

THESIS

MENTAL PLANES

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ABSTRACT

MENTAL PLANES

My works are mental planes in which I chart the accounts and associations I have with textiles and patterned objects. Each piece is a direct consequence of being raised within a family of industrial textile manufactures that produced fabrics for fashion, food, and bio-medical science industries. While I do not know the technicalities that exist within the process of designing and creating fabric-based materials and ornamentations, my daily exposure to the industrial craft has instilled an inherent sensibility for textiles and related objects of pattern that I come in contact within my daily encounters.

Painting in an abstract manner that mimics collage, I incorporate the synthetic, the flat, and the vagaries within representational forms. This encourages intentional ambiguity within synthesized spaces, causing the viewer to struggle and grasp to make a connection. The viewers are invited into the puzzle to create their own narratives of place and time.

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MENTAL PLANES

In my paintings I examine my associations with textiles and pattern. Each piece is a direct consequence of being raised within a family of industrial textile manufactures that produced fabrics for fashion, food, and bio-medical science industries. While I do not know the technicalities that exist within the process of designing and creating fabric based materials and ornamentations, my daily exposure to the industrial craft has instilled an inherent sensibility towards textiles and patterned objects that I come in contact with in my daily encounters. As a result, I translate the culmination of my experiences into my work in a way that emulates the fundamentals of a mental plane.

A mental plane is a plane on which the process of thought operates. It is composed of thought and 'mindstuff,' the term mental plane has theosophical roots and is often referred to as the fifth plane out of the seven planes of creation. The other six planes are the physical plane, the astral plane, the casual plane, the akashic plane, the messianic plane, and the buddhaic plane. The mental plane gained mass recognition after Helena Blavatsky established the Theosophical Society in 1875 and after the publication of Annie Besant's book *Ancient Wisdom: The Mental Plane* in 1897. The term is more commonly associated with spirituality rather than any set religion. By nature, it is abstract, intellectual, and emphasizes truth. As the name implies, a mental plane is composed of consciousness working in a way that is uninhibited from rational brain processes.¹ The painter Hans Hofmann defines this type of reality as "a spiritual reality created emotionally and intellectually by the conscious or subconscious powers of the mind".² Growing up in a

¹ Annie Besant, *Ancient Wisdom: The Mental Plane* (Kessinger Publishing LLC, 2005), 1-78.

² Herschel Chip, Peter Selz, and Joshua Taylor, *Theories of Modern Art A Source Book By Artists and Critics* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968), 539.

textile factory, I was constantly exposed to patterns and fabrics that have subconsciously woven themselves into my history. By regurgitating the mental narratives that derive from my personal history with these manufactured textile objects, the resulting amalgamation of the abstracted images on the canvas can take the shape of the first, second or third class of thought-forms which exist within a mental plane.

The first class of thought-form takes on a more literal representational form; this is most commonly associated with the idea of a specific place or location. This class of thought-form is evident in the painting *Outside The Print*. (Fig 1) In the painting, the pink and the gradating green shapes in the background are compositionally set and are proportioned in scale in a way that is reminiscent of a landscape- green grass and a pink sky. There are two forms that are indicative of vegetation or trees. There is a bluish form that reflects pink stringy forms from the top of the piece, which gets cut off on the bottom of the composition; this suggests a body of water. These forms resemble more representational objects typically encountered in nature. This adds to the association of the forms coming together to be a reference to a specific place, in this case a landscape.

The second classification of thought-forms takes on the image of a material object. This is usually used in reference to an object that displays a more physical presence. It is descript enough to create an association of a thing, regardless of whether or not it is man made or naturally formed. An example of the second class of thought-forms can be seen in the painting *Yard*. (Fig. 2) In *Yard*, a giant light pink blooming flower descends, upside down, from the top of the painting. While the flower is abstracted, it is still clearly recognizable due to its color associations and the specificity and composition of its shapes.

It is much more definable as an object in comparison to other parts of the painting like the vague forms that exist in the ambiguous blue space at the bottom of the composition.

The third class of thought-forms takes a form entirely its own. An example of the third class of thought-forms can be seen in the painting *On The Rocks*. (Fig. 3) The green and red flat forms that float within the painting are very non-descript. The third class of thought-forms portrays the inherent qualities of the directed object, but at the same time is distorted through a plastic mental state. In other words, the chosen qualities portrayed in the third class of thought-forms, theoretically, can constantly be altered or perceived differently due to their ability to be remolded in the mind. They can also be forms that are non-literal imitations of physical objects.³ Because the green forms in *On The Rocks* are so non-descript, it is unclear how they are to be perceived to the viewer. The intended descriptive quality may be the shapes contours and patterns, and not color, or vice versa. The title suggests that rocks may be present, but whether or not they are is unclear.

The sparks that cause my mental forms to develop are usually related to memory, family history, and my travels. The most immediate, or common trigger is noticing a patterned object or fabric swatch that causes memories from the textile factory to arise. This is particularly true of patterns and textiles that I find which are small and rectangular, and/or stringy. The objects I take notice of are not always clean; they can be oily, dirty and dingy as well. Any encounter with a specific pattern, texture, color or shape that is reminiscent of some object or a similar event that I have encountered in my past sets my mind racing. I couple all this information into new narratives and forms. I then envision how shapes and colors may go together compositionally and how they would potentially

³ Annie Besant and C.W. Leadbeater, *Thought-Forms* (London: The Theosophical Publishing House Ltd, 1901), 36.

become composed. From there, I start translating my mental concepts into a physical product. Embedding representational forms within abstract shapes encourages intentional ambiguity and creates synthesized spaces. This causes the viewer to struggle and grasp to make a connection. They are invited to insert themselves into the puzzle and create their own narratives of place and time. This intuitive, creative state is where the painting is made. Philip Guston talks about this mental to physical transformation of reality that transcends his medium. "Reality is when you feel thick, pink paint and you put it down and for some mysterious reason, in some magical way- it becomes a hand. That's painting".⁴ That intuitive, meditative, creative state is how I feel as I compose my painting.

Aside from Guston, other artists who use a combination of similar flat, specifically abstracted, forms and flat planes of color in their work to convey a personal narrative include American painter Thomas Nozkowski, and American sculptor, Jessica Stockholder. All three of these artists are interested in ascertaining the nature of their worldly experiences and translating their relations of such into a language, which is deemed coherent within the realm of visual fine arts.

Jessica Stockholder accomplishes this in her large-scale installations by intersecting a pictorial way of looking with the physical materiality of things in space. She states, "I continue to be interested in how experience of the physical world, its form, and our form determine how and what we are capable of thinking".⁵ Thomas Nozkowski is known for his smaller scale, abstracted paintings in which he sets out to capture a particular, and sometimes mundane, experience. Every shape and color choice he makes is highly

⁴ Philip Guston, "Philip Guston Talks About His Art: The Thickness of Things," *MoMA* (1988): 7.

⁵ Jessica Stockholder, "My work this January 2011," Jessica Stockholder, (accessed 22 November 2013). <www.jessicastockholder.info>.

intentional so that the viewer can similarly interpret the essence of his experience. Philip Guston utilizes abstract forms, and a vocabulary of more recognizable, particularly cartoonish, symbols to convey a similar theme. In his work after 1968, he started to use himself and his own personal narratives as the procreative nucleus for his paintings. His forms are presented in a way that extorts a psychological read. This is partially accomplished by the purposefully rudimentary or 'dumb' quality of his forms and paint handling. The way in which he chooses to present his objects increases the viewers' doubts about the objects, enhances the dilemma of recognizing them, and solidifies Guston's creative energy. It is evident his work stems from personal encounters that are tainted by his doubt and constant anxiety.⁶

Like these artists, I am coding my experience into the medium of fine art. I am transcribing my relationship to industrial textile crafts in a way that captures my mental state when thinking about or encountering these objects. The visual outcome of my work is only partially recognizable- holding the energy of certain personal narratives. Most of my shapes have hard edges, resonating with the cut swatches of fabric scraps that were all too common to find on the factory floor. Certain memories of childhood events that took place in or nearby the factory typically coincide with specific colors and shapes, like in the painting *Top Drawer*. (Fig. 4) *Top Drawer's* various blues, pinks and reds are reminiscent of line work hues in hand drawn lace pattern drafts. The dark pattern-like shapes near the center of the piece are similar to patterns on fabric scraps, and the slightly rendered gold object vaguely resembles small metal knickknacks- all of which I used to find when scouring through the various drawers in the office space in the factory. In some cases, the

⁶ Jonathan Fineberg, *Art Since 1940: Strategies of Being* (Prentice Hall, 2011), 396- 403.

memory is more recent than from my childhood and can originate from a totally different environment than the factory. In certain paintings like, *Mt. Etna*, *Empty Stomachs* and *Lingerie*, I reference objects that resemble patterns, fabric swatches and tools from the factory and trigger my mental associations and narratives between the factory and Catania, Sicily. (Fig. 5) The ambiguity within my shapes and forms and the vague symbolic representations of patterns and objects leave the viewer to decide how all the parts of the painting are communicating as a whole.

By originating with a reference to pattern and industrial textiles, it makes craft an easy point of reference. Transitioning from a craft material to painting is an intrinsic process. Automatically while I am stretching a canvas, my mind thinks of mass-produced textiles, such as the pieces of fiber I stretch that become my substrate. When the process of painting starts, my mind resonates less with the idea of craft and craft objects, and instead goes into contemplation of breaking down shapes, colors, and textures that I would associate with textile memories. My paintings can be considered to be homage to craft while maintaining their presence as a fine art object. Throughout art history, craft and fine art never seemed to get along; craft was never deemed as respectable or valued as the fine arts. Even though today there seems to be less of a gap, and there is generally a greater acceptance of objects made from craft materials to be classified as fine arts, there is still a divide. Many articles have been written about the separation of the two categories. Even today, there are still fine arts institutes and academies that focus primarily on painting, drawing and sculpture. The academies with the most extreme traditional philosophies do not offer concentrations in fibers, ceramics, or any other similar medium, which have a strong association or history with the production of industrially functional objects.

I feel that what I am accomplishing in my work is a contrast to the goals of the Russian Constructivism movement. The years of influence of Constructivism started in 1915 and lasted until the middle to late 1930's. In its inception, Constructivism was centered on expressing the experience of modern life and capturing its disoriented quality of space and time. The other key ideas of the movement were to reject traditional concerns of artistic composition and focus on construction. They believed that art was to be seen as a language that functioned systematically. It was to therefore reject the concept of expressing beauty, artists' personal outlooks, realism, narrative, and representations of the world. Constructivist art was instead intended to employ a technical analysis of modern materials or 'truth to materials' which would result in the translation of ideas and designs into factory based, mass production.⁷ I find myself doing a sort of opposite. I am taking patterns and designs that originate in a factory, and am utilizing them as a set of characters that act in portraying my personal interactions with these objects - from my comprehension and association of their manufactured birth, to their introduction and dispersal into the world. This is evident in the painting *Leaving Them Out To Dry*. (Fig. 6) In the painting, there are irregular flat rectangular forms that hang from a line. This makes them resemble fabric hanging on a line outside to dry, but the bar code on them resonate with some form of ticket. In my mind, these relate to tickets for transit or travel, and ticketing the marked fabric from the factory for transport out to the dye house. The American writer Henry

⁷ Briony Fer, "Metaphor and Modernity: Russian Constructivism," *Oxford Art Journal* 12, no. 1 (1989): 16-30.

Miller resonates with this notion of creation. He quotes “The artist does not tinker with the universe, he recreates it out of his own experience and understanding of life”.⁸

In Jessica Stockholder’s keynote address at the College Art Association meeting in Chicago in 2014, she stated that the act of being an artist has a lot to do with just noticing.⁹ She talked about the importance of taking notice of things and utilizing them in ones artistic practice either formally or conceptually. I find this notion to be true, and can even be applied to pop artists, whom my use of source materials is also akin to. Pop art focused on elevating the everyday, mass manufactured object, to the status of highbrow art. In the artist Allan Kaprow’s article of 1958 entitled ‘The Legacy of Jackson Pollock’ he addressed his perspective of how the direction of art in the immediate future, at that time, should be dictated. He proposed that it should pursue a ‘concrete art’ that consists of ordinary everyday objects through which artists would divine the extraordinary. Pop artists did just that while zeroing in their focus on consumer culture. Some of the more iconic examples, which are still recognized by many individuals today, are Andy Warhol’s works that glorified and monumentalized the Campbell’s Soup can.¹⁰ My conceptual interests are different from pop artists, as I am not attempting to make a statement on advertising or mass-market consumer culture, however I do resonate with the methodology of finding inspiration from factory-produced materials.

I believe that a successful painting is an honest painting. Growing up in an industrial craft household is so distinguishable to who I am, that referencing pattern, especially laces

⁸ Henry Miller, *The Cosmological Eye* (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1939), 193.

⁹ Jessica Stockholder, “Keynote Address” (presentation, Annual College Art Association Conference, Chicago, IL, February 12, 2014).

¹⁰ Joseph D. Ketner II, *Andy Warhol* (New York: Phiadon Press, 2013), 29-31.

like in the painting *Just Another Hole*, feels reputable. (Fig. 7) Working in a painterly collage way feels like the most sincere way that I can paint these recollections and encounters. Rearranging flat shapes, forms and patterns feels just as meditative and contemplative as reorganizing mental thoughts. Working this way is not easy, for I do not always love the materials I am referencing. I don't find all pattern and laces beautiful. My association to them is quite grungy. I am accustomed to seeing them in their state of production, which happens to be a stinky, oily, industrial and unsavory environment. However, manufacturing them is such a painstaking, exacting, process that when I encounter similar patterns and textiles, while I do not adore them, I still hold them in a high regard. My respect stems from the fact that even though I do not know how to execute the design and production of these textiles, I know that there was a laborious amount of work and artistry that went into their creation. My work has similar qualities, in that I associate with my paintings primarily in their state of production, which like lace, is an oily, messy, and nitpicky process.

Contemporary Philadelphia based painter, Virgil Marti, also plays with this association to materials and inspiration. His work, which is much more sculptural than painterly, straddles the divide between high art and craft. He talks about his relationship to his materials, such as macramé, that he chooses to incorporate into his work. "It's partially about for me. It's the stuff I grew up with. So if I don't have some affection for it or some kind of respect for it, it's kind of like hating a part of yourself".¹¹ Much like myself, he finds some of his source material to be unsavory, and the finished piece to be aesthetically unpleasant, while in contradiction; viewers tend to find them quite beautiful and even decorative.

¹¹ Daniel Abraham, "Virgil Marti Interview Part One," *Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, 16 August 2007, (accessed 24 October 2013). <www.youtube.com>.

The notions of creating something intentionally repulsive or intentionally decorative are not on my mind when I set out to start working on a painting. When composing a painting, I tend to agree with the modernists way of thinking when it comes to the format of a substrate. The limitations of the picture plane are ultimate boundaries. A painting should not appear as if it would continue on in any direction outside of its confinement. The images on the canvas are contained solely in that space; they should not need a frame to emphasize their containment. This is why I choose to work on square canvases, for a square substrate is not as suggestive of a continuous plane as a typical rectangle can be. In reverence of the factory, the primary source of my inspirations, I have chosen to work with dimensions that exist within the measurements of the viewing planes and the measurements of the totality of the model L Kidde knitting machines. None of my work extends past the total height of the machines, which is eight and a half feet.

Thinking again of Henry Miller's quote about how artists act upon their life experiences, I find that my background in music is also significant to my process. My past endeavors in jazz saxophone performance and composition strongly influence how I construct my paintings and the conscious decisions regarding color I make while I am in the process of painting. When working, I enter a meditative, inherent, mental state that only lasts as long as the process of painting does. The mental state can be re-established upon working in multiple sessions. Once the painting is done, I am detached, therefore leaving that time and energy confined within the painting and its borders. It feels very much like a jazz improvisational session. While the typical improvisation time is mere seconds in comparison to the time it takes to construct a painting, the processes are similar. Musically, there is a set time – visually there is a set surface size. Then, there are

chord changes and guide tone lines, which are equivalent to sketches and proposed color palettes. From there comes the performance.

In this performance with color, I have my intended palette assumed, but as I work, I intrinsically respond to what I lay down on the canvas changing what I already have done to try to keep the painting in its relative key. When color and shape are too harmonious, it is too balanced. Like music, painting benefits a great deal from small doses of dissonance. Playing with discord and consonance allows me to emphasize the collage feel in my paintings when I reference shapes and objects that would not normally exist within the same spaces. Contemporary painter Dan Sutherland is a superb example of an artist who successfully captures dissonance within his work. The various color and pattern shifts throughout his collaged works create enough discord to keep his work visually interesting without being distracting or chaotic enough to throw the harmonization and continuity of the pieces completely off balance.

Discord typically appears within my work through the contrast of mark making versus flat forms, as well as the opposition of specified flat shapes or patterns against supreme vagaries. By constructing my painting this way, I offer the absence of vast, illusionary, space. Flatness is an appreciation of the inherent language of painting as color and shape. While Clement Greenburg, an influential 20th century art critic who supported the notion of pictorial flatness, would approve of such things, I also find myself utilizing flatness in a way that is intentionally suggestive of relatively trivial space – playing these opposing forces against themselves.

Not all of the shapes within my painting are flat. Through playful, rudimentary and seemingly arbitrary mark making, I allude to the suggestion of possible forms - thought-

forms. However I am not painting them in a manner that is technically rendered with value and chroma to create volume. In some cases, the scrubbiness of the mark making is so thin, it feels underpainted. Evidence of this is noticeable in my painting *You Can Touch My Hair*. (Fig. 8) Other painters such as Giorgio Morandi, Eric Fischl and Georgia O'Keefe' apply paint in the same manner.

In some cases, the color and direction of my mark making are helpful in implying suggestive objects, however, the objects themselves still flatten out – never reaching the complete illusion of form. They exist as vagaries that are present within representational forms, rather than the representational forms themselves. In most cases, I go as far as to exaggerate the innate flatness of the non-solid, non-pure, colored shapes by outlining them; thus containing their entities to a small area that exists within the rest of the flat space. This is evident in the shrub or cloud-like forms within the painting *Pantalica*. (Fig. 9) In some cases, they can feel like stickers stuck onto the jumble of shapes within the painting. For me, this resonates with the process of contemporary Brazilian painter Beatriz Milhazes who uses pattern as a language to convey representations of her cultural heritage. She literally collages her paintings by constructing each pattern shape individually with acrylic paint on plastic surfaces. She then peels the acrylic painted shapes off the plastic after they are dry and adheres them to the surface of her painting substrate.¹²

By playing with direction, orientation, overlapping of shapes, and hue, I try to create a thin, superficial, space that references and negates perspective at the same time. This can be seen in the painting *Schuylkill*. (Fig. 10) I want the viewer to be confused and to query how it is they are expected to move through the pictorial plane. It is my intention for the

¹² Meghan Dailey, "Beatriz Milhazes," in *Vitamin P New Perspectives in Painting* (New York: Phaidon Press Limited, 2002), 218.

viewer to feel partially separated from the painting instead of immersed in it like one would be if they stood before a towering Mark Rothko piece. Rothko's pieces use a language of symmetrically simplified, stacked clouds of color to evoke elemental emotions amongst the viewer. While I encourage emotional stimuli, I also want to force the viewer to see, not just feel the piece. Organizing the elements of the painting in a way that makes logical spatial navigation tricky creates a barrier restriction that influences or stimulates the idea of pure curiosity for the viewer. Once their curiosity is at play, they start to create their own ideal narrative for the piece.

As an artist, I believe it is valuable to remain in a near constant state of intuitive perceptiveness as much as possible. Mark Rothko stated in 1943 "To us art is an adventure into an unknown world, which can be explored only by those willing to take the risks".¹³ It is necessary to keep an open mind, be willing to experience new things, and use our familiarity of the past as a springboard for the future. The fear of inadequacy causes one to ignore the ideas that come naturally. By tapping into recollection, and having balanced awareness of the world around me, I create a circumstance for my medium to create a new reality, a mental plane composed of 'mindstuff' narratives and thought-forms. In totality, any piece of work I produce is a product of the unification of life experiences that shaped the core of who I am, with the innate plastic quality of paint.

¹³ Chip, Selz, and Taylor, 545.

FIGURES



Fig. 1, Jennifer Titone, Outside The Print, 2013, oil on panel, 18" x 18"



Fig. 2, Jennifer Titone, Yard, 2013, oil on linen, 36" x 36"



Fig. 3, Jennifer Titone, One The Rocks, 2014, oil on linen, 36" x 36"



Fig. 4, Jennifer Titone, Top Drawer, 2013, oil on linen, 12" x 12"



Fig. 5, Jennifer Titone, Mt. Etna, Empty Stomachs, and Lingerie, 2013, oil on canvas, 62" x 62"



Fig. 6, Jennifer Titone, Leaving Them Out To Dry, 2013, oil on canvas, 48" x 48"



Fig. 7, Jennifer Titone, Just Another Hole, 2013, oil on canvas, 24" x 24"



Fig. 8, Jennifer Titone, You Can Touch My Hair, 2014, oil on canvas, 90" x 90"



Fig. 9, Jennifer Titone, Pantalica, 2013, oil on linen, 36" x 36"



Fig. 10, Jennifer Titone, Schuylkill, 2013, oil on canvas, 60" x 60"

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