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Portal: Systems for Perception

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Abstract:

Perception as a set of sensory faculties affects our ability to relate to one another. Conversely, that mutual understanding affects our intuitive recognition and awareness of other variables in the physical world. This paper discusses the ways in which beauty and systematization can be cooperative in developing a visual language which encourages an audience to identify with conventionally difficult or uncomfortable subject matter; explicitly, that of disease or handicap. Furthermore, an argument is proposed for the creation and maximization of opportunities for empathetic awareness through specific conditions (or systems) of viewing, particularly those influenced by our direct—yet largely unconscious—interaction with aesthetically pleasing, finely-crafted objects. A summary of the ways in which my studio practice accomplishes this claim within the confines of contemporary critical discourse completes the essay

Portal: Systems for Perception

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In partial fulfillment of the
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Masters of Fine Arts

By

Elizabeth Graehling

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The conditions of a work in three-dimensional space are integral to how an audience perceives it. If a viewer feels incapable of being able to fully appreciate a piece due to compounding physical or emotional limitations grounded in its demonstration, two very different outcomes are likely to occur: an extinguishing of initial interest or frustration stemming from increased desire to more completely understand what has been intentionally limited perpetuates a curiosity for and discernment of what is accessibly displayed. This place of dissatisfaction is an equally unforgiving and also generous arena in which to establish the context of work seeking to navigate parallels between members of society managing individual psychological or physiological restrictions and those unaffected by such realities. In addressing that space for potential intimacy, my studio practice most regularly employs systematic organization and beauty. Both engage an impetus toward facilitating an empathetic response while satisfying a personal desire to meticulously fabricate highly-crafted objects.



Elizabeth Graehling, *Plate/Armour*, process detail (2016). Acrylic and eyelets on punched and layered paper. 10.5" x 10.5".

“Intimacy” can mean a variety of things when referencing a work of art: it can describe the viewing space (both physical and emotional), it can define the subject matter in relation to the creator and/or audience by artistic device or setting, or it can become a condition of self-consideration prompted by introspection upon the deconstruction of a space’s symbolism-laden cultural cues. In other words, intimacy as a state of shared understanding can be encouraged within the act of developing an internal

dialogue about a work which either offers more than one overt thematic directive or deemphasizes such altogether. Two artists in particular affected my consideration of the term throughout my graduate studies.

Karen Margolis approaches her creative process in a largely pseudo-scientific manner, utilizing her background in psychology as a point of inspiration for categorizing her feelings into simplified color shapes. These records of emotion come directly from her more than twenty years of personal writings, constructed as a formalist code in which she divulges a narrative that remains completely hidden. She has stated her aim “couldn’t be personal and had to be about the universal. I used myself as a subject because it was easier.” (Wolfman) This acknowledged paradox illustrates the manner in which all discussions classifying and dissecting any common societal denominator must ultimately originate within; the most biased source material, the self.



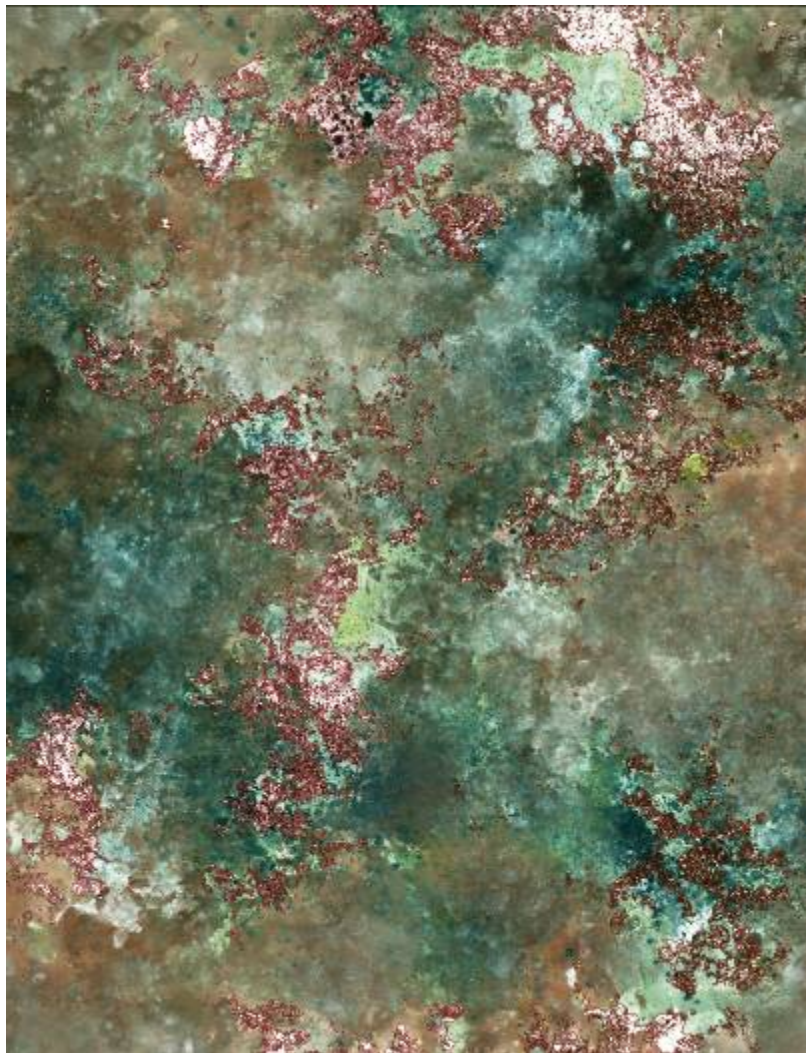
[left] Karen Margolis, *Cacophony* (2012-2015). Drawing with collaged maps and Pantone reproducible pigment. 30" x 22".



[right] Karen Margolis, *Cyclothymia* (2014). Drawing with collaged maps and Pantone reproducible pigment. 14" x 11".

Much like Margolis’s, my work utilizes modes of categorization, containing or eliminating color and shape within borders which offer no immediate explicit purpose. In contrast to her interest in stepping outside of self-analysis toward a generalized collective

imperative of emotion and its effects, my studio practice seeks to develop work from a self-conscious place of limited awareness in which others can feel free to enter and deconstruct from their own experiences.

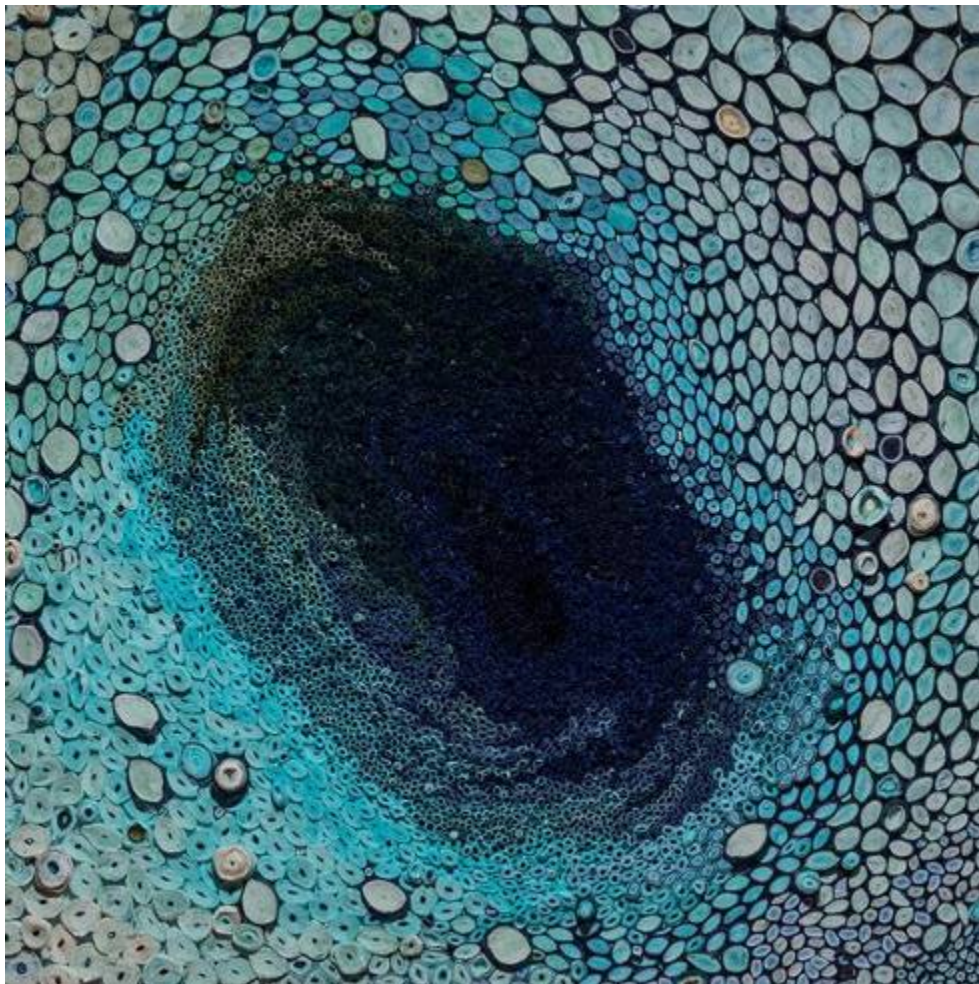


Elizabeth Graehling, *Terra Infirma* (2016). Acrylic ink, watercolor, and gel pen on Rives. 26" x 20".

It is this sense of expansiveness as a catalyst for conversation that drew me to Amy Genser, another mixed media artist who creates within her own organic yet repetitive language. Genser's clean and sophisticated graphic design skills evolved upon enrollment in a papermaking class during her Master's program in the early 2000s. After realizing that the substrate she was creating could be folded in on itself and compacted to allow a greater sense of dimensionality and movement within her pieces, she began a prolific body of work entirely composed of painted, rolled, and cut paper cylinders which provide a completely modular approach to layout and composition. Influenced by

dynamism within the natural world (and often titled to reflect that source of inspiration), her pieces transcribe moments of transience in formations such as rivers and tributaries as well as the progression of seasons and extraterrestrial events.

The roundels of varying thickness have a tangibility and textural presence which suggest a durability of material in direct opposition to the impermanence of the subject matter abstractly portrayed. Using her system of projected pointillist components, Genser is able to develop works both refined enough in size to fit comfortably within a living space, as well as massive, wall-length installations that are clearly visible from the outside and across the street from the buildings which contain them. Each individual unit of paper is crafted with incredible care and finish, allowing the work to be appreciated for its structure and form upon intimate inspection and proportional adroitness when viewed in totality.



Amy Genser, *Blue Abyss* (2013). Paper and acrylic on Masonite. 36" x 36" x 1.5".

This span of scale variables is congruently reflected within my own body of work, as minute, tile-like specimens often share the same workspace as human-sized, multi-dimensional panel installations and many-layered, portrait-length portals. The same fastidious attention to detail—observable or not at the ideal viewing distance for the finished piece—remains the same for each work, demonstrating a borderline irrational devotion to the materials used, given that the effort may be entirely missed by a casual observer.



Elizabeth Graehling, *Portalscape: Rust Belt*, process detail (2016). Acrylic ink, watercolor, lacquer, gel pen, and crystal on Arches. 1.5" x 1.5" each.



Elizabeth Graehling, *Durner's Chandelier*, detail (2014). Acrylic ink, watercolor, and gel pen on Rives Black. 44" x 30".

In assessing my own work in relation to that of Margolis and Genser—the two contemporary artists who have informed my developing visual language—I find parallels with the use of a circular, spherical, or domed format in which to frame space or a set of cumulative shapes. The perception of a barrier that impedes total consumption of that expanse invests what is being viewed with a sense of preciousness which stems both from curiosity at what lies beyond (but is obscured by) the visible boundaries, as well as the prior precaution taken to intentionally contain (and protect) what is confined. In such a manner, the work created becomes a portal; maintaining a specific distance between what is observable and what is theoretically available, yet unproven as such. In removing the rectilinear layout that traditionally engages a viewer in seeing a work of art as being grounded in the material world—its “pictureness,” framed and finite in delineation—the quality of roundness, or edgelessness, suggests a greater capacity for visual information outside of what is actually being seen, much like what we anticipate when examining something through a lens.

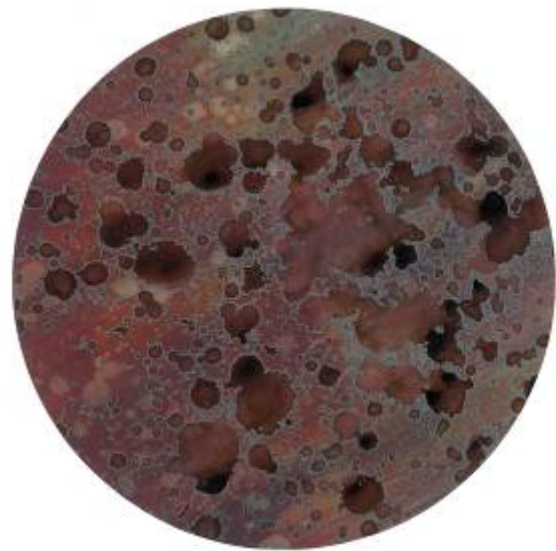


Elizabeth Graehling, *Circle II* (2015). Acrylic ink, watercolor, and gel pen on Bristol. 10.5" x 10.5".

That subtle adjustment from depicting an image-object as a four-sided, authoritative element of high art found in museums (like that of the Rembrandt self-portrait inset) to that of a globular, intuitive witnessing point deconstructs the known context of viewership: it displaces the expectation of an audience member from that of passive passerby to active participant in withdrawing the often unconscious ligature of rectangularity repeatedly reinforced by the Eurocentric academic canon. The Western tradition of painting established the quadrilateral format as not only an easily replicable manner in which to readily build, paint, and dismantle visual documentation of real and mythologized histories, political messages, and geographic locations, but also to declare it solvent as such. Paintings, being physical things, had and continue to possess great influence conveyed by their simple existence; they are a testimony to the importance of what they portrayed by the time and skill invested by whoever was assigned to create them.



[left] Rembrandt van Rijn, *Self-Portrait with Two Circles* (c. 1665-1669). Oil on canvas. 45" x 37".



[right] Elizabeth Graehling, *Circle I* (2015). Acrylic ink, watercolor, and gel pen on Bristol. 10.5" x 10.5".

In utilizing a completely different geometric model as the basis for organizing space, I create work defying this pattern of rectilinearity maintained for so many years by the most elite European authors of visual history. This specific and intentional deviation acknowledges a distinct separation from the previously accepted model of image creation as well as the values of colonialist representation (or lack thereof) associated with its perpetuation, particularly in regard to the display of power relations. Historically,

the subject of a painting was often also one of actual or anticipated domination: “primitive” cultures necessitating civilization and order, gender roles or their personifications requiring establishment or reification, and heralded moments of ancient literary records both real and fictive demonstrating a specific “other”—and an inherent position to subjugate or eradicate it. Even still life panels subconsciously established the fact that their contents were arranged involuntarily by the expertise of their modeler—with exactitude and control. In my work, the subject is not always explicitly defined for the viewer to automatically venerate or scrutinize as the most important reason for the painting’s existence. Rather, a created space allows observers to locate what they find familiar within the picture plane and establish its context within their previous associated experiences.

Considering the postcolonial infrastructure within which I find my studio practice situated and the limited spectrum of critical social feedback I can authentically present from an autobiographical perspective (that of an incompletely and increasingly less-sighted advocate for those differently-abled), my work seeks to engage its audience in a conversational manner through order and beauty from a “no-man’s land” where neither takes obvious precedence. By offering symbolically-referent mixed-media planes subject to multiple interpretations of natural environment, atmosphere, and perspective within such spatial constraints, both my drawn and three-dimensional works confine themselves to a literal physicality while affirming their potential as portals to larger, more complex existences. Delineations and boundaries are drawn, etched, cut into, affixed upon, and embedded within the surface with careful attention to the cultural considerations of what those exact actions portend. Self-representationalism (or the absence thereof) provides signifiers of the culture in which I live and my more personal reflection upon and reaction to it, where appropriate in narrative-specific imagery.

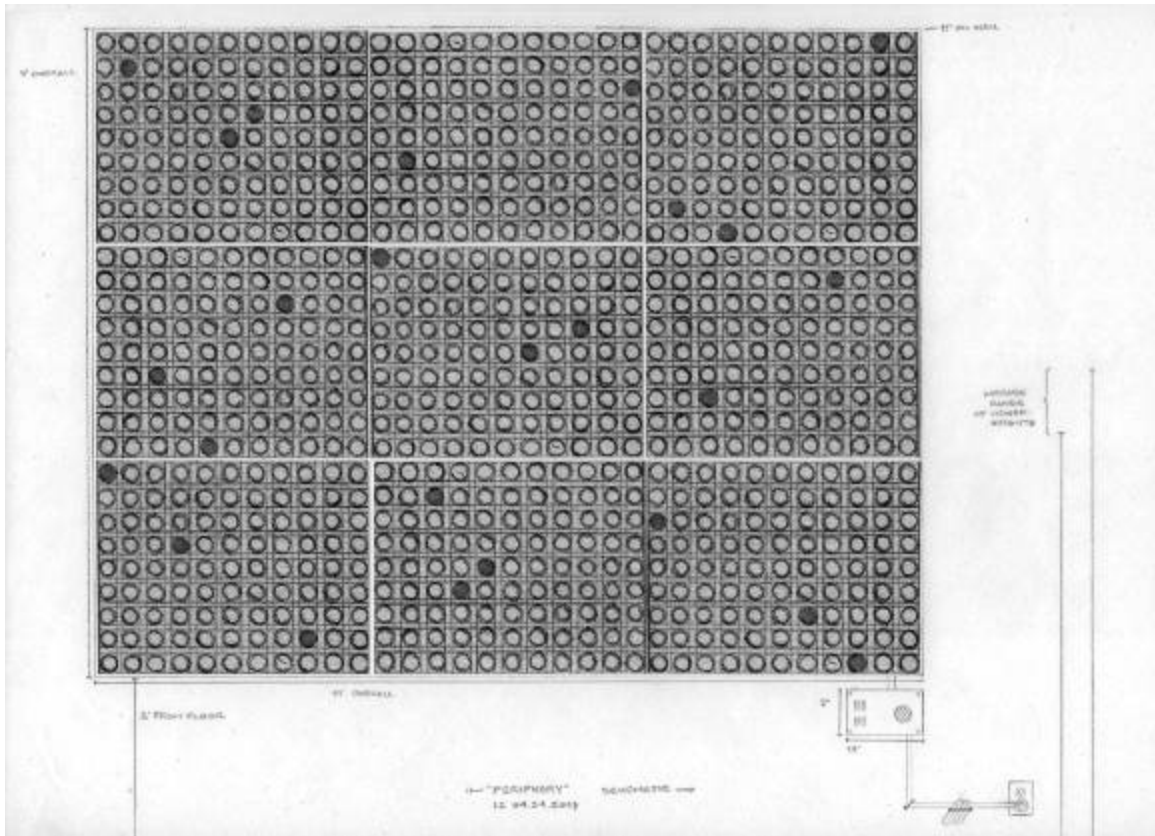


[left] Elizabeth Graehling, *Eyerony* (2015). Acrylic, acrylic ink, watercolor, and gel pen on Bristol. 10.5" x 10.5".



[right] Elizabeth Graehling, *Circle VI* (2016). Acrylic ink, watercolor, and gel pen on Strathmore Sketch. 4.125" x 4.125".

The very materials chosen convey an awareness of their art-historical significance: water-based pigments, mica, charcoal, commercially printed and hand-prepared papers, natural resins, polyurethane lacquer, crystal embellishments, and glass domes. None of these media hail from a canonical school of high art creation, nor do they fall squarely into the realm of kitsch and its rejection of those academic ideals. My aspiration to form beauty from things which can both be precious and not, entice an extended gaze with layers of material and light manipulation, and present contemplatively-rendered detail as organically and spontaneously manifested but categorically contained, arises from an interest in engaging the complex discrepancies within our ideals and actions as a form of literal and empathetic construction. In my manufacture of increasingly formidably-sized objects which occupy spaces human-sized or greater, a power shift occurs within the relationship of who or what is viewer and viewed. The personification of visual fallibility as a looming, blinking expanse of complete-yet-perforated information, unable to reciprocate engagement with those who examine it while impeding their ability to see the entirety at once, produces a sense of overwhelming futility in the act of attempting to see. Conversely, the hyper-detailed microcosms of lacquered substrate encapsulated within domes of shining clear glass compel the continuation of such an impulse. The point of resonance I seek to pursue most insistently is the delicate space which aesthetic material occupies immediately before devolving into dissonance. To that end, I exploit the effects of meticulous fabrication, as is demonstrated within my thesis installation.



Elizabeth Graehling, *Periphery*, scale schematic (2017). Graphite and paper assemblage. 12" x 8.5".

Both Howard Risatti's *A Theory of Craft* and Glenn Adamson's *Thinking Through Craft* are influential considerations of craft in relation to high art outside traditional arguments. Risatti argues that technical ability, particularly regarding faithful rendition of the source of an object's inspiration and/or an innate awareness of the history of such mimicry, is hierarchically the most important aspect of the article past its inherent usefulness. Adamson offers the more widely-accepted contemporary postulation that an excess of attention to skill belabors ornamentation that is superfluous to the point of the object and thus nullifies its content to varying degrees. In short, there is a thin margin in which craft as a whole is deemed successful when dissected by the theoreticism imposed by and pertaining to high art—and that threshold is incredibly difficult to navigate, being intended as a litmus test for something other than what it actually is (Wayne). *A Theory of Craft* and *Thinking Through Craft* regard both the ideas and objecthood of "craft" outside of these accepted—and yet hopelessly oversimplified—parameters through separate historically-situated definitions and contexts to define the term most concretely as an alternative, complement, or foil to all that we understand as Art—and yet ceaselessly informs it.

As someone drawn to order and systems, I find that applying a universal taxonomy to craft in comparison to considering it as exclusively process—and one unable to be even remotely defined, at that—is extremely comforting in relation to my own studio practice. While craft is defined as two separate, but overlapping terms within the above two texts (one as a unidimensional assessment of specific, reckonable objectness, according to Risatti, and one as a holistic expression or even lifestyle, as described by Adamson), craft as both survival and self-expression forms a set of values which govern my current body of work.

The repetition and process-oriented consideration of image and surface placement is both sociologically informed as a means to seduce an audience and physiologically inclined so as to alleviate emotional distress. Anxiety is an increasingly directly-addressed subject in contemporary art. Though this emotion was acknowledged within literary and visual works prior to the formal establishment of Romanticism as a cohesive movement, artists of that period in particular sought out and fixated upon peripheral ambivalence, fear, and the depressed state of things not only conventionally “alive,” but also within raw material objects and the environment which contained them. Subjectivity in the literal sense of representational portrayal became a less popular theme from which to draw inspiration with the development of Modernism and its tendency toward divining an absolute artistic truth within the most basic of symbolic imagery. Despite this noble impetus, the theoretically more collectively accessible psychological spaces within art gained a distinctly palpable air of uneasiness given the impossibility of communicating any truly universal Modernist message, due to the complexities of lingual and contextual interpretations of media and content inherent to the very nature of symbolic communication.¹ Works that divulged the least amount of referent material but demonstrated some transference of human energy, unmistakable in the Pollock below, attest to this discontent—and its success in registering a sense of tension.

¹ See Vidler, especially pages 1-3, for a concise summary of anxiety from an art historical perspective.



Jackson Pollock, *One: Number 31, 1950*, detail (1950). Oil and enamel paint on canvas. 8'10" x 17'5.5".

Postmodernists continued this tradition toward defining apprehension, becoming consumed with discussing the ramifications of obsolescence and trendiness explicitly within their works, and many post-Postmodernists to this day are self-referencing, self-deprecating, irony-saturated vessels of contradictory behavior who communicate largely through some form of debate initiated by their products, as is evidenced by the Lawrence Weiner interpretation included herein. Often, these artists are relegated to a self-contained personified monologue of cause for and response to disquiet that maintains their personal relevance, largely at the expense of greater social discussion with those outside of the high art community.² I wish to cultivate such a conversation within the physical demonstration of my own apprehension while limiting the amount of overt distress it creates within those who view it.

² See Fitzpatrick, Chapter 1, Section 4, for clarification of the role of postmodernism as conversation.



Lawrence Weiner, *A RUBBER BALL THROWN ON THE SEA*, Cat. No. 146, (1969). Text on wall. Variable dimensions.

I have a deep need to move and assess my inner anxieties surrounding my gradual loss of sight as isolated, containable manifestations apart from my body due to an excess of energy that becomes both physically and emotionally uncomfortable when unaddressed. In manic creation of repetitive line, enclosed shape, and layered paint, there is an interest in maintaining the underlying feelings that mandate those visual restraints while encouraging other interpretations. The desire to seek and express empathy within my work to create awareness of larger social issues regarding disability allows for resolution of my own anxieties surrounding the subject. While this information is not necessary to the viewer, it is helpful in locating and affirming the validity of perpetuating such a seemingly defunct conversation regarding the necessary position of crafted work within high art, demonstrating that it comes not only from a place of civil exigency, but also self-conscious dependency on practice of skill as emotional relief. Though a divisive topic that has no formulaic answer given the multiplicity of definitions surrounding it, craft is indeed confined to an object and the latency of meanings acquired by and initially invested within that object. Furthermore, it is a process considered and manipulated by its awareness, closeness, and forced codependence on high art. In my work, it is also the necessary thrust in attracting the attention of an audience to come closer.

Beauty, arguably one of the most biased and yet widely-held virtues within all of humankind, belongs most satisfactorily to modern scholarly interpretation of the visual arts on a spectrum of coordinated dualism between subjective and objective

considerations. This duality embraces both the reality that a cultural collective agrees upon and influences desire and tastes for specific quantifiable material (mathematically provable limits or ratios naturally available and duplicable) and the realm of sensorial experience, often that which overpowers or confounds measure (intangible yet sensuous moments, interactions, and places both geographically actual and imagined) (Viso 87-89). I do not attempt to argue for or against the magnanimity of beauty, to rationalize or predict its fickle conditionality, or even attempt to define the limits within which it may or may not exist, but rather to address the psychological drive within an ever-present number of people to appreciate and create things they consider beautiful through a multifarious language of anxious behaviors: particularly, that of craft.

In my own studio practice, there is a pervasive sense of particularity despite my tendency to gravitate toward and venerate amorphous, nonspecific location—that which could be considered “dream-like” or a surrogate for extant memories no longer fully accessible due to the impact of degradation of the physiological structures that control vision in partially recreating neuro-ophthomologically retrieved information (Wilson 120-121). Though each of the images created begin as spaces reminiscent of those found within unspectacular stock photos or magazine advertisements showcasing far-off natural locales, the soft-focus, painterly artifice rendered by watercolor and gouache betrays any room for precision to dictate actual place. This visual inconclusiveness and the residual anxiety it creates is punctuated by metal eyelets and rivets. These fasteners compact multiple hazy layers of anamorphic material into a cohesive but agitated surface that has literal holes within it. A void of discernible information is framed within the industrial, seemingly functionless portals, as the physical removal of elements within an image, instead of the mere suggestion of their location outside of an expected boundary, further perpetuates a disjunction from the celebrated forms within traditional academic canon.



Elizabeth Graehling, *Figure Fourteen* (2016). Acrylic, eyelets, and crystal on punched and layered paper. 3" x 3". Photography by Dan Grych of The Art Box, DeKalb, IL.

Additionally, light, refractive glass crystals, and supplementary textural strata belie a sense of technical proficiency, creating patterns less observable within each object alone as they are within a collective display. This acknowledgment of and deferment to the handmade as its own vocabulary within the context of things conceived and having no other duty than to be beautiful, reiterates authenticity of substance despite a lack of complete and explicit knowledge to what it might represent. Within these repetitively painted, cut, punctured, and decorated forms, the ambivalence of what actually exists in them and the expected hierarchical value system inherent to that existence is assessed by the viewer, who is charged with determining what is *beautiful* and what is a *survival mechanism within which beauty is created* in order for the maker to function most successfully within the shared continuum of apprehension we know as life.



Elizabeth Graehling, *Figures*, serial process detail (2016). Acrylic, eyelets, and crystal on punched and layered paper. 3" x 3" each.

Humanity has a penchant for and proud tradition of upholding a procedural dissection of itself within all the various outlets of knowledge it pursues, regardless of actual objective solvency in analysis. Ergo, “[...]the logic constitutive of beauty appears to tie aesthetic value to the domain of rational agency” (Winfield 48). This drive to orchestrate, create, confirm, and recreate observable phenomena is no less important than the manner in which that information is gathered. Any comprehensive schematic and its appropriateness in addressing these variables can be considered a *system*, a formula or series of parts which culminates in a unitary whole (Dictionary.com). Such systems allow us to assess quantifiable significance to aesthetic feedback within a spectrum of metrics, allowing for comparison between moments and objects that are often initially based largely on emotional response.

As popularized by the Surrealists—and employed regularly by members of subsequent movements and individuals ever since, demonstrated by the following Miró—repetition in mark-making, emphasis and distortion of boundaries, ritualistic use of color or shape, and a decidedly emotive demonstration of line each fall into the traditionally held collective of symptomatic behaviors of neurosis within persons particularly affected by their surroundings. Those able to articulate an unease within their existence despite the confines of language, obfuscate and rearrange their own numerous systems of symbols to self-soothe, the most prodigious having the capacity to

do so outside of that moment of anxiety (Ducasse 111). Instead of viewing a tendency toward compulsion, rigor, and reiteration as indicative of mental inefficacy, it is far more helpful to locate these impulses as coping mechanisms through which a positive (or at least less uncomfortable) set of stimuli can be attained and are seen as replicable, useful tools for adjusting to high levels of otherwise uncontrollable ambivalence. It is through this reduction of movements, marks, and the feelings inferred from their construction that a semblance of beauty begins to occur in order to fill the temporal “gap” created by impressions too sustained and overwhelming to be handled through other conventional avenues.



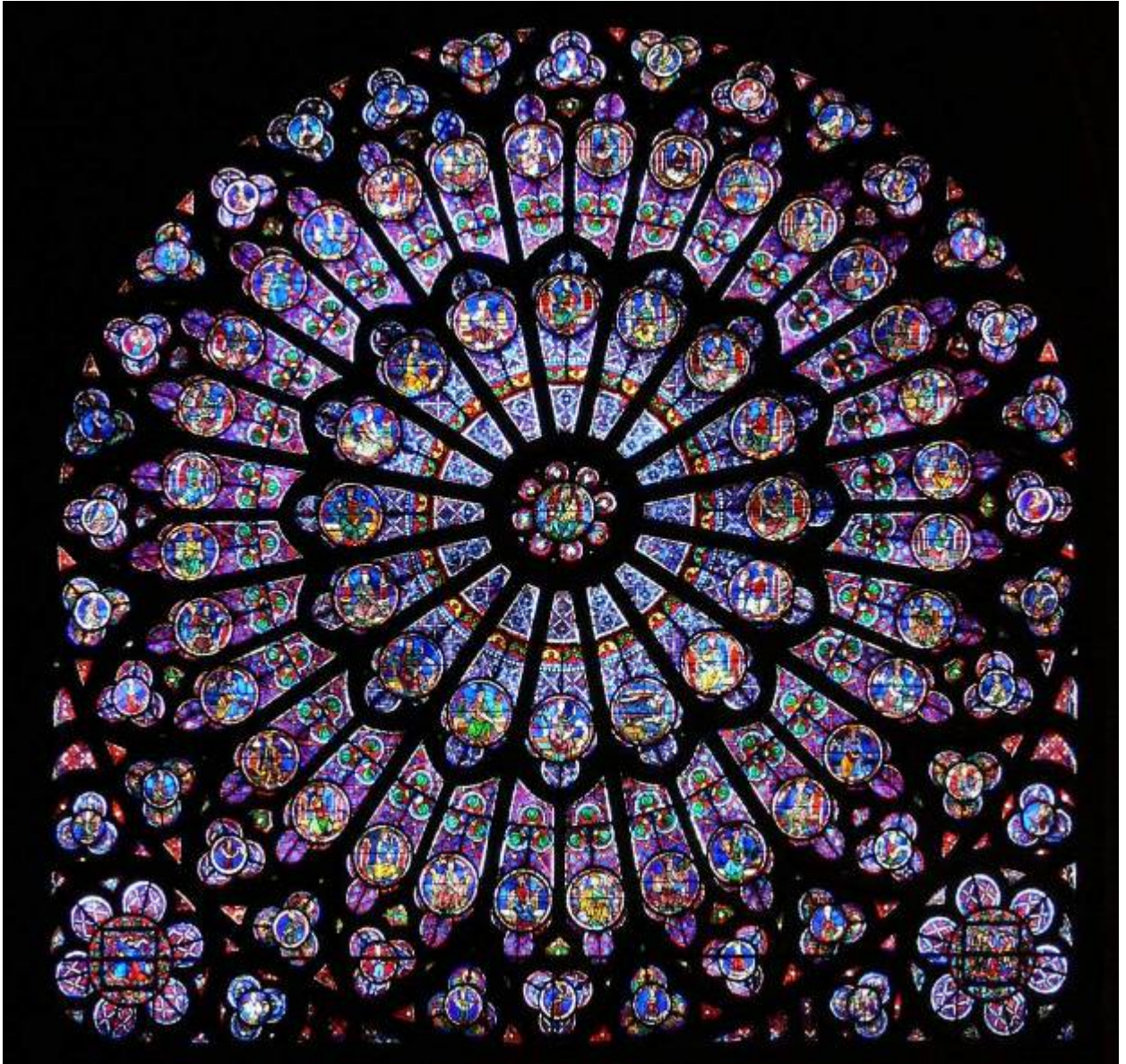
Joan Miró, *The Birth of the World* (1925). Oil on canvas. 8'2.75" x 6'6.75".

This importance of systems and the spaces between is directly tied to the concept of intimacy as our natural interactions with the world can only be understood through the familiar. What is familiar within a work has the capacity to relate otherwise potentially arbitrary aspects of an image—shape, color, or division—as acceptable, despite not being fully understood. That acceptability provides an impersonal but unthreatening place for the viewers to locate their own considerations of the variables at play and fundamentally insert their experiences of such into the images within their own conditional code. In essence, an artist is able to create incredibly personal, performative templates into which audiences can project their own complex narratives keyed largely off the existing spatially-informed media before them through the delicacy of wonder balanced by socially-informed resonance and the safety of the known.

In Stephen Greenblatt's *Resonance and Wonder*, he delineates two particular forums of consideration when preparing a group of works for public consumption: resonance and wonder. Resonance, he states, is, "...the power of the displayed object to reach out beyond its formal boundaries to a larger world, to evoke in the viewer the complex, dynamic cultural forces from which it has emerged and for which it may be taken by a viewer to stand." (42) The resonance of an object is supported and magnified by the cultural and historical parameters in which said object was originated and has been successively displayed, both with and without alterations to its particular physicality, setting accoutrements (or absence of), and supplemental textual analysis conveniently accessible within the constraints of the exhibition (Greenblatt 44). Thus, it might be more succinctly posited that the resonance of an object is chiefly dependent upon its specific capacity to provide a cohering space for introspection across multiple and temporally dynamic cultural fault lines that might otherwise remain discordant.

That capacity for contemplation, Greenblatt argues, is most successfully bounded by the phenomenon of wonder, defined as, "...the power of the displayed object to stop the viewer in his or her tracks, to convey an arresting sense of uniqueness, to evoke an exalted attention. (42) In essence, wonder is the presumption of and instinctual obligation to the greatness, preciousness, or power of an object. It manifests within a viewer through the magnanimity of one or multiple facets of its being, whether technically prodigious, materially rare, of certain unusual scale or expense, or having ties to an individual or institution of social stature (Greenblatt 50-51). While indebted to resonance for contextual validation and narrative appeal, wonderful objects are capable of being appreciated for the sole reason that they simply exist and have been made known to others through disseminated accounts of their existence. This distinction is made arrestingly apparent in the example of stained glass: while compelling as a color

plate *seen* within the pages of a textbook, their awesome grandeur is only *revealed* to those who witness it in person.



Jean de Chelles, architect, *Notre Dame Cathedral North Transept Rose Window* (c. 1250-1260, original glazing). Stained glass assemblage in stone. 42'4" x 42'4".

Much as how we see affects our emotional state, how objects are offered to us also weighs upon their impact: what is wonderful to one person can become overwhelming to another; an anxiety-inducing event can produce the energy necessary to create an accessible space of contemplation that surpasses the initial moment of apprehension to others. Similar to how we believe there is a realm outside our

immediate portals of observance—though there is often no object confirmation of such—to develop and maintain an unrelenting pursuit of peripheral information allows for a virtually unlimited potential for empathetic interaction.

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