

THESIS

EXPLORATIONS OF ENABLED CYBORGS: NAVIGATING BLURRY BOUNDARIES
WITH A TASTE FOR AMBIGUOUS AESTHETICS

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

Spring 2026

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis proposes a personal philosophy and embodied practice grounded in the theory of “Ambiguous Aesthetics of Enabled Cyborgs”. My practice uses drawing to map reality through the lens of lived experience with legal blindness and light sensitivity, generating visual evidence as it navigates both literal and conceptual spaces. The work examines the power of perception and the complexity of human ability through aesthetically ambiguous compositions that mobilize the unknown. These compositions prompt viewers to question their own search for meaning by introducing uncertainty. Through constraint and indeterminacy, ambiguity becomes a mechanism for experiencing perceptual loss, channeling both the sublime and the uncanny. This positions drawing as an ongoing investigative practice that explores the nature of reality and consciousness. It interrogates the processes that construct knowledge and acknowledges the fundamental uncertainty inherent in the formation of reality. Central to this research is the indeterminate nature of reality and its potential for change. Ultimately, this thesis advocates for empowering human abilities to improve the quality of life and includes diverse and marginalized ways of perceiving the world by promoting creative expression, intuitive understanding, and aesthetic experience.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to recognize the people who have inspired, motivated, and guided me throughout my educational journey. First, I am deeply grateful for Ajean Ryan. I would not be here without your advocacy, guidance, and unwavering support, from championing my acceptance into graduate school to giving me the confidence and tough love that have shaped my growth.

Thank you to the dedicated members of my committee for their time and insight in helping me develop my research and refine my practice. I am grateful to Emily Moore for challenging me to take a deep dive into material culture, Marius Lehene for engaging discussions on philosophy that sparked my curiosity about uncertainty, Mary-Ann Kokoska for her patience and generosity during the most difficult times, and Cye Tornatzky for providing the confidence and space to explore new media. I am especially thankful to Doug Sink for his guidance in gallery spaces, and to the many members of my crew for sharing years of enjoyable collaboration and professional experience.

I would also like to acknowledge the few patterns, programs, and institutions that have made my journey possible. While I cannot fully name all the influences that have shaped my development, lacking the memory to recall, the time to consider, or the space to write them, I am eternally grateful to the vast array of authors, artists, and systems I have been fortunate to encounter.

Finally, I am incredibly grateful to the city of Fort Collins, the state of Colorado, and the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation for fostering the personal and professional growth that I have achieved throughout my journey.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my incredible fiancée, Maggie, and our wonderful dog Bean. You have given me the strength to become who I am today, and your time and attention will never go unappreciated.

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INTRODUCTION TO AMBIGUOUS AESTHETICS OF ENABLED CYBORGS

Systems, models, and structures of knowledge constructed within what I will call the light paradigm rely almost exclusively on light-based data and visual information. The ability of sight and properties of light are the two major factors shaping perception that define this paradigm of light, as if two monolithic columns uplifting a grandiose arch. These structures reinforce representationalist perspectives that treat language as a transparent reflection of meaning.¹ Much like the materialist movements that claimed to represent the world through mathematics to explain the physical causality of effects on matter as inert, representationalism shapes this paradigm through boundary-making processes. Information is filtered, making knowledge exclusive and generally inaccessible to people, especially those of diverse backgrounds.

In my case, the physical effects of light, along with the supremacy of sight, upholding the light paradigm, have amplified impacts based on my uncommon lived experience. My complex vision drastically influences my perceptual lens. My body produces no pigment, leaving my eyes, skin, and hair without color. Despite my Chicano-American heritage, my skin and eyes are completely pale, making me naturally reflective of light and highly vulnerable to its effects. Extreme light sensitivity can refer to the immediate burning of my skin under ultraviolet waves, but this relates more significantly to highly sensitive eyes with complex vision. My unique sight, skin, hair, and eye color are all the results of being born with the condition Oculocutaneous Albinism Type 1. The struggle to be included by the standard models and access information in a sight-centered paradigm remains a challenge for me and countless others. Systems, structures,

¹ Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

models, and perspectives that only pursue understanding built on the perception of phenomena like light and abilities like sight, while refusing to confront indeterminacy or be inclusive toward uncertainty, are strictly constrained systems that limit accessibility. New perspectives that venture to reimagine the systems, structures, and models of old offer new and valuable insights into the physical and philosophical canon of the West.

My vision is blurry, variable, and extremely sensitive to light. The investigative goals of my practice exist as a direct result of my complex relationship and uncommon sensitivity to light determined by my lived experience with extreme light sensitivity, legal blindness, and nystagmus. The unique limitations with sensing light and visual information I experience initiated my interest in perception, ideas about uncertainty, and theorizing of an embodied worldview. Initial interest in these ideas has developed into an essential framework for this thesis and an inseparable part of my practice-led research that explores knowledge through art making. My artwork provides visual evidence for my studio-based investigation. Using an array of techniques and materials to create multi-media drawings. This investigation navigates both the literal and conceptual environments surrounding me while exploring the uncertain nature of reality and consciousness. I navigate phenomena and explore uncertainty to develop a deeper understanding of my own embodied knowledge and uncover the hidden potential held in the exclusions of reality. Karen Barad's Agential Realism (AR) argues that quantum discoveries expose the interplay of continuity and discontinuity, determinacy and indeterminacy, possibility and impossibility that constitute the differential spacetime matterings of the world. This differential marks the boundaries separating structures of knowledge from the uncertain realm of

exclusions. From this view of entanglement, material reclaims agency, and ethicality becomes part of the very fabric of the world; the call to respond and be responsible is part of what is.²

Through my lived experience and practice-led research working with age rail material, I have developed an ambiguous perspective and visual language. My work explores both the struggle and value associated with experiencing limitations, learning to live with loss, accepting uncertainty, and attempting to honor the human condition. Blurry boundaries and indeterminacy are inherent characteristics of my perspective. These two distinct features of my perception have deeply influenced my artwork, research, and writing. Phenomena and the perception of boundaries become a central focus of the two key theories informing this text, Agential Realism (AR) by Karen Barad³ and Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) by Graham Harman.⁴ Shaped by my lens of perception, when searching for meaning within ambiguous compositions, observers experience visual constraints or perceptual loss, which destabilizes certainty. Uncertainty matters now more than ever in an age of rapid technological advancements, the discovery of cosmic acceleration, or the ongoing threat of nuclear death. We live in a time of heightened conflict and instability, and it can feel inevitable that we all go M.A.D., as in mutually assured destruction. The urgency to become safe comes from our fears stemming from dark areas we call the unknown. This is why I work to communicate authentic messages through aesthetic experiences to help cope with the loss of certainty and promote an ambiguous perspective that sees blurred boundaries. The artwork I create often does not seek adherence to beauty standards or traditions, but rather, my investigatory practice is my way of staying with the trouble of our time. Each

² Karen Barad, “Agential Realism: How Material-Discursive Practices Matter,” in *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 132–86.

³ Barad, “Agential Realism,” 132–86.

⁴ Graham Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything* (London: Pelican Books, 2018).

work is an earnest attempt to inspire critical thinking and a willingness to work toward positive change.⁵

The ambiguous aesthetics of Enabled Cyborgs define my embodied worldview, inspired by my complex vision, which perceives boundaries as inherently blurry. At its core, this research engages indeterminacy as a site of change. Despite all efforts to secure certainty for their models, scientists must reckon with the groundbreaking insights offered by quantum mechanics. Famed particle scientist Niels Bohr argued that quantum physics not only revolutionized physics but shook the very foundation of Western epistemology. Bohr's inseparable understanding of philosophy-physics poses radical challenges to not only Newtonian Physics but also to Cartesian epistemology with its representationalist triadic structure of words, knowers, and things.⁶ As an embodied worldview that is deeply inspired by the philosophy of physics, ambiguous aesthetics offers an optimistic perspective on the fundamentally uncertain nature of reality, viewing exclusions of the unknown as opportunities for growth and as spaces of potential where transformation can develop. The term Enabled Cyborgs represents the reality of people living in a world full of material that enables their existence. Here, ambiguous aesthetics refers to an authentic visual language implemented in my work, a process that Karen Barad may refer to as material-discursive practices⁷, that aims to communicate complex meaning through simplified or fragmented forms that embrace uncertainty. A taste for ambiguous aesthetics describes the capacity to perceive physical and conceptual boundaries as blurry and indeterminate.

Ambiguous perspectives of Enabled Cyborgs acknowledge both the danger and potential of seeing blurry boundaries between the self, others, objects, nature, and the environment.

⁵ Donna J. Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Manifestly Haraway* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 3–90.

⁶ Karen Barad, "Niels Bohr's Philosophy-Physics: Quantum Physics and the Nature of Knowledge and Reality," in *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 97.

⁷ Barad, "Agential Realism," 132.

Ultimately, the thesis promotes the power of creative expression, intuitive understanding, and aesthetic experience as forms of knowledge production, and advocates for the empowerment of diverse and marginalized ways of perceiving. All this is done in hopes of empowering individuals, improving systems, expanding accessibility to information, and propelling progress toward a higher standard for quality of life.

Sections in this thesis outlining my theory are organized into three thematic concepts showing the passing of time within a day. These themes have served as a way to collect and connect my thoughts, allowing me to relate disparate concepts in a cohesive framework to help guide understandings and enrich connections individuals make between many entangled concepts. These sections are concerned with investigating the perception of phenomena as Light, exploring uncertainty as Darkness, and describing the ambiguous aesthetics of my artistic practice and entangled existence as Twilight.

NAVIGATING LIGHT: THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE KNOWN UNIVERSE

Through my drawings, I investigate perception and pose critical questions toward our sight-centered paradigm. My work explores how humans construct knowledge through light, information, and matter. The physical properties of light and the supremacy of sight shape perception in ways that are amplified by my uncommon lived experience. With limited sight, I find myself feeling conflicted, occupying a humanist orbit that uses telescopes and microscopes to reinforce Man as the nucleus. Representationalism, metaphysical individualism, and humanism stabilize our worldview, but Niels Bohr's philosophy-physics poses an enigmatic challenge to models such as Newtonian Physics.⁸ In the same spirit, I make work that attempts to call attention to perception and ask questions of our complex relationship with light, and by challenging assumptions based on visual information. My artistic practice has become a key vehicle for understanding and communicating my unique perspective, creating authentic meaning from my lived experiences and embodied knowledge. Developing an understanding of embodied knowledge through drawings allows me to understand and communicate personal experiences alongside findings on the phenomena of light.

Struggling to perceive visual information clearly is not a flaw, but a significant feature of my perceptual lens that deeply influences my work as a visual artist. Through drawings, I investigate phenomena by mapping reality through the lens of my perception and raise critical issues about our light paradigm that prioritizes sight and visual information. Astronomy is a meaningful system that develops from repetitive observation and measurement, which could metaphorically represent all sight-based models in the paradigm of light. The scientific method is synonymous with this paradigm as it prioritizes measurement. The ability to think logically and

⁸ Barad, "Agential Realism," 134–5.

linearly. Perception, construction, understanding, and knowledge all seem to fall into place under uniform arrangements that take shape when [we] humans convince ourselves that knowledge is the only kind of cognitive activity worth pursuing. This process claims literal statements tell you what it means, no more or less, seen by many as a cardinal virtue of clear propositional language, protected from the vague and dreamy statements of artists.⁹ Harman wisely points out two areas of exception that do not conform to the demands of literalism: philosophy and art.¹⁰ The investigation is conducted through my own drawings, mapping reality through the lens of my perception to communicate intuitive yet complex information. This means visual art functions as a kind of evidence that demonstrates my explorations, posing challenges to standard models. Similar to observers making measurements between stars in astronomy, viewers of my work generate meaning by investigating phenomena present in the work, but their models will always remain incomplete. A cornerstone of OOO is the view that there is always a deep wedge between objects and their qualities,¹¹ giving way to the idea that reality is constructed rather than given.

Reflecting an astronomer's perception of interstellar phenomena and construction of cosmic models, viewers search for meaning within the information they can find in compositions. In conducting my investigation, my studio operates as a site of philosophical experimentation. The artwork I make provides visual evidence for my practice, which investigates light, matter, and knowledge while exploring the uncertain nature of reality and consciousness. The investigation is a direct result of my complex relationship and uncommon sensitivity to light. Existentialism propounds that every person, in striving for self-knowledge

⁹ Harman, "Aesthetics Is the Root of All Philosophy", 91.

¹⁰ Harman, "A New Theory of Everything", 44.

¹¹ Harman, "Aesthetics Is the Root of All Philosophy", 91.

and self-awareness, will have to face the fact that we are ultimately alone as individuals.¹² My practice unfolds like an investigation - perception of light, which then encounters uncertainty. Understanding emerges through iterative making. Like a detective, I interpret any available information that might be meaningful for my investigations into drawings to collect visual evidence. Viewers encounter several of these drawings spread out across the wall within the installation, *What Is The Matter With You?* (Fig. 1) arranged as if pinned to an invisible detective's board. The installation positions the viewer in the role of investigator while resisting fixed interpretation or clear definition. The work destabilizes perceptual certainty and reframes perception as a condition rather than a limitation.

It becomes apparent that reality is constructed rather than given when considering the role of observers making measurements to construct structures of knowledge in fields like art or astronomy. Like other scientific models, theories, and even entire fields of study, astronomy had to brace itself to try not to buckle under the pressures applied by discoveries in quantum mechanics. Astronomers, Cosmologists, and Astrophysicists alike felt the jolt of sharp tremors radiating from the one unmovable theoretical ground they stood on. The common view of language as a transparent reflection of meaning to the knowing mind is challenged by discoveries in quantum physics.¹³ Barad writes about the power of language and how it has been granted, and in works like (Fig. 1), I intentionally strip away language so the aesthetic experience becomes that main vehicle for understanding.¹⁴ The work (Fig. 1) exhibits a mixed media collage to help visualize connections between otherwise separate concepts, images, and motifs. I have tried to leave as much room for intuitive understanding and aesthetic connections as possible; no lines or

¹² Erin Martz, "A Philosophical Perspective to Confront Disability Stigmatization and Promote Adaptation to Disability," *Journal of Loss and Trauma* 9, no. 2 (April 2004): 139–58.

¹³ Barad, "Niels Bohr Philosophy-Physics," 97.

¹⁴ Barad, "Agential Realism," 132–86.

strings are used to connect one composition to another directly. Multi-media installations utilizing ready-made or found objects embrace the phenomenon of emergence, where new properties appear when smaller objects are joined together into a new one. OOO defines an object and describes how we have no direct access to them, nor certainty of their existence.¹⁵ From just glimpses of reality, I begin to construct a world functioning as one, meaning in the work is synthesised in the spaces between known concepts. The combined composition leaves room for many interpretations that lead to new understandings through metaphorical connections based on the viewer's unique associations between different pieces.

I consider the ontological implications of perception and phenomena by examining light, information, and matter. The process of investigating perception has revealed to me many shifts occurring over the last century across most professional and academic fields, ultimately affecting underlying epistemological frameworks seeking to understand reality. Niels Bohr's Philosophy of physics, Barad's AR, Harman's OOO, and other sources included in this text turned out to be the best examples of such shifts I could think of to draw upon. *What Are You Looking At?* (Fig. 2) draws attention to the major role perception plays in constructing reality. Similar to an astronomer's process of identifying shapes to form meaningful connections between stars and galaxies, when viewers look through the chaos of abstraction, a fragmented order emerges through shapes and symmetries. In this installation, as in nearly all of my work, meaning emerges relationally between objects that evoke perceptual uncertainty. Boundaries providing visual clues in my work often mirror the boundaries we perceive and use to define reality, but are misleading. The tricky part about boundaries is that they do not exist in any determinate way. Instead of harsh boundaries that create separation, boundaries are patterns that indicate differences, like the diffractive pattern of light that exists at all boundaries between light and

¹⁵ Harman, "A New Theory of Everything", 30, 51–52.

dark.¹⁶ Diffractive patterns also describe the intra-actions between beings and the environments they are immersed in, as human (and more than human) practices are a part of the ongoing reconfiguring of the world. In this way, beings are seen as entangled with the environment, and so human (inside) and world (outside) can be considered the same. I agree with thinkers like Barad, whose theories explain that the phenomena we experience as beings are the world (universe) making itself intelligible. Others who are open to these ideas are then able to see the world as a process of mattering and meaning in which they are intimately connected and eternally entangled.¹⁷ Artwork like *What Are You Looking At?* (Fig. 2) functions as a visual means of communicating an ontological question to viewers about the phenomenon of light itself. Like light seen by astronomers shining through the darkness of the night sky, lines are drawn between perceived phenomena to form fragmented systems, shapes, and symbols. This work provides one example of an aesthetic exploration into the nature of light's wave-particle duality, as shown in the use of red and purple dots spread throughout the composition. Information in this work is modeled after phenomena, indicated through a pattern of flowing black lines and existing only in spaces between that which is unknown. These waves and particles sprawl out across the canvas, placed against a neutral grey background, arranged in a chaotic pattern with a general progression that places a higher density of dots toward the top of the page. These dots reference photons flowing down from a light source above the imagined space. The patterns become interrupted by black wave-like lines, as well as the stark white of the canvas revealed at the edges of the work, and the chalk marker used to write numbers and draw lines alluding to the form of a central figure. This work explores perceptual uncertainty through the neutrality of the grey background and the black lines forming waves, which become

¹⁶ Barad, "Agential Realism", 154–56.

¹⁷ Barad, "Agential Realism", 140–41, 171.

reflective when viewed from certain angles. Informed by phenomenological understandings of embodied experience, (Fig. 2) depicts a visual example that allows viewers to experience how reality emerges through partial perception. As viewers move through space, causing light conditions to shift, stable forms dissolve, revealing perception as an active process rather than passive observation. In this mixed-media drawing (Fig. 2), viewers are able to establish their own orientation before being prompted to find meaning in the light reflected by numerical signs and implied symbols of chalk. The intentionality of material use is evident in the marks in (Fig. 2) that mimic phenomena. In my use of chalk markers, I reference the indeterminacy of boundaries and phenomena that we take to be reality. The use of chalk markers is also meant to act as an impermanent manifestation of meaning, like writing words or equations in chalk on the now antiquated classroom blackboard. The direct answer to the question posed in the title of the work *What Are You Looking At?* (Fig. 2): a celestial self-portrait that gives agency to a conceptualized constellation that is inspired by theories like AR that articulate post-humanist accounts of material bodies (human and non-human). I find the case of determining reality's most fundamental element to be an interesting, if not entertaining one. Theories such as these dig in deep and come up with conclusions I am compelled by, such as Barad's assertion that the primary Ontological units or reality are not independent objects but phenomena.¹⁸

Both (Fig. 1) and (Fig. 2) address the fact that perception and lived experience are always a negotiation between body and environment. In the works produced by my investigation of perception, I actively challenge assumptions based on visual information and highlight embodiment as the primary mechanism that forms the foundation for knowledge. Through artwork, I address how embodied experience functions as a form of knowledge production. In line with Barad's theory of understanding intra-actions, experience emerges through the

¹⁸ Barad, "Agential Realism", 139.

entangled interaction between observer and environment that results in diffractive patterns of change. Another shared trait between astronomers and people viewing my work is their inability to account for all of the data. Participatory perception is a facet of my practice that I did not consider nearly as much before being exposed to AR's understanding of the influence of observer participation on the larger situation or space. I aim to facilitate encounters with both phenomena and uncertainty so that observers may have aesthetic experiences led by curiosity and intuition. Apparatus is defined by Barad as the material conditions for the possibility and impossibility of mattering. An apparatus is both preceded and followed by the boundary-making practices of any given context. Apparatus is a key term used by Barad to describe the entanglement of observers and experiments with their findings. The apparent entanglement of the observer and phenomena is a significant development that causes us to question our relationship with the universe that we sometimes see ourselves as separate from. Like any experiment aligned with the scientific method, any one artwork I create functionally exists as an apparatus.¹⁹ Though true for any given artwork, the existence of uncertainty in phenomena is made incredibly clear in (Fig. 2). By its use of bold waves of black spray-painted lines that conceal the information contained in the background from sight, (Fig. 2) directly references those hidden layers of reality we do not have access to. This wave-like pattern of uncertainty renders the number-based meaning system incomplete. Viewers are faced with the unsettling reality of indeterminacy and uncertainty, mirrored by our limited knowledge and incomplete models of our universe. As previously stated, work destabilizes perceptual certainty. This work explores perceptual uncertainty through black lines forming waves that become reflective when viewed from certain angles, referring back to the ontologically-unstable view of reality and the essential role of the observer in determining meaning relationally. Drawing on phenomenological understandings of

¹⁹ Barad, "Agential Realism", 148.

embodied experience, the work (Fig. 2) depicts a visual example of how reality emerges through partial perception. Ultimately, it is important to know that in my artwork, meaning emerges relationally, and limited perception is treated as a condition for phenomena rather than a limitation of ability.

My drawings and installation position viewers into the role of investigator - resists fixed interpretation. Difficulty arises when viewers only search for logical connections, linear thinking, and rational explanations in drawings embracing uncertainty. The investigation is further strained by the ambiguous aesthetics of work ranging from representational figures to abstract patterns and spaces. In these works, viewers are urged to recognize that experience emerges through the interactions and entanglements between observer and environment. Embodied experience functions here as a form of knowledge production, which is what informs my use of the term embodied knowledge in reference to intentional meaning in my work. I highly value observer participation, which is why my work encourages each viewer's right to speculate. So that there may always be some level of speculation, I always leave some room open for diverse perspectives to make unique interpretations. After all, literal language is always an oversimplification and does not give us any object or thing directly. Since literal language does not give us the world, but only a translation of it, I opt for using indirect or oblique means of accessing reality. My work is focused on facilitating aesthetic experiences that are led by curiosity and intuition because, as Harman points out, these are in some ways a wiser mode of access.²⁰ Non-linear narratives are typical of my thought processes and common in my work. Such fragmented narratives are evident in (Fig. 1) as various drawings constitute small windows that give different glimpses of uncertain information and uncomfortable realities. Viewers are able to experience the process of investigation as they scan each composition, assuming the role

²⁰ Harman, "A New Theory of Everything," 37–40.

of the detective when searching for meaning. Partial vision reveals perception to be constructed rather than given. Making art and having aesthetic experiences are parts of a very unique ability that people share. Artistic expression allows us to communicate on levels that literal communication fails to reach, offering immense value to those who seek understanding in spaces permeated with uncertainty. It is the unique material and conceptual potential of art and aesthetics that enables me to ask critical questions and create models despite not having determinate answers of my own. My perspective as a visual artist living and working with complex vision allows me to operate from the outside, as I find myself sorted into the exclusions by many systems and structures, making boundaries in the light paradigm. More than anything, my lived condition as a person with a physical disability has contributed to my decision to conduct my investigation through art, which uniquely allows me to venture beyond the limits of perception. It is from this position that I invite viewers outside, so to speak, and so through viewing my artwork, observers are able to have the experience of wandering into the wild.

TO WANDER IN DARKNESS: STRANGE ENCOUNTERS WITH UNCERTAINTY

In my practice, artwork is generated as a result of a studio-based research method that engages my lived experiences with physical limitations relating to sight. In the theoretical framework outlined by this thesis and embodied by my practice, I claim to navigate phenomena by investigating light. Therefore, it is by wandering through darkness that this theory explores the uncertainty of the unknown. For someone to wander through darkness may have nothing to do with light, but this also can refer to exploring the space that lies outside of all that is known. Such a space has been the source of innumerable speculations, and as in the first section, I do not claim to have definitive answers regarding the matter. However, I can testify from firsthand experience that there is tremendous potential in the space of the unknown, and this is why it is where I extend invitations for viewers to explore. The invitation outside, prompted by encounters with uncertainty, is intended to move viewers outside of their own perspectives. Intentions do extend further, though, as the work invites viewers to step outside of all perspectives the work stages encounters with loss to experience what is beyond the limits of perception. The sublime is an effect or kind of feeling that emerges through cognitive and sensory insufficiency and has an everlasting presence in my work. The sublime identifies the experience of approaching the border of all phenomena and reaching that boundary that seemingly separates inclusions from exclusions. The feelings associated with lived experiences affected by disabilities are outlined concisely by Martz when writing about the stigmatization of people with disabilities. In many people with disabilities, a negative “halo” effect develops as a result of stigmatization. In this experience, the negativity within others’ opinions begins to set in as a part of the thoughts in the mind of the person with a disability. The ideas of others become very real for people stigmatized

based on disability, and the negativity of the “other” is integrated into the consciousness of the self, which creates varying levels of cognitive dissonance.²¹ Stigmatization is something that has long-lasting associations with disabilities, and my complex vision, combined with my affected outward appearance, has been the site of much stigma. It is the pervasive effects of stigma that cause me to ask self-examining questions aimed at probing my mind for signs of the negative halo effect.²² Complex vision becomes a barrier for me much of the time in the systems and structures supporting our current light paradigm. Exclusive boundaries are constructed by such structures, limiting accessibility to information and reducing possibilities for meaningful connections by prioritizing the logic of light and visual experiences. Exclusion is not only a concept but can also be described as an experience. The feeling of what it is like to be excluded has close ties with loss, grief, and death. It is the intensity of this experience that emerges as a visceral feeling that is difficult, if not impossible, to conceptualize. This is why my theory engages existentialism as a philosophy with a specialized purpose designed to help interpret and accept such experiences. In the case of a person who incurs a disability later in life, they often experience an existential crisis after realizing the life they had experienced before the disability will be forever altered. In other words, once they begin to realize that their life as it was before being disabled is gone, they experience it as if it has ended. It is common for people in these situations to experience an existential crisis lasting approximately 100 days, where everything revolves around life, disease or disability, and death. Less commonly discussed but no less relevant is the social death experienced by people who develop disabilities later in life. Importantly, an existential viewpoint may help promote an individual’s adaptation to disability by its focus on the present and the future rather than dwelling on the past. Existential

²¹ Martz, “A Philosophical Perspective,” 141.

²² Martz, “A Philosophical Perspective,” 140–42.

perspectives appreciate the fragility of life and acknowledge our closeness to death.

Existentialism is concerned with finding meaning in one's life, and asserts that one should live courageously despite the inevitability of death and of the unpredictable nature of life.²³

The work stages encounters with the limits of perception by inviting the viewer “outside”, which evokes the sublime effect of uncertainty and allows viewers to confront the indeterminate nature of reality. I contemplate darkness and dark matter in relation to the models built by astronomers and utilize their meaning to thematically indicate epistemic limits, exclusions of reality, and perceived boundaries that work to conceal possible futures. The sublime emerges through cognitive and sensory insufficiency. Wander into the wild under darkness, and you risk becoming lost, separated from everything you know for all time. Instead, my work serves as a prompt to see what exists in the wild while somewhat mitigating the inherent risks. Viewers searching for meaning are invited to take cautious steps outside, into the unknown, to explore the mysteries of reality.

Ambiguity creates space for emergence between boundaries. Negative space is another way of discussing the ambiguous aesthetics in my work, as both are contingent on uncertainty. Drawings such as *Deep Waters and The Republic* (Fig. 3) establish immersive environments that allow for emergence and speculation by depicting partial structures in negative spaces. These partial structures are implemented as a way of providing visual information within the uncertainty of negative space. (Fig. 3) mobilizes the unknown to bring attention to exclusions, hidden information, and partial structures.

Mark-making techniques used to compose partial structures are inspired by strategies used for navigating the uncertainty of the visually limited environments I am immersed in, as well as the strong physical sensations and affective experiences incurred along the way. The

²³ Martz, “A Philosophical Perspective”, 149–52.

environments and partial structures capturing fragments of information are composed using various markmaking techniques and mixed media approaches that range from representational to the abstract. Meaning in my work may be found in many ways and by many means, but the meaning I prioritize is that which can be generated intuitively. Intuitive understanding in my work finds resonance with Aristotle's 'enthymeme', which refers to a syllogism that is in the listener's heart without an orator needing to state it explicitly. Harman writes about how language is filled with such instances, so it is reasonable to assume that the visual language of aesthetics contains the same number, if not a great many more.²⁴ At times, techniques are considered as in the grid of pale blue dots across the top and bottom of the composition, and other times they are chaotic, exemplified by the large patch of paper-based substrate glued to the middle. This mass is cause for concern as it conceals a large section of the surface, which is visibly warped from the tension of its weight. There is an irrefutable sense of loss in this work, which is subtly referenced by the title *Deep Waters and The Republic*. In this work, I consider the once pseudohistorical perspectives that discuss great floods and ancient civilizations, and I even speculate alongside fringe views that describe the catastrophic change that must have occurred if we are to believe that Plato's Atlantis is now underwater. I wonder about the distant future in this piece (Fig. 3) and consider the probability that Western Civilization as we know it becomes lost to the mystery of time. Ontological instability and perceptual ambiguity are derivative factors of unresolved form in my work. Fragmentation asserts that reality is fundamentally uncertain, making it so that disorientation becomes a site of reflection.

Absolutely core to the identity and existence of Enabled Cyborgs is their agency and sense of authenticity, because it is by their agency and authentic lifestyle alone that they can actively participate in and even affect the condition of their lived experience of reality. As Barad

²⁴ Harman, "Aesthetics Is the Root of All Philosophy," 91–92.

writes, agency is not something humans “have” to varying degrees, or a binary proposition as in on or off, and responsibility is not the exclusive right, obligation, or dominion of humans.

According to Barad, matter plays an agentic role in its iterative materialization. Barad discusses how reality is composed of things in phenomena by explaining that physical reality is made up of the phenomena that arise as a result of the intra-actions between objects. Agency is the space of possibilities opened up by the indeterminacies entailed in exclusions. The “space of agency” is much larger in Barad’s Agential Realism framework than in many other critical social theories. Agential separability is described by Barad as being a matter of exteriority within phenomena.”

Ambiguous Aesthetics of Enabled Cyborgs, like Agential Realism, does not take sides in the determinism versus free will debate, but instead promotes the dynamics of possibilities that are constantly being reconfigured and opening up new possibilities. The “spacetime-matter manifold” is enfolded into itself, and phenomena are forever being reunfolded and reformed.²⁵ Enabled Cyborgs are empowered by different theories and philosophies but find particular interest in existentialism and the value it places on authenticity. Personally, I choose to exercise my agency as an artist whose practice is my way of trying to live authentically. Authenticity with a disability would signify acceptance of the uniqueness of one’s life without letting social norms dictate what one’s ideal self should be or what one’s existence should look like. Furthermore, individuals with disabilities who are striving to live authentically would not let their disabilities determine who they are, but discover who their core selves are despite their disabilities, which is why I focus so intently on creating visual artwork that is rooted in my lived experience with a visual disability.²⁶

²⁵ Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 120–182.

²⁶ Martz, “A Philosophical Perspective,” 153.

LIVING IN TWILIGHT: TO EXPLORE BLURRY BOUNDARIES

As a result of my investigation of perception and exploration of uncertainty, I find myself asking many of the same questions I read from other contemporary scholars, such as Judith Butler, wondering about the relation between language and materiality. I am convinced by her argument that language is not reflective but productive, and extend this logic to art and aesthetics.²⁷ It is my exposure to the theorizing titans of our time, like Harman, Butler, and Barad, who take seriously the study of material culture that my practice embraces uncertainty as generative, and I am able to perceive indeterminacy as potential. I take the ideas of these authors seriously and attempt to incorporate ideas that resonate with me into my practice. When Jane Bennett challenges us to think slowly through distinctions made between “dull matter” and “Vibrant Life,” I consider how I can accept and issue the same challenge in my artwork.²⁸ By blurring the conceptual boundaries that separate us from the world, we can understand what Barad means when writing that the human is not exclusively human. The fact that humans have no inherent boundaries may sound absurd to some, but Barad shows how this fact is supported by the same quantum mechanical fields that drive the cutting edge of science and technology. Quantum discoveries have irreversible effects on dated perspectives based on classical models. Such novel discoveries expose the intra-play of continuity and discontinuity, determinacy and indeterminacy, possibility and impossibility that constitute the differential “spacetime-matterings” of the world, and ultimately show how ethicality is part of the fabric of the world. Our very existence is situated by the call to respond and be responsible issued by the material world we

²⁷ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), 30.

²⁸ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), viii.

are entangled with.²⁹ Niels Bohr's conclusion through his famed gedanken experiment that observation is only possible on the condition that the effect of the measurement is indeterminable leads to the complete destabilization of ontological perspectives and epistemological frameworks relying on the support of certainty and causality. Barad identifies how Bohr's argument that the indeterminacy of the measurement interaction is of profound consequence. Since observations involve an indeterminable discontinuous interaction as a matter principle, it is then concluded that there is no unambiguous way to differentiate between the "object" and the "agencies of observation." Basically, observations do not refer to properties of observation-independent objects because they do not preexist as such. The important point here is that, in light of the perspective of Bohr's Philosophy-Physics, no inherent Cartesian subject-object distinction exists.³⁰ Ambiguous work I create acknowledges the state of our entangled existence and maintains the perspective that reality is ontologically unstable, whether physically or philosophically. My work foregrounds non-discursive modes of understanding and intuitive communication to avoid the pitfalls and limitations associated with language. The work engages uncertainty as a generative condition rather than a limitation. Despite what systems and structures of knowledge tend to portray, there is no separateness inherent to reality.

The Enabled Cyborgs' relationship to the technologies made possible by the material world defines their ability to function beyond their natural ability in systems that may or may not have been constructed with them in mind. The struggle to access visual information in a sight-centered paradigm may continue to be an issue that presents challenges to many areas of life, but I count myself fortunate, because by an incredibly fortunate and equally improbable outcome, I am alive in the time of exponentially accelerating technological advancements. These

²⁹ Barad, "Agential Realism," 172–83.

³⁰ Barad, "Niels Bohr's Philosophy-Physics," 114.

allow for radical interventions, rapid progress, and unprecedented access to information. Enabled Cyborgs to prosper by engaging uncertainty as a generative condition rather than a limitation. Cyborgs do not gain power or abilities as an individual who considers themselves to be separate from their environment. Instead, the Cyborg looks far into the distance, beyond the horizon of what is perceivable, to discover what might be possible. In this way, Cyborgs are always in need of help from another source outside of themselves, but they are capable of becoming empowered by nature, enabled by the outside.

My practice investigates perception and explores uncertainty through visual art because of its unique potential to make information accessible through aesthetic experience. Regulatory systems of our sight-based paradigm are challenged by works like *Twilight Through the Timberline* (Fig. 4). Decisions arise through embodied knowledge. Construction signs are prized items in my practice that evoke perception as literal objects made to enforce rules of the road with visual information. When opportunities arise, I am sure to collect these metal street signs as evidence, to then reuse them as found art objects. As shown in (Fig. 4), the once present “detour” is concealed behind coats of black spray paint. While the word “detour” is made invisible and could only be disclosed by me, there is a beautiful coincidence that remains visible; double-printed words overlap, reading both “Drake” and more faintly “timberline”. Using spray paint to conceal the signs' information, sparing the cluster of diamond reliefs that expose the daylight fluorescent orange pigment was my intention. I did not realize at the outset that the two double-printed words would remain visible, but this has become an inextricable element to the piece. Like finding the signs in the first place, this provides an example of the responsive nature of my practice. The work engages uncertainty as a generative condition rather than a limitation.

The Uncanny emerges as a perceived quality of ambiguity. Observable in works like (Fig. 4) that foreground non-discursive modes of understanding.

In line with ambiguous aesthetics, my work encodes complex meaning into subtle and simple forms. Shapes, symbols, patterns, and compositional arrangement convey information in ways that are encrypted yet intuitive, capable of being optically perceived and understood through aesthetic experience. This makes information simultaneously ambiguous and accessible to a wider audience, and caters to a broad spectrum of the different shapes of perception. With the overarching ambiguity and an element of the Uncanny work, like (Fig. 4), foregrounds non-discursive modes of understanding. Art offers a way of exercising agency, generating authentic meaning, and communicating through aesthetic experiences. Intuition is actively considered and engaged through works like (Fig. 4), which hint toward non-discursive modes of understanding that challenge standard models and systems of meaning that are bound by light speed or logical structures. When creating artwork that is intended to be visually engaging, I enter a state of negotiation between the abilities of my own mind and body. I consider the fact that audiences will, in most cases, see the work more clearly than I, so I will imagine ways of bridging the gap between their perspective and mine. By using a large number and wide variety of objects, marks, forms, and substrates in my work as material inquiry. I aim to strike a balance between inclusivity and ambiguity. The implementation and limitation of information can determine the level of connection and quality of communication in non-linear compositions, meaning emerges relationally.

Another of my installations, called *Not So Different After All* (Fig. 5), establishes a space where perception is enabled in some ways and restricted in others, and lived experience is understood as an active negotiation between body and environment. This work implements

constraints to perception through limited visual accessibility to reveal that perception is partial, embodied, and negotiated rather than defective. As shown in the installation, there is no determinate boundary separating us from the material we engage with regularly. AR accounts for the quantum entanglements involved with observation, which inspires me to consider how observer participation becomes a part of the apparatus that is my artwork. Consciousness operates as a relational field rather than an isolated interior state. As an installation, *Not So Different After All* (Fig. 5) calls for the viewer to engage in navigation and consider the value of having different perspectives on their relationship to material. In observing this work, viewers are urged to see more overt things from a disinterested distance before being called to navigate the available space around the installation to gain more information from alternative perspectives. An important outcome of this work is to bring attention to the fact that perception shifts as the viewer moves through space, validating the value and acknowledging the differences between different perspectives. Within this installation (Fig. 5), a collapsible white cane leans against the wall as if it were left out of convenience, then lost or forgotten. Its presence will bring up thoughts in viewers' minds about the blind and visually impaired, and refers to my lived experience with a visual disability. A wide range of objects arranged in space makes it impossible to see all relevant information, forcing people to consider how moving through space becomes an important feature of learning and a vital part of existence.

This installation (Fig. 5) employs ambiguous aesthetics through its compositional arrangement and material use. To communicate with people who have a wide range of visual abilities, I make multi-layered or multi-level work that depicts objects and details that become visible at different scales and distances. Inspired by the ready-made objects of Marcel Duchamp, I include many objects to complicate what qualifies as art. (Fig. 5) creates a space where

perception is understood as an active negotiation between body and environment. Art offers chances to become a part of the apparatus. Meaning emerges relationally, and consciousness operates as a relational field rather than an isolated interior state. The Uncanny is used in bridging strange gaps. Ambiguity is the catalyst for investigations to arise within viewers, allowing critical thought and speculation.

Ambiguity is the catalyst for investigations to arise within viewers, allowing the necessary space for critical thought and speculation. Spaces composed in (Fig. 4) and (Fig. 5) provide great examples of the inclusivity of ambiguous aesthetics. Looking at the work from a conventional “disinterested” distance, influenced by the long-lasting impact of Kant’s analytical perspective used to pick, larger compositional elements aligned more closely with traditional gallery mediums are visible.³¹ An assemblage of objects, including drawings, blank paper, plastic coffee containers, pill bottles, street signs, sandwich baggies, loose change, self-care items, mirrors, candles, a walkman, milk crates, a fluorescent orange coat, and a white-cane challenge viewers to consider how perspective generates meaning within the work. Viewers must navigate the available space around the installation to gain more information from alternative perspectives. Perception shifts as the viewer moves around the work, and new information is revealed when seen from a new perspective. The installation (Fig. 5) features many objects, including a collapsible white cane, leaned against the wall as if it were left out of convenience, then lost or forgotten. The presence of the white cane is indicative of my lived experience with a visual disability. An icon or symbol of the uncertainty I experience in everyday life, this special technology is widely recognized as a visual aid, so it brings up thoughts in many viewers' minds

³¹ Donald W. Crawford, “Kant,” in *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*, ed. Berys Gaut and Dominic McIver Lopes (London: Routledge, 2002), 51–64.

about the blind and the visually impaired. Embracing exclusions can look as simple as using objects, marks, forms, and substrates as material inquiry.

CONCLUSION

My practice investigates perception and explores uncertainty through the ambiguous aesthetics of visual artwork. By investigating the perception of phenomena while exploring uncertainty, I work on constructing more inclusive models of reality that forge a new, authentic path to understanding. The goal is to embrace the ambiguous aesthetics of Enabled Cyborgs, which acknowledge entanglement of nature and culture. Material discursive practices and authentic perspectives of Enabled Cyborgs embracing ambiguity partially reveal the dynamic nature of the fabric of space and time, exposing the indeterminate nature of a spacetime manifold with no determinate trajectories. The past and future both matter, and even though time passes, that past is never left behind. Instead, we are transformed as we accumulate experience, access information, and incur damages to show marks that indicate change over time. Like a tree gaining rings year after year, we are enriched in our becoming.³²

The ambiguous aesthetic of the Enabled Cyborg defines my theory of an embodied perspective, one that arises from a complex, hybrid vision that views exclusions of the unknown as room in our Universe for growth, providing the needed space of potential for transformations. When searching for meaning within ambiguous compositions, observers experience visual constraint or perceptual loss, which destabilizes certainty. In viewing my work, viewers must engage critical thought and intuitive understanding. Existence is itself mysterious and complex. The entanglement of matter and meaning discussed by Barad highlights the fact that ethicality is an inherent part of the fabric of the universe, and the call to respond and be responsible arises with movement and the exertion of agency as an unavoidable consequence of navigation.³³

³² Barad, "Agential Realism", 181.

³³ Barad, "Agential Realism", 182–183.

My uncommon lived experience and unique limitations with light and visual information provide the foundation for my intrigue in perception, ideas about uncertainty, and conception of an embodied worldview. I have developed an authentic perspective and artistic practice as an embodied worldview shaped through the lens of perception, which explores the struggle and value of experiencing limitations. Ambiguous aesthetics of Enabled Cyborgs identify this embodied worldview, which is a kind of synthesis of my lived experiences, artistic practice, personal philosophy, conceptual interests, theoretical research, and intuitive understanding of reality. The term Enabled Cyborgs represents the reality of people living in a world full of material that enables their existence. Ambiguous aesthetics is the term used here to refer to an authentic visual language implemented in my work that communicates complex meaning through simplified or fragmented forms that evoke uncertainty. Ambiguous aesthetics does not claim to provide determinate answers, but instead offers its wisdom as a tool with the ability to help with some of life's most difficult and transformative challenges, like learning to live with loss, accepting uncertainty, or attempting to honor the experience of the human condition.

Without answering questions with definite answers, my theorizing of ambiguous aesthetics may serve well to readers as a kind of companion to help guide or a lens to help filter. At this stage of my artistic and intellectual journey, I am more interested in the questions that have gone unanswered: What value is there to be found in suffering? I wonder, in what ways can diverse and alternative perspectives help us progress into the next paradigm of radical inclusivity and unprecedented connection? Or, maybe most importantly, how much potential waits within the exclusions of reality, and how can they become accessible? These are all questions I plan to repetitiously ask myself as I continue moving to find my future direction. As I tread my paths, build my structures, and construct my models, I will remember Barad's conceived entanglement

between matter and meaning to retain a thoroughly ambiguous attitude of diffraction. Seeing all boundaries as blurry will allow me to remain in a superposition that resists separateness or determinate definitions.

A taste for ambiguous aesthetics describes the capacity to perceive physical and conceptual boundaries as blurry and indeterminate. Central to the research conducted to investigate perception and uncertainty, as well as any of its ambiguous findings, is viewing the fundamentally uncertain nature of reality and the indeterminate state of the future as the potential for positive change. As an embodied worldview, ambiguous aesthetics offers an optimistic perspective on the fundamentally uncertain nature of reality. To start viewing exclusions of the unknown as opportunities for growth and as spaces of potential where transformation can develop, we will rapidly accelerate progress in general while naturally developing more harmonious ways of existing. It is from this viewpoint that we will be able to embrace our entangled counterparts and become more inclusive of exclusions: objects, others, and the outside.

APPENDIX



Figure 1: *What Is the Matter With You?*, Mixed media installation, 4 x 3 ft., 2024.



Figure 2: *What Are You Looking At?*, Mixed media on Canvas, 6 x 4 ft., 2025.



Figure 3: *Deep Waters and The Republic*, Mixed media on Canvas, 31 x 33 in., 2024.



Figure 4: *Twilight Through the Timberline*, Spray Paint on Metal Street Sign, 26 x 22 in., 2024.



Figure 5: *Not So Different After All*, Mixed media installation, 3 x 6 x 9 ft., 2025.

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