

Spring 2023

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Stephen Harmon

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“ ”

by

STEPHEN HARMON

(Under the Direction of Jason Hoelscher)

ABSTRACT

My work tries to perplex the viewer to acknowledge themselves in the act of seeing. In order to perplex them, I use ambiguous reference to figure and space using multiple perspectives, vantage points, gaze, marks, mediums, and, more recently, light and site specificity to establish liminal relationships and experiences. Liminality is a kind of in-betweenness, being on the threshold of places or states of being. My experiences in and studies of the Jewish Diaspora have been my path towards understanding liminality, but liminality is not unique to diaspora or to the Jewish experience and my work does not attempt to illustrate those. Instead, I'm looking to explore the different thresholds that these ambiguous references offer. The picture plane itself is a threshold between psychological and physical spaces and experiences.

“ ”

by

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A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Georgia Southern University in Partial

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MASTER OF FINE ARTS

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

My paintings explore the tension between abstraction, representation, and reality. I am interested in mystery and suggestion, the intersection between readability and unreadability. I'm searching for the moment of perplexity in a representation, the point at which the viewer must choose the content of the work. It is like that moment in the night when the shadow of a chair could be someone, the halfperceived.

This is because the viewer's freedom is paramount. I'm not interested in making a work with one interpretation. Freedom is the ability to choose. The more perplexing something is, the more it circulates through the viewer's mind, the more opportunities they have to choose the content of the work, so I'm trying to slow the viewing experience.

This has led me to pursue materials, marks, and a palette that suggests multiple spatial and figural possibilities, because these possibilities offer questions to the viewer, not statements. So instead of distinct places with clear figures, I create liminal figurespaces: spaces that are between multiple spatial possibilities, all saturated with human presences and figures that are between selves. I want the viewer to progress from seeing very little human presence to seeing it everywhere. The viewer completes the painting.

Because the boundaries that society creates and enforces make certain dictates on how we can be in the world and how we perceive others. The spaces we exist in and the tools that we use all affect our perception to the point that we pass people constantly, whether bodily or in representation, without recognizing their humanity. In any instance, the spectator is responsible for recognizing people as human. As a result, I use objects, light, and installation to expand the

liminal operations of the painting into the viewer's space to confront them with their own spectatorship. I want to perplex the viewer until they see themselves looking.

Liminality is a characteristic of people in diaspora, who have been scattered from their homelands and find their status in another country to be uncertain. After 2600 years of being expelled, held captive, subject to pogroms, and otherwise oppressed, diaspora is a deep part of Jewish culture. As a Jewish person, nearly all of my holidays commemorate such events. My personal experiences with police brutality against the rising antisemitism and other racisms in our society make me urgently want the spectator to see themselves.

CHAPTER 2

EARLY WORK

At 11:53 pm on February 23rd, 2013, an adult male was arrested at the bar “Chuggin Monkey,” in Austin, TX offense 0905-0 resisting arrest or search. Daniel Harmon was treated and released at the hospital and transported to jail. At 11:53 pm on February 23, as the bartender was moving cash from the till, a patron reached over and grabbed at it. She called the bouncers, who forcibly removed him. At 11:53 pm, Daniel Harmon was having a drink with me, his older brother. We did shots and he woke in jail. He could not open his eyes. That evening, my brother and I reconciled after a long fight, barhopping around 6th Street. At each bar we toasted once and moved on, and at this bar, after the shot, I went to the bathroom, which was through a backroom, and when I came out, my brother was laying on the floor and two police officers were on him and one sat on his chest pushing him into the broken glass and the other was punching him in the face. I leaned in and asked what did he do and the officer turned and shoved me to the ground and went back to hitting him. I got back up. Standing off to the side, I said let me talk to him, let me help, I’m his brother, he’ll listen. Danny heard me and tried to sit up and the officer slammed his head into the broken glass of the floor until he stopped. His face looked like a closed fist. They dragged him by the legs into the street. A crowd circled. I remember the lights from all those phones, all those people taking videos and pictures that I could never find, that never surfaced on Facebook or YouTube. Danny lay in street. I told an officer, I am his brother, please let me help, and he shoved me to the ground pointed in my face and screamed, “You’re next.” A homeless man picked me up and got me to a cab. I am forever shattered by this event that is the collision of many social systems embodied each actor, each with their own narrative that belittles

my brother and I. But the greatest horror, for me, is that of the spectators laughing at this worst night of our lives, recording us for what can only be their private enjoyment of our pain. The only person to see us with empathy was the homeless man, the only one outside of these systems. And when the bar finally released the video, vindicating us, I was horrified to realize that my recollection of that space is wrong, however visceral. The bar is simply laid out differently. The experience my brother and I had is dictated by the different narrative each actor brought with them to the event, but each single narrative distorts the actual event, even mine. Danny has no memory of it. The court dismissed the charges but forced Danny to apologize to the officer that gave him a concussion. Of the whole thing, all that's left are my questions. I don't want to recapture that lost actuality, but how can I render the lostness? How can I make the spectator not look, but see?

It sounds like a paradox that I want a viewer to see missingness, but that's what being perplexed is, and my intent is to perplex the viewer. If the bartender, the bouncer, the police, or any of the spectators were perplexed about the narratives imposed on us, things might have gone differently. By perplexed, I don't mean to do anything to trick the viewer. I mean that self-consciously partial apprehension, the awareness of things beyond one's awareness that is a heightened level of engagement. It's the moment where a knot becomes the possibility of its unraveling, where you see that an enigma is no longer impossibly opaque. The Rambam, an important medieval Jewish scholar known to the West as Maimonides, thought so highly of this state that he addressed it in one of his life's major works, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, in which he attempts to reconcile Aristotelian logic with Rabbinical Jewish thought. The Rambam, working within Jewish traditions of esoteric thought, states early on that certain knowledge cannot and should not fully be explained "even in the presence of a single student" (21) and then,

in a rare instance of figurative language, describes the relationship of epiphany to perplex, “We are like those who, though beholding frequent flashes of lightning, still find themselves in the thickest darkness of the night” (22). The Rambam sets up a good way to understand the conditions of perplexity (21): the viewer must already grasp some information, must perceive the possibility of understanding, and must perceive that there is more to understand.

In the artwork I made leading up to my entrance in the program, I pursued this idea of perplexity in two types of image. On one hand, I made nonrepresentational paintings in acrylic on paper and canvas using all-over compositions informed by Jackson Pollock, Mark Tobey, Norman Lewis, and Dr. Ablade Glover because their fields of repetitive marks embody the idea of systems, of interacting layers of operation and information, and I was trying to find the limit of recognizable shape and pattern in the implicit lines formed by the position of what appear to be random marks. I worked in the process of action painters in that I proceeded with a kind of automatism with volition, making marks that evolve from chance characteristics and position, and then reacting to each mark in the field of marks until the painting reached a point where I could begin to perceive a constellation within the noise. I was trying to depict complex systems. At the same time, I also made work tied to the human form and emotional, subjective experience. I filled notebooks with expressionistically distorted depictions of the human head made in charcoal and oil-based paint markers. I made these as reactions to my experiences with police, as attempts to record the emotional experience that are lost in the encounter with those enforcers of social orders. But the marks I used in the paintings come from Willem de Kooning, Joan Mitchell, and Cy Twombly because the character of their marks presents a narrative of the subjective experience of the artist – something deeply important to my work. Norman Lewis and

Dr. Ablade Glover present fields of human figures, and Howardena Pindell's dots originate in her experience of segregation, making their works fields of subjective experience.

This led to me trying to combine these two approaches in the very first works I made in the program – abstract paintings with gestures towards the human form. However, the first few critiques of the program centered more on the display than the works themselves. As a result, I realized that I needed to present more information for the viewer to latch onto. My work didn't provide spatial information or enough clarity of the human form for it even to be recognizable, and the colors, like the marks, were chosen as reactions to the other colors, not as ways to present specific kinds of information. There was simply not enough for the viewer to become perplexed.

Then my first breakthrough happened in the 3rd critique of my first semester, with the painting, *mistbreaketh in thought* (fig. 1). I began to incorporate text and collage as references to something outside the painting, information that I wanted the viewer to begin to consider in

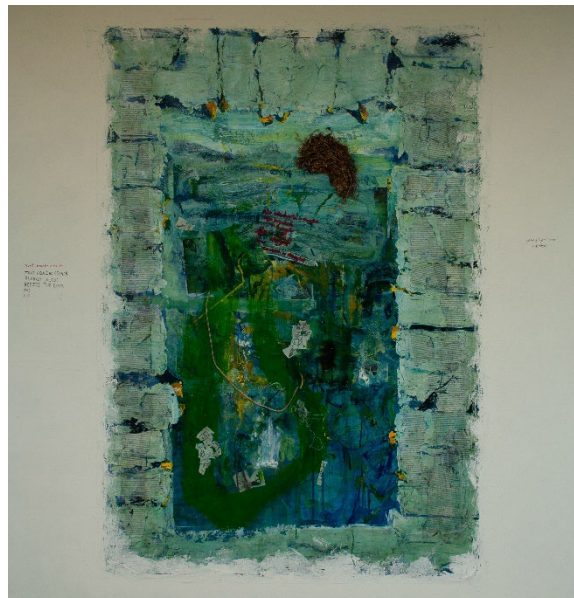


Figure 11 – Stephen Harmon, *mistbreaketh in thought*, 2020

relation to the abstract paint. As a poet, I navigate the failure of language to describe reality.

Language, as a codified form of shared experiences, is inherently referential and representational – the moment it ceases to refer to anything is the moment it ceases to be language. So, in this painting, I present red text written with characters in a higher typographical weight, blurring the letters so that the word is not readable. Then, to the left of the painting, I wrote the same text with the same red, enabling the viewer to understand the otherwise unreadable text. I did this so that the painting incorporates its own mysteries and a solution to the mystery. The text itself, though, offers several versions of itself. Inside the painting, I permute the first line, “mistbreaketh in thought,” with several variations of line break, offering different readings at the level of phrase, line, and stanza, while outside of the painting, the text exists as a line in a separate stanza. To the right of the painting, I place yet another string of text as another possible reading. I chose the subject of each text to offer different interpretations of the composition of the painting and of the action it depicts. The red text includes the word “thought,” offering a possible reading of the interior of the painting as a depiction of thought, reinforced by abstract mark-making. The stanza to the left also includes the word “DOOR,” which opens the possible interpretation of the painting as a kind of door, something I hoped to reinforce in the format of the painting and in the composition, using several regular impasto around the edge of the painting to create a frame that left a rectangular opening in the common proportions of a doorway. The stanza to the right of the painting, “gentling fingers brushet / tetextxt,” embodies the sort of recursion that I included elsewhere, jamming the word “text” within itself, as the “text” of the painting is also jammed within commentary. Furthermore, I made gel transfers of nonrepeating strings of random Latin characters and glued them onto the impasto border, giving another layer of text in between things.

But as I used text to create a network of references to itself as text, to the visual elements, and to itself as network, I used both it and collage to refer to the world beyond the borders of the painting. To emphasize the network of connections between these and the visual elements of the work, I used line as symbol of thought itself, threading together implied lines, painted lines, actual string, speaker wire, and collaged images of hands in the middle of tying knots out strings. Even the composition is a reference to the layout of the Talmud (fig. 2), with its ever expanding rings of commentary. The references to the human body in the underpainting, gel transfers of



Figure 12 – First page of the Vilna Talmud

self-portrait photographs, and narratives implied by the text were all chosen to expand this network, as were the choices in color. The white border of the painting is specifically the same Kilz primer used to paint the board I mounted it on, and the substrate is paper so that it can blend into the wall. I even painted over the edges of the piece and the whole board with that primer so that the border between the painting and the wall became indistinct, expanding the action of the painting itself to encompass as much of the world as possible. Blue, green and yellow were chosen to create an optical space beneath the collage, a kind of space that we can perceive but not imagine entering (Greenberg).

This was the first work to embody the experience of perplexity that I want to create. I learned, from that and from my next painting, *crackbreath silence*, that text was too powerful of a device to control the apparent meaning of the piece. I realized that, when text was present, viewers had difficulty finding meanings beyond the text, no matter how distorted the narratives and images presented by it. It became the kind of clear boundary that I wanted to get away from.



Figure 13 – Stephen Harmon, *crackbreath silence*, 2020

This painting is significant in that it represents a turning point, after which much of my imagery and painting style changed. As I'll explore more deeply later on, this painting introduces my first attempts to make a statement about the spectator's relationship to a figure. In looking through old Popular Mechanics encyclopedias of home repair, I discovered an image of a group apparently enjoying themselves by playing musical instruments together, but the woman playing a ukulele is flanked by men in front of and behind her, watching her. The fact that the photographer wants us to associate with them, to desire to be them by purchasing the book and making the home improvements, instead of understanding that the woman is trapped between

these men is a misogynistic perspective on this event. The image understands these men as doing something positive, so, I collaged images of men doing something with their hands all around the woman in order to exaggerate the misogyny to the point of obviousness.

One of my attractions to abstract expressionism and paintings that behave in the way that Leo Steinberg describes is in the amounts and kinds of information they can contain without losing their identity as abstract work. In the previous piece I began to figure out how to create perplexity in the relationship between some elements, but I wanted to activate the potential for mark to create perplexity, here. In this piece, I wanted to establish a relationship between mark and the other elements of the painting. All of the nonrepresentational marks interrupt one another at the level of mark to mark and mark to field as signs of what the collaged woman must be feeling in that instant, the way the moment is interrupted by the crowding of these men. The collaged images of the men then, towards the center of the image, look at the viewer. I attached a broken mirror to the painting as another such exaggeration because people generally make mirrors to reflect the human face and body, and the idea of personhoods expressed by misogyny is one that frankly distorts and dismisses many possible ways to be. But a painting that only really concerns itself about misogynistic males might inadvertently seem to privilege them, so it was important to me to imagine a woman free of all that, especially a woman of color. It was important that this figure would be painted amidst the collage and in a different style than the rest of the painting to formally remove her from the other elements.



Figure 14 – Stephen Harmon, *Lantern, the Palace Cage*, 2021

Lantern, the Palace Cage follows many of the ideas I explored in *crackbreath silence* in that it creates perplexity through the relationship between elements, but it departs from my previous work in the treatment of figure and in the stylistic shift from abstract to figurative. It originates with the image of the girl beside the dollhouse, and my other decisions proceed from my interpretation of it. The photo depicts an event: a girl sits holding a doll that is a representation of girls. She sits beside a dollhouse, which is also a representation of houses, in a room that is probably inside a house. The girl resembles the doll and both conform to a kind of idealized notion of girlhood that was commonly represented, as the house resembles those depicted for similarly idealized families. The photographer then chooses to represent this with an obviously staged image. The way the series of representations loses connection to the reality of these lives was fascinating to me because each one is a distortion that points us back to the event and its likely departure from normal life.



Figure 15 - Detail of *Lantern, the Palace Cage*

There's something horrifying in the way that the society that produced this so refuses reality. My decisions to distort the figures and represent the space proceed from this reading: the girl's personhood is ultimately discarded by the photograph, so I rendered a figure that has some likeness to her head and hair, obscuring the face, on top of an adult body that is unexpected. Similarly, I chose to render the doll with distorted features and placed the photo inside a distortion of the dollhouse, intending for both figures to lead the viewer to meditate on the relationship between them and the photograph, and then between the girl and doll in the photo, and then between the girl and life. To make the questions of reality even more explicit, I attached an object to the surface that is not immediately identifiable, tied a piece of twine to it that I glued to the surface to appear as though it were being pinched by the doll, and painted a line that resembles the wobbling of the twine. The real twine becomes represented twine at the point of

contact with the doll, which occupies a similar relationship between the real and represented. Finally, I painted the figure of the girl as holding a square that opens, somehow, behind her, referencing the painting itself as a representation. With this and later paintings, I started to feel that my approach to perplexity was beginning to offer viewers enough information to begin engaging them to interpret the work.

CHAPTER 3

PROCESS

While *Lantern, the Palace Cage* was generally well received well, there were some things about the responses to it and some of the previous pieces that led me to reconsider my approach, especially with regards to the way that text and collage both introduced and restricted possible viewer experiences of the work. Having a strong background in poetry, I entered the program with the intention to make abstract paintings that could exist both as painting and as poetry. This intention was based on the numerous examples of abstract paintings that include everything from painted representational information, such as in De Kooning and Norman Lewis, to collage and objects, such as in Rauschenberg, while retaining their identities as abstractions. However, I quickly realized that the use of any text whatsoever becomes a focal point for the viewer, making the remainder of the piece subject to the narratives and concepts implied by the text. In *mistbreaketh in thought* and *crackbreath silence*, for example, I tried to shrink the text and use both color and positioning to place it lower in the hierarchy of viewing, but once the text became intelligible to the viewer, it also became a kind of barrier, closing the circle of possible responses. While my use of language was not criticized, I began to view it as a kind of limitation, so I relegated it to the title, in *Lantern, the Palace Cage*, but the same thing happened – the possibilities offered by the wooden object are wider than those suggested by the words “lantern,” “palace,” and “cage.” Text had too much authority over the painting. As a result, I decided to remove text altogether from the work.

I decided to remove found photographs as the inspiration for my work for similar reasons. As mentioned earlier, language can never be nonrepresentational. The moment that

language ceases to refer to some shared experience is the moment that it ceases to be language, becoming asemantic writing. Photographic information has a similar feature: if what ties all photographic processes together is that they document an instance of light, then all photography is representational, no matter how abstract the image is. A found photo, much like language, then accumulates shared experience with the added referential context of the photographer's historical moment and intent. I have found that photos and language always point the viewer's attention outside of the immediate experience of the painting. I wanted paintings that direct the viewer's attention inward. So, while my struggle to incorporate photographic information continued for a while longer, I began to remove photos from the surface of my work. As I'll discuss later on, I also removed them because the mark made by photographic processes is quite mechanical, and I eventually determined that mechanical marks worked against my project.

Having realized that text reduces perplexity and that found photographs did not match my painterly approach, I began to experiment in my process, gradually incorporating more preparatory drawings. For example, having gained some newfound confidence in my ability to render the figure, I began to pursue work that explored other types of figuration, as with the 2nd



Figure 16 – Stephen Harmon, *Untitled*, 2021

piece of my second semester (fig. 6). In this painting, I rendered the same figure in three different ways, placing them against a field of color, with some lines in the background to imply the presence of a landscape, and other elements included to further explore the surrealist imagery I had begun to use in *Lantern, the Palace Cage*. Previous to this painting, I approached the act of painting using the procedures of action painting, using direct methods and an automatism that retains a decision-making capacity, incorporating all the elements in an unpremeditated way.

While the final painting used these methods, I prepared for this work by first making several realistic charcoal drawings of the figures, “rehearsing” the figures beforehand.



Figure 7 - Stephen Harmon, *Untitled*, 2021

Then, in the final painting of that semester (fig. 7), my work shifted again in several significant ways. I made several compositional sketches in preparation of the final piece and made several smaller tests to make sure that the placement of color functioned as intended. With this piece, I was interested in setting up a similar network of related information as I had in previous work, while further developing the sense of surrealistic imagery that I had begun to explore. My previous paintings were largely flat with occasional moments of optical space, so I wanted to push my imagery by using clear lines of perspective to create space in one way, with rectangles receding into the distance, and color information to challenge that space in another,

placing highly saturated yellows in the middle and background rectangles. I also designed this “endless” hallway with suggestions of space that I drew from Magritte, placing lines along the side of one panel on the left and along the “floor” suggesting that the parts stretching off into eternity were an illusion rendered on a curtain (see fig. 8). This information places the viewer in

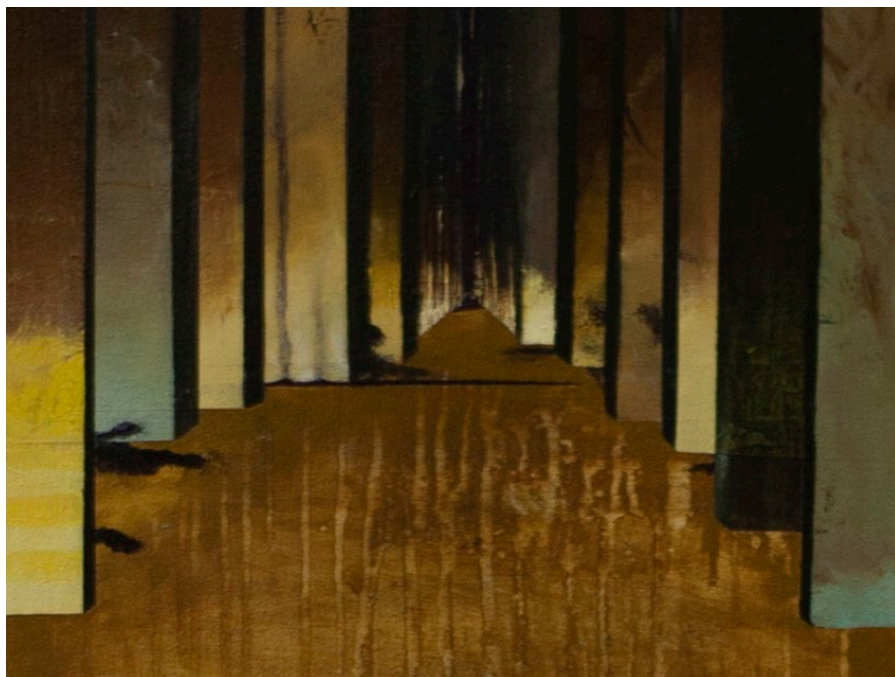


Figure 8 – detail of *Untitled*

a position of power as they interact with the piece. When the viewer begins to perceive this information, the sense of space depicted could become more tightly confined, and this moment asks the viewer to make a decision about the space being depicted. I also painted and collaged the two foremost rectangles so that they project from the surface of the piece, positioning the viewer in an uncertain vantage point to the scene depicted. Finally, I had also displayed this work in the center of the nook in the MFA Hub so that the two flanking walls became visual extensions of the rectangles depicted, confusing the boundaries of the image.

Several different parts of my process with this piece became consistent features of my working method, even though the specific implementations of these would change with subsequent works. The reliance on compositional sketching and studies of figures, the multiple

tests to explore possibilities to establish and confuse color and space, the use of spontaneous surrealist and action-painting methods, and the consideration for ways that the installation environment could be used or shaped to reference the information inside of the picture plane are important to the process, but so is the choice of a subject matter that is emotionally significant to me – the uncertainty and threat of confinement, for this piece. After this work, I would combine the use of ambiguous space with distorted figures and use my own photography as a references, and this combination led to a breakthrough in the work for my 3rd semester. While I will explore those paintings in the Liminality section, photography began to play a more prominent role before disappearing from the surface of my work.

In my 4th semester, inspired by David Salle's work, I struggled again with trying to incorporate photographic information into my work. While I used found photographs to create collages in my earlier work, I now attempted to create photographic installations out of my original photography to perplex the viewer. However, I never managed to become satisfied with the contrast between the marks made by photographic processes and those made by painting processes. The mechanical quality of the mark always removed it from the other elements of the

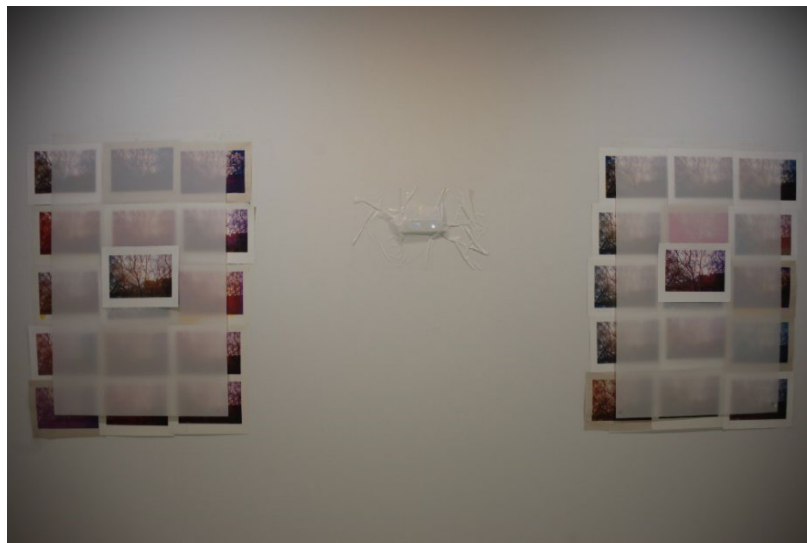


Figure 9 – Stephen Harmon, *Untitled*, 2022



Figure 17– Stephen Harmon, *Untitled*, 2022



Figure 11 – Stephen Harmon, *Untitled*, 2022

painting in similar way that text did, so I began to explore the possibilities of photography to do what I had begun to understand in painting. In the installations below, I continue my exploration of the relationship between image, site, and light, but with photographic prints. In each of these pieces, I used the installation site as the substrate with which to establish a relationship between information inside the image and outside of it, intending by this to draw the viewer's attention to the space they occupied and their relationship to it. I experienced some successful critiques and images with this approach. However, I eventually dropped photographic imagery as an end altogether because the relationship I had with the subject was too distanced by the mechanical characteristics of the process. Whereas the experience of writing is dictated by linearity and grid, the experience of making a photographic print is dictated by mechanical interfaces at every stage, from camera to development (digital or analog) to print (printer or enlarger) and the resulting image is shaped by that. Painting offers more flexibility of process. It can easily be immediate or delayed, mechanical or expressive. In the expanded field, it is more inclusive, retaining its identity across a far greater number of mediums and imagery. The resulting image is dictated by far fewer constraints, many of which are not mechanical.

However, photography also asks for a particular relationship with the world that I have found useful for my paintings. Documentary photography, which is what I have been trained in, asks you to hunt through the world for interesting locations, people, and events, and, in my case, the camera draws my attention to liminal spaces and optical illusions: alleyways, overlooked places, and the ways that reflections can confuse the boundary between internal and external spaces. My paintings now begin with photography for that reason. It forces me to interact with the world outside my studio, and because I use a strange-looking twin lens reflex camera I am often approached by strangers while I'm on shoots. I have met a lot of people this way, and even when they do not enter my shots, they become a part of what I think about as I work. This has become significant to me because photography asks me to engage with the world in the way I eventually wanted my viewers to engage with the paintings, to see human presence in everything.

My work is driven by a desire to perplex the spectator into considering their interaction with the world, and this necessitates that I consider my own interactions. Text and found photographs were just ways for me to consider that interaction. I have come to realize that this drive is a characteristic of diasporic art, as announced by R. B. Kitaj, fleshed out by Carol Zemel, and present in Jewish culture for a very long time before either of them. R.B. Kitaj describes "Diasporic painting [as] unfolding commentary on its life source" (qtd. in Zemel 138), always reaching back to something lost or far away. And, in a way, my process now reflects diaspora. Each painting becomes a history of broken connections. It begins with the photograph, the recording of vanished light. The first drawings remove specific references from the real places and figures, while allowing me to retain the structure of place and figure. The later drawings shift

these elements around, adding and subtracting, moving further away from those sources. The final painting bears little resemblance to the photograph from which it came, but it remembers.

CHAPTER 4

THE LIMINAL

“we Jews are not painters. We cannot depict things statically. We see them always in transition, in movement, as change. We are story-tellers.” (Kafka)

“The One Secret
butts forever into the word.

(Who falls off that, rolls

under the leafless tree.) (Celan)

To be in a diaspora is to be in a liminal relationship to / position in society. While the field of diaspora studies offers numerous viewpoints, Rogers Brubaker summarizes the definitions of diaspora itself as “coher[ing] around three key features: dispersion, homeland orientation, and boundary maintenance” (qtd. in Alexander 1546), with traditional descriptions centering on “the notion of violence and trauma – of flight and enforced scattering” (Alexander 1550). I think that forced dispersion leads to a different mindset for the individual in diaspora than in migrations. The numerous expulsions of Jewish peoples led to a certain anxiety of further expulsions, for instance, being a feature of our culture, and within a dominant culture, we are never able to forget that we are Jewish. At the end of *Looking Jewish*, Carol Zemel, after examining art of the Jewish Diaspora¹ across the 20th century, suggests that diasporic art is

¹ Zemel’s description resonates with descriptions of diasporic art produced by other communities, as seen in Farzan (2012), Rangi (2015), and Finley et al. (2019). These, too,

characterized by its “the positing of multiple subjectivities . . . its tendency to allegory . . . its meandering and mutable borders rather than fixed cultural frames, and its aesthetic appeal to many types of viewer, whether knowing participant or critical spectator” (159-160), and I have found this to describe the goals and impulses I have towards making an image, object, and an installation. These characteristics emerge from the betweenness, the liminal position that is being in the exile of diaspora. Mediya Rangi best describes the relationship a diasporic artist has with diaspora when they state that such an artist “finds *home* in his exile, as it provides him the opportunities he is denied in his *homeland*: the freedom to be and to become, and freedom of expression” (4). While Rangi doesn’t use the word liminal, they associate it with “detrterritorialized space” (4) and the results of being removed from the kind of categorical identity enforced by a location, which is a kind of a liminality.

I pursue the liminal in several different ways. Earlier in the program, I mistakenly used the word ambiguity to describe my goals, so I would like to differentiate these here. Ambiguity always offers the possibility of multiple meanings, but this can result either from having so much information that there cannot be one meaning or from having so little information that one meaning cannot be reached. Liminality is being in between states, on the threshold of something (*OED*), neither here nor there, and this is something embedded in the history of my people and a symptom of the Jewish diaspora, if not all the other ones too. While boundary maintenance – who is and who is not Jewish – is important to my culture, boundaries imposed by external parties, such as yellow stars and other signifiers, are source of anxiety for us to the point that it’s fairly common for Jewish children to be taught not to reveal their identity outside of safe spaces.

resonate with concerns articulated in the wider field of diaspora studies, as seen in Alexander (2017) and Mendes et al. (2018).

For many of us, there is a connection between this aspect of our cultural history and the behavior of states and state entities, like the police, towards other groups and, for me, towards individuals. There is something safe, something free in the uncertainty of the liminal. I pursue liminality in many aspects of my paintings, in my renderings of placeless places, in my renderings of space, in my choice of a style that grasps after representation with the paint applications of abstraction, in my figures that are always on the verge of something and that make gestures towards personhood but not identity, in the choice of acrylic, and with other formal aspects.



Figure 18— Stephen Harmon, *Untitled*, 2021

The work I have already discussed has featured distorted figures and suggestive, surrealist places, but my work didn't achieve a distinct direction until I began to position these figures with a liminal relationship to those places. This was an understanding I first came to at the start of my 3rd semester (fig. 12), where I continued exploring the same relationship between

abstraction and representation as the previous painting (fig 9), employing the same spontaneous stains, drips, and fields of color in the underpainting with the intention to provide more recognizably representational information in the upper layers. After the underpainting, in rotating the canvas to determine the final orientation, I realized that the shape of some of the wash layers could begin to resemble mountains in the distance and decided to frame that area of the underpainting within a rectangle taped off from the green upper layers. The way that this shape and value contrast with the green layers resembles actual windows enabled these abstract marks to be perceived as a window in the critique, giving the location depicted enough information to relate it to the actual world, and similar considerations went into the value, temperature, and translucency of the green and sienna layers to imply “wall” and suggest “floor,” while doing nothing to conceal the character of the marks. However, I realized that the figure itself must also contain the same relationships, so I rendered it in largely the same colors as the rest of the painting, choosing a pose that indicated the figure may be sitting on the edge of an unrendered seat, leaning forward towards the viewer. I placed the figure so that the majority of its suggested body should sit behind the green “wall” and also emphasized the flatness of the green layer to confuse this relationship. The place occupies a liminal position between representation and abstraction, and the figure contains this relationship and amplifies it by occupying a liminal noplac within that space.

This is because I found a great deal of possible liminality in the renderings of interiors. Interior spaces are inherently abstract, being geometrical spaces separate from the ragged, irregular spaces formed by nature. Most buildings are boxlike cuboids or assemblages of cuboids which then subdivide into sets of cuboids. We only recognize these shapes as rooms and not boxes because of the presence of windows and doors because they signal the needs of the human body. Windows and doorways are just rectangular holes that differ only in their location within a cuboid. (Doors are rectangles that recognize the general proportions of an upright human body.) The specific identity of a room is tied to the objects inside of it, which offer us clues to its the intended purpose, so removing these objects but retaining the windows and doors loosens the up the identity of the shape to become “roomlike” rather than room. These relationships were something I tried to push further with color in the next paintings. In fig. 12, I used a cool-warm progression to establish a basic, albeit shallow, sense of space. More significantly, the color operated as expected to shape the space, and I began to explore more opportunities to confuse

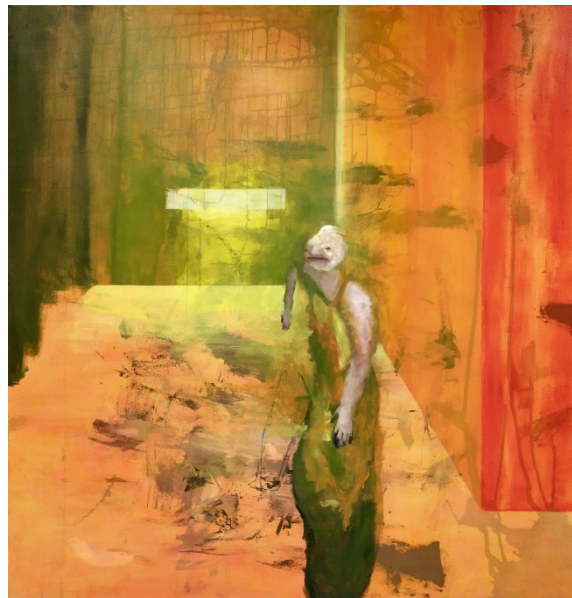


Figure 13 – Stephen Harmon, *Untitled*, 2021

color and establish the kind of confusion I had explored in other areas, using linear perspective to establish a spatial order that contrasted with color information. So, as with fig. 13, I began to reduce the amount of information needed to understand the space, from “walls” to floorboards and size differentiation.

For the 2nd critique of my 5th semester I discovered a style that expresses liminality more completely by using constraints in hue, tool, media, mark and light. Despite my work having been well received up until that point, I was not satisfied with the conceptual resonances with some of my formal decisions. I was achieving a liminal expression in the imagery and installation, but hadn’t, until that point, seen the opportunity to explore it in other aspects of my work. In my progression towards monochrome, I realized that the white ground I had used was preventing me from getting there. White, being the upper ceiling of value ranges, lends itself to idealization (O’Doherty 14), binary constructions, and the kind of clear boundaries that I want to deconstruct. It establishes ideal conditions for the identity of colors in the layers that sit above it. Priming the canvas with acrylic polymer – the same medium that I make the paint with – allows the material of the canvas to make the first statement regarding hue, value, and saturation, setting the beginning point at a closer approximation to human skin than whiteness ever would be. The muted yellow of the canvas also allowed me to finally pursue monochrome and a value range that was limited to middle tones. Priming it with wilder gestures of a brush instead of a roller also allows the texture of the ground to have the subtle implication of the human hand, only visible, in the end, at certain angles in the more bare stretches of canvas.

This decision led to a host of other formal constraints. Deciding to eliminate the white ground and deciding to let the canvas announce itself necessitated that I eliminate white from the palette, which led me to eliminate most direct painting methods and to formulate a paint mix that

itself has liminal properties. Rather than mixing media on the surface of the painting, as I previously have, I now only use acrylic. Acrylic itself occupies a liminal position in the spectrum of painting media, being flexible enough that one can adjust the properties to behave as any of the others, and using the Guerra system to create the paint allows me to have a great deal of control over the how the paint behaves and finally appears. In studio visits, faculty and visiting artists have sometimes had difficulty identifying which painting medium I use, and I have received comments that it looks like oil, encaustic, watercolor, or, as Ben Tollefson recently commented, that it “looks like honey.” The viscosity is medium-body, liquid enough that it can drip and thick enough that it can retain an impression of the mark, and it has a glaze-like saturation, even though it does not have the viscosity of a glaze. Rather than adding thickener, I work with an open pot of paint and plan the types of mark made around the changing viscosity of the medium as it dries. The choice in hue is a blend between raw umber (PBr 7) and raw sienna (PY43), giving the color an identity between two fairly standard earth tones. Furthermore, brown occupies a liminal position on the color wheel, as all the other colors mix together to create different variations of it, and the same brown can function effectively as a yellow, orange, or red, depending on its context. Any colors I use are now mixed heavily with this blend of raw sienna and umber. Finally, as a student of abstraction, I have always felt that brown was not celebrated as a color in and of itself. At best, it is associated with traditional underpainting – an intermediary stage between drawing painting – and so with “unfinished.” As comments in some of my critiques show, it can be associated with ugliness or excrement. Ralph Mayer even mentions that “a prohibition against brown” (*Artists Handbook* 153) in his recent past. But humans are just varieties of brown. Most paintings that are called monochrome are really just limited palettes. I want to celebrate a color that I perceive as being overlooked. I now also select and craft lighting

situations in warmer temperatures (2700k) that approximate the color of the canvas to spread the operations of the hue beyond the canvas into the space of the viewer.

I also restricted the application of paint itself. I now use a limited set of brushes and paint shapers, rendering the majority of marks with a #3 filbert, a small sized silicone shaper, and my hands. While I used them in the past, I have also begun removing mechanical marks from the surface of my work, and this is one of the ways that my work resists the imposition of clear boundaries. In the previous paragraphs, I have likened the hues of the canvas and paint to human skin; when I shape and stretch the canvas, I often feel as though I am interacting with another person, learning about and reacting to them. I sometimes decide to embrace their irregularities, the way the wood wants to stand from the wall, or the trembling line arising from the way the wood sometimes resists the table saw. Sometimes, if the line is too perfect, I will add these irregularities to let the wood itself speak beneath the canvas. Sometimes I will add or subtract a few inches to the format I have discussed. I have come to think of them as individuals. Ambera Wellmann seems to mean something similar when she articulates a desire for her works to have

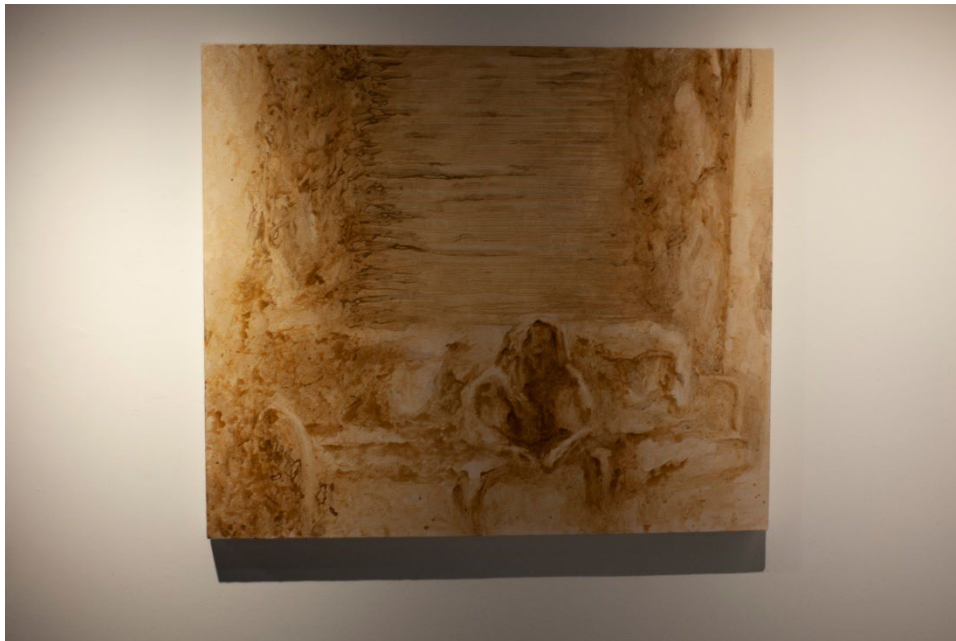


Figure 19 - Stephen Harmon, *Untitled*, 2022

“a subconscious of their own.” So I removed mechanical marks because I didn’t want them to internalize the kind of clear, imposed boundary that I try to resist.

With these constraints, I have been able to extend the liminal relationship of space and figure to the rest of the painting in the work above. While in previous paintings, I attempted to use clarity of information to present something unclear, I began to offer information about specific kinds of locations while rendering everything in an unclear style. I chose the subject of a figure sitting on a couch, staring towards but not at the viewer. In preparatory drawings I discovered that blinds, couch, and figure were the details significant to reading the space as an interior, a room, so in the painting I sought to provide this information using an abstract application to also signal interiority, choosing a more obscure approach than in previous work. Rendering the whole painting in this hue and in a style that embraces the viscous, with shapes whose contours dissolve into fields of marks, allowed for the similarly rendered figure to blend into the setting and for both to blend into the paint. Finally, I chose to light this piece with two spot lights on either side of the painting to extend these operations into the viewer’s space. Logically speaking, the light should sit on the surface of the “blinds” area, but I chose to let this and the figure side in comparative dimness. Light makes ocular perception possible, but it reveals nothing here. The liminal dimness is what reveals the figure.



Figure 20 - Stephen Harmon, *Untitled*, 2022

This led me to discover new possibilities for liminal expression in the figure. The figure I had discovered in fig. 12 was one that confused the space and figure and the one in fig. 13 began to offer figures distorted in perspective. But this figure was represented in different styles at once, intending to represent a single self across different moments in time. It took me several more paintings to realize that this figure worked specifically because it contained the possibility of multiple selves within contours that could be read as those of a single figure, and this was what I discovered in the next painting. Beginning with a photograph of a man standing beside a fence around a parking lot in front of some houses, abstracting the shapes revealed the possibility of all these cuboids to suggest interior spaces, so I sought to signal that interiority by inserting another figure seated on a couch. However, instead of taking a reference photo, I drew the couch from life and then sat on it, marking, on the drawing, the places that my body intersected the couch in various poses. Drawing this composite figure several times showed me that one figure

could become an ambiguous grouping of figures suggested with both additive and subtractive methods, with one grouping of seven abstracted figures occupying the logical position of an individual, limbs simultaneously serving the contours of several bodies at once so that the viewer's perception of any single figure is momentary, leading the attention to a continuous apprehension of figures. The figure standing beside the fence is a similar grouping, with several



Figure 16 - Detail of *Untitled*



Figure 17 - Detail of *Untitled*

arms in the position of a single arm, and several faces suggested within the general area of the head, so the individual is itself a liminal perception. The identity of the figure is liminal, a self between possible selves. When the viewer decides that one of these is “the” figure, they have imposed a boundary upon what these elements can be. This is to face the viewer with the burden that all spectators carry in any moment of perceiving another person, that of discovering humanity in what they perceive.

The spectator should, at some point in their viewing, confront their spectatorship, even if it's just to decide that they can't tell what something is. Works in the more aggressive style of fig. 13 tended to receive the comment that viewers felt as though they were intruding upon something and became self-aware of their spectatorship in that feeling. In these paintings, I have sought to do this with fields of marks that suggest crowds of faces and installations that recognize the viewer's body position.



Figure 18 - Stephen Harmon, *Untitled*, 2022

In the painting above, for example, after rendering the major figures and the spatial elements, I proceed to apply paint in fields of viscous marks, taking the suggestions of multiple figures within a single grouping and spreading it across architectural features or planes along the “floor” and the “wall” to the rear of the “room.” The way the forms interlock with one another gives these regions a similarly liquid appearance as in earlier paintings, but I render these as fields of staring faces as a direct reference to the spectator (see below). However, because each

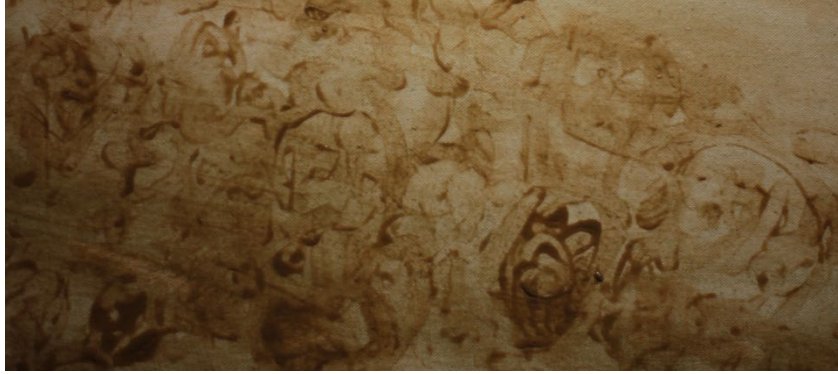


Figure 19 - Detail of *Untitled*

face exists in an irregular variety of marks and because so many faces interlock with others, they first read as descriptions of texture. Rendering the central figural grouping with the contours of a single head affects the visual hierarchy in an interesting way. Viewers in the critique first perceived a single figure sitting in a room. Then, after longer viewing, this figure resolved into a grouping of faces and figural elements that finally allowed viewers to recognize the fields of marks as human faces. Finally, the lighting deepened that effect. I overly lit the piece with 4 spotlights to sculpt harder edged shadows and positioned them so that the geometry of the painting as a single shape became itself a rectangular element in a grouping of rectangular shadows. Whenever a viewer leaned in to scrutinize some part or when they gestured within the path of the light, they cast four shadows, becoming themselves a grouping of human features that surrounded the painting. I do not see this as creating an additional performance out of the viewer or forcing anything new from them. Viewers are always active participants in the creation of what they perceive. The shadows just draw attention to that. In a place that could be any lobby or waiting room, the figure, in between itself, is surrounded by spectators that stare in all directions without really seeing anything. Once the viewer begins to see this and the interaction of their shadows, they see themselves seeing.



Figure 20 - Stephen Harmon, *Untitled*, 2023

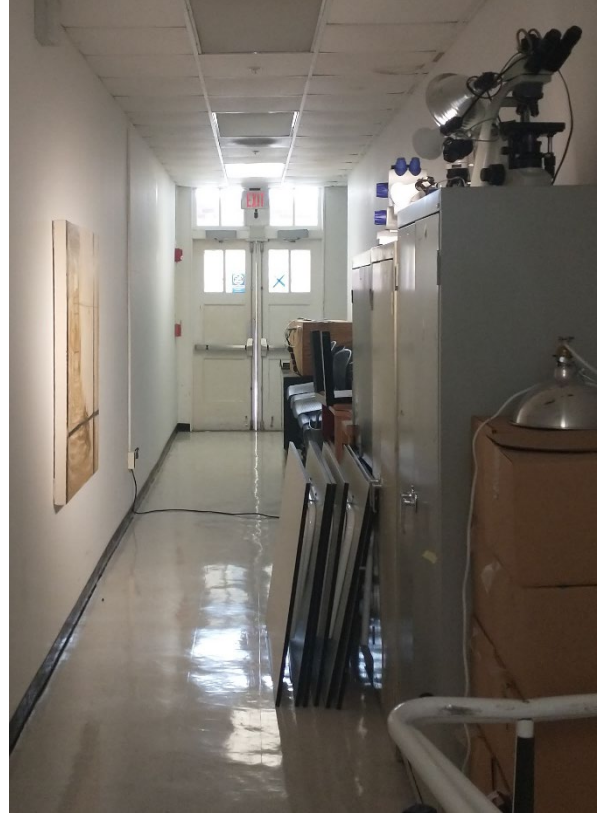


Figure 21 - Installation shot of *Untitled*

Then I deepened the interaction between the painting and viewer by selecting a composition and installation that address the viewer's body position. The originating photo for this painting is of a narrow, gated alleyway between two buildings – a liminal space that I transformed, in sketching, into a kind of hallway that opened out into the suggestions of more defined architecture. I included more types of space and figuration in this work to begin offering the possibility of narratives beyond the sense of intrusion presented in the earlier style. The three spaces suggested by this composition are that architectural space on the other side of the hallway, the interior space that is also more vast than the one outside of it, and that suggested by the “door” implied by those lines and circle that press up against the picture plane. The “door” positions the implied viewer as pressing close to the scene depicted, peering into it. So I installed the piece in an cluttered hallway to force the viewer to become conscious of their body as they

navigated that space. The composition depicts a single perspective on the hallway, which I replicated by positioning lights in the installation that all faced the same direction – if you tried to view the painting from the wrong angle, you became blinded by those lights and sought the comfort of the viewing angle depicted above. The main figure-grouping stands in the hallway with the wall of spectating faces behind them, looking either towards the implied landscape within the wall across or towards the figure on the ground. The installation reflects this by positioning the crowd of viewers in a similar relationship to the scene depicted. The viewers of this work could not ignore themselves. In the critique, viewers asked themselves questions and made statements that I find it important to list here: “Are we being observed?” “We make it unbearable.” “We [the viewers] have ‘access’ but those inside do not.” “We have the ability to change this if we just open the door.” These remarks indicate that they became aware of their spectatorship as responsible, in some way, for these liminal figures.

In the next painting, I began to seriously consider the suggestions for installations offered by the originating photograph before even starting adjust that information with sketching. I analyzed the photograph to determine the liminal possibilities that could inform not just the painting, but the installation site of the painting, deciding to install it in the courtyard between the ground floors of the CAT and Arts Building. Then I analyzed the site itself for the



Figure 22 - Installation shot of *Untitled*

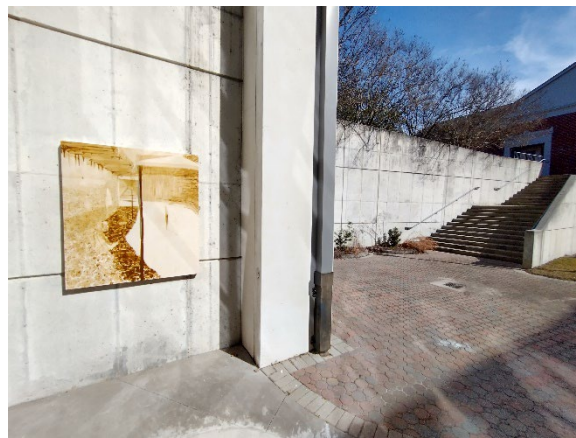


Figure 23 - Installation shot of *Untitled*



Figure 24 - Stephen Harmon, *Untitled*, 2023 Figure 25 - Detail of *Untitled*

possibilities that it also offered the painting, determining that the connection between the site, space, and viewer could be made both more directly and with more subtlety with the reflection of the viewer upon glass. The originating photograph contained reflection in the glass of one building depicted, as did this space. Additionally, both photograph and site contained similar other elements, such as looming architecture and stairways. Both sets of information then informed the painting's composition, placement of figural groupings, and use of figural fields. I installed the work in a position that could only be viewed from a narrow range of locations, just in front of the doorway to the CAT, and so that the site, painting, or viewer were reflected in every vantage point upon the work. I disabled the lights in the foyer on the other side of the glass to clarify the reflection of the sunlit courtyard. Additionally, more than in other paintings, I placed the figures in multiple styles and positions, with some figures appearing to gaze at others, choosing to make the initially most visible figure rendered with only the absence of paint and

hiding the others in fields of marks and gazing faces. The painting contained spectatorship in these groupings and in the fields of faces, with signs that, after sustained viewing, could lead the viewer to turn their heads and see themselves reflected in the glass beside the painting. One of these is the mark that functions as a horizon line, as in my previous painting, being rendered to resemble the seam between concrete blocks that make up the structure of the courtyard. I also hung the painting so that the line would draw the eye towards that seam from many vantage points, drawing the viewer's head to the left, to their own reflection. In this way, the painting becomes the catalyst for the viewer's self-awareness. The picture plane itself becomes liminal, the threshold between actual space and psychology.

CHAPTER 5

“ ”: THE EXHIBITION

My intent, in designing “ ”, the exhibition of this work, was to make the installation of the show itself embody the kinds of liminal suggestion that I had pursued between elements within the picture plane, actual space, and light. This began with the title, which, as with my other works, contains indirect references to human bodies and presence. Written language is always means audible speech, but quotation marks signal a speaker separate from the implied narrator behind every instance of text. Spaces are themselves a liminal aspect of textuality, being that which separates the string of characters into words. Using spaces between the quotes allows for this indirect person to speak a pause, rather than a phrase or a word. There are ten spaces, one for each finger and because this length approximates the visual size of many words on a page, indicating the absence of something. The title is also an uncommon use of text, which should draw attention to itself in what I hope to be a perplexing instance, if only by the difference in this title from all other titles.

I took this exhibition as an opportunity to revise the displays of certain works, not as a disavowal of the original installation, but a recognition of the new context offered by the gallery



Figure 26 - Installation shot of Exhibition

space. While the clear institutionality of a designated gallery space might preclude it from ever being liminal space in and of itself, I attempted to create liminal spaces within it. If my intent, with this body of work, is to expand the operations of the picture plane to the viewer's space to invite their self-awareness, then decisions I made for individual pieces wouldn't have had the same effect when collected. As a result, I began to consider the exhibition as a light sculpture. As the translucent medium I paint with shapes light that falls upon it, and as the objects and installations I have devised shape the light and space, I used false walls, dimness, and curtains to shape the light, even going so far as to adjust the power streaming to individual rails in the track lighting.

Removing most of the ambient daylight light flooding in from the exterior of the gallery with black curtains allowed me to explore liminality in a range of dimnesses, and lights that were

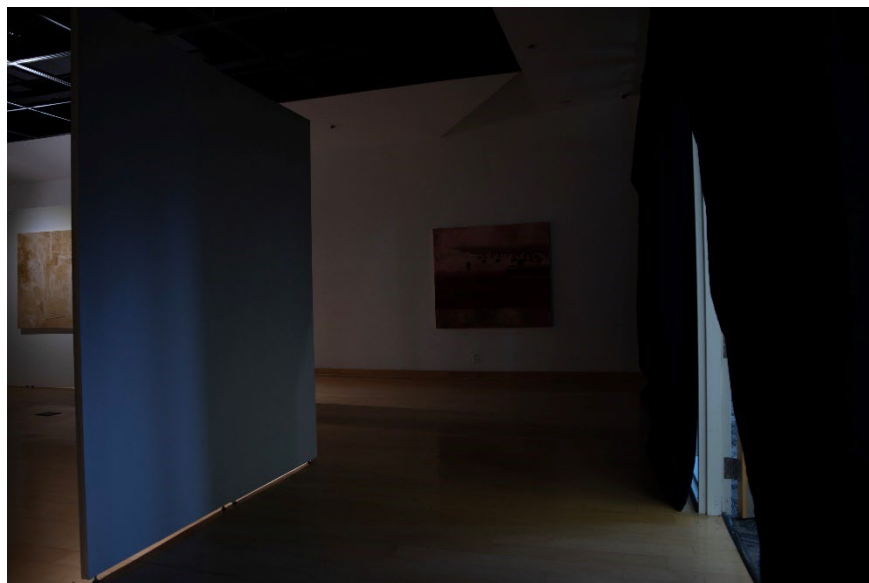


Figure 27 - Installation shot of Exhibition

themselves references to other kinds of spaces, such as the A19 bulb common to interior residential spaces. The curtains set the initial light levels of the space quite low, and I placed false walls in front of the doorway to immediately confront the viewer with the choices to not enter or to proceed to the left or to the right. A viewer that enters would, as they stood in the doorway, be confronted with their own shadow cast onto the wall before them. When you shine light through a single opening into a dark space, several pools of light are rendered on the wall in what is called an interference pattern, as the waveform of light projecting from one part of the opening interacts with light projecting from another. The darkness of the gallery's entrance allowed for the daylight doorway to project an interference pattern upon the false wall and the walls of the gallery, as visible above. A viewer at the threshold of the gallery space would have their silhouette diffracted along with it. The viewer's shadow would then, like the figures in my paintings, become an uncertain multiplicity of figures. I also set up the false walls into hallway-

like spaces so that a contrast of intensities and temperatures would be apparent around each bend, the way that like inside a house in the night, one lit room casts its light into the darkness of a hallway. As the viewer progressed through the space, they would follow their own shadow around the room, until they entered the interior of the space.

While most I used the false walls to imply subdivisions of the space: the three L shapes are enough to suggest a second interior within the interior of the gallery. A plexiglass cuboid, then, suspended near the center of the space, suggested a third interior. I chose these walls for their relationship to boundaries: the outermost walls are real, the secondmost interiors are false, and the innermost ones of the plexiglass cuboid are translucent and reflective, engraved with information that is visible but unreadable. I also the hung the show so that pieces with the most intense colors were largely on the the gallery walls, while the monochrome and limited palette works were seated mostly on the false walls. As the viewer's shadow paints the gallery's walls along the rim of the space, their reflections, and reflections of their reflections, paint the secondmost interior along the acrylic sheets of the cuboid, those attached to the wall, and,



Figure 28 - Installation shot of Exhibition

because of the more intensely lit paintings, the polish of the floor. A viewer drawn to enter the unlit cuboid in an attempt to read the text will find the sound changed, so that they struggle with the act of viewing to the sounds of their own breath.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

This style opens many paths forward for me, but I see clear areas of exploration in color, mark, and the relation between these to the narrative and allegorical suggestion of my work. I have already discussed some of the liminal resonances of brown; these resonances adjust the concepts possible to understanding any suggestion of narrative in the painting, especially with regards to color context. Ralph Mayer differentiates raw umber from raw umber by the presence of manganese, which adds violet to the red-orange-yellow spectrum of the iron-oxide within the clay (p. 74-76), giving raw umber the darker appearance. If the color I use makes a kind of comment upon reality, then so does the history of the pigment and the history of the metals and elements that make up that pigment. I plan to pursue these histories for future work and to pursue an ever deeper understanding of paint and color at the chemical level. I have developed a love of making paint over the past few years, a practice and understanding that I still feel at the beginning of. I have started research into mill designs, for example. That the brown is clay, that the clay is orangish because of iron or violetish because of manganese, means that perhaps other metals or minerals in the clay can open that identity even further. The fabric itself offers similar possibilities. I eventually want paintings that appear first brown, then a full range of color.

Similarly, I see more possibility for mark and its relationship to narrative. I have begun to explore mark at a middle scale in relation to narrative, in that the basic spatial and figural structures are beginning to blend together, differing in apprehension by their scale and placement in visual hierarchy, but the infinity of possible marks allows for a deeper exploration of this. The way I have described nesting figures together can be rendered at other scales. I imagine paintings

for which the shape of the composition suggests this blend, at the macro scale, and for which *each* mark, even those which serve to render a subtle value difference in a segment of a single stair, can offer the suggestion of figure, the suggestion of narrative. I have also considered the possibility of creating different suggestions on different tonal layers, allowing for the perception of different narratives to arise from the apprehension of those layers. In these ways, I see the possibility of this style to render images of the operatic complexity that we see in Brueghal or Mark Tansey within scales that do not elapse those of the body, offering, through liminality, ever vaster interiors.

Narrative emerges from setting, gesture, and expression – the same things that open us to empathizing with a figure, with another person. But the certainty of a one clear narrative can also close us off from empathy, as can all the social, spatial, and technological systems that we have created to organize life. These ways of organizing life govern more than our interactions; they govern our perception and worldviews. In exploring the uncertainty of the liminal, I am trying to resist this way of seeing which is a way of being. While my pathway into liminal experience arises from my experiences in and understanding of the Jewish diaspora, liminality is something that resonates across the experience of many groups and individuals. Other mediums do offer possibilities for liminal expression. For me, paint itself and paint's relationship to reality opens more possibilities than any other to perplex the viewer into seeing themselves seeing.

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