Heard or Dreamed About

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HEARD OR DREAMED ABOUT

A Thesis Presented

By

Priya Nadkarni

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

MASTERS OF FINE ARTS

May 2014

The Department of Art, Architecture and Art History
HEARD OR DREAMED ABOUT

A Thesis Presented

By

PRIYA NADKARNI

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ABSTRACT

HEARD OR DREAMED ABOUT

MAY 2014

PRIYA NADKARNI, B.F.A. RUTGERS UNIVERSITY

M.F.A. UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

Directed by: Professor Shona Macdonald
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

**Lineage:** referring to an order or progression, without hierarchy (i.e. a chord progression in music)

**Opsis:** spectacle, as referring to Aristotle’s “Poetics” dramatic theory

**Diegesis:** a recounting of an interior view of a world, as referring to film theory

**Ekphrasis:** a rhetorical device in which one artistic medium describes another

The terms above correspond to the titles of works in my thesis exhibition. They are also conduits for the particular dialogues of painting discussed in this paper. Herein lies the sequence of this paper: Content as space, space as material, material as framework, and framework as content. It is cyclical in nature and intricately linked to the realm of studio happenings—where time knows no order and history is inevitable.

The title for this paper, and the exhibition, comes from Rudyard Kipling, a staunch advocate of British imperialism and author of the Jungle Book. The title describes his process of writing these stories, many of which describe his childhood experiences of growing up in British colonial India, mythologizing and exaggerating the jungle landscape, fictionalizing the naive savage characters, as a child in his circumstances probably would have. Yet many of these stories were actually written through the lens of nostalgia while he lived in Brattleboro, Vermont. That overlapping of fiction and experience, as well as distance and familiarity, is significant to me. Despite the obvious critique that I would have of his worldview, I like to think that there are also some similarities in our creative process,
fictionalizing real experience, mixed with cultural attitudes and mythology. To me, 
"Heard or Dreamed About" describes the affect of images in our world (legacy) and 
the after image (the legacies that are further removed), how they linger on in the 
collective consciousness.

I am interested in painting images that pervade in our culture—especially 
ones that reveal the underbellies of American consciousness. They are often images 
that have been distilled through folklore, media, hearsay and a legacy of attitudes 
that have been cultivated over generations of our history. These images explore 
notions of the civilized, the savage, the conditioned, the liberated, the feminine, the 
exotic, the Western, and the many permutations of each of these. They are images 
that are once or twice removed from the familiar, and lie within the realm of 
recollection. They are then further removed and digested through paint and by my 
hand.
CHAPTER 2

CONTENT AS SPACE

“...This is the source of the seasons and the years, and is the steward of all things in the visible place, and is in a certain way the cause of all those things he and his companions had been seeing.”

-Plato

It is inevitable as viewers, thinkers, makers, artists, readers who possess eyes, ears, and hands that we make meaning of what is in front of us by what came before. It is the natural tendency in the voyage for truth. The Sun (or more specifically, God), the Platonic source of light and life, illuminates and brings forth the objects and bodies that comprise our world. The Sun also indicates time, and the passing of day and night, which points to history and lineage. We perceive our bodies through time, even the time that came before us. We understand ourselves through affirmation in folklore, the telling of tales and passing of knowledge. We embody the progression from these legacies. And like musical notes, they require order and timing without hierarchy. Painting, as gesture and action, embodies this progression, as well. Painting, as a discovery and declaration of knowledge, honors lineage. Painting is a function of its own past, much as we are.

One could define painting as every mark and gesture implemented by hand to a surface throughout human history. However, painting is more commonly accepted as the finite number of paintings that history has given to us, for our acknowledgment, through means of power and influence. This specific history speaks to the tradition of oil painting in its function to reflect (represent) the world. This ability to represent our “world” onto a two-dimensional surface has been
proven a highly coveted act, in a Western sense, as the European paintings that achieve this remain to be some of the most prized possessions and highly valued objects in the world.

Oil paint, as a material, was used as early as the fifth century in Afghanistan; although it is more popularly credited to the Flemish painter Jan Van Eyck who refined the medium for its benefits over tempera. At the time, oil paint had much more scope in depicting light and form the way one would see it in the world, effectively making oil painting a way of capturing what one can actually see. This notion of capturing light and form, to transpose the three-dimensional world onto a two-dimensional surface is in fact a highly conceptual idea (that we in the twenty-first century take for granted), and it was intimately connected to the rise of European empires and the economies that supported them. This catalyzed oil painting as the premier form of image making in Europe, after Van Eyck, and fed into the economy of imperialism. Levi Strauss said,

for Renaissance artists, painting was perhaps an instrument of knowledge but it was also an instrument of possession, and we must not forget, when we are dealing with Renaissance painting, that it was only possible because of the immense fortunes which were being amassed in Florence and elsewhere, and that rich Italian merchants looked upon painters as agents, who allowed them to confirm their possession of all that were beautiful and desirable in the world. The pictures in a Florentine palace represented a kind of microcosm in which the proprietor, thanks to his artists, had recreated within easy reach and in as real a form as possible, all those features of the world to which he was attached. 

As painting gained economic grounding as a device to capture the world, through representation but also through power, it became the armature of Western visual culture. Through its many progressions and transformations, painting continues to be the underbelly of art and the predecessor that informs how we now
see pictures and images, globally. Painting's lineage is particularly important to me as I try to understand my position within this history. The complications of who is appropriating who come to the surface when thinking about myself as performer, author, maker, or viewer of paintings. Acts of subversion and transgression are complicated by multiple histories that acknowledge origins and intentions of painting. As an American woman of Indian descent, there is a continuous pushing and pulling, layering and covering, masking and manipulating in the understanding of myself as a painter of oil paintings in this time and in this place. What is it that I am interested in capturing through paint, or what is it that I am eager to leave behind with my mark? These acts are instruments of possession, as Strauss says. And in the acknowledgement of this, the act of painting becomes a subversive one.
**Painting and Time**

Painting exists in multiple times. It exists as a lineage or chronology. It exists as a cultural moment within a zeitgeist. It exists as a creative process over a human lifetime. It exists as a lifecycle of a painting in the studio. It exists as a momentary gesture over a surface. And it exists beyond time, as it is propelled back into the realm of history. In the book *Wet*, Mira Schor says,

One of the misapprehensions, or arrogances, of postmodernism is the assumption by its practitioners that certain battles within the field of painting and image were definitively fought and “won” between 1850 and 1970, and that an artist’s reconsidering of certain basic problems within painting is a historicist and reactionary action. In other words, the assumption is that there was one problem and one solution—modernism—and, now, postmodernism’s response is the only legitimate reading of “linear” art history. ³

To restate Schor, it would be to the disadvantage of painting to reduce it to a linear progression that requires a hierarchy. Of course there are cycles of time within painting that expand a mere linear read of art history. And perhaps lineage does not read as a line, despite its etymology. But more importantly Schor is stating that as Postmodern artists, we have come to define ourselves as a causality of something rather than addressing a set of problems unique to our time. To elaborate on this idea, a painting does not reveal itself to the viewer linearly either. It emerges through pockets of realization. For example, if one were to stand in front of the Breughel painting pictured below, one might first notice the crooked table, and then move towards the figures lying on the ground, and then begin to notice the skewed perspective of the entire painting, which in turn allows one to re-evaluate the crookedness of the table. But also, another person may notice entirely different qualities and details of the very same painting. Hence, one would not reduce the
reading of a painting to a singular or linear hierarchy. There is an order and there is a progression, but it is subject to the particularities of the viewer. And in the same way, the vastness of images and works that emerge from art history are also subject to the particularities of the artist. And further still, the formal or conceptual references made in painting can also be subject to the particularities of a visual consciousness that functions outside of a chronological framework.

Figure 1: Pieter Breugel, *Land of Cockaigne*, 1567, oil on panel, 20.5 x 31 in, Alte Pinakothek, Munich

Figure 2: Vincent Desiderio, *Cockaigne*, oil on canvas, 1993-2003, 13 x 9 feet
In Desiderio’s *Cockaigne*, the relationship to Breughel is perhaps more directly stated in the title than in the image of the table. In Breughel’s *The Land of Cockaigne*, which also translates as “the lazy-luscious land”, suggests a gluttony of sorts that Desiderio alludes to in the cacophony of art history books strewn across the floor. Where would one find a room such as this? It exists as a space that is not to be encountered physically, despite the qualities of realism and illusionism. It is a space that exists only through the experience of viewing this painting, a fantasy that is not meant to occur in any other type of reality other than the reality of standing in front of the painting.

Although Mira Schor is arguing that artists should be able to produce in the field of painting and image making in the twenty first century free from the burdens of Modernism and pre-Modernism, she does not address that the movements of painting that preceded us have intrinsically informed the way that we see, and that freeing ourselves from this tradition is more of an abstract notion than a tangible one. In a sense, we are not liberated from Modernism, though we may be independent of it. And as a painter, I am not, nor do I choose to be, free from painting’s history. It has, in a very real sense, informed my very desire to make paintings.
On Velázquez

Figure 3: Diego Velázquez, Portrait of the Infanta Maria Teresa of Spain, 1653, oil on canvas, 50 x 39 in, Kunsthistoriches Museum

Figure 4: Vincent Desiderio, Cockaigne (detail of Velázquez reference)
Figure 5: Julie Heffernan, *Self Portrait as Infanta Maria Teresa Dreaming Madame de Sade*, oil on canvas, 2006

An obvious but important idea is that painting is not merely its image, and neither is it simply material. Rather, it is also the way that an image is painted through material. That is why, in all of the paintings pictured above that reference the figure Infanta Maria Teresa, the mood and meaning of each painting differs entirely. This is also why a painting must be experienced or beheld physically for one to understand it. The physicality of the painting is that which carries its meaning. However, despite this fact, the ability for an image to penetrate and influence can happen by means of digital reproduction (although integral aspects like material presence, the play of light with paint and textural qualities would be lost).

Figure 7: Nicolas Uribe, *Infanta*, 2008, oil on canvas
The figure in *The Infanta Maria Teresa* may be one of the most referenced figures in contemporary art (similar to how the Sleeping Venus was reinvented throughout art history). This complicates the notion of originality. Each artist qualifies their own way of painting that is a product of their zeitgeist and authorship. Yet within that there is an acknowledgement of the legacies and forefathers of painting, where questions of originality are irrelevant. It seems in Western art where the mark of the individual is crucial, that in this particular instance it is acceptable to not be original. Rosalind Krauss states,

but, as we have constantly been reminding ourselves ever since Walter Benjamin’s “Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” authenticity empties out as a notion as one approaches those mediums which are inherently multiple. “From a photographic negative, for example,” Benjamin argued, “one can make any number of prints; to ask for the ‘authentic’ print makes no sense.4

I would say too that painting, in the age of reproduction, could adopt the characteristics that “mediums which are inherently multiple” possess, in a way that is unique to painting. For example, in the work of R.H. Quaytman and Wade Guyton, the discernibility of the artist’s hand is an integral part of the content of their work. Whether the work was made by man or machine is addressed both formally and conceptually, and the answer is not always obvious. But because the handmade is an inherent quality of painting, in this scope there can be particular subversions that address the boundaries of painting. And even through subverting the boundaries of how painting can be defined, it still belongs to the realm of painting.
In the work pictured above, there is also a direct relationship between the act of painting and the description of how one sees and gathers images in the digital age. In this work entitled *Three Women of Maria Teresa* there are direct and indirect references to the original Velázquez painting. The work is a large-scale oil painting made up of three panels. Each panel depicts a woman, each of whom is modeled after the figure in the original portrait by Velázquez. This painting brings to mind notions of femininity, conditioning, the Western and non-Western, and appropriation of the female body. The image of Maria Teresa, that portrait specifically, has shaped Western culture, which has in turn shaped history, perceptions, and through the notion of lineage, the brown-skinned women and their perceptions of themselves. Rather than this work merely being a direct reference to Velázquez, it’s a direct reference to the affect of Velázquez’s painting. This lineage is similar to Desiderio’s *Cockaigne*, where the reference to Breughel is one that is digested and internalized through the composition that carries the painting.
The central figure in my work, *Three Women of Maria Teresa*, is both a reference to and invention of the pubescent princess of Velázquez’s painting. It serves as a pivot between two brown-skinned women who toil between ethnic garb and stiff European hoopskirt. This central figure serves as a frame to understand the relationship of female subjecthood in painting as well as affect and effect. In the original Velázquez painting, the princess is coming of age, entering into society and nobility, the same way a non-Westerner would assimilate into Western society. The two bookend panels show women who are mimicking, replicating and perhaps even appropriating what is expected of them. In this yearning for civility there is a nakedness and “upskirting.” Windows that don’t exist in the frame of the painting, most likely situated behind the viewer, cast spotlights onto these women, pushing them into the realm of performers. They are performing the role of a subject of painting. The subjects are pieced together through overlapping shapes and parts.

Stage props of domestic objects are tucked into the skirts that open up an interior world separate from the space where the women seem to be situated. The two brown-skinned women on either side are attempting to be like Maria Teresa, who serves as an archetype of poise and class and a symbol of western civility, while she herself is revealed as half naked. There is a struggle of what it means to be dressed and undressed, and what it means to pose oneself for an audience. Only the central figure is directly aware of any viewer. The other two figures are pre-occupied with mimicking Maria Teresa and therefore becoming the subject of gaze. The legs are cut off, subject to fragmentation, drawing attention to the edge of the painting. It begs the viewer to think about the frame as a device that selectively
presents certain areas to the viewer, rather than a complete picture. Authorship is present. Oil painting as a Western lineage forms the lens from which to view. Questions of complicity towards the imperialistic nature of these women modeling themselves after a Velázquez figure will hopefully arise.
CHAPTER 3
SPACE AS MATERIAL

In some of my work, particularly in the work of Three Women of Maria Teresa, I utilize a collage methodology. Collage draws attention to the fracturing of time and space that occurs from the age of simultaneity--or the digital age. Secondly, it speaks to the flattened pictorial space of screens, the steward of how we access information now. This brings to mind a type of *ekphrasis* (one artistic medium used to describe another). There are specific qualities that arise when the uniqueness of one material is used to describe something outside of itself. For example, a more explicit quality arises when screens are used to talk about the culture of screens, and a more implicit quality arises when paint is used to talk about the culture of screens.

I am thinking of flatness and the pictorial space of screens as a description of this current age. There is a fracturing of space that describes the sensation of living in this age (being able to experience multiple spaces and multiple times through digital devices and the internet). That type of multiplicity becomes a metaphor for navigating through multiple identities, which most people in this age experience, particularly our geo-social identities. The fractured pictorial space, a neo-cubist space, describes all of these sensations. I am using paint as a material and a language to describe these qualities.
In the above image, which is not a painted image but a digitally constructed one, the fracturing of pictorial space becomes an opportunity to capture and invent a lineage. The two images revealed are a portrait of my mother and an image of Gauguin’s *Melancholy*. The many visual overlaps in both images not only bring together a formal synthesis, but also bring forth the notion of the ethnic female body as subject, both by Gauguin and then again by my mother’s image. This imitation, or reenactment, of the original figure is a commentary on who should be the descendants of this lineage. It is a collage, but it is also the simulation of a collage through digital construction.

Mickalene Thomas also uses the collage aesthetic in her work. We can see in the following images that the work itself does not necessarily start as a collage. But the image undergoes a series of progressions where the materiality becomes a crucial component of the work. Tears, disjointed parts, and fragments are
synthesized to create the ‘feel’ of collage. In Thomas’ work, painting becomes a crucial discourse on the very nature of constructing images. The second and third images, pictured below, are indeed collages, but it is only through the articulation of paint, in the last image that one sees the performative and fabricated nature of the collage aesthetic, and thus, reveals the fabricated nature of representation. To borrow terminology from Aristotle, I call this the *opsis*, or spectacle, of collage. In the same way, I paint because it is an implicit way of acknowledging the nature of fabrication and the construction of representation.

Figure 10: Mickalene Thomas, Dejeuner Sur L’Herbe: Les Trois Femmes Noires

Figure 11: Mickalene Thomas, Dejeuner Sur L’Herbe: Les Trois Femmes Noires, collage
Figure 12: Mickalene Thomas, Dejeuner Sur L'Herbe: Les Trois Femmes Noires, installation at PS1 MoMA

Figure 13: Mickalene Thomas, Dejeuner Sur L'Herbe: Les Trois Femmes Noires, rhinestone, acrylic, enamel on wood panel, 2010, 120 x 288 in
CHAPTER 4
MATERIAL AS FRAMEWORK

Here I am in front of (a) painting. Of course I am looking at it. But I am just as much under the threat of its gaze. Painting looks at me (la peinture me regarde). It sees me and keeps its eye on me. It summons me to see what I otherwise do not want to see (what I don’t want to admit any regard for [ce don’t je ne veux rien savoir]). It picks me out, anxious and undone, but also deliciously displaced, unfettered, and relieved of the weight of my own assent to the obtuse order of things. It makes me delight in a peculiar sort of fear, a fear confessed and overcome— provisionally.5

- Christian Prigent

As mentioned in the previous section, the function of painting as a tool to fabricate is important to consider while discussing the relationship between painting, the artist and the viewer. There is something to be said about the relationship between materiality of paint in the digital age, objectness, the gaze, performance space, and diegesis in cinema. Where does the action take place in regard to a painting—in front, behind, within? As Prigent states above, the relationship between viewer and painting is more complex than a gaze directed upon an object. The painting looks back and carries its own weight. Therefore the material of paint has objectness as does the painting itself. The materiality of the painting is the subject. The performance of painting happens in the relationship with the viewer, but also with its place in history. The painting looks back, it performs, the same way the artist who makes it does. And the world of the painting, its diegesis, happens within and outside the work itself. The framework of Western oil painting is furthered as an act of subversion when one takes into account not only the Euro-centric and imperialistic lineage of capturing and objectifying through
paint, but also the nature of the gaze and the nature of the performer (the subject and the artist).

Acknowledging the history of these inherent qualities in painting, as an artist of color and a woman, affirms it as a subversive act. As Mickalene Thomas has stated, “if I wanted to be controversial, I would have used photographs. But I'm not interested in being so literal and direct. Paintings give you more room for illusion and fantasy, more room to discover things.” Thomas talks about painting as being a medium free from the directness or literalness of other media, particularly photography. This is especially true in a culture of screens, where one is used to seeing images through photographic and videographic devices. There is much to be implied in the materiality of paint. There is also much to be experienced in the objectness of paint. Prigent continues by saying,

of course, one may say that painters are busy making the forms of reality visible (disposing them in a space the eye can identify). But the opposite statement is just as true. The works of painting burn with the desire to disfigure (or to distort the objectal and corporeal forms we spontaneously identify and in which we recognize ourselves). They undo the numbed vision we have of things—the vision which, precisely, we call “reality”: the visible vision. As a result, the very conditions of that visible vision are tinged with suspicion and thrown into doubt and confusion.

I'm interested in the distortion that happens when considering the relationship between photographic images and painting. Images that are familiar through the media become distorted and digested through paint.
The source of the image depicted in the work is a still from a popular reality TV show, which I then distorted through Photoshop. It may be a familiar image to many, even those who don’t recognize the original source, and yet it becomes detached through its distortion. Pageant girls line up awaiting their anticipated trophies. Rather than condemning the ritual, I am instead trying to understand and reinterpret the image through paint. Effects of light and color affect the way this image is read and gathers meaning. These effects can only be fully realized when viewing the painting in person. The paint is as much the subject as are the figures.

Tiina Heiska, a contemporary Finnish painter, states that her work has a relationship to cinematography. Upon looking at the work, one feels the sensation of a narrative without knowing what it is. The body of the female subject, quite possibly the artist herself, enacts a stance that implies the presence of a camera or viewer. The formal qualities and color choices resemble Richter’s figurative
paintings. These works beg the viewer to imagine what came before and what comes after. The materiality of the paint and the way it is applied, even the color palette, are all extremely important. The paint becomes a description of light, while the description of the person, and perhaps even the setting, remains mysterious.

Figure 15: Tiina Heiska, (No Title Found 1)

Figure 16: Tiina Heiska, (No Title Found 2)
In film theory, the term *diegesis* refers to the interior world of the film. This would be the world the characters experience singularly, and that the audience participates in only as voyeurs. I feel that this term can be applied to painting on many levels. The underlying meaning of *diegesis* is in the understanding of who performs the action of the gaze and who is gazed upon. In many ways painting, especially figurative painting, frames a particular “scene” that is intended for a viewer. There are, however, moments in film that are within the film and still outside of the diegesis (known as *extradiegetic*), such as a soundtrack that is laid over the narrative, of which the characters would be unaware. This implies the hand of the filmmaker as mediator in the relationship between story and viewer, the internal and external worlds inherent to film. Similarly, I see painting as an internal processing of the external world. And the external world informs that internal processing. In painting, I believe there is even a fourth dimension involved and that would be the history of painting itself.
CHAPTER 5

FRAMEWORK AS CONTENT

Veil them, cover them, wall them round--
Blossom, and creeper, and weed--
Let us forget the sight and the sound,
The smell and the touch of the breed!
Fat black ash by the altar-stone,
Here is the white-foot rain
And the does bring forth in the fields unsown,
And none shall affright them again;
And the blind walls crumble, unknown, o’erthrown,
And none shall inhabit again!8

- “Letting in the Jungle” by Rudyard Kipling

Ekphrasis, where one artistic medium describes another, is more commonly thought of as a rhetorical device. In this instance, words are used to describe visual experiences. For example, a poem or verse that tries to capture the essence of a painting and the qualities unique to the nature of looking or beholding a particular work. Embedded in this meaning is the tension between the verbal and the visual, where words serve as a secondary descriptor for the primary one. But as it is used in this paper, more loosely, ekphrasis can be used to describe any type of descriptive medium outside of its own materiality. A painting that depicts a sculpture is another version of ekphrasis (or a film that describes a song). Through this interpretation, one can come to understand that painting is innately a form of ekphrasis. Its descriptive qualities, whether representational or not, describe something outside of itself to the viewer. The surface quality, textures, variations and undulations set up a specific situation for the viewer to understand, or perhaps more simply, to behold.
The essence of ekphrasis is the challenge of trying to describe a particular material by what it isn’t. Any material has its own unique limitations and capabilities. It is these qualities that define what a material can or cannot do. It is these boundaries that the artist struggles with and dances along, pushing action into the realm of art. Ekphrasis emphasizes the qualities of one particular material by what it cannot do. Through this, one comes to find what it can do. It implies the conceptual characteristics of the material, the paint, in the context of the representation. It also qualifies the particularities of any specific material that make it non-substitutable with a different material. Much of my work describes images found through screens by using paint. Without hierarchy, the painting must inform in a way that the screen cannot, while acknowledging its own limitations. The relationship is that the screen and painting do not replace each other; rather they can inform each other through ekphrasis. Alas, painting cannot be replaced by something that isn’t painting.

Ekphrasis invokes the conceptual nature of painting. Even though perceptions by many contemporary artists suggest that painting is only primal, emotional, and corporeal, it is significant to note that painting is also an inherently conceptual practice. The mere gesture or mark acts as metaphor. It serves as a descriptor for something that it is not.
Origin of Materials

The materiality of paint is important to an understanding of painting. And the origins of the painting materials are important to an understanding of the histories and economies that are embedded in the medium. We perhaps take for granted the accessibility and relative inexpensiveness of oil paint in the current age. However these materials were not only expensive and labor intensive to produce throughout the height of European art, they were also intricately woven into Europe’s relationship with non-Western cultures. Many of the most prized pigments, found in colors such as ultramarine blue and alizarin crimson, came from regions in the Middle East, Asia and Africa. Cotton and linen were fabrics that were imported from Africa and Asia. The plants used to make the oil mediums, such as safflower, linseed and walnut, originate in the Middle East and India. The economics of importing from these regions is of course not limited to painting, but certainly worth noting, given the weight of painting in European culture and the economics of representation. Even Dutch Still Lifes often featured items that were acquired through various means of importing and pillaging of regions in the non-West, and proudly displayed as objects of conquest. There were also the paintings that depicted the non-Western body, the naïve savage, the servant or slave, as objects of conquest and status of wealth (much like the exotic objects strewn across a table). There were also formal qualities that were appropriated from non-Western art forms, such as the African masks that Picasso avidly collected, which later informed the painting Desmoiselles D’Avignon, which in turn influenced the movement of Cubism.
This leads me to painting’s deeply intimate connection to Orientalism and the Western desire for exotic objects. As Edward Said has put it “the Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences.”9 We can extend the term “orientalism”, in this case, to incorporate not only Middle Eastern and Asian cultures that have conventionally fallen into this category, but also any culture that is outside of a Western framework. And it is more complex of a notion than simply dealing with white versus non-white peoples. It deals more with the economies of language, the economies of objects, and the economies of representation of peoples. It is understood that the canon and lineages that define the art world (the now globalized art market that deals with the highest monetary transactions of art works), is Western. Even art institutions in cities like Bombay, Beijing, Dubai, or Lagos participate in the Eurocentric notion of isolating and exhibiting art as objects to be exchanged for money.

The ways that bodies get represented in this exchange, particularly black and brown bodies, is a potent thought considering the origin of materials and economic relationships in Western painting. Artists today, both white and non-white, continue to confront ideas of representation, as the performance and brand of the “artist” gains monetary value. Art is a business of representing, and the legacies of these images not only define a set of people, they define a time. As Kerry James Marshall says, “the things we see [in art] determine and shape our expectations.”10
The economies of representation also define a secondary way that I think about the term ekphrasis in this paper. In my work, I consider the various translations by which an image can be contained, and how its transference from one medium to another adds to the distortion and mythologizing around that particular image. In one of my paintings entitled *Ekphrasis: Their Temples Won’t Last* (pictured above) a landscape is depicted. Upon closer examination, one might notice the traces of tropical foliage, and perhaps even the temple ruins in the background. The image in the painting derives from the stock background imagery of Disney’s *The Jungle Book*. I chose this particular image, which I first distorted digitally before painting it, since it speaks to the many types of mythologies of the naïve savage that the image adopted as it went from the original Kipling story and illustrations, to the
Disney animated film, to a stock background image, to online dispersal, and finally to painting. In each progression, the image becomes further distilled and carries with it more resonance surrounding the mythologizing of the jungles of India (which today are virtually non-existent). The jungles live on through fantasy rather than through physicality. In the image, there is a suggestion of human presence through the crumbling temple ruins amidst overgrown trees. However nature has overcome this once thriving civilization and overtaken the landscape. The mysteriousness is heightened by the Orientalist notion of this civilization that once was but is no longer. Interestingly, the reality in India is the opposite, where human presence has only grown rather than disintegrated. But the image of the jungle is not meant to serve as an indicator of reality, rather it is a representation of fantasy—the opsis or the spectacle—of how the East is perceived through the eyes of the colonizer. It is classic folklore that I further perpetuate through painting.

Since my work ultimately comes from my experience, notions of the self enter into it. I, as an American woman of Indian descent, a woman of color, or other formations of self, enter into the work. The way that I have taught myself and choose to paint with oils is of a Western tradition, and it influences the way that I see and think about my world. It influences the culture we live in, even for the person who has never seen a painting. We, as a society, are influenced totally by what came before us—whether it enters our conscious mind or not. As an artist, I cannot divorce myself from this history— the art historical canon. It is intrinsically layered into every decision that I make in the studio, whether through resistance, through complicity, or unconsciously.
CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION: LINEAGE AS AN ACT OF TRANSGRESSION

One could say that the paintings in the images below honor the legacy of painting through referencing the subject of hanging meat. There is clearly a lineage being exposed here that is intentional by all artists participating. However there is also an act of transgression in this reference to hanging meat. The subtlety at play is that honoring this legacy raises questions about complicity and subversion within the conditions of painting. I appreciate this type of acknowledgement in painting, as it is an integral part of my work. In the images below, the meat is literally shot at, dragged on the floor, possessed, and captured; becoming a symbol of violence. I interpret this as a nuanced commentary that reveals painting’s own history of violence and imperialism. Honoring this lineage of painting is more complex than a mere homage or rite of passage as painter, as there are layers of critique each time the meat is replicated. This shows that there is room for resistance even within complicity.

Figure 18: Pieter Aertsen, Meat Still-Life, 1551. Oil on panel, 4 x 6.5 ft. Uppsala University Art Collection, Uppsala.
Figure 19: Francis Bacon, *Figure with Meat*, 1954, oil on canvas, 51 x 48 in, Art Institute of Chicago

Figure 20: Jenny Saville, *Torso 2*, oil on canvas ,141¾ x 115¾in, 2005, Gagosian Gallery
Figure 21: Vincent Desiderio, *Quixote*, 2008, oil on canvas, 107.75 x 458 in, Marlborough Gallery

Figure 22: Detail of *Quixote*

Figure 23: Phillip Thomas, *Matador III*, 2013, 86 x 118 in, oil on canvas triptych, Richard J. Demato Gallery
In my work, I choose to acknowledge the many problematic histories of painting that I have discussed in this paper. Although these qualities may seem reason enough to resist painting or to declare it dead, I see it as an opportunity to excavate important dialogues surrounding power and influence. By choosing to paint, I choose to be a descendant of painting’s lineage. Painting the hanging meat becomes an act of acknowledging the violent and complicated nature of painting. It is also an acknowledgement of progression. Like chords on a piano, there is an order, there is an acknowledgement of the former, but there is a transition that ultimately leads to a specific direction. As I envision the direction of my work, I see the paintings moving more and more towards the materiality of paint as the primary language. It is a language that translates the various images that enter my consciousness and the ways in which I have encountered them. Rather than being purely representational, or purely abstract, it is the distorting of the means of representation that remains important. This type of distortion is a metaphor for how a collective memory or collective consciousness, specifically through an American perspective, participates in the attitudes and preferences for certain visual languages—how bodies get represented, and how we in turn can mimic these representations. I consider painting as a tool for distorting and perpetuating these representations. Lastly, I am ultimately concerned with the notion of painting as monument, and how it can be prodded, provoked and penetrated through my work.
NOTES


TECHNICAL INFORMATION

The materials used in this thesis exhibition were oil on canvas as well as powdered graphite on paper. The oil paintings were completed with a medium that included varying ratios of mineral spirits, linseed oil and dammar varnish for each layer of the painting. The undergounds for many of the paintings started with a transparent layer of cadmium orange and venetian red. The graphite drawing used graphite powder applied with a brush, with water added to the powder in select areas. Traditional techniques of oil painting and drawing are an important component to the work.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


PHOTO OF ARTIST-AT-WORK
IMAGE IDENTIFICATION

1. *Ekphrasis: Their Temples Won’t Last*, 23 x 36 in, oil on canvas, 2014
2. *Opsis*, 30 x 40 in, graphite on mounted paper, 2014
3. *Diegesis*, 95 x 66 in, oil on canvas, 2014
4. Detail of *Diegesis*, installation shot
5. *Melos*, 60 x 72 in, oil on canvas, 2014
6. Detail of *Melos*, installation shot
7. *Three Women of Maria Teresa*, triptych 155 x 62 in, oil on canvas, 2014
8. Detail of middle panel, *Three Women of Maria Teresa*
9. Detail of *Three Women of Maria Teresa*, installation shot
10. *After Melancholy*, 20 x 24 in, archival ink jet print, 2014
11. *Study for Diegesis*, 30 x 50 in, oil and acrylic on Arches paper, 2014
12. Installation shot of exhibition with title
13. Installation shot of exhibition
14. Installation shot of exhibition
15. Installation shot of exhibition
16. Installation shot of exhibition
17. Installation shot of exhibition