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The Unfixedness of It

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THE UNFIXEDNESS OF IT

A Thesis Presented by

KERRY O’GRADY

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
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My drawings contemplate the unfixed nature of my experience. I draw from a state of uncertainty about the relationship between self and space, between a moment of experience and the one that follows it. My process involves intuitive mark-making in which instances of perception are indeterminate and discontinuous. I draw from the experience of unhinged moments, from silence and stillness, and from the indefinable, inarticulable, interstitial moments of perception between those that can be concretely described.

The immediacy of drawing, the direct engagement with the mark on the surface, is central to my work. Intuitive mark-making is a way of engaging as directly as possible with the indeterminate nature of my experience. As the drawn marks allude to a once-fleeting present, the layers of marks interact to remind me of the non-linear nature of time and the unfixed nature of experience. The making of the mark punctuates a fragment of experience, dividing it into before and after the mark. The esoteric nature
of drawing, the variety of marks engaging on and within the surface, the ethereal traces, the engagement with the space implied by the panel, the discontinuities revealed between adjacent drawings on panel, and the implied experience compressed in the seams between the panels address multiple and unresolveable ways of experiencing a moment in a space.
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INTRODUCTION

My work contemplates the unfixed nature of my experience. I am drawing from a state of uncertainty about the relationship between self and space, between a moment of experience and the one that follows it. My process involves intuitive mark-making in which instances of perception are indeterminate and discontinuous. I draw from the experience of unhinged moments, from silence and stillness, and from the indefinable, inarticulable, interstitial moments of perception between those that can be concretely described.

In *Eye and Mind*, Merleau-Ponty suggests that our ability to see is intertwined with our ability to move, so the nature of experience needs to account for both our physical sense of place and our ocular perception.\(^1\) The origin of our awareness then oscillates between the body and our vision, so our moments of perception take on discontinuities, shifts in the point of origin. These shifts unhinge moments of perception, creating fragmented narratives and giving rise to questions about the continuity within our experiences.

I am interested in the unresolvable nature of the relationship between a space and a body in it. In *The Wisdom of Insecurity*, Alan Watts asks, “Where do I begin and end in space?”\(^2\) I question the distance between self and space. My awareness of the space I occupy shifts from the immediate space that I can reach or the volume of air I displace to all the space

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I can see or hear if I stretch my senses to their furthest distance, or imagine it even further.

The questions I have about the relationship between a space and a body also involve questions about the continuity of time, the linear relationship between sequential moments. Any experience involves both a sense of place and a sense of time, and somewhere within those relationships, incidents of perception become unfixed from one another. If one moment is spatially or temporally unhinged from the next, there is no knowledge of a connected narrative, a continuum, or a causal relationship. Previous information becomes disconnected in perceiving the present.

My drawings explore the problems and conditions of the indeterminate aspects of temporal and spatial experience. The esoteric nature of drawing, the variety of marks engaging on and within the surface, the ethereal traces, the engagement with the space implied by the drawing surface, the discontinuities revealed between adjacent drawings on panel, and the implied experience compressed in the seams between the panels address multiple and unresolveable ways of experiencing a moment in a space.
The immediacy of drawing, the direct engagement with the mark on the surface, is central to my work. Intuitive mark-making is a way of engaging as directly as possible with the indeterminate nature of my experience. I am interested in the way drawing conveys the presence of the creator in a space implied by the surface. Mark-making embodies the spontaneous movement that made it. In her essay *To Draw is to be Human*, Emma Dexter quotes art critic Jean Fisher’s point that “[t]o draw is never a transcription of a thought . . . but rather a formulation or elaboration of the thought itself at the very moment it translates itself into an image.”

This work belongs to the tradition of mark-making that stems from automatic writing, a technique employed by the Surrealists in which a person would engage in writing an unedited train of thought, inviting free associations in the process. As in automatic writing where the writing spills forth uncensored and unedited to reveal truths held in the subconscious, I aim to begin drawing with marks that are uninfluenced by expectation in a continuously unfolding, responsive process. The spontaneity and free associations of automatic writing translate into lines and marks that invite an exploration of the unfixed, ephemeral nature of present awareness.

The lack of expectation in the process of intuitive mark-making leads to multiple potential interpretations in the finished drawing. The multiple possible readings of the marks allow for the acknowledgement of a coexistence of multiple and differing

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relationships among the emergent elements. I have come to understand that my work is more about unfixedness when the marks are made without a specific illustrative intention, rather than when I deliberately pursue a goal of conveying a sense of indeterminacy.

To fully adopt the ideas of automatic writing, the marks in my drawings would be created without any sense of expectation and would be left unedited. My process, however, involves numerous sessions of mark-making. When I return to a drawing, my process becomes responsive. I look at the unfinished drawing and then re-engage with it through further mark-making to explore the relationships among emergent elements. My aesthetic preference for indeterminate images influences both my exploration of the relationships within the drawing and the next layer of marks. I sense that a drawing is complete when the experience of looking at the drawing resonates with the experience of making it.
TRACE AND PLACE

My drawing process involves mark-making as place-making, and so is related to the initial human urge to make marks. The urge to create a mark comes from a desire to record a moment of contact with the surface. Cave drawings and many drawings made since deliver the same proclamation, “I am here.” Each mark spontaneously records a relationship between self and place at a certain moment in time. Evidence of one instant of awareness is manifest in the mark. As I engage in mark-making, I record impulses and impressions, creating a record of fleeting present moments. Throughout my drawing process, the variety and layers of accumulated marks explore different ways of being “here.”

Early cave drawings make manifest in two-dimensional marks the projected imaginary images of the creator. While I view them, I feel both a sense of permanence and a sense of fluid unfixedness. The moment of the making is gone, the relationship of the creator to the place of creation has changed drastically, the relationship of the new viewer to the image is completely different. The marks are extremely concrete records of the past while also serving as a reminder that everything changes constantly. Looking at images of cave drawings, I oscillate between viewing them as studies of an inaccessible past time and perceiving that the hand of the artist remains very much present in the images. The cave drawings both assert “I am here” and provide a trace of a past moment, pointing directly to the transitoriness of the relationship between a person, a place, and a time.

I think about the idea of trace when I draw. As the drawn marks allude to a once-fleeting present, the layers of marks interact to remind me of the non-linear nature of time and
the unfixed nature of experience. The making of the mark punctuates a fragment of experience, dividing it into before and after the mark.

Alan Watts describes memory as a wake or trace in the present of an irretrievable moment. He describes experience as always dying and becoming past. A mark immediately becomes a trace of the past. The culmination of marks in these drawings evokes a sense of memory for me. It is not a memory of anything in particular, but a nostalgic awareness of the ephemeral nature of the present.

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4 Watts, 83.
I equate Gaston Bachelard’s writing about immensity in *The Poetics of Space* with the concept of unfixedness. Unfixedness involves a wavering of boundaries, a fluidity in the relationship between an experience and the experiencer. It involves a vagueness in self-locating, in the relative scale of self and place.

Bachelard writes that a phenomenology of immensity “need not wait for the phenomena of the imagination to take form and become stabilized in completed images,” and then, “in other words, since immense is not an object, a phenomenology of immense would refer us directly to our imagining consciousness. In analyzing images of immensity, we should realize within ourselves the pure being of pure imagination.”5 If a phenomenology of immense would refer to our imagining consciousness, it seems that processes deriving from automatic writing would provide access to the idea of the immense, and of other vast and unfixed concepts.

In discussing the poetic image, Alan Watts writes that the truth of an image is revealed in the act of vanishing, as the poet takes away its static solidity and makes it ephemeral, “[f]or the poets have seen the truth that life, change, movement, and insecurity are so many names for the same thing.”6 Bachelard also discusses the fleeting and instant nature of the poetic image. He proposes that the poetic image is not drawn up from memory,

6 Watts, 41.
but in its instantaneous arrival, happens to resonate with memory. It is the instantaneousness and fleetingness of the poetic image that interests me and that resonates with my idea about the unfixedness of experience.

Through my process of intuitive mark-making, I attempt to engage in the ephemeral nature of the present. Moments of mark-making are barely recognizable before the mark is already a memory. The marks repeatedly record fleeting instants that immediately vanish. As marks accumulate on the surface, I often think about the immensity of the infinitely accumulating collection of these moments. My drawings are an intimate site for a meditation that allows my imagination to expand on the fleeting present and the vast collection of ephemeral present moments.

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7 Bachelard, xvi.
SILENCE

Silence is important in my work. It is a significant part of my process and of the experiences that inform my content and my aesthetic. The austerity of silence allows me to explore the unfixed nature of spatial and temporal experience. Silence implies vastness, and in the vastness of silence, elusive fragments of memory can be as present as immediately tangible situations. Time expands and collapses in a non-linear, discontinuous way. Nearby sound fixes me into the present. Uninfluenced by any such sound, the connections between memory, imagination, and sensory experience multiply.

Bachelard says, “As soon as we become motionless, we are elsewhere; we are dreaming in a world that is immense. Indeed, immensity is the movement of motionless man. It is one of the dynamic characteristics of quiet daydreaming.” I feel similarly about silence. Once we are silent, our relationship to both time and space becomes transient.

I find silence in the austere whiteness and ethereal marks of the panels. The indeterminate marks, weaving in and out of the whiteness, hang in the air like the last resonance of an echo.

In Arvo Pärt’s album Pärt: Alina - Spiegel im Spiegel, the silence between the notes hangs heavy with resonance, extending the interstitial space and conjuring connections between the present and obscured memory. I relate the silence between the notes in this album to the breaks between my drawings on panel. While the plane of the panel sits over an

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8 Bachelard, 184.
inch off the wall to suggest that the space created in the panel extends indefinitely, the abutting panels compress this plane, collapsing time and space between the adjacent panels. Depending on the discontinuities between panels, this collapsed time and space can seem to contain different types and amounts of undisclosed experience. This undisclosed experience is my analogy to the silence between the notes on *Alina - Spiegel im Spiegel*.

The rhythm of Arvo Pärt’s music frames the silence, giving variable amounts of distance between distinct notes of tangible experiences. The notes guide the listener through the indeterminate silence. I seek the same relationship in my work, between the marks and the ground, and between the panels and the spaces between them. As in the series *trace, echo*, the marks navigate the white ground of the panel, and various marks engage the ground differently. They activate the undrawn space of the panel and bring about multifarious relationships among the undrawn space, the traces of marks, and the immediate marks. The rhythm of the marks varies, creating varying periods of suspension and information, like in *Alina - Spiegel im Spiegel*. 

![Figure 1. three panels from trace, echo, 2009. graphite and milk paint on panel, each panel 11” x 11.”](image)
I decided to draw on panel after encountering a problem working on paper. When hung directly on the wall, the marks drawn to the edge of a sheet of paper end abruptly on the wall plane where the edge of the paper meets the wall. It is implied that marks drawn to the edge of a panel, however, continue in the extended plane implied by the panel’s surface. The drawing can extend to or from the unseen area of the plane beyond the surface of the panel.

The drawings are created as series of panels. I often start a number of panels as one continuous drawing, and then rework them separately or in different combinations. Recombining the panels in response to an exploration of the marks and emerging spaces is a part of my intuitive editing process. A significant part of my process involves playing with the arrangement of panels to engage with the continuities and discontinuities between them. The resulting groups of panels are resolvable in relation to one another, collectively describing discontinuous, fragmented moments of an experience.

Within a group, panels are often presented adjacent to one another. The seams between the panels create discontinuities that relate to discrete moments of perception. With these discontinuities, I intend to suggest shifts of perspective, compressed time, or undisclosed moments.
The panels are all eleven inches high, but they vary in width, and the space between them sometimes extends to a couple of inches. They are presented in arrangements of up to seven panels long. The types of discontinuity between panels vary, so the space between them implies different types of undisclosed information. Due to the variation in panel width, in the arrangement of panels, and in the quality of the alluded experience between panels, the rhythm panel-to-panel, edge-to-edge, is variable and creates periods of suspension, silence, and stillness, and moments of compressed movement.

The size of the panels is small and intimate, asking the viewer to come close to the work, and then to enter it. The scale also references the vignettes of visual memory or imagination, the discontinuous images that describe an experience. I chose eleven inches as the height because I found that panels taller than fourteen inches began to reference the torso and not an ocular experience, therefore highlighting a different discourse of associations between mark-making and the body.
The panels themselves are traces of singular moments, or contain traces of several singular moments within them. The larger pieces that are comprised of several panels present these traces in relation to one another and present a composite, but not linear or continuous, description of fragmented nature of perception.
MATERIALS

I choose specifically to draw in graphite because it allows for a very direct approach to drawing. The pencil is an extension of the body that makes the marks. The directness of drawing with graphite allows for responding to the texture and resistance of the surface. I feel I can engage fully in the visceral manipulation of the marks and explore their placement within the space implied by the surface.

The transitions and variety of effects graphite can create, from tonal areas to bold gesture to delicate lines, suit my approach to drawing. Graphite also allows for deliberate undrawing. It is important to me that graphite can be worked subtractively, either through erasure or wiping out, as much of my mark-making is done subtractively. The undrawn, erased lines leave a different sort of trace than the drawn mark, evidence of their shifting placement.

I also feel that drawing with a pencil resonates throughout my history and allows me to be vaguely cognizant of past experiences. The smell of graphite, like many smells that evoke memory, draws the past out of the presumed continuum of experience, allowing my memory to mingle freely with my present experience.

I choose to work in the gray of graphite because it allows for the ambiguity implicit in an exploration of the unfixed. The relationships among different marks, between tonal areas and trace marks, gesture and delicate lines, are intended to be unfixed and often discontinuous. Drawing these marks in a color palette would start to engage the plasticity of color and the particularities of color in atmospheric perspective. It would
also create a categorization of marks based on criteria other than the inherent qualities of the mark-making. The relationships between the marks within each panel, and between different panels, would become fixed. The grays of graphite allow for greater fluidity in the relationships.

The white ground is either a homemade gesso of marble powder and hide glue, a casein-based milk-paint, or some combination of the two. These materials are old-fashioned and don't include solvents or chemicals commonly found in contemporary art-making materials. My preference to work without the distraction of those ingredients is similar to my preference to work in silence. The contemporary scents of chemical products fixes me to the present, while my discomfort with chemical exposure sets me at a remove from my materials.

The different grounds offer surface qualities that accept the graphite in a variety of ways to encourage the marks to sink into an implied depth, float on the surface, or hover in between. They also respond differently to working subtractively and leave different sorts of traces of past marks. In the panels with marble powder, marks on the soft, dusty surface transition gently in and out of tone and line, often leading to ethereal images that explore the change in space implied by tonal areas and the white of the ground. The surface has an earthy quality that sometimes cracks or creates air bubbles, and the texture often starts the drawing, a crack working as a delicate line to start the responsive process. In the milk-paint panels, the application of the ground records the path of the brush. The mark-making begins with the application of several layers of ground, creating
strata of brush marks. Once sanded, the history of the brush marks remains as a pattern in the sheen. The first graphite marks sometimes respond to the sheen.

The process of mixing and applying the grounds feels like a sort of alchemy. The materials must be handled carefully in order to mix and adhere properly. I enjoy the attention they require; the quiet ritual of preparing the ground relates my practice to another time.

Working with wood offers me another opportunity to feel a sense of history resonate through my process. Constructing the panels requires patience and introduces the possibility of a nearly meditative moment in my practice. Each panel requires so much care that when I am done constructing the panels, I already feel a relationship with the surfaces upon which I will draw. The wooden panels also offer an objecthood that gives weight to ethereal imagery of the drawings. They are concrete as panels, while they are indeterminate as images.
INFLUENCES

In the mid-1920’s, Andre Masson and some of his contemporaries translated the ideas of automatic writing to automatic drawing. During the period when Masson was associated with the Surrealist Movement, he created drawings in which his free-flowing lines attempted to “circumvent rational processes” and explore the subconscious. While his drawings often result in recognizable forms with sexual content that don’t relate to my work, the concept that they flow from the subconscious onto the page informs much of the lineage of mark-making with which I identify.

I look at Cy Twombly’s work to explore the relationship between the conceptual basis of mark-making and the evidence of the concept in the resulting marks. I am particularly interested his work from the periods when his marks are non-objective rather than illustrative, liberated from the fixed meaning of drawn images or words. In such works, his marks are simultaneously the formal and conceptual elements of the work. I find this to be particularly true of the grey paintings from the late sixties and early seventies, which Simon Schama describes as a “‘auto’ or proto-calligraphy.” In these drawings, the marks are everything; the entire image is a trace of Twombly’s movement.

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I engage with the layering of marks in some of Twombly’s earlier work from the fifties (and certain later works such as the Gaeta series from the mid-eighties) as composites of traces from many moments interacting with each other. In these drawings and paintings, Twombly draws intuitively, inviting free associations among his indeterminate marks. The marks look like discrete fragments of an experience. Attempts to resolve them within one work permit many permutations and resist the idea of a fixed interpretation. I see the layers of marks in these works as a palimpsest of fragmented vignettes. This sort of fragmented record of history resonates with me as an accurate description of perception as a series of incomplete, unresolved glimpses.

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I am also interested in the work of contemporary New York-based painter Jill Moser, whose mark-making and surfaces raise similar questions for me the aforementioned works by Cy Twombly. Moser’s marks seem to emerge from layers of the past to surface in the present, asking questions about the relationship between the obscured marks and the more immediate ones. Time is implied in her surface, but it is an unfixed history, obscured and redrawn repeatedly at discontinuous, albeit similar, moments. As art critic Lara Taubman describes it, “[t]he key to her thought process is that nothing is fixed.”

I appreciate the unpredictable gesture of Moser’s work, which has been described as a sort of automatic drawing. In describing her direct approach to drawing, she referred to what Philip Guston called the “bareness of drawing, how it locates, suggests, and

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14 Image as reproduced in Roger Boyce and Anne LaPrade, Masters of the Obvious. (Amherst, MA: Hampden Gallery, 2004).

discovers.” The I-am-here of Moser’s mark-making parallels that of cave drawing. The assertions of her marks collect as a palimpsest of moments, each mark punctuating the moment of its making and leaving a trace, culminating in visual echoes of I-am-here . . . and here . . . and here . . .

In her series Parings (2003-2004) and Stills (2005), Moser’s work is presented in diptychs or groups. She describes her series Stills as a collective with no set sequence. “Each painting has its own inherent character but also has a kinship to the others.” The pairings and grouping of paintings invite multiple reads, allowing for various relationships and disruptions to arise between the paintings. I see in her paintings glimpses of movement at multiple past moments, both within the collected layers of individual paintings, and even more so among groups of related paintings.

I have also found resonance with the work of photographer Uta Barth, particularly her series white blind (bright red). In this series, the artist presents many photographs of the tree and telephone pole outside her window taken over the course of several winters. The series was installed around the walls of a gallery with the images side-by-side. The shifting frames of similar images, the differences in focus or cropping, and the changes in contrast or quality of light, point to the singular nature of each moment of experience. The shifts that occur with the slight reframing of the images suggest a discontinuity of perception, the punctuation of singular events by specific moments of awareness. In white

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blind (bright red), the passage of time is evident, yet I see no evidence of a fluid continuity in the timeline. Time here is fractured into moments whose sequence is irrelevant and unhinged.

Figure 6. Uta Barth, detail from white blind (bright red), mounted photographs, 2002. 14 parts, each 54 x 66.5 cm

Questions of near and far, of how far one’s immediate experience of space extends, are present for me in much of Uta Barth’s work. One visual element often functions as a sort of scaffolding to measure the otherwise vague, atmospheric space between the viewer and another element. In some of the photographs in white blind (bright red), the telephone pole or wires scaffold the distance between the viewer and the tree or the farther sky. In some images, I feel that my immediate awareness of the space of the photograph extends far into the distance; in others my experience is restricted to the immediate area of the tree.

In some of my drawings, I use linear elements to similarly scaffold the space in the drawing. In areas where the space is indeterminate and atmospheric, this sort of linear scaffolding can help me to better explore the space implied by the drawing surface and facilitate further responsive drawing. In several panels from the series through to where, I

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used a few place-marking lines in the left hand panel and a column of verticals on the
right to measure out the vague white atmosphere and gain access to a deeper sense of
space. I find the linear elements in *white blind (bright red)* to provide a similar scaffolding
into the sky.

![Figure 7. two panels from *through to where*, 2009. graphite and homemade gesso on panel, 11" x 22"](image)
CONTINUING

In my previous work, I changed formats frequently. With each new piece I would change the surface, the scale, or the materials. The question of format distracted me from other elements of my work and posed a challenge in viewing the work. It was difficult to understand the conceptual progression of the work due to the different affects of the formats. Committing to this format, many panels of one height and a few widths, has allowed me to focus on mark-making and to better understand my process and the content of my work.

Once I arrive at a point where I feel comfortable bringing my content to a new format, I would like to experiment with working larger. I have committed in this body of work to what I consider an "occular" scale, and I am curious how the work would read if I made panels of a scale that related more to the body. I am interested in continuing with a monochromatic palette, but I am curious what would happen if one color other than gray lent an affect to the marks.

I better understand why, in the past, the more I tried to grasp at the content of my work, the more elusive it became. Unfixedness is, by definition, ungraspable. An important and continuing aspect of my practice is the development of trust that my aesthetic preferences are in line with my concept because they come from the same source. I also intend to further contemplate the idea that the unfixed moments of perception are not unrelated, but are all interrelated. I feel a sense of expansive possibility when presented with the idea that we are continuously running through
unfixed moments so quickly that once we have conceived of one, it is a memory, and that these moments can relate to one another in infinite combinations.

“We are seeing, then, that our experience is altogether momentary. From one point of view, each moment is so elusive and so brief that we cannot even think about it before it is gone. From another point of view, this moment is always here, since we know no other moment than the present moment. It is always dying, always becoming past more rapidly than imagination can conceive. Yet at the same time it is always being born, always new, emerging just as rapidly from that complete unknown which we call the future. Thinking about it almost makes you breathless.”

19 Watts, 82.
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PHOTOGRAPH OF THE ARTIST AT WORK

Kerry O’Grady in the Studio Arts Building Woodshop, August 2009.
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