

Everything I disbelieve, all the things I can't deny.

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intro.

In planning my thesis show, I spent a great deal of time assembling my paintings in pairs and stacks – does the painting of the bust sit atop a painting of my mother, drawn together by a formal relationship of a continuing line? Or, ought the bust be paired with another painting, in which the paynes-grey palette of both images communicates a relationship between their subjects? In another diptych, a small painting of a strange, modern building is stacked atop a larger panel, which depicts two pages from the library image file of sculptures. By bringing together these two images in one diptych, relationships are drawn between institutions and the things they hold – museums and artifacts, libraries and documents. Furthermore, this piece brings together the architecture of modernity and the infrastructures of modern painting. The frame within the frame immediately reminds me of everything from *Las Meninas* to *Homage to the Square*. Schwitters, Richter, and a host of painters from the European modern canon come to mind – the subject of collage is immediately referenced in many of my paintings through stacking, adding, juxtaposing.



The space of painting is ideal for addressing these collaged elements – though this piece contains elements of trompe l'oeil, the flatness of the painting opens the dialogue to address what its contents are. The photographic space of the two sculptural busts are made photographic by the added information of the labels and the details of the picture file, while being a window into the history of representational painting. Meanwhile, the veracity of the photograph itself is called into question with the subtle irregularities of the small painting of the building. The color harkens to old photography, while existing in a space of abstraction – things are flattened out, slick, idealized, utopian in the manner of Brasília, containing all the promises of early Modernist architecture. Through bringing together both paintings into a diptych, things are homogenized from their disparate sources to inhabit the same space. A third image is effectively produced – once brought together, they can no longer be seen as separate things. I collage and arrange my paintings to address the spaces between them.

Much as my paintings and my thesis exhibition were comprised of disparate parts, brought together through curation in a kind of collage, this essay is made of segments. At this point in my practice, I find it impossible to provide an absolute statement or summary of my paintings – working on my thesis brought about a series of potential subjects and meanings, which may or may not become central to the work as I continue. This essay is organized into chapters – it is a working document that describes the myriad angles with which I am thinking of my painting practice.

i.

The frame within the frame, the image of the image, the painting of the painting – all are indicative of the “modern” condition of the artwork that is “self-aware.” For me, these structures are related to the idea of “seeing” – of the ability of the self-aware art-form to gaze upon its own history, engaging in a practice of taxonomy, naming, classifying, identifying the age of museums against the age of the objects within them. Modern art history is also responsible for anachronistically placing its own values upon art of the past. After Greenbergian aesthetics, it becomes impossible to look at a medieval painting and not think of its ties to the modern ideal of flatness. Though many modern artists (i.e. Picasso) were quite open about their regard for different histories, and the great influence that African art had upon their work, many of these details have been shuffled to the side, demoted to promote a narrow view of Modernism within a specific trajectory of European superiority.



I am interested in using these structures of frames, squares, rectangles, flat planes and representational images, to play with narratives of history. The book is simultaneously a representation of the object, and a totally flat abstraction – I address the surface of the painting to capitalize upon these subtleties of form. As a shape, it is a container for the structure of “modern art,” and as a nameable subject, it is a container for ideas, history, images, narratives, etc. Likewise, in the diptych with the building, the picture file images sit in a nebulous space between abstraction and representation, at once hearkening to modern painting, while being fully what they are – still life paintings of objects. Signifiers for modernity and knowledge, these objects in my paintings contradict themselves by simultaneously resisting real taxonomy. Though the painted picture files contain images, which are represented with relative fidelity to the original photographs, they are unaccompanied by identifying information, thus denying the functionality of the picture file itself, or the book. These are objects that reject information, emphasizing the gulf between the thing depicted and the thing itself.

With my work, I am interested in addressing this sense of alienation that I feel from history, and from things categorized so carefully with the intention of elucidating and clarifying the past. In many institutional situations that involve framing objects within an image or a vitrine or a card catalog, there exists a desire to narrativize or summarize the past. The traditional institution of the museum serves to present artifacts in direct contrast with the context of the present – to an extent, we (as museum goers) begin to define ourselves in opposition to these things, belonging to an epoch that is fundamentally different from the modern reality that we know. Yet, objects resist these impositions of passivity. Objects of use are particularly unwilling to be relegated to that status.

I am reminded of a text I once read – I cannot remember the author, or whether it was in the introduction to a book, or an article online. Despite the lack of a citation, I feel that the author described a universal enough narrative to be shared without attribution. The author spoke of going to museums, of always perceiving artifacts in a totally scientific way – there is the roughly hewn piece of slate used by a Neanderthal as an arrowhead, for purposes x, y, and z – and of the sense of distance between herself and the people who used these objects. One day, she went to see an exhibit of ancient Semitic artifacts, and came across a well-preserved woven basket – and this object suddenly spoke so strongly to her own experiences as a human being, and to the woman who might have once used this object to go about her day, gathering food and feeding her family – that the whole of this historical context suddenly sprang to life, in full color.

The basket is specifically relevant because it is an object of use, displayed in a manner that strips it of use-value. Museums take away function – a western idea, valuing preservation of a thing in original archaeological condition. This is incredibly different from cultural practices outside of the “west”, of which I know very little. Some small examples - throughout much of Chinese history, the practice of copying previous paintings was not frowned upon as lack of originality, but held up as an absolutely important facet of art-making that recognized the living value of the past. In India, centuries-old temples continue to be used – religious Hindu sculptures are discarded when they break, replaced with new objects that are whole – things are repainted and refurbished. The Great Mosque at Djenné is maintained and repaired annually, in a festival that engages the entire community.

My point, however circuitously reached, is that Western museums present a very specific idea of the relationship we ought to have with things made before us. We are not

encouraged to have an active relationship with the artifact – we do not think of history as being *ready-at-hand*. However, this is not the natural condition of objects – things do not exist separately from us, simply because they are old. I am interested in the way the museum frames history, because it forms so much of the context of how I think about my cultural identity as an American with Chinese parents. Growing up, much of my interaction with Chinese artifacts was at the Philadelphia Museum of Art – these things are totally placed within the modern, Western framework, and I only know them in that capacity.



ii.

// an anecdote:

Soon after their arrival to this great pit of bones, the paleontologists became engaged in a heated debate – if the barely unearthed fossil seemed infinite in its hypothetical identities to the untrained eye, be assured that it is not so! One paleontologist, who considered herself an amateur ornithologist and was an ardent lover of birds, adamantly proclaimed that the conclusion of this dig would surely reveal a great, winged animal – ‘look at how that one ridge of bone arcs? Look at how thin and hollow it is. It is a thing with feathers.’

‘There is no evidence for your speculation,’ another scientist interjected, ‘Behold the tapering of that form – they are tusks! It must belong to the Elephantimorpha – some primordial ancestor to the Mastodon.’

Another rejected both claims – the beast is clearly an undiscovered behemoth of the sea – here is the whale that carried Jonah in its cavernous belly.

A cousin of the Brachiosaurus, ten times its height! An ancient arthropod with a body long enough to circle the earth! A shelled organism large enough to carry a city on its back!

The last paleontologist turned away. He found it utterly impossible that anything new could be found in this day and age, and attended the dig either for the vicious pleasure to be had in the affirmation of one’s rightness, or the desperate and uncontrollable desire for the world to surprise him.

iii.

The de-contextualization and re-contextualization of the artifact is a recurring theme in my paintings. In some of my paintings, like *APPARITION (GIOTTO)*, I reference art history while removing identifying information – in this case, the Virgin Mary. I am interested in the subsequent loss of content. Does this present us with an image that is closer to what an alien would see, peering at Giotto's *Flight Into Egypt*? The peculiar structure of Giotto's mountains is replicated, the haloed, winged angel is transformed into a moon, the colors transmuted into something contemporary – it is stripped of context but firmly adheres to the formal structure of the reference. In losing context, do we gain clarity?



Star Trek: Deep Space Nine, The Search, Parts I and II

Episode Synopsis

Odo is a shapeshifter who has never encountered another of his kind; he is a being who can take the form of any solid, liquid, or gas, but spends his days locked in the poor approximation of a human visage, longing for others who can understand the universe from his perspective. Upon travelling to unknown space, he locates the changeling homeworld, where his people choose to exist in a liquid state they call the “great link.” They form an ocean that stretches across their planet, experiencing absolute oneness, the wave the ocean and the ocean the wave, their molecules literally mingling, the space between them negated, an absolute knowing of one another in which all barriers dissipate.

It is interesting that this allegory for Zen awakening utilizes physical touch to articulate the obliteration of loneliness. In reality, touch so often promises intimacy, then ultimately fails to deliver. Even in the best of circumstances, touch must be terminated by time.

The surface of an artifact is an index of interaction; all events and objects that have come into contact with the artifact have also wrought their existences upon the object in both visible and unseen ways – the scratch, the transference of atoms and molecules, the damage of acids and oils, bits of DNA. An artifact contains all of these fragments of data, and yet, often expresses none of it in the absence of an undisturbed archaeological context. This principle seems to apply equally to all things that are not iconic – from the family photograph to the shard of carved ivory, our capacity to access meaning and knowledge through objects is severely curtailed by the apathy of the objective world. When I look at a photograph of my mother as a young woman, I am able to feel the weight of the paper, the sheen of its silvery surface, the fragility of the album. There a gulf between the thing, the photograph, the artifact – and the idea I assume it represents, the details of that history. It is both an object of real personal meaning, and also a thing that fundamentally denies me access. I am close to it – I can touch it, scan it, paint it – and yet, it remains illusive. There is a contradiction between that which I have and that which I desire. Touch is a form of intimacy, and painting is all about touch – to paint the artifact is to articulate the desire to know a thing. As the artifact is the index of the past, a painting is the index of the painter's hand. I, as a painter, engage in an authentic relationship with an artifact, for in that moment, narrative and language and myth are stripped away, and remaining is the reality of the thing in itself – of its imperfections, of the way the surface of the object acts as an index for time. When I paint these objects, I attempt to embody the experience of observation – to craft an authentic experience with an object. Yet, the product of these labors is a record, not of the object, but of myself. Artifacts dodge representation.

For me, archaeology is the attempt to capture something of the past that is fleeting – to establish, through the artifact, landmarks of history, so that we may feel a little less untethered in the currents of time – to craft a sense of collective memory that springs from a verifiable past rather than mythology. For me, painting engages with the scientific, present-at-hand methodologies of observation and documentation, but utilizes them for the purpose of personal speculation. I paint artifacts – archaeological, art historical, personal – in the attempt to better understand my relationship with these various strands of history. I think of painting as another kind of excavation, in which material is shifted to discover something previously unknown; once paint has coated the surface of a panel, it is a matter of renegotiating edges, of pushing the material this way and that, of committing to an action and seeing how the painting reacts, until the image reveals itself. For me, painting is a mode of investigation.



I am quite skeptical of the Victorian aesthetic in Mark Dion's work – I am not interested in nostalgia or sentimentality, and his projects often relate to both. However, the process of his *Tate Thames Dig* feels increasingly relevant to my work. In this piece, he conducted an archaeological dig in a section of the Thames river during low tide. The location is considered an archeological dead zone – the currents of the river and the various populations of London have, over the centuries, resulted in a place where condoms and 16th century delftware co-mingle. By excavating and carefully cataloguing all of his finds, Dion gives us a presentation of the world, as it is, a reality in which antiquity cannot be simply sifted from the contemporary moment. (Tate)

In this exhibition, I present multiple histories together – as illustrated by Dion's project, the divisions between historical narratives aren't necessarily grounded in reality. A photograph is situated near a Greek bust – a painting of the Shanghai History Museum sits atop anonymous images from a picture file – Camille Claudel by a painting of a defunct library picture file. Things in this exhibition signify taxonomy while presenting no taxonomic information – the paintings seem to reference visually specific sources, while totally rejecting linguistic entrance to their subjects; the viewer must rely on formal relationships to infer meaning.

Dion's work insists on taxonomy and museological systems to convey meaning in otherwise disparate objects. I use signifiers of 'taxonomy,' and then subvert their function. I bring up Dion's project as a foil to my work – though his work and my work immediately appear to have similar subjects, they are actually opposed – where Dion trusts taxonomy, my paintings question their ability to articulate something true.

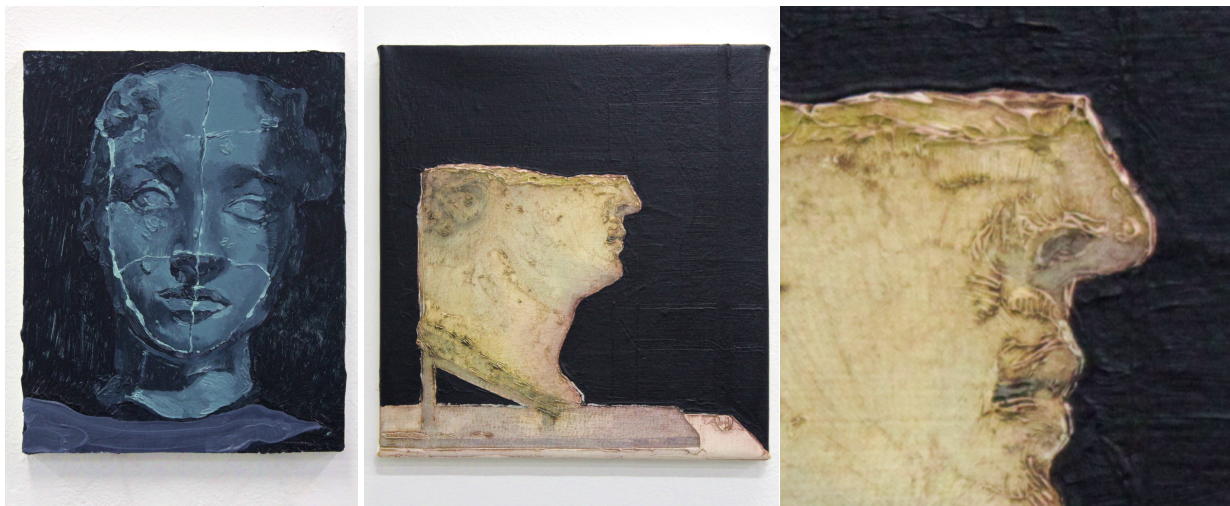
Some of the images I paint are photographs I have taken, and others are sourced from the internet. I paint from and reference photography because my work largely addresses the distance between the self and the object of perception; I am interested in the degrees of separation that form in between ourselves and “the past,” mediated by the experience of institutions such as museums or libraries. These spaces inherently alienate us through their re-contextualization of history, and yet become the only direct portals of access to a sense of history through objects – short of visiting an archaeological site. The smartphone camera roll and the Google image search both mediate our ways of looking.

I select images of objects that are personally evocative to me – the photograph of my mother, the bust of Camille Claudel, the sculpture so weathered that its place of origin is totally obscured, a photo from a natural history museum – without a label, it belongs only to the epoch of the distant past. Most of my paintings are completed quite directly, over the course of one or two days. I like making small paintings because of the intimacy of making reflects the intimacy of looking at artifacts, of reading.



Standing before an effective trompe l'oeil painting, we become recipients of a different reality, if only until the illusion shatters. In this brief, orchestrated suspension of disbelief, we are embedded within a fiction that feels authentic. I'm not interested in trickery. Rather, I use the history of trompe l'oeil to set up opposing senses of materiality and illusion in my paintings. In *PICTURE FILE (S)*, the thickly painted sculpture is a foil to the trompe l'oeil book – by using multiple dialects of mark-making in this individual painting, I set up contradictions and questions about authenticity and reality. When I depict the surface of a sculpture from antiquity, I am interested in the different ways paint can function to describe a surface. In *MET (COLOSSUS)*, the surface materially mimics a patina, whereas in *BLUE FACE (CAMILLE)*, the paint serves to describe an affect or a sensation.

Whether I am painting an artifact or the photograph of an artifact, the act of observation is an important part of my work. Painting observationally questions my preconceptions of how things appear. To look and translate what the eye sees is to identify the strangeness of an object's contours – to engage in an act of approximation and best guesses.



Pati Hill's work utilizes the transformative power of the photocopy machine to generate new ways of looking, and to capture the strange and glorious moment when one is surprised by the familiar. Hill's photocopies strip objects of their use value and convert them into specimens to be examined. The copy machine, Hill once remarked, "repeats my words perfectly as many times as I ask it to, but when I show it a hair curler, it hands me back a space ship, and when I show it the inside of a straw hat, it describes the eerie joys of a descent into a volcano." (Arcadia)

Hill came to art-making after decades as a writer, so it's not surprising that her work ties directly to systems of language; her photocopies resemble pictograms, especially when they are arranged in a grid. The photocopy becomes the stand-in for the object itself and is perhaps the most objective form of representation: Try as the artist may to control the final image, the photocopier's eye is its own, and peers from beneath its glass platen to produce the unpredictable. Hill's photocopies become a universal language — a printed symbol created through the unbiased eye of a machine, unaffected by human touch.

In the course of her work, Hill does make aesthetic choices – decisions that place her photocopies in the realm of representation rather than presentation. However, her work seems conscious of this fact, and expresses the desire to negate the artist's authority, to relinquish control to the object. Though her strategy opposes mine by removing the hand, I think our goals are similar. Hill's work is about taking a second glance at an object – removing the context while keeping the essence of a thing, and re-evaluating.

x.

The paintings in this exhibition are linked through their individual relationships with a narrative of history. The frameworks that provide context for history and meaning exist here in various stages of disintegration; by adding or subtracting elements, each painting individually becomes somehow alienated from its source. I am interested in the impossibility of penetrating the past – regardless of museum text or history books, the past is a different country. The removal of context is not intended to be iconoclastic, but is instead an attempt to investigate the histories that these objects really do physically hold – the reality of a crack in a teacup, or a rip in a page – if they could speak, what would they say?

Let us compare two of the three portraits from this body of work.



The subject of both images is *history* – here, distinct from *the past* – and both images contain the visual clues signifying these particular engagements with a narrative of historical events. The Roman bust, a senator, a man, a white man, a white man of power, is situated in and representative of a specific, Western sense of space and time. This particular image of the bust is not an iconic image, but the literal, photographic quality makes it recognizable – nameable. The object of the bust, which is the subject of the photograph, carries connotations of authority; it is symbolic of “civilization,” of the right to emphasize and erase, to define orient from occident. The distinctly photographic quality places this ancient object in a relatively modern context. The bust is revealed by flash photography in an otherwise dark space.

In contrast, the photograph of my mother is situated quite differently; it is a personal history, which spans decades rather than centuries, and has significance to me, and to no one else. The personal photograph, or the family photograph, serves as evidence of a past. The studio portrait photograph, in particular, bears few indications of a specific time or place; that information is ironically vacant for such a personal and specific image. Once the photograph is taken out of the context of specific ownership – of a specific album belonging to the person or a relative – it becomes devoid of meaning. By painting the image of my mother, I reclaim it – it is mediated through my hand.

Painting from photographs is a role reversal – though photography may have usurped painting as the primary mode of depiction, painting the photograph reiterates presence of the hand, the subjectivity of the image – qualities specific to painting. In painting the photograph of my mother, I am using a painting as a tool for touching the past, physically constructing a history – history becomes embedded within a material of my making. (– this materiality separates painting from drawing?) The mark is looser here, allowing me to have an equal part in the construction of the image as did the photographer. Painting the photograph of my mother as a young woman is an attempt to construct intimacy with a subject who is fundamentally different from my mother who I know now.

I am told that I look a lot like my father's mother when she was my age. I can neither confirm nor deny this assertion, as no photographs of my grandmother exist; she destroyed them, along with all of her other possessions, during the communist revolution. She did this for fear that the images of herself and her family – wealthy people – would turn them into targets. Reaching into the public domain – the internet, the library picture archive, the antique store – is a mode of reaching an approximation of the past through juxtaposing

tangible histories. The past may be found in the space between images and artifacts; measured better when situated against the landmarks of real images, than through aimless conjecture. The space between the bust of the senator and the photograph of my mother is vast – but this framework of relationships is the basic structure for the making of meaning in my work.

In both cases, the photographic nature of the source imagery is not masked; photographs are not used here as a lesser substitute for real objects or the imagination; for instance, I would not ask my mother to sit for me. Rather, fidelity to the photograph is fundamental to these paintings, and is deliberately highlighted by the inclusion of such clues as the deckled edge of the photograph of my mother, or the harsh contrast of flash photography in the image of the bust. This relationship to photography takes on various forms; in the case of the bust, the painting is photorealism, whereas in the case of the portrait, the hand is more immediately obvious.

Photography is important to my work because it implies a kind of objective document – of course, photographs are staged, mediated, and authored, but the indexical nature of their production place them in the guise of documentary.

“Photographs - and quotations - seem, because they are taken to be pieces of reality, more authentic than extended literary narratives. The only prose that seems credible to more and more readers is not the fine writing of someone like Agee, but the raw record - edited or unedited talk into tape recorders; fragments or the integral texts of sub-literary documents [etc...]” (Sontag 74)

I use painting as the act of re-presentation; here, painting becomes a medium conducive to the reassertion of authorship over a narrative. Painting is a field in which the image may become embodied; a photo-realistic painting, then, is the recombining of the contemporary image with tangible being in the world – framing the contemporary moment, so often described with such nebulous terms as *post-human*, *post-truth*, *post-whatever* – in something that is grounded. In painting an image, several things:

- (1.) A specific, subjective author, a hand, reasserted in spite of the anonymity of digital photography and the internet.
- (2.) Photographs scan the three-dimensional, whereas painting *transmutes* photography. In Star Trek, images displayed upon the view screen are infinitely enlarge-able – there is no limit to resolution. In our reality, Photoshop uses algorithms to approximate the probable arrangement of pixels when we use the healing brush, or transform a section of the image. Unlike digital images, painting transforms with no limitation, and without rule.
- (3.) The image, able to be circulated, is seen in an identical manner all over the world on different devices, is turned into a singular experience that is only accessible with the body in a specific location – you cannot take it with you.



I am interested in the role of the Archive in constructing history. This semester, much of my work began to reference the library, the archive, and the picture file. The picture file is particularly interesting as a proto-internet – libraries and books are places where information and context can escape the speedy vicissitudes of sea change in trend. The physical nature of the library is analogous to the museum.

One thing that draws me particularly to painting is its materiality – to some extent, painting defies documentation in its true form – unlike a digital photograph, a print or a drawing, and unlike sculpture, which is obvious in its defiance of the two-dimensional field of representation, painting often flutters between the space of being elusive and apparent. A painting manages to be captured in an image, but never really seen through proxy – its surface, materiality, dimensionality, subtlety of transparency – all are elements that escape

the capture of the photograph. Paintings, therefore, dodge the digital, while we continue to believe that they may be transformed into the square of the instagram snapshot.

Painting is metaphor, then, for the dissolution of history – for the enduring value of objects and artifacts, and how they are lost through representation. Additionally, paintings are cultural artifacts. By painting museological objects, I create a representation of the artifact with acts in opposition to the documentary photograph – where the photograph posits reality in artifice, pretends to display itself objectively, a true representation, painting is obvious in its subjectivity and fallacy. A painting of an object would never be mistaken for the object itself. Yet, the painting of the artifact becomes (immediately) an artifact itself. The painting embeds itself within the context of history – its materiality hearkens to a place in time, an anchoring in the past.

What does it mean, then, to make a painting of objects? Still life painting in the twenty-first century is not entrenched within the anachronisms of the Academy – rather it is *about* anachronism, it is *about* forging alternate histories through representation. Contemporary painting cannot escape the inherent self-referential quality of contemporary painting. (For me, perhaps post-modern just means that I feel unable to make things with absolute, direct earnestness.) I am interested in the role of painting in this particular moment – by translating structures of contemporary, digitized experience into paint, I suppose I am insisting that there is value in slowing down, and carefully looking. Perhaps my point is simply to remark on the importance of thinking in context of the past – especially the ancient past that we do not consider in living color.

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