means to constructing a preconceived image. It relies far more upon chance: decisions I make in the second phase—priming and painting—are utterly contingent upon the first phase—building a shaped, possibly multi-tiered surface out of MDF and wood. Decisions made in the first phase are influenced by decisions I speculate I might make in the second phase, but decisions I make in the second phase never follow a script. The second phase therefore is always a suspenseful second beginning. It is this suspenseful second beginning that allows me to make work that explores that mysterious gap between paint and the surface/thing.

VITA

Born in 1980 in Heidelberg, West Germany to American academics, Sam Dahl has lived in America since 1985. He was homeschooled from third grade through high school, and has been painting and drawing and building since age eight. His heart set on a liberal education that would inform his art, Sam Dahl majored in studio art and comparative religion at Dartmouth College. In 2002, he graduated magna cum laude and a recipient of the Perspectives on Design award. Before graduating from Dartmouth, and while he was still naïve enough to make life-affecting decisions with little agony, he realized he was too much of a maker and a painter not to be an artist first, foremost, and for life. For five years, Sam Dahl had his own studio in a restored 18th-century grist mill above the Delaware River in Titusville, New Jersey, where he made and sold work. In 2007, he began a three-year MFA program at the University of Texas at Austin. Now in 2010, receiving a degree in painting, he is on the cusp of a new body of work in a new life in a new place, where he will teach, make, and explore.

His work can be viewed online at:

www.samueldahl.com