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Appearances: Towards A Synthesis of Experience and Expression in Painting

Jonathan E. Ruegg
University of Massachusetts Amherst

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APPEARANCES:
TOWARDS A SYNTHESIS OF EXPERIENCE AND EXPRESSION IN PAINTING

A Thesis Presented

By

JONATHAN ERIC RUEGG

Submitted to the Graduate School of the University of Massachusetts in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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Department of Art
APPEARANCES:
TOWARDS A SYNTHESIS OF EXPERIENCE AND EXPRESSION IN PAINTING

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Approved as to style and content by:

__________________________________
Richard Yarde, Chair

__________________________________
Jeanette Cole, Member

__________________________________
Nancy LaPointe, Member

Jeanette Cole, Graduate Program Director
Studio Art Program
Department of Art

__________________________________
William T. Oedel, Department Chair
Department of Art
I would like to thank my mother and father for their immeasurable support, prayers, and guidance all of these years. To my future wife Hilja, who has been my “foil”, as well as my refuge. I would also like to express appreciation to Chris Carlisle and the Ark, as well as Terry Rooney and Nashawannuck Gallery, for providing the opportunities to show my work.

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INTRODUCTION

Our experiences are not definable by empiricism alone. Our attempts to systematically bracket experience are frustrated by our world whose complexity, rather than come into focus, seems only to increase when put under the scrutiny of close observation. This “scientific” approach is further complicated by our philosophical, albeit self-conscious realization that the very world we are studying is far too susceptible a subject of our own making. In my estimation, this renders the world not more understood, but more mysterious. However, it is not as though the natural world we occupy is somehow amorphous and without order, but insofar as we count ourselves the primary agents of its fashioning, we find ourselves flummoxed by our inability to reconcile our experiences with our desire for knowledge. Our nature, which is at once physical and biological, cannot be extrapolated as the locus all of experience. We are in this world and yet paradoxically often feel apart from it. This world however, is not of our manufacture, and while we can leave our footprint, naming those things we see and contact, there are invisible characteristics and qualities behind and within reality that have been acknowledged by humans throughout history.

My work explores the correlation between the visible world and our human existential conception. These two things seem to me to be a certain paradox, whereas our transient, immaterial experiences have a certain weight and authority about them that gives them substance. Nature, while physical and tangible, seems to be merely a conduit whose sole purpose is to communicate to and through our experience of it. In my artistic investigations, I have gravitated towards painting, primarily because it occupies that same visible world it signifies. In painting, both the visual, sensual source of our experience and that of our expression become, through synthesis, more or less unified. It is here, within painting, that a curious relationship between the representational object and that thing represented takes stage. Over the course of my studies at
UMASS, I have explored representation through painting, and of painting, in the pursuit of a sincere expression of personal sentiment.
CHAPTER I
BIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVE

Painting, in my practice, has been more than a means of critical exploration. It has been intimately woven into an expression of my being. In work leading into this thesis project, I explored my relationship to painting in conjunction with symbolism from classic Hollywood movies. Movies, as much as paintings, had informed the visual language I worked with. Within my childhood experience, movies were more of a shared experience than painting was. In my home (as well as those of most others I knew), movies were strictly a form of entertainment, whereas paintings occupied a mysterious and less immediately accessible place. This was represented in the layout of our home as well. The television was located in the “family” room, a casual, rugged room where most time was spent. Art, however, occupied a mythological place in the “living room”. Despite its name, this room received little use. It contained immaculate furnishings and its’ comfort was strictly reserved for the entertainment of guests.

The living room, however, was more formally decorated than the television room however, art in the traditional sense was not found on the walls. My parents were of modest means, so our historical art collection was represented exclusively, through picture books which were neatly displayed and fanned out on the coffee table. Though these books were small in number, the greatest art in western history was represented. Among them, we had a book of the Sistine Chapel as well as a book containing highlights from the Louvre, places wealthier relatives had visited and thought to share by way of these books which were purchased in gift shops. Their experiences I only knew by extension, through pictures. But through those pictures, I came to know art; I traveled to Europe, to Italy, France and beyond. They inspired my imagination and informed my basic appreciation of art and painting.
Movies, in contrast to painting, always seemed more commonplace, but also more immediate in terms of experience. While working towards my BFA in painting, I began to take a more academic interest in film and through an introductory study of film-theory, began to appreciate the complexities of film, and recognize the potential for cross-pollination between it and painting. Painting movies was my way of establishing a representational connection between these two seemingly dissimilar forms. I used each medium to speak to and through the other, while simultaneously playing with their construction, inflecting those cultural forms with my own individuality.

My main interest in cinematic representation was its power of suggestion—how notwithstanding the narrative, a film’s mise en scène could convey an emotion, and through that space could itself become personified. Mise en scène, is a French cinematic term which is literally translated: “putting on stage”. The term, which is used in theater as well as film, describes production, which includes everything that appears before the camera. In painting, the analogue is, of course, its formal construction, but this also includes a certain consciousness made visible through the painting’s construction: what becomes its meaning through expression, subject, narrative, etc... I was aesthetically compelled by mood and drama, conveyed within filmic space, and how the formal arrangements seemed to harbor some intrinsic meaning and/or emotional weight—sensations which were necessarily charged by the medium’s potential for empathy, and the capacity through which it referenced the world it was a representation of. This representation is a space, a picture with definite shape and border, but also part of a world whose existence within the film always speaks of its expanse beyond the frame, and is, in this respect, boundless.

My artistic, painterly exploration of film entailed watching dvds non-linearly, sometimes in slow motion. While searching for interesting source material, I would often pause movies at
random in order to more closely examine shot construction and its corresponding “effect”. I found viewing, in this manner, a form of investigation which was itself as pleasurable as watching the movie sequentially and narratively. In the most emblematic work from this period, I painted images based on constructions I made from found movie footage. I would typically choose movies that displayed epic male-female character relationships set within a thematic context of action/adventure; especially found in Hitchcock films and James Bond movies. Given the specificity of the genre, I was not, however, interested in capturing epitomical moments from these films as much as I was interested in exploring the space within each movie.

While viewing movies for source material, I would locate moments that would resonate with a certain feeling, pause the scene and take a still of the television screen. Some photos were of character relationships, others just of place; of establishing shots or transitional shots, but mostly moments that would occur between scenes and were not crucial to the movies narrative. I was searching for hidden, empathetic moments. By watching the movies out of the narrative context, I could focus more on gesture and expression, not just of characters, but also of place. Using the stills I had taken, I made paintings based on superimpositions constructed from miscellaneous sources. Typically, I would crop figures from one scene and place them in the “landscape” or scene of another. My painting construction for this work was influenced by the back-projection technique of film-making. Back projection, or blue-screen as it is known today, is a technique of shooting the actors in front of a background which was painted or projected behind them. This technique was utilized to emulate on-location shooting within the controlled environment of a sound stage. In this way, actors could be staged in front of numerous locations within one day of shooting.

In keeping with this tradition of film-making, my own work staged the characters in front of a set, playing on the effect of back projection by theatrically separating figures and
background. In one example from this body of work, I superimposed an undressing couple from Hitchcock’s *Torn Curtain* with a nocturnal shot of a truck stalled on train tracks from a scene in the James Bond film *From Russia with Love*. I exaggerated the color and light contrast between the foreground and background to play up the convention of staging. There was an uncanny quality to the juxtaposition of an intimate, sexually charged indoor scene “filmed” outside on train tracks, enhanced by the differing qualities of light that separated the two figures from the background. The painted image was extreme in its artifice, but also very referential to the movies that inspired it. In fact, the painting had such a strong reference to film, that when it was first shown in a gallery in downtown Gainesville, many people inquired as to what movie it was from.

While my earlier work was to a large degree, illustrative, and emulative, those formal strategies facilitated reproduction of cinematic narrative through character relationship. Over time however, the figures relationship to space in my work grew with increasing significance. First, space was treated entirely separate from the figures. Much like back projection and the use of the blue screen in classic Hollywood films, I was interested in how the staging effects visually separated the narrative components into individual parts. While each component would work relationally with one another to establish a cohesive unity and wholeness of image/idea, each component could also be seen as a distinctive, separate element, therein each element would communicate specific symbolic and visual information. My work employed this consciousness of construction—of figure and background relationship, and how each compositional element would interrelate.
In subsequent paintings, I continued to employ cinematic staging devices, but I did not limit myself to photographic sources from movies. The decision to open up the work to include more source material allowed for the import of directly personal subject matter. In *The Woodsman* (fig.1), I painted an embracing couple from a western film into the landscape of a golf-course I loosely based on a photograph from a golfing magazine. The concept behind this painting was to stage a romantic drama, similar to one from an old western movie, on a golf course at night, illuminated by artificial/supernatural light. The figure’s identities were hidden. The man was cropped at the shoulder whereas the woman’s face was concealed by the embrace. In this way, their anonymity functioned to cast them as stand-ins for the viewer.

While the figures communicated a timeless, non-specificity, the golf-course served to place the embracing figures in a recognizably modern space. Although I was aware, self-consciously, that the image, especially the golf-course, harbored a subtle ironic humor and perhaps even evidenced some critical detachment on my part, the painting was also very personal and communicated a sincere expression.
Raised in Florida, I spent most of my life surrounded by resort communities and golf-courses. They were familiar spaces from my childhood though only on rare occasions did I have an opportunity to set foot on them. Golf-courses were prevalent throughout my Florida upbringing, but they were also a familiar sight on family vacations to my grandparent’s home in Columbus Ohio. Although Columbus is a large industrious city, in the 70’s, my grandparents lived on the outskirts of town, in expansive farmland that was just undergoing new development—to become what is now a large suburb. Their idyllic neighborhood was surrounded by farms, cornfields, and the Thorn Apple Country Club golf course. The golf course was a place of mythological beauty, with sweeping vistas, lush fairways, and shaded brooks traversed by plank wood bridges.

Although my father and grandfather only occasionally allowed me to accompany them on their golf outings, we would often take long walks at dusk, departing from my grandparents’ home to trace the perimeter of the course, hunting for lost golf balls embedded in the soft, rich farmland soil. That place and its essence of beauty marked my imagination deeply. Golf courses became my personal mythological place. These places of beauty and grandeur were intimate and real, and yet impenetrable. Their beauty, though experienced in richness, was more often only seen from a distance, from the outside looking in. In this respect, golf-courses functioned in the same way as the pictures that depicted them.

The more thought I gave to the role of space within the filmic paintings, the more space and by extension place, became the primary subject for my work. Through the filmic paintings, this had evolved from the process and manipulation of *mise en scène*. Once I had brought this ordering more fully into consciousness, I came to the realization that space itself was a character, not merely a setting for an event, but an actual event, powerful enough in expression to function autonomously from extraneous subjects and narrative. Golf courses provided an interesting
subject of space for my work. They were natural, but in a way, a ready-made representation of landscape. Golf courses were simultaneously artifice and real, rustic and coldly modern, and in this way, operated similarly to the stage sets I had employed from movies. However, they were also very personal, and that biographical meaning superseded any apparent visual contradiction.

A pivotal work that utilized my childhood experience of golf courses, *Dutchman’s Cove* (fig. 2) evolved as a blending of process and memory that bridged the filmic “staged” paintings to my increased interest in landscape. Culled from memory and imagination, *Dutchman’s Cove* was my first attempt at fabricating a landscape without any pre-meditated composition. Unlike all the previous film influenced paintings, I did not use any source material, nor did I make any preliminary sketches or studies. I wanted the painting to evolve organically through the process of painting. Beginning with a traditional wash made with thinned oil-paint, I made sweeping gestures across the canvas with a large brush, wiping some areas with rags along the way. This process would yield an atmospheric texture and network of mark making.

![Figure 2 Dutchman’s Cove](image)

Through editing, I would make additions and subtractions, building up transparent washes into recognizable forms. Once a theme presented itself, I would respond intuitively to the mark-making. Horizontal bands could be interpreted as horizon lines or tree lines, whereas
vertical marks could become trees, rocks, etc… The idea was to allow spaces to slowly develop through the editing process facilitated by gestural strokes from large brushes and rags. I was not concerned with establishing pictorial logic as is usually done with representational painting. I was merely interested in the construction and appearance of space. Through the painting process, I allowed areas to establish themselves independent from one another, non-contingent of any predominant pictorial logic. In this way the painting became a landscape composed of similar forms, but from differing vantages, with paradoxical natural conditions. Opposing spaces were bridged by pastoral expanses that served to smooth transitions between otherwise, disparate elements. The overall effect was similar to collage, and created a sensation of looking at pictures within pictures.

Representational painting’s use of perspective functions to approximate the way we see, whereas collage simulates cognition and memory. In my landscape explorations, multiple perspectives lead to complex spaces, conjoining traditional landscape painting technique with the conceptual functioning of collage. Collage allows for space to become challenging, richer, and in some respects, closer in value to experience. Although it unites through its formalism, collage simultaneously separates conditions of experience so that they occur out of sequence or are placed in a context wholly apart from time, turning sequential events into a singular event of occurrence. Collage also permits visual dislocation of place, scale, and proximity–all these speak of experience. In terms of memory, collage approximates the anamnesis process. Memory rarely, if ever, presents itself in a fixed way like photographic pictures. Quite the contrary, memories form and disperse in consciousness through intimations and sensations.

Allowing memory and incident to reign as a foundation for pictorial logic, I was able to concentrate solely on the character of each space individually. Furthermore, I could examine how each space operated autonomously as well as in relationship to one another. Relationships create
space and the feeling of place. When painted, that expression becomes a potential for re-lived experience, as memory locates itself within representation. I was not necessarily painting actual places, but an amalgam of memories and sensations gleaned from places and experiences that I had had. In contrast to my previous method of painting, I avoided working in a manner centered on re-creating of appearances. Instead, I facilitated the use of appearances as a means of exploring essences.

Nature is a physical place, but our experience of it is one of essences. As for the wind, we can’t see it, but we know of its presence by its effects in other things. We can hear the rustling of leaves and we can see the effect of wind on trees. Although the elements of the landscape are comprised of physical and tangible objects, regardless of that physical presence, our experience of landscape is not entirely empirical. Even though wind can be empirically deduced as moving air from study of those things it passes through; even measured in terms of the force it exerts on objects, our experiences of wind are not exclusively those of our senses nor of the realm which can be fully understood through science. Of course, one can understand the wind merely as an effect of some naturally occurring antecedent cause, but that is not how we experience it. Landscape has a presence. Its spatial arrangement affects how it is felt.

Standing before a small tree may yield an entirely different response than being in the presence of a very large tree, or a host of trees. Trees in that context are no longer just trees but become woods and woods have the power of density, and by their proximity have the capacity to enclose. I do not believe that it is just in the naming that these “woods” receive their personification. The various groupings and arrangements of the landscape are more fundamental to how they are experienced. A field divides. A tree punctuates. All things find relative values in relation to other things.
Spatial and consequently, symbolic relationships, are as natural to painting, as they are to the way we conceptualize place. When I establish a painting and a theme develops, it may not be consciously pre-mediated, but it is reflexively pre-mediated. Painting, by way of its history, is a complex representational construction. Though not limited by any intrinsic language, painting does, however, communicate due in part to the pre-existence of external, conceptual forms. In my painting *The Meadow, The Woods* (fig.3) for example, a relationship between the pastoral and the numinous is dependent on the interplay between certain historic painting conventions.

In this painting I joined an impressionist pastoral scene with an ominous forest that impinges on the picture plane like a setting from a Stephen Spielberg film. The meadow is painted in various yellows, oranges, and greens with soft dabbing touches from the brush, whereas the woods, though containing brushed textures and patterns of bark, are treated in a hard-edged, planar way, that further sets them apart from the field. The trees are backlit by green light, but while that same green evokes softness and airiness in the pastoral scene, the effect of the light behind the trees is seemingly un-natural, perhaps supernatural. The color as it occurs in one event seems commonplace, whereas its use in another alludes to something extraordinary. I was
interested in how the quality and character attributed to light could shift within a given painting, and how those lit spaces could communicate with one another.

By Contrasting impressionist, pastoral light with supernatural, numinous light, though seemingly a play on conventions, I attempted to express something deeper and more spiritual through painting. While the forms I used were authentic to my expression, this would be the last time a cinematic trope would enter my landscape work in such a direct way. I became increasingly self-conscious that such forms would seem wholly out of place, were it not for the assurance their inclusion was deliberate, from a critical position, or at the very least, through the filter of ironic detachment. Suspicious, even of my own distancing through such forms, I purposefully concentrated on entering my own work more intimately. In this way, external or self-conscious criticisms notwithstanding, I could justify any forms inclusion by virtue of its sincerity of expression. I would pour myself into my work, and empty all superfluous narrative and representational content from my painting.

My primary method for achieving sincerity of expression within my landscape work was to paint more deliberately from my current experiences of place. The filmic paintings and early landscapes were used for similar purposes, but they all contained elements that were mediated through other recognizable, representational forms; influences that were never immediate to my own personal experience. They were useful towards my evocative intentions, but they were also an unnecessary, meditative addition. In order to attain a more pure and direct expression in my work, I had to empty out subject and representation that were extraneous to this end. I began to focus on the cognitive processes between experience and memory, where intimations are received, processed, and slowly brought to consciousness. In terms of landscape, how local spaces enter into awareness of place and how that space possesses certain feeling and form became crucial.
Having spent most of my life in Florida, its local sensations had been permanently burned into my consciousness and likewise were the most immediate of my space/place lexicon. It was my desire, however, to discover and express how New England was affecting my awareness of its spaces. Through painting landscape, I could reflect upon the sensation that accompanies establishing home in a new place, here in Amherst and New England.

In a work that I consider to be my first “New England” painting, *Penumbra* (fig.4), spaces appeared in the painting that suggested the spatial and evocative attributes of my new locale. Most apparent to me by way of contrast with my previous home Florida, *Penumbra* registers the sensations conveyed through sweeping valleys and the elevated expanse of rolling hills. In comparison to Florida, New England offers a protracted view of landscape. Because of Florida’s flatness, space is always seen linearly, and depth is typically restricted by any vertical projection. In order to see deeper space in Florida, any trees or other vertical obstructions must be located far in the distance. Space, in that respect, is constructed by the field that defines that expanse. In contrast, New England, by virtue of its combination of valleys and hillsides, is like Florida, linear, but its planar construction (trees for example) is elevated by hills into overlapping partitions that recede upwards and outwards into space increasing the sensation of breadth. In *Penumbra* this effect is strangely merged with my Floridian spatial affect, whereas land masses and verticals recede atmospherically in space, but they do so flatly and planarly, as if every component of the landscape were seen separate from one another, yet from the same vantage and elevation. While the spatial unity of the painting is somewhat amorphous, exaggerated by the disconnection of vertical planes from one another, they are held together by a consistency of light, character, and mood, sensations that I also attribute to my New England experience.
Unlike Florida, New England is often overcast, and by that light, its forms are made more subtle, their hues closer in range, yet richer in depth. *Penumbra* captures my experience of this specificity of place, but also merges with an atmospheric anomaly that is common in the valley. On days of mixed sunshine, with the skies occupied by large, low altitude clouds, there can be large expanses of shadows cast over the landscape. This can effectively throw entire areas of land into deep mid-tone while the horizon may still evidence sunshine and blue sky. Similarly, my observations have found that frequently at dusk, there is a brief period of intense, dark chromatic effect upon the landscape while the sky (viewed facing east, away from the setting sun) remains steely blue. While cloud-shadows and dusk present two differing atmospheric conditions, their effect can register the same appearance and feeling. Painting merges the two seamlessly as one experience. Either/or can be alluded to within *Penumbra*, though the painting does not differentiate them for the viewer.

While I consistently utilize atmospheric conditions as dynamic forms to convey mood and place, I have also experimented extensively with expression through paint. This invariable entails deference to those painters in history who have already solved certain problems, and have discovered through their work, intrinsic characteristics and attributes of painting that are useful towards expression of sentiment. While I do not deliberately emulate any specific painter, I am
indebted to their craft. Their knowledge is remnant in the paintings they have left behind. Moreover, I am drawn to certain periods and painters because in their works I see my own humanness. This influence upon me is rarely due to narrative, but one of mood and feeling expressed through the handling of light and atmosphere through the paint. History does not just provide a practical guide for the medium; it is a record of humankind’s desires and longings.

Dutch painting has always had a strong influence on my sensibilities. My exposure to Rembrandt in the fourth grade made an impact, but not as great as Vermeer, who’s Woman with Balance, hung in our home, over the sofa. At some time, my mother had found this reproduction in a magazine and cut it out, forgoing the natural rectangular composition for an oval one, which my father adhered to a decorative wooden plaque. Covered in a heavy coat of polyurethane, the art-object that my parents had jointly created shared a similar, albeit exaggerated, glazed surface the Dutch were so keen on using during the 17th century. The slick glass-like finish “sealed” everything under its protective skin. In Vermeer’s work, I attributed this to his exercise of control of his craft. In metaphoric terms, it represented the very thing it signified through the painting’s narrative, mainly virtue; temperance.

In my paintings, however, I utilize glazing and varnishing in order to enhance stillness as a predominant mood. This effect has entered my work on numerous occasions and in varying subtleties. In Veil (fig.5), the homogeneity of surface serves to enclose the entire space in an even-ness of feeling. This effect heightens the atmospheric quality of the image by attributing to the painting an over-all sense of feeling in the painting’s facture. In this way, my mark making is suspended, and hidden within thin, glazed layers. This effect is less like wrapping then it is like embedding. The landscape that appears in Veil is dark, quiet, and gauzy, its layers like the paint itself, suspended within its compositional matter.
Similarly, in paintings such as *Penumbra*, and *Cascade*, the smooth surfaces serve to encompass the painting into its “picture”. While in some respects this may reference my painterly influences as experienced through reproductions, my paintings always feel like paintings to me, and in that respect they feel more physical, a product of my engagement with the material in time, spanning time. Nevertheless, the uniform treatment of the paint and restraint of its physical application to the canvas serves to invite the viewer to a certain kind of looking, one that forgoes surfaces. These paintings are views from a distance, but they are also viewed from a distance.

![Veil](image)

**Figure 5 Veil**

In subsequent paintings I made atmospheric effects the dominant thrust, and this opened up the possibility for me to further unite expression with painting. In painting, experience mingles with memory and becomes represented through paint, which is itself a sensuous act. In painting the clouds in *Thunderhead*, my experience painting, became more closely aligned with my experience of clouds in their essence. While establishing the essence of clouds, my consciousness, and memory worked in unison upon the canvas to convey a feeling of clouds. My brushwork, fluid in some areas, dry and scumbled in others, is not orchestrated in order to conjure a picture of a sky, but to approximate the feeling of sky and atmosphere. I achieve a unity of my experience and expression through painting that approximates my empathetic relationship to
actual sky. The joy and wonderment I experience from landscape is seemingly impossible to capture within painting, and yet I have a deep seeded longing to live in that wonderment, to affirm it, share it and prolong its experience.

I have never seen a picture or a painting that somehow registers experience with the fullness of the actual thing itself. It is apparent to me that this deferment of experience is not a problem for the artist to solve, but somehow a revelation about human existence. The paintings I make in relation to wonderment cannot ever exceed that wonderment, especially the object of that wonderment. In this way, the painting always points to the experience outside of itself. It is a proclamation of beauty whose fulfillment is impossible within the painting.

While I do not consider my painting to be a directly religious expression, my Christian faith is fundamental to my conviction about representation, especially in regards to how as a personal expression, painting’s integrity is dependent upon the sincerity of the painter. In this way, I view the act of painting to be analogous to my act of Christian worship, where the content and worth are not measured merely in terms of liturgy and aesthetics, but by the spirit of that expression. Nowhere has the necessity of humility been more apparent than in my own wrestling with corporate religious worship where one is bound to a community of other believers. Suddenly, one’s worship of God, at once personal and individual in its expression, is joined to a community of fellow Christians, whom while sharing certain unequivocal beliefs, may differ in terms of its aesthetic expression. Worshippers in today’s evangelical churches, though they may worship in spirit and truth, they do so nonetheless through the aid of spaces and objects, which by nature also reflect specific cultural conventions, its artifacts and affectations.

For some time, I have contemplated the use of symbols in the church. Most churches I have attended have a cross situated somewhere on the altar, or hanging over it, in order to direct
the worshipper’s attention to Christ’s passion and salvific work. Some churches, however, are more ornately decorated, and the sanctuary is filled with symbolic objects and imagery whose addition is purposed to transport the worshipper into communion with God. A Baptist church I attended in Amherst had plastic trees adorning each side of the sanctuary. Though used merely as decoration, I pondered their symbolic value in relation to actual articles of worship. While the trees were plainly artificial, I became curious about the role of symbols and the valuation of meaning they held.

Did the plastic tree serve to bring the sanctuary of nature into the sanctuary of worship? The plastic trees were only possible because they were a signification of real trees; nonetheless they were fakes, imposters that I could not reconcile. I then turned to the cross and asked myself the same questions—then to the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. This was not an attempt towards revelation through the justification of plastic trees; on the contrary, I was using my established Christian faith to understand the role of symbols in worship, as well as in art. I found that in all respects of my worship of God, symbols were only as powerful as the meaning I allowed them. Conventions were merely that; consensus. Therein there may be truth, but it is only through personal apprehension and expression that those forms receive their significance for the individual. In this respect, those conventions, like a relationship with God, are volitional in nature.

My landscape paintings provide a place where I reconcile conventions of signification with my own apprehension of experience, thereby fusing experience with expression. While my work is constituted by the play of pictorial conventions, the encompassing emotional read of each work is a singular one. Primary to all of my landscapes is a dedication to the painting’s own essence. While painting represents instances instantaneously, the overall feel of the painting, its field, communicates yet another layer of meaning, one that has the power to affect all meaning...
within the work. The overall feel of the painting is in its conviction, comprised of its mood and its sentiment and acts as a built in emotional lens with which to read the whole. In my work, this attribute is achieved in two corresponding ways: essence is established pictorially by the interplay of forms to indicate light as a presence, and materially, through the handling of the paint and surface.

![Figure 6 Burn](image)

Light has always been an important attribute in my work, but the quality and character of light itself has become a dominant focus in my landscapes. Light is not only instrumental to perception, but it is a necessary element for the sustenance of all biological life. Symbolically, light speaks of illumination, of revelation, and is an intrinsic attribute of God throughout Holy Scripture. Historically, in Romantic painting, especially that represented by the Hudson River School, light signified the glory of creation and stood as a metaphor for its magnitude. Light was not merely an attribute within a given landscape, but was its conditional source by which every existing element was contingent.

In *Burn* (fig.6), a light penetrates so intensely that it disintegrates (or absorbs) all other matter into itself. There is little distinction made between forms of solid matter and that of
immaterial light. I worked within a monochromatic hue, as well as a tight mark-making range in order to imply a “sameness” of the landscape; that every present form was of a singular source, that source being light.

While visual representation relies on conditional relationships in order to establish differences such as night and day, it is possible through painting, utilizing multiple perspectives and light sources to achieve a character and feel of light as opposed to a picture of light. My most recent work and its predominant focus on cloud forms, has allowed for the inclusion of multiple qualities of light within one painting through a process that incorporates the expressive attributes of painting into the creation of forms. Similar to Thunderhead these new cloudscapes are a synthesis of experience and painterly expression, but whereas Thunderhead developed into a “natural” landscape, with land masses and horizon line, the newest work was concerned only with the arrangement of forms in order to establish light and atmosphere as forces. This exchange is corollary to the painting process, where light and forms are birthed in direct response to the mark making. Neither the act of painting nor the establishment of identifiable forms is subordinate to each other. Action and event become nearly seamless in the creative process and painting becomes a physical embodiment of expression. Undirected towards any specific conclusion, my approach with these paintings was action; a choreographic response to the emergence of forms.
In *Flood* (fig.7), turbulent painterly marks swirl in concentric through the composition, pushing and pulling in space to establish points of view that suggest both above and bellows, clouds and abyss. This duality is further enhanced by way of monochrome. *Flood’s* bluish palette encompasses a spectrum ranging from deep aquatic blues to warm violets. Inspired in part by the Genesis account of creation, *Flood* signifies the creation of expanse; the separation of water from water, of the deep from the skies. Mirroring the story of creation, I unified function and form in order to convey an ethereal materiality of my subject. Like *Burn*, *Flood* was developed organically from painterly expression. Gestural marks established energy within the painting and further painting simply functioned as the editing of those movements. It was my desire to merge my process, representation and experience in such a fluid manner that those painterly marks would become things, and objects would be born from paint. During the process, I felt more immediately connected to the forms that emerged and they felt more like a bi-product of my own expression. In this way, painting became a channeling of energy and mood, and correspondingly the paintings also became more kinetic in their structure.

My most successful synthesis of expression and painterly forms appears in *Cloudbreak* (fig.8), my most recent painting. Although many of my paintings evolved from a similar process,
Cloudbreak is the most pure example of synthesis between my process of painting, the appearance of forms, and my real time experience during that process. In terms of composition, its formation happened as a direct response to gestural mark-making. As I had done in previous work, I responded to individual forms and spaces as they appeared to me, but rather than distinguish them through the use of hard edges, I allowed the paint and the corresponding brush work to remain loose, sometimes scumbled and quite thin. The looseness of paint gave primacy to the power and energy behind the forms represented and made manifestly tangible their invisible qualities and attributes I had only alluded to in previous work.

While the composition of Cloudbreak is divided by hue into two main halves down the middle, brush work weaves an intricate web across colors, which helps establish unity amongst disparate parts. Through softer edges, the collage elements of the work are nearly imperceptible. Even though spaces fit in juxtaposition with one another, they do so organically. That unity, which was achieved mainly through monochrome in Burn and Flood, is attained in Cloudbreak through uniformity of expression; brush-work and edges. In representation, the forms that emerge share a likeness as well. Tempestuous explosions of water form mist into clouds. Through gestural marks, all the elements within the painting share a uniformity of power and energy. Cloud-forms embody as much tangible weight and presence as rocks. Vapor and matter seem to exist as a means of witness to the light and energy that form and pass through them.

What culminated in Cloudbreak, was a discovery that the object of painting is more directly related to those experiences that inspire my act of painting. While painting is always bracketed by its representation and expression, those attributes cannot be clearly delineated. There is never a perfect representation of experience, nor a complete experience of reality. We are neither omnipresent, nor omniscient. Though painting is contingent upon the self-expression of the individual, as well as its own historical, self-referential attributes, it does however,
emphatically point towards external realities and influences. Expression through painting is an
affirmation of beauty that exists before, and apart from painting. While the act of painting
remains separate from those sensations it represents, I enter into being within “landscape”
through the sincerity of my expression. Sentiment and sincerity, through the act and expression
of painting, do not merely symbolize experience, but transubstantiate it.

As I paint, I am not merely symbolizing experience but engaging in a process empirically
embedded within that same visible world I am signifying. Responding to forms and spaces
within painterly marks is analogous to the way in which I dialogue with and conceptualize
experience. It is as much a cognitive activity as it is a sensuous one. It is counterpart a response
to nature, whose beauty I find so mystifying I question my ability to will it otherwise. Nature is a
messenger, not by chance or human fabrication, misrecognition, or false-consciousness, but by
divine authority. What lies behind landscape, alluded to by trees and skies is an essence, a
numinous power; something I have come to understand through my faith as a revelation of God’s
incomprehensible majesty. My stewardship as an artist is to merely acknowledge this discovery.
Fig. 8 Cloudbreak
TECHNICAL INFORMATION

My canvases are hand-built from pine 1x2’s and ¼ round molding strips. I use both Daniel Smith and Utrecht brand #10 canvas, as well as Daniel Smith 10.5 oz Belgian Linen. Canvases are stretched taught and stapled to the back of stretcher bars with enough extra canvas left in case of future re-stretching. Prior to Fall 2007 I primed my canvases with Daniel Smith Acrylic Gesso. I primed each canvas three times, sanding with 120 grit sandpaper between coats. Due to the high absorption of acrylic gesso, and the “sinking” of oil colors, I switched in the fall 2008 to traditional oil priming methods. Each canvas is first treated with rabbit skin glue, lightly sanded, then covered with two coats of Utrecht oil-primer. I allowed each coat of primer to dry approximately 2-3 weeks before sanding. The final surface is sanded to a smooth finish and dusted with a drafting brush before toning.

For all the work included in my thesis show, I have toned the canvas similar to tradition, using a combination of earth pigments, usually raw umber, yellow ochre, and/or ivory black, thinned with odorless mineral spirits, and applied using cotton rags and large brushes ranging from #10 flats to 2” house painting brushes. While the process of toning was traditionally utilized for creating an even “mid-tone” to facilitate sketching, I treated toning as the beginning of the actual painting process, integrating the imprimatura in my application of the toning paint. The paint was worked thinly, in an additive and subtractive process that established the atmosphere from which forms and spaces emerged.

My palette is quite broad in range, and over the last three years I have experimented widely with various brands and pigments. I use flake white as my foundational white paint. Besides being the traditional white used by painters until the 20th century, flake white is also more reflective and more durable than the more modern titanium white. *Sennelier*, a French
manufacturer of artist’s materials, is my oil-paint brand of choice. Their colors are vibrant and the consistency is like firm butter. I also am very fond of Blockx. Budget constraints often force me to compromise with certain colors, especially heavily used ones. I find that Winsor & Newton and Rembrandt are both high-quality yet affordable substitutes for my preferred brands.

Although I often limit my palette to include only those colors needed for each individual work, the following is a comprehensive list of my oil colors:

- Flake White
- Ivory Black
- Blue Black
- Lemon Yellow
- Cadmium Yellow
- Cadmium Orange
- Cadmium Red
- Yellow Ochre
- Raw Sienna
- Raw Umber
- Venetian Red
- Transparent Iron Oxide Red
- Quinacridone Red
- Ultramarine Blue
- Cobalt Blue
- Cerulean Blue
- Phthalo Blue
- Green Earth
- Perm. Green Med.
- Chromium Oxide Green
My most common brushes are white hog-hair, or Chung-King bristle brushes. I prefer Isabey brand, whose bristles are softer and more resilient than others I have tried. I do utilize less expensive brands for underpainting, as my technique, which can be aggressive, has a tendency to eat through brushes within one session. Creative Mark white bristle brushes are well suited for “sketching” and are very economical. I typically paint with filberts and rounds in even sizes ranging between 2 and 12. At the conclusion of every painting session, I condition each brush with “Master’s Brush Cleaner” after first washing in odorless mineral spirits.

While painting, I work in the traditional method from lean to fat. In early stages of under painting, paints are lightly thinned with odorless mineral spirits. Subsequent layers of paint are enriched with increasing amounts of cold-pressed linseed oil. Since the fall of 2008, I have utilized a traditional oil painting medium for final painting layers consisting of damar varnish, stand oil, and gum turpentine in a ratio of 1:1:3.