

THESIS

PRESENCE OF MIND

Submitted by

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In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the Degree of Master of Fine Arts

Colorado State University

Fort Collins, Colorado

Summer 2005

COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY

April 13, 2005

WE HEARBY RECOMMEND THAT THE **THESIS** PREPARED
UNDER OUR SUPERVISION BY JEANETTE J EDWARDS ENTITLED
PRESENCE OF MIND BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING IN
PART REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ART.

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ABSTRACT OF **THESIS**

PRESENCE OF MIND

This body of work is a visual interpretation of my thought process. A combination of the present, the essence of stored memories and the intensity of experienced emotions create a state of awareness. This awareness is a space influenced by stream of consciousness and repeated kinetic actions. A space where biology ends and psychology begins.

The compositional format and repeated shapes lay the foundation. Slices of the past are frozen in the present through the different processes of layering media, while colors and depth of the subconscious surface through immediate acts of polishing, scratching, pulling and tearing. Each painting presented for thesis work traces experiences transformed through this process, depicting sections of consciousness simultaneously to produce a personal moment of awareness.

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DEDICATION

THIS THESIS IN ITS ENTIRITY IS DEDICATED TO MY FAMILY. THEY HAVE ALWAYS ENCOURAGED ME TO AIME HIGHER AND REACH FARTHER. WITH OUT THE INFLUENCE AND SUPPORT OF ALL THE OTHER UNIQUE AND AMAZING PEOPLE WHO OFFERED AN OPEN DOOR, A STRONG BRIDGE TO NEW IDEAS AND THE GIFTS OF THEIR OWN EXPERIENCES, I WOULD NOT HAVE BEEN ABLE TO ACCOMPLISH MY GOAL.

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The format I have chosen is a direct result of my personal connection to biology. The ratio of length to width resembles the shape of a slide mount used to view wet samples of cells under a microscope. As a child, I viewed my own cells swabbed from my cheek and tongue under a microscope in biology class. As an adult I have revisited this memory and added my own twist to it. What if I could swab the inside of my brain and view those cells in a wet slide mount? As cells capture memories and are forever receiving and possibly loosing information the continual flux of cause and effect intrigues me. Watching the cells on the slide mount changing in a fluid space within the confines of the different depths is like revisiting different times in your life.

¹ “He ‘comes to himself’ sitting on a bench. The harmony which now fills him is indescribable. He experiences a rightness, a rightness of extraordinary scope, a rightness of which he had no idea.” This passage is the closest description of the moment of awareness I strive to achieve in my paintings. Henri Michaux, *The Major Ordeals of the Mind & the Countless Minor Ones*, (France: Editions Gallimard, Inc., 1966) 87.

Some of the moments are crisp and hard edged while others are hazy and hard to distinguish. In *Green Terrain*, 2003, (Fig. 1) the prominent green circles enclosed in black are a definitive, solid conclusion to a continuously evolving and changing interpretation of a memory influenced by time.² As the memory is captured in the present, it is different viewed through the veil of present awareness. This doesn't mean that the faded areas are any less important than the more defined areas.³ The position of the shapes on the surface and when they occur during the process provides a possible resolution stemming from a moment of awareness. The awareness that I am searching for is the instant that all the different parts of the painting come together in transcendence. The memory itself is influenced by surrounding and associated memories like the influence of surrounding colors on a color. This rectangular format is also important for its association primarily with a liquid specimen. As I will discuss later, the pooling of acrylic mediums and fluidity are necessary to allow for present time's influence.

The repeated image of the cellular shape is used as a constant.⁴ Its relation to biology is important to link transcendent ideas to their residence in a physical part of the body. The constant, a circular form, is shaped by my present energy. As a representation of the self, the present attitude of myself surrounded by past and present locks the

² Confocal Microscopy eliminates out of focus light rays. It changes the position of the focal plane with in the specimen, thus obtaining optical slices. In focus sections are readily distinguished from the background, blurred image. Because human vision is capable of momentarily rejecting the out of focus light, by both vision acuity and the brain's ability to recognize pattern, the in focus plane and out of focus plane can be viewed simultaneously. The focused and unfocused sections exist simultaneously to present this phenomenon. Alan R. Hibbs, *Confocal Microscopy for Biologists*, (NY, NY: Kluwer Academic/ Plenum Publishing, 2004) 1-18.

³ "In a process called the *cycles of experience*, a need stays figural until it's satisfied, and then fades into the background, permitting the next most pressing need to emerge." Adam Cash, PsyD, *Psychology for Dummies*, (NY, NY: Hungry Minds, Inc., 2002) 299.

perception in time. The result is an assortment of round shapes. Often the circle is associated with perfection.⁵ I am purposely denying the implication by painting wobbly, looping shapes in different sizes. They stem from observing the way time changes everything and acknowledges my own imperfection. The circle is closely linked to the continuity of time, no end, no beginning; therefore I am only trying to capture a moment, a slice, to show the viewer.⁶ There is also the cellular membrane. This membrane is in a state of flux, allowing information in and out of the unit. It acts as a defense or as an enveloper depending on the strength or absence of contents. I chose to use a circular shape not a dot. For my work a solid dot would not suggest the question of inclusion/exclusion (as in what to remember or leave out of memories) or facilitate an examination of layers of time as seen through the impact of a single stored memory. The movement implied by the different circular shapes implies that the cellular shapes have the ability to move themselves individually or as a dependent group. Another aspect to consider is a thought contained inside a circular shape. Individuals are exposed to and identify with the concept of text balloons through comic strips and cartoons. The importance is that ideas are captured in this circular shape promoting the theory that communicated information is captured visually and subconsciously linked to an individual circular shape. For me, the link is simple. My ideas, memories or experienced emotions are stored physically in cells. Bubbles, blurbs, boiling and effervescence influenced my decision to use the distorted circular shape. The haphazard nature of the

⁴ “Even the most repetitious rituals and patterns of expression can be viewed anew with in the unique context of the moment.” Shaun McNiff, *Trust the Process: An Artist’s Guide to Letting Go*, (Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications, 1998) 3.

⁵ Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant, *The Penguin Dictionary of Symbols*, trans. John Buchanan-Brown (France: Blackwell Publishers, 1994), 195.

⁶ Chevalier, *The Penguin Dictionary of Symbols*, 195.

changing shapes of air pockets moving through liquid allude to unpredictable ways that stored memories can present themselves from the subconscious.⁷

The linear and spatial divisions in the work are used to show the varying depths and characteristics of the boundaries and strata present in my consciousness.⁸ I start with the initial boundary that separates the conscious and subconscious. As my exploration continues, attempts to locate even the slightest change in conscious space and its contents are painted. Overlapping edges and unique boundary transformations reflect experienced regions of my mind. In many cases the edges of the stratified space are consistent with the ease or difficulty I experienced during the thinking process. *Novice Distinctions*, 2003, (Fig.2) clearly and simply shows the divisions and intensities of the separate levels of consciousness. Yet, upon further consideration, the viewer becomes aware of the greater unity of the foundation.

I consider my process to be an integral part of painting. I choose to work primarily with acrylic mediums for the immediate qualities it provides. Since painting for me is an active pursuit and defined by time, quick drying and easily controlled opacity/translucency is essential. Multiple layers of paint and circular shapes are applied in an automatistic way in the beginning.⁹ It is easy to loose the filter of the conscious

⁷ I suggest that the space between the stored physical cells and the release of what is stored can be thought of as boiling soup. In motion, churning, bursting to the surface the most unsuspecting memory can erupt at any point in time. "Ah, Carl, while you are not safe I am not safe, and now you're really in the total animal soup of time". Allen Ginsberg, *HOWL and other Poems*, (San Fransisco, CA: City Lights Books, 1956) 19.

⁸ Stephen Newton and Anton Ehrenwieg describe the unconscious as "highly complex and stratified". Stephen James Newton, *Painting, Psychoanalysis, and Spirituality*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001) 70.

⁹ A recapitulation of Anton Ehrenwieg's "three phases of creativity" follows. "First phase of creative process, raw, fragmented, disjointed elements, which actually represent 'split-off' parts of the artist's own personality, are projected into the artwork. These inarticulate projections instigate a dialectical creative tension in a reciprocal response initiating the second phase. The second phase involves the creation of a "manic" womb to contain and integrate these fragmented projections. The third phase is one of 'reintrojection' and objective reappraisal of earlier work carried out, essentially, unconscious." Stephen James Newton, *Painting, Psychoanalysis, and Spirituality*, 71.

mind. As the layers begin to build I recognize color combinations and edges that remind me of an instance. I become aware. Decisions are made whether or not to keep the marks, the shift from unreflective to reflective thought.¹⁰ Reflection leads to identification. I see the progression of paint application and choose what I want mimicking selective memory. By using tape or an application of a polymer varnish, I can select and save which areas I accept as part of this painting's experience. The process of going back and forth between reflective and unreflective thought in the brain is shown on the painting's surface. Removing the tape or pulling up sections to reveal the surface underneath is a skip in time.¹¹ The different depths seen in *Mind Candy*, 2004 (Fig. 3), result from the search for a harmonious combination of older, deeper memories and accepting their position and importance in my present life.¹² As time passes I choose to hide the less desirable sections. However my intention is not to eliminate them completely, but to veil their intensity while showing their connection to a present resolution.¹³ The marks made are impressed on the canvas just as an experience alters thoughts and their sequence of manifestation.

The addition of other media opens the painted surface up to chance. The resistance of acrylic enamels poured into a pool of acrylic varnish brings in the

¹⁰ "Where the conversion from unreflective to reflective thought comes about." As I layer the pieces I travel back and forth between the immediate physical reality of the paint in front of me and the knowledge of paint's possibilities from learned experience. I equate process to my thought process for experiencing life. Kenneth Beittel, *Alternatives for Art Education Research*, (NY: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1973) 56.

¹¹ Allowing the viewer to see different slices of time in unison. "These moments demonstrate how experience and creation do not always move according to linear causation. C.G. Jung observed that events and relationships often take shape according to "acausal" patterns." Shaun McNiff, *Trust the Process: An Artist's Guide to Letting Go*, 21.

¹² Stephen Newton characterizes the unconscious as stratified, therefore my use of changing depths and linear elements is the recognition of this subconscious phenomenon. Newton, *Painting, Psychoanalysis, and Spirituality*, 70.

opportunity for the unexpected. I use charcoal, graphite, India inks, and cattle-markers, too. Relating this to brain activity is obvious when looking at the reaction of a foreign substance on neurons. The neurons react, accept or reject the outside substance and are changed from the contact. Perhaps the stored memory in the cells is inexplicably mutated or perhaps the cell's walls have become thicker to protect its contents from further exposure. Therefore, a lifetime of memories and experienced emotions can be altered by an unexpected exposure in the present. In *Bottom Dwellers*, 2004, (Fig. 4) I introduced acrylic enamel into a pool of acrylic varnish, letting it pour off the end of a brush. Where excess enamel fell, it pulled itself together into pools, separating itself from the varnish. I watched this happen without me.¹⁴ With only the initial prompting from my paint application, a chain of events unfolded at random. It was my decision to lock these new shapes in time, end the reaction. Using a gloss varnish also relates to the wet mount slide, which provides a fluid environment conducive to motion. Varnish also resembles water and plasma, two substances surrounding or holding cells. Where the paintings look wet, an ode to the present exists; while the matte areas present the effects of time drying out the paint and stopping its evolution.

The kinetic action of polishing the canvas in a circular motion induces a state of mind similar to meditation receptive to the unconscious. The mind clears through the repeated actions of the body, bringing forth stored information and observations from the subconscious.¹⁵ Inducing stream of conscious while painting allows focus to roam freely.

¹³ Pentimento is defined by Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, Eleventh Edition, as reappearance in a painting of a design which has been painted over. By allowing the under painting to show through I am exposing mistakes and admitting that the present shapes my perception of memories and vice versa.

¹⁴ "It constitutes nothing less than an assertion that the material itself may act as a signifier of psychic processes" Newton, *Painting, Psychoanalysis, and Spirituality*, xvi.

¹⁵ "The unconscious is capable of an intuitive and subliminal perception far superior to its conscious counterpart." Allowing the insights of my subconscious to surface, I can achieve a unique perception of the

The logical sequence of time is interrupted and skipped. Multiple depths of experience are seen in random order in the mind and captured on the painting. Ripping and tearing through previous layers is another way to experience sections of time and consciousness simultaneously.¹⁶ Seeing these sections in their new surroundings can bring about a new perspective, especially when the hue revealed is in opposition to the rest of the paintings.

In the painting, *Steam Cleaned Mistakes*, 2004, (Fig. 5), the hot pinkish vertical section on the right was an instance of awareness. The connotations associated with this intense color demand that the area receives attention. The viewer is stopped in the present, the same way I was arrested when I ripped off the surrounding areas to reveal this slice. The palette I have chosen is intense and unadulterated. My intention is that the colors feel honest.¹⁷ Over time the vivid colors may be worked over into a neutral version of its original self as I contemplate their place in the present. The fading effects of sunlight and the deteriorating progress of time are referenced. Happy and exuberant colors come from the way I chose to visualize the stored experiences that create my life. However reexamining memories through layers of life experiences I have found that not all of the sections are cheery and vivid. There have been moments when the worries and concerns stored away in my subconscious have nearly drowned out the logic of consciousness. The muted blues and reds used in *Quick! Out of the Blue*, 2003 (Fig. 6), communicate the fading light of depth and the brimming sensation of despair. Aside from flickers of intensity, the only concentrated vivid hue is the orange circular shape.

painting's surface and its organization. Stephen James Newton, *Painting, Psychoanalysis, and Spirituality*, 69.

¹⁶“In this way, (Phillip) Guston could reintroduce underlying colors to the surface, creating those ambiguous paradoxes that both engage conscious analysis and confuse and thwart conscious solutions.” “The artist can leave the manic-oceanic phase only to reenter it at a later stage if the painting is further developed.” Newton, *Painting, Psychoanalysis, and Spirituality*, 150.

This bit of strength recalls the tiny, underestimated presence of hope I feel in situations that appear to be rising out of control.¹⁸ My most successful pieces are those that compile sections of intense experienced emotions from a range of times in my life filtered through my present capability to accept or reject their position in my life and on the canvas.

In the end, I hope that the viewer experiences an independent moment of awareness and hears the flash of the light bulb, its pseudonym, Ah-ha! I suggest the viewer explore the contents locked away in their own minds and discover if their present perception influences their ability to come to new conclusions of past events and experienced emotions. By juggling, rearranging, omitting or veiling all the information stored over time in the subconscious and conscious, individuals can experience an unprecedented/ unique instant of awareness. These paintings are the product of a lifetime of experiences, sliced and examined through multiple filters. As time continues to march through my mind, I want to record its impact on my past and present in paint.

¹⁷ “Ehrenweig’s understanding that any increase in ‘unconscious structure’ is consciously recognized as enhanced plasticity, vividness and dynamism...” Newton, *Painting, Psychoanalysis, and Spirituality*, 78.

¹⁸ “Our ability to separate ourselves by thinking creatively creates a psychological space of sorts. We can envision possibilities. As long as we’re able to imagine alternatives and other possibilities, we can continue to strive towards being. This power is crucial to the existential concept of freedom.” Adam Cash, PsyD, *Psychology for Dummies*, 308-309.



Figure 1. JJ Edwards, Green Terrain, 2003. Mixed media on canvas, 48 x 24".

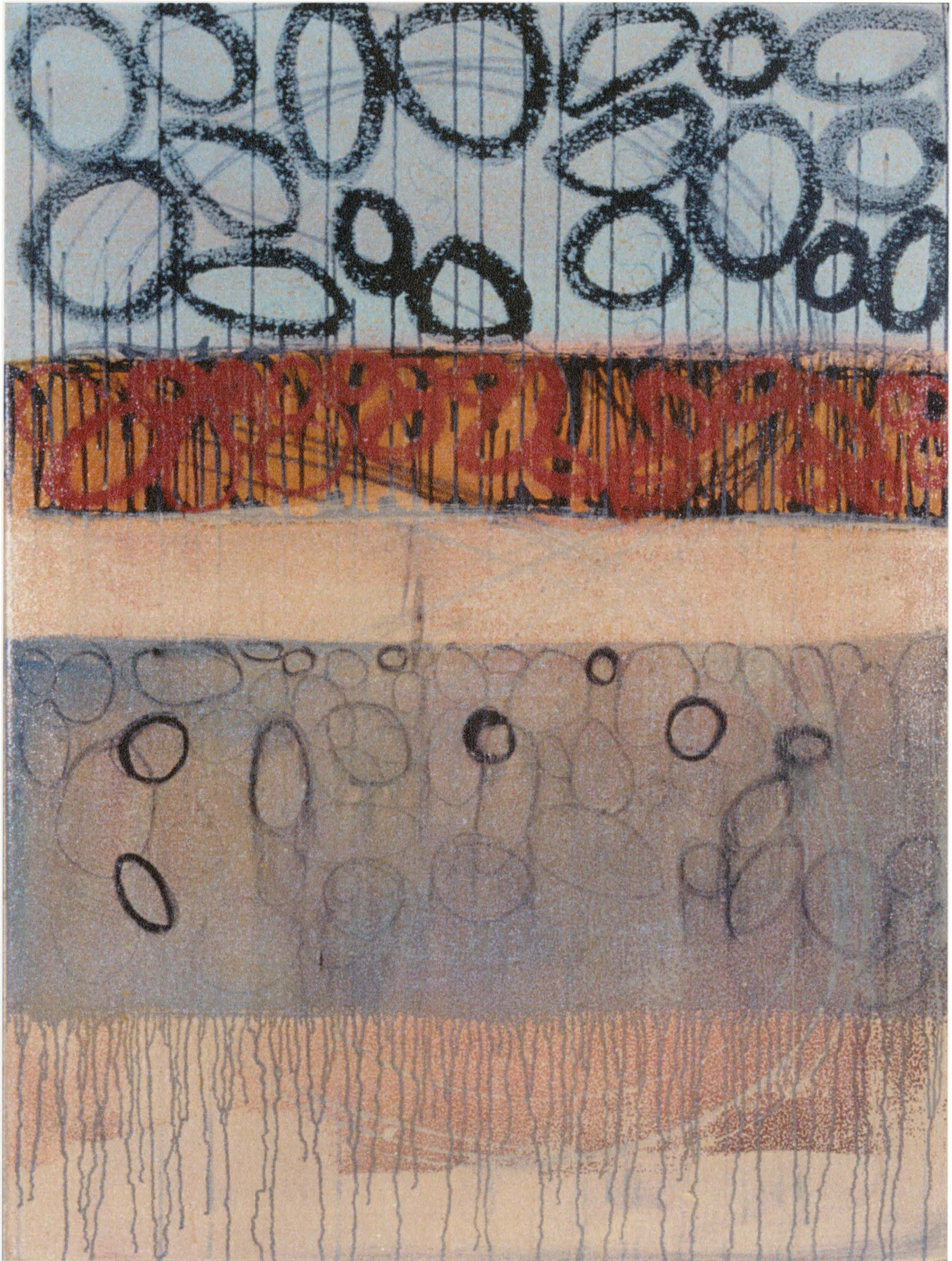


Figure 2. JJ Edwards, *Novice Distinctions*, 2003. Mixed media on canvas, 48 x 36".



Figure 3. JJ Edwards, Mind Candy, 2004. Mixed media on canvas, 40 x 60".

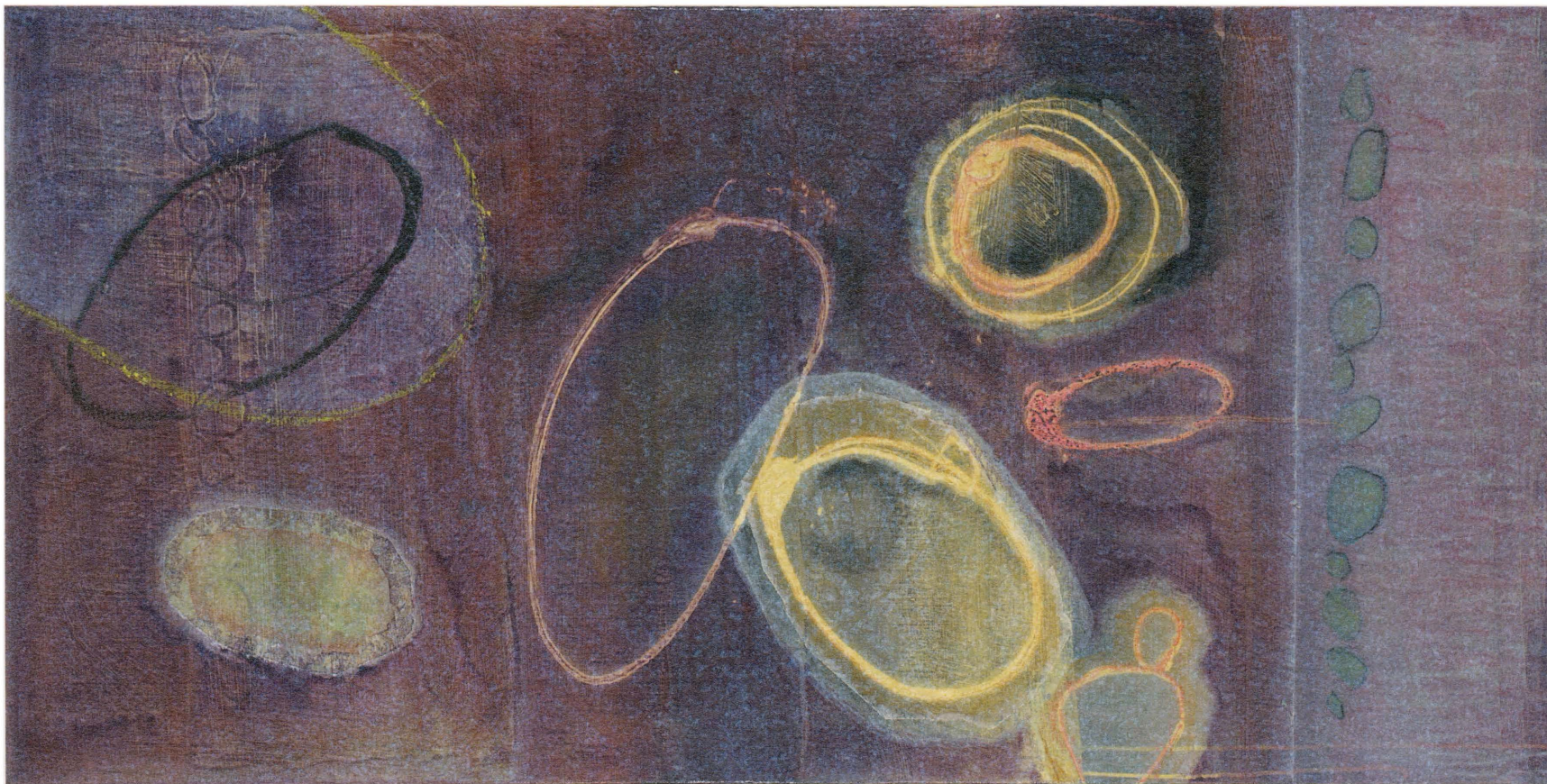


Figure 4. JJ Edwards, Bottom Dwellers, 2004. Mixed media on canvas, 26 ½ x 52".



Figure 5. JJ Edwards, *Steam Cleaned Mistakes*, 2004. Mixed media on canvas, 36 x 48".



Figure 6. JJ Edwards, Quick! Out of the Blue, 2003. Mixed media on canvas, 80 x 52".

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