

# **Foolish Painterly Conundrums**

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## Abstract

*Foolish Painterly Conundrums* is powered by the idea of foolishness both in its approach and as a conceptual inference within the production of paintings. This dissertation explores the notion of *Foolishly Camp* by fusing together historical ideas associated with that of *The Fool* with those of the frivolous and excessive nature of *Camp*. Through *Foolishly Camp*, this writing unpacks the allusions to playfully and willfully negotiating hierarchies of taste and structures within painting. The constraints of this medium is viewed as pigment applied to a flat substrate utilising marks, forms, colour combinations, tonal gradations and representation. Alongside the production of paintings in the studio and the examination of painting in the written dissertation, two key relationships have emerged: the relationship between materiality and image and, that of the figure and ground.

The works made in the studio comprise of 75% of the project whilst this written dissertation comprises 25% of the overall research, it is the studio work which is paintings, drawings and sketches which has led this written dissertation.

Through the examination of artists such as Laura Owens and Katherine Bernhardt, this writing approaches how printed reproductions on the internet, video games, and seemingly *Camp* films have influenced the practice of painting. The idea of artifice is explored in relation to an urban cultural context influenced by the internet, and colour. More specifically, these ideas are explored in three chapters: *Romy and Michele's High School Reunion* (*Camp*), *Super Paper Mario* (*artifice*) and, *Call me by your Name* (*painterly conundrums*).

*Foolish Painterly Conundrums* is an exploration of painting through its mediations; scrolling images, video games, film and the experience of viewing and making paintings. This dissertation charts a trajectory of painting which is playful and speculative as this painter stumbles, wobbles and fumbles his way towards a new suite of paintings.

## **Declaration**

This is to certify that

- (i) *the thesis comprises only my original work towards the Masters of Fine Arts,*
- (ii) *due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used,*
- (iii) *the thesis is 12,685 words in length, exclusive of tables, maps, bibliographies and appendices.*

Fu-On Chung

## **Preface**

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Image credit: Eric Jong



# Foolish Painterly Conundrums

*Foolish Painterly Conundrums* courts the idea of foolishness both as an approach and as a conceptual inference within the practice of a painter buoyed by humour, excess and artifice. The role of foolishness gleaned from the sensibility of *Camp* is grounded within rebellion against conventional hierarchies and systems. The idea of the fool is to turn the normative canon upon its head and to usurp given hierarchies. Within *Foolish Painterly Conundrums*, this idea functions as a means to describe the bumbling and clumsy process I am plugged into as I stumble, wobble and fumble my way towards a new body of work.

This project is first and foremost cemented in the medium of painting. The medium of painting within this project is defined as painted marks utilising pigment that is applied to a flat substrate. These painted marks can be sweeping gestures or small marks which amount to illusionistic representation. *Foolish Painterly Conundrums* is an exploration of painting through its mediations of digital and printed reproductions. This is combined with my own experience of making and viewing paintings in the flesh.

Throughout this writing, I will examine the paintings of five artists. In Chapter One, the examination of paintings will serve as ways of thinking and embodying an approach to painting which is wilfully playful with similarities to the sensibility of *Camp*. I will discuss the influence of digital networks and technology in relation to painting in Chapter Two, and the process of painting where the image outcome isn't set in concrete from the outset is explicated in Chapter Three. The analysis of these paintings will centre upon two key relationships within painting: figure and ground, and materiality and image. The concept of figure and ground will be discussed in depth in *Chapter Two: Super Paper Mario*, however this relationship is considered in relation to the examination of painting's representational space, how far marks and forms recede and advance towards the viewer. In regards to the relationship between materiality and image, New Zealand-based writer Anthony Byrt writes that:

“good painting has nothing to do with choosing between abstraction and figuration and everything to do with managing the dialogue between materiality and image: a conversation where time, space, process, and the raw stuff of paint collide with the medium’s illusionist, performative possibilities”.<sup>1</sup>

When I discuss the *materiality* of paint I am referring to how it gloops, splatters and pools upon the surface of the canvas. And when I use the notion of *image* in relation to *materiality*, I am referring to what these gloops, splatters and pools amount to, whether it be figurative representation or an illusionistic space which faintly alludes to something, or perhaps something entirely of its own logic and reason.

The idea of foolishness is aligned with my outlook upon the production of paintings, favouring a sensibility of extravagance alloyed with an approach that is wilfully playful. Judith Halberstam writes about the role of foolishness in their 2011 text *The Queer Art of Failure*.<sup>2</sup> This text is about seeking alternative ways for success or reaching an outcome, by upturning things to find new solutions under the guise of ‘failure’. Halberstam references the animated film *Finding Nemo* where “Dory represents a different, queer and fluid form of knowing, that operates independently of coherence or linear narrative progression. By some standards, she might be read as stupid or unknowing, foolish or silly, but ultimately her silliness leads her to new and different forms of relation and action”.<sup>3</sup> For Halberstam, the character of Dory operates independently against coherence and it is through this clash with the central character of Nemo (who by comparison is more coherent and normative) that tension arises within the plot of the film.

Through this analysis of the animated film *Finding Nemo*, Halberstam attempts to dismantle “the logics of success and failure with which we currently live. Under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may, in fact, offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world.”<sup>4</sup> I think about the potential of failure, losing, unmaking, redoing and slipping within painting and how these ideas could spur forth a painting practice. Halberstam’s reference to this animated film is a use of *low theory* which offers a counterpoint to academic norms.<sup>5</sup> *Foolish Painterly Conundrums* will follow suit as each chapter will

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<sup>1</sup> . Anthony Byrt, ‘Phoebe Unwin’, *Artforum International*; New York, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Halberstam now goes by the name ‘Jack Halberstam’ However since this text was written under the name ‘Judith’ it will be referenced as such. Halberstam is fluid with gender pronouns so as a result I will refer to Halberstam as they/them within this dissertation.

Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 54

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 2-3.

<sup>5</sup> Halberstam discusses *Low Theory* within this text stating that the purpose of utilising this theory is to create a new way of knowledge by darting between *High* and *Low*, bouncing between esoteric thinking and popular culture. In a way,

utilise an example of film or a novel to discuss the chapter's core idea. It is through these wayward (and wayfaring) references that my personal lived experience is illuminated through the writing. This is to mirror the manner in which my personal lived experience is illuminated through the painting. Isabelle Graw writes that "It is through the act of painting – putting brush to canvas or panel – that the painter's person appears to be brought into play, creating the phantasmic presence that turns out to be an absence".<sup>6</sup> If the mark of my hand within my paintings allows them to be imbued with a sense of self, this is accounted for in the writing by utilising references from my personalised lived experience to illuminate further the relationship between the maker and the paintings.

*Chapter One: Romy and Michele's High School Reunion*, discusses the idea of *The Fool* exploring its history and defining its characteristics of outside of the norm thinking. This chapter then discusses the sensibility of *Camp* speaking specifically about it as a sensibility which is "serious about the frivolous."<sup>7</sup> This idea of *Foolishly Camp* is discussed in relation to the practice of Los-Angeles based artist Laura Owens. Furthermore, the New-York based artist Dana Schutz will be discussed in relation to the school of Bad Painting which I muse is the result of folding *Foolishly Camp* into the medium of painting.

This research project takes place during a time where pictures and representations of paintings are easily accessible through illuminated screens such as mobile phones and computers. Jörg Heiser writes that "Painting must compete with this mass media image pool, whether or not it actively addresses it. At this same time, painting must compete with itself, with its own history, which in turn is part of this image pool."<sup>8</sup> The digital environment is ever present and has seeped into the paintings of New-York based Katherine Bernhardt. These ideas will be explored in *Chapter Two: Super Paper Mario* referencing the idea of artifice in relation to video games. The London-based artist Phoebe Unwin will also be brought into this discussion through figure and ground.

The first two chapters essentially explore *foolish* and how it can fold into the act of painting. The third chapter marks a slight shift in tone as it jettisons campy films and video games for romantic longing prose in the explication of the *Painterly Conundrums* of this writings' title. *Chapter Three: Call me by your Name*, references the André Aciman novel of the same name within a discussion around yearning

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this is Halberstam flattening divisional leagues of taste in an attempt to find new ways to gain knowledge. Whilst there are allusions here to Kitsch as fleshed out in the bibliography of this writing, kitsch won't be explicitly discussed here in this writing, instead focusing on the hierarchies of taste within *Camp*, as a means to streamline the ideas within this writing.

<sup>6</sup> Isabelle Graw, *The Love of Painting: Genealogy of a Success Medium*, ed. Niamh Dunphy, trans. Brían Hanrahan and Gerrit Jackson, 2018. 51.

<sup>7</sup> Susan Sontag, Notes on "Camp", in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Picador, 1964). 288.

<sup>8</sup> Jörg Heiser, 'Bodiless Elegance versus Pungent Physicality The Painting of Decisions', in *All of a Sudden Things That Matter in Contemporary Art* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2008). 97.

across phases of time.<sup>9</sup> The painting of London-based Tomma Abts will be discussed in relation to engaging a process of painting where the maker navigates calibrated decisions as the present unfolds whilst keeping one eye open towards the painting's future potential. John Kelsey writes about this type of painting involving over-painting and erasure describing that this is an "act of painting [which] is decentred from its own clumsy present, and put back in touch with both a forgotten past and a future poised elegantly on the tip of the tongue."<sup>10</sup> Pinpointing that the future image of the finished painting is poised upon the tip of the maker's tongue alludes to the way that the final image outcome is the result of an intuitive method, where the maker is stumbling and fumbling and calibrating decisions which are presented to them until they decide that the painting is finished.

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<sup>9</sup> André Aciman, *Call Me by Your Name* (New York: Picador, 2007).

<sup>10</sup> John Kelsey, 'Big Joy Time', in *Jon Kelsey Rich Texts: Selected Writing for Art* (Sternberg Press, 2010). 38.

# Romy and Michele's High School Reunion

Foolishly Camp and Bad, Bad Painting

*Foolish Painterly Conundrums* rotates around the central idea of foolishness, this chapter begins by fusing together the idea of *The Fool* with the sensibility of *Camp* referencing Susan Sontag's 1964 text *Notes on 'Camp'*.<sup>11</sup> This chapter examines the 1997 film *Romy and Michele's High School Reunion* in relation to the notions of foolishness and *Camp*.<sup>12</sup> The Los Angeles based artist Laura Owens will be used as an example of an approach to painting which is *Foolishly Camp*. I then fold this *Foolishly Camp* sensibility into painting involving a discussion around the school of making known as *Bad Painting*. As a result, this project explores how a foolish approach within painting is an antagonistic one. This will centre around a discussion of the paintings of New-York based Dana Schutz.

## 1.1: Forever the Fool

I partook in my first tarot card reading earlier this year in an attempt to shed some light upon my future. My friend who was administering this reading, fingered the card I had chosen and flipped it over to reveal 'The Fool'. The illustration upon this card was a Jester-like figure striding elegantly towards a cliff's edge, head turned upwards facing a beaming sun-drenched sky. Perhaps this figure was traipsing forth unencumbered by fear or worry. Perhaps this figure represented the willingness to defy straightforward logic and tumble towards territory unknown.

The Tarot is a deck of cards that allegedly possess the potential to foresee the future, each card features an illustration which seemingly derives from myths. Chris Hill writes that there is a card in the pack which "can be regarded as either the last in the pack or the first. It can be outside of the sequence altogether . . . This card is named *The Fool*."<sup>13</sup> This project views the idea of *The Fool* the same as the Tarot categorises it, odd and outside normative canon. *The Fool* exists beyond the sequence of the rest of the Tarot, as it exists outside of the logic of the norm.

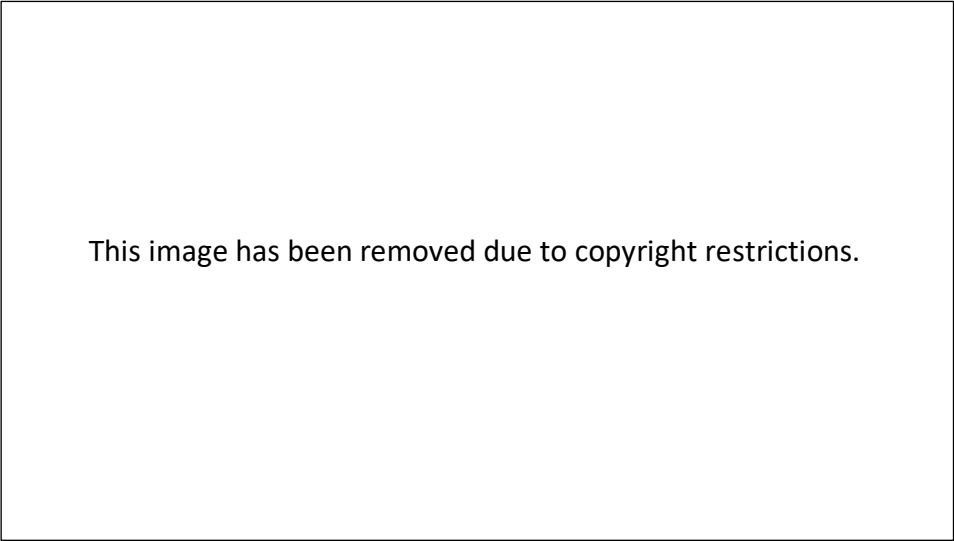
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<sup>11</sup> Susan Sontag, *Notes on "Camp"*.

<sup>12</sup> *Romy and Michelle's High School Reunion*, directed by David Mirkin. Buena Vista Pictures, 1997.

<sup>13</sup> Chris Hill, 'The Foolish Dramatherapist? An Exploration of the Role of the Fool.', *Dramatherapy (British Association for Dramatherapists)*. 27, no. 2 (2005): 3. 3.

I'm interested in the idea of *The Fool* who sits within lower hierarchical structures with the foresight and wit to outsmart their superiors. Chris Hill explores the history of *The Fool* with its origins in the court jester, with specific references to Shakespeare's *King Lear*.<sup>14</sup> Hill states that within this play, the character of the court jester administers "satirical or even critical adjudication on the actions of his master. The king, who is in the process of falling into . . . his own folly, provides an interesting counterpoint to the 'non-folly' of the fool."<sup>15</sup> In this instance, the character of *The Fool* holds the potential to outsmart his ruler despite the character's hierarchical ranking and perceived intelligence. The character of *The Fool* has been rewritten and repeated within different narrative structures through time. For example, *The Fool* is a common character trope within campy and comedic films.



This image has been removed due to copyright restrictions.

**Figure 1** *Romy and Michele's High School Reunion*, directed by David Mirkin, Buena Vista Pictures, 1997, (film still).

## 1.2: High School Hierarchies

I remember the first time that I watched the 1997 film *Romy and Michele's High School Reunion* when it was broadcast on free-to-air television in the early 2000s. I remember being enamoured by the film's profound silliness, the theatrically garish costumes and deadpan jokes. I remember being enchanted by a peculiar sensibility that this film cultivated, and being fascinated by its use of irony and humour.

The American actresses Lisa Kudrow and Mira Sorvino portray Romy and Michele, who are long-time best friends who lead modest but happy lives. The narrative wheels are set in motion by the central character's looming ten-year high school reunion. We learn that our loveable duo were despised by the 'popular' group in high school. Romy and Michelle decide that to avenge their former social

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<sup>14</sup> William Shakespeare and Harold Bloom, *King Lear* (Yale University Press, 2007).

<sup>15</sup> Hill, 'The Foolish Dramatherapist? An Exploration of the Role of the Fool.' 5.

standing, they must invent an artificial image of themselves to win the affections of the 'popular' group from the past. Comedy ensues as our heroic pair slip and tumble into trouble as the film steamrolls towards an uplifting conclusion.

Within this film, the two central characters of Romy and Michele assume the role of *The Fool*, both individually and as a collective pair. Hill writes that the word *fool* "is derived from the Latin *Follis* meaning bellows or windbag. The inference is that a fool is an empty-headed person whose words carry little weight."<sup>16</sup> Our heroic pair of Romy and Michele assume this character position as *The Fool*, unassuming, 'dim-witted' and subservient to the popular group. However, just like the court jester of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, Romy and Michele hold the potential to usurp their old high school hierarchies which are reignited in the occasion of their ten-year high school reunion.

*Foolish Painterly Conundrums* engages the seriously frivolous aspect of *Camp*, to explore how this approach can be applied to painting. Sontag writes that "The whole point of Camp is to dethrone the serious. Camp is playful, anti-serious. More precisely, Camp involves a new, more complex relation to 'the serious.' One can be serious about the frivolous, frivolous about the serious."<sup>17</sup> For Sontag, *Camp* is seriously frivolous. I link this back to the role of *The Fool* whose inherent goal is "to cause us mischief, to fool or outwit us."<sup>18</sup> If the modus operandi of *The Fool* is to be seriously mischievous, I speculate that this antagonistic approach lends itself to an approach to painting which is ever so slightly rogue, an approach to painting which I describe as *Foolishly Camp*.

Andy Medhurst argues that *Camp* "facilitated the unsettling of hierarchies [and] enabled new appreciations of underrated popular forms and advocated an arch scepticism towards established cultural canons".<sup>19</sup> For Medhurst, *Camp* is a reshuffling and a reorientation of pre-existing notions and elements, reprioritising elements of taste to create this new sensibility. These aesthetics of taste exist within a pecking order similar to social pecking orders in high school, through the seriously frivolous nature of *Camp* this is unsettled, reinvigorated, and reordered. I fuse this with the role of *The Fool* who has a "tendency to subvert the established order."<sup>20</sup> I therefore muse upon what would happen to my paintings if I were to assume the character roles of Romy and Michele and therefore assume the character of *The Fool* as he appears upon the tarot card striding elegantly forward towards a conceptual cliff, head faced up towards the beaming sun.

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<sup>16</sup> Hill, 'The Foolish Dramatherapist? An Exploration of the Role of the Fool.' 8.

<sup>17</sup> Susan Sontag, 'Notes on "Camp"'. 288.

<sup>18</sup> Hill, 'The Foolish Dramatherapist? An Exploration of the Role of the Fool.' 5.

<sup>19</sup> Andy Medhurst, 'Camp'. 279.

<sup>20</sup> Hill, 'The Foolish Dramatherapist? An Exploration of the Role of the Fool.' 5.

To unsettle, reinvigorate and re-order are terms that can be applied to the practice of painting. A practice which includes, scumbling, wiping and layering. *Camp* becomes a system in which the painter engages in as well as an aesthetic outcome of frivolity. Jan Bryant's text *Snow Falls on Mountains Without Wind* accompanied her 2007 curated exhibition at St Paul Street Gallery, Auckland by the same name.<sup>21</sup> This painting show featured the work of eleven artists including the ethereal pseudo figurative pastel paintings of Saskia Leek, the figurative shipwreck-themed images of Whitney Bedford and the hybrid decorative landscape images of Barbara Tuck. In Bryant's accompanying text, she muses upon the idea of cliché, referencing how painting has been criticised for being an exhausted medium:

"If painting necessarily begins with the burden of overused visual coordinates, this would be its eidos, if you like, and part of its ontological structure, so that even if we are incapable of seeing these clichés, they nonetheless remain rooted in the territory of painting, and yet, this seems to circle endlessly, but never resolve".<sup>22</sup>

These "overused visual coordinates" are determined by the constraints of the medium, which for this project include a flat, stretched substrate, pigment, brushstrokes, form, line and colour. A *Foolish* approach to painting drawing upon the seriously frivolous aspect of *Camp* plays with and reorganises these clichés. And although these clichés seem to "never resolve" according to Bryant, with every new generation of artists, these overused painterly visual coordinates are churned, re-churned and summoned to circle once more in an attempt to find their own form of resolution.

### 1.3: The Joyous fun of Laura Owens

The idea of foolishness within this project involves an embodied approach towards painting. Although the term *foolish* isn't explicitly used, The Los Angeles based painter Laura Owens has built a career through an anti-serious and free-form approach to painting. In a text responding to her 2017 Whitney retrospective, Ariella Budick writes that Owens rose to prominence in the 1990s and that "Owens' art is and always has been fun. She did what she wanted, and if the theorists went along with it, that was fine with her."<sup>23</sup> I reason that Owens' approach to painting is in line with *The Fool* with the prerogative to stride confidently unencumbered by the thoughts of others, in this case art 'theorists'. Owens' early work exudes a sense of cartoonish naivety and joy, with their illustrative subject matter and pastel colours which emanates through flattened reproductions through screens and print. This writing will focus on her more current work which has taken a shift towards the technological.

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<sup>21</sup> Jan Bryant, 'Snow Falls on Mountains Without Wind', in *PX: Thoughts on Painting*, ed. Gwynneth Porter (Auckland: Clouds, 2011).

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 118.

<sup>23</sup> Ariella Budick. 'Make Lemonade; Laura Owens; Coy, Kitschy, and Loving It: On a Rare, Fun-Loving Artist'. *The Financial Times*, 25 November 2017. Infotrac Newsstand.



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**Figure 2** Laura Owens, *12 Paintings by Laura Owens (Solo)*, 356 S. Mission Rd, Los Angeles, 2013.

This writing discusses the exhibition *12 Paintings by Laura Owens*, 356 S Mission Rd, Los Angeles, 2013, (figure 2).<sup>24</sup> This installation view of the exhibition depicts the gallery space as a spacious sun-drenched warehouse. The paintings which occupy this site are staggering in scale filling the gallery walls from floor to ceiling. Each singular painting subscribes to its own logic, but common elements include the use of a compositional grid and forms which seem to derive from the paint tool in computer software (such as Microsoft Paint or Photoshop). Ariellia Budick summarises the practice best stating that Owens “fills her palette with pastels, relishes goopy abstraction and notebook-doodle figuration, sticks newsprint, yarn, and fabric to canvas, and ices it all with impasto.”<sup>25</sup> In many ways, this is a practice which exudes a free-form eclectic mode of making which is open to possibilities.

*Laura Owens, Untitled, 2013* (Figure 3). features washed out pools of grungy turquoise with luminous pink and orange as the backdrop. These pools of colour are splodged upon a beige surface which through this reproduction reads as un-primed cotton duck canvas. This offers a ‘reveal’ of the substrate, so that the very foundation of this image is unstable, in many ways this is Sontag’s “failed seriousness.”<sup>26</sup> Laid over the top of this foundation is a precision point painted grid, flat upon flat. A swooping form is interwoven into this grid, the shape of which alludes to digital painting software. The most interesting part of this image is the negative space. There are points where the blue grid has been erased with the same shape as the positive space of the swooping forms. As I read this painting, I can feel the movement of the cursor within a painting software, running across the grid in swooping,

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<sup>24</sup> ‘356 S. Mission Rd’ was an artist-run gallery initiated by Laura Owens and Wendy Yao in Los Angeles, it sustained a five-year run from 2013 until 2018.

<sup>25</sup> Ariella Budick, ‘Make Lemonade; Laura Owens; Coy, Kitschy, and Loving It: On a Rare, Fun-Loving Artist’.

<sup>26</sup> Susan Sontag, Notes on “Camp”. 287.

looping movements erasing this layer to reveal the splodgy pools of orange, pink and turquoise beneath. It is through this moment, that this image becomes *alive*. It is painting, image, reproduction and pixels ready to be manipulated all at once.



**Figure 3** Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 2013, Acrylic, Oil, Flashe and Resin on Canvas, 3492x3048mm.

The painting's flatness is ironically emphasised by its use of impasto upon the most prominent mark in the forefront. This worked up, raised surface is limited to the confines of the swooping mark. A drop shadow is painted around this mark, a shadow traditionally used to illustrate representational depth is used here to reveal the complete and utter flatness of this image. This is intelligent painting that both refers to painting (through a technological software medium) and seeks to undo the representational qualities by revealing its flatness.

Laura Owens exemplifies a *Foolishly Camp* approach to painting, her paintings with their staggering scale and vibrant colours speak to a sensibility of exuberance. In an interview with Robert Enright, Owens states that "if you want painting to stay [relevant] then you have to show its elasticity – it's infinite. . . the way that I approach painting, is to ask myself what I haven't been putting in a painting, and why I shouldn't try and put that thing in."<sup>27</sup> Owens actively pursues a logic within the process of painting which is wayward, seeking difference. I fuse this with the idea of *The Fool* as "being separate

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<sup>27</sup> Robert Enright, 'Painting in an Expanded Field.', *Border Crossings* 37, no. 3 (August 2018): 84.

or even outcast from the community.”<sup>28</sup> To fuse together *The Fool* with the sensibility of *Camp* is to focus on the seriously frivolous and to engage a type of thinking which is off-kilter and always asking questions to the current norms.

The central notion of *Foolishly Camp* which I have foregrounded operates as the driving factor within *Foolish Painterly Conundrums*. The role of foolishness articulates my approach to the medium of painting, the role of *The Fool* historically has been thought of “as satirical inversions of the regal orb and sceptre”.<sup>29</sup> If I as the painter, assume the role of *The Fool* I assume the outlook of satire which is confined to the “regal orb and sceptre” being the medium of painting. The paintings which I have made throughout the duration of *Foolish Painterly Conundrums*, have been made with an intention of dare I say, fun.

My work *Storming the Palace*, 2018, (figure 4), began with a ground of lemon yellow and luminous manganese cerulean blue. This combination of colours tickled my retinas which delighted me greatly. I think about the illustration of *The Fool* upon the tarot card striding elegantly towards a cliff’s edge, head turned towards the beaming sky. My head is turned towards the beaming sky of chromatic indulgence, as I, as painter armed with a shoebox of pigment dispensed from tubes, have the ability to fabricate within the realm of painting as I please.

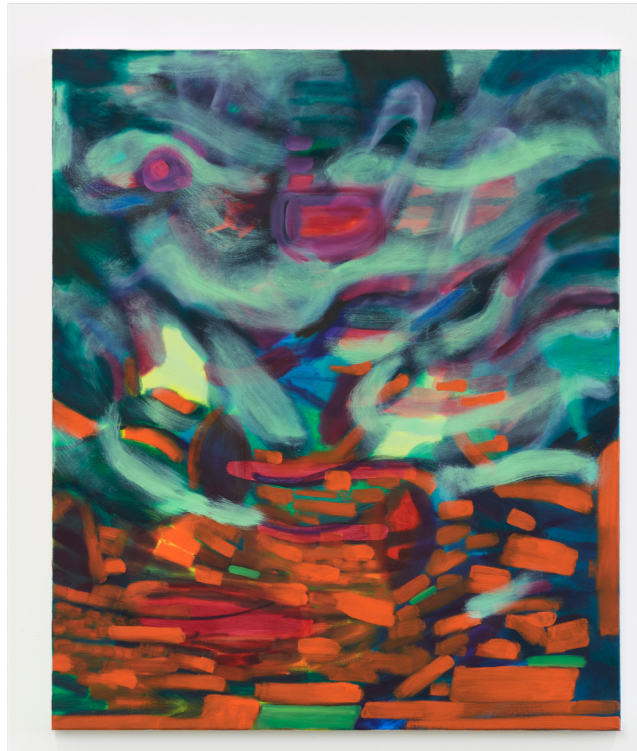
I have alloyed *The Fool* with the sensibility of *Camp* through the undercurrent of frivolity, there is however another aspect of *Camp* which I am preoccupied with, that of extravagance. Sontag writes that “Camp responds particularly to the markedly attenuated and to the strongly exaggerated.”<sup>30</sup> It is the notion of exaggeration with its connotations of luxury which ignites my passion for painting. *Storming the Palace*, 2018, (figure 4), came alive through the inclusion of luminous pink bars which throb like neon lights in the urban dark. I knew that this painting was finished when I was startled by the flat orange bars which were applied with speed and vigour running, weaving and dodging previous layers along the bottom third of the painting, allowing for a complexity in representational depth.

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<sup>28</sup> Hill, ‘The Foolish Dramatherapist? An Exploration of the Role of the Fool.’ 7.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. 6.

<sup>30</sup> Susan Sontag, Notes on “Camp”. 279.



**Figure 4** Fu-On Chung, *Storming the Palace*, 2018, Oil on Canvas, 965x863mm, Image credit: Christo Crocker

#### **1.4: Bad, Bad Painting**

This writing has so far cemented the notion of *Foolishly Camp*, and will now fold this notion into painting. Reflecting on Laura Owens and Dana Schutz, I think about this school of contemporary painting which I am drawn to, a school of making that goes under the brand name of *Bad Painting*. This is a school which favours wobbly gestures, oscillating between irony and sincerity, courting awkward compositions and garish colour combinations.

The lineage of *Bad Painting* can be traced to two key exhibitions. This term seems to have been coined by the curator Marcia Tucker who curated the exhibition “*Bad*” *Painting* at the New Museum in New York, 1978. *Foolish Painterly Conundrums* uses the 2008 exhibition *Bad Painting – Good Art*, MUMOK, Vienna curated by Eva Badura-Triska and Susanne Neuburger as an example of going deeper into the school of Bad Painting. Neuburger describes Bad Painting as

“... a complex phenomenon, ranging from regressive wishful thinking to a critical analysis of culture . . . .Bad Painting may be painting, but it is also project, action and text. It not only

questions rules, but also avant-garde dictates, and speculates ahead, either successfully or unsuccessfully..."<sup>31</sup>

It would be too easy to dilute *Bad Painting* down towards an aesthetic takeover or a pursuit of ugliness. However, Neuburger speculates that *Bad Painting* is a questioning of rules. The exhibition featured artists such as Sigmar Polke, Philip Guston, Albert Oehlen and Martin Kippenberger. In this section, I lead with the term antagonistic painting, Eva Badura-Triska writes in her accompanying exhibition text that painters who engage this school of making "are convinced painters who clearly declare their commitment to the medium. They stand by it even (or especially) in times when it is repudiated by the dominant movements in art".<sup>32</sup> Bad Painters offer a considered approach. In many ways, it isn't so much an aesthetic rebellion, rather it's a painterly charged critique. In a review of this exhibition *Bad Painting – Good Art*, Matthew Bowman writes that:

"The stylistic disunity and historical extendedness here renders it difficult to detect an underlying element that irreducibly defines the badness of bad painting . . . Ultimately, such diversity raises the suspicion that bad painting is nothing more than a subjective judgment applicable to a wide number of examples. Bad Painting seems a quagmire cunningly disguised as a category." <sup>33</sup>

This brings us to the painterly quandary, where there is no concrete method to describe Bad Painting in formal terms. I posit that the hallmarks of Bad Painting is that of an antagonistic approach to the medium, an intent on pushing the material of the paint and the way an image comes together. If in the preceding writing *Foolishly Camp* offers a playful approach of pillaging the borders and outskirts to overturn hierarchies and the normative canon. Bad Painting may prove the requisite brand name of this type of making.

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<sup>31</sup> Susanne Neuburger, 'The First and the Last Painting? An Experimental Set-up for Bad Painting', in *Bad Painting Good Art*, ed. Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, Eva Badura-Triska, and Susanne Neuburger (Köln: DuMont, 2008), 12.

<sup>32</sup> Eva Badura-Triska, 'Who Becomes a Bad Painter, When, Why and in What Sense?', in *Bad Painting Good Art*, ed. Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, Eva Badura-Triska, and Susanne Neuburger (Köln: DuMont, 2008). 48.

<sup>33</sup> Matthew Bowman, 'Indiscernibly Bad: The Problem of Bad Painting/Good Art', *Oxford Art Journal* 41, no. 3 (December 2018), 325.



**Figure 5** Martin Kippenberger, *Kaputttes Kind (Broken Child)*, 1985, Emulsion, Acrylic, Sticker on Canvas 1300x1200mm

I will briefly discuss the Martin Kippenberger work *Kaputttes Kind (Broken Child)*, 1985, (figure 5), which was part of this exhibition. This painting utilises representational imagery in the form of a human face, a face which is crudely painted with it's tongue poking out. The background is formed out of painterly linear swooshes and the painting is finished off with an application of bumper stickers which are seemingly nonsensical. Julia Gelshorn writes that the presence of these nonsensical phrases "sabotages a common system of communication by undermining its communication structure by amassing disconnected signifiers and various categories."<sup>34</sup> Gelshorn comments upon the random nature of the elements within this painting that introduces this vagueness, perhaps this is a painting by an artist who is deceptively coy, or willingly trying to self-sabotage

I would muse that one of the criteria of Bad Painting would be this ad hoc approach to the medium where figuration, marks, forms and outside materials collide and thwack and wallop upon the

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<sup>34</sup> Early in Julia Gelshorn's text she examines Kippenberger's painting *With the Best Will in the World I Can't see a Swastika*, 1984. This work presents as purely formal painting which adheres to a cubist aesthetic. The title alone indicates the presence of a swastika. Gelshorn comments upon the varied reception of Kippenberger's work and the way the artist enacted a somewhat vague persona, refusing to adopt an outright political stance. However, it is widely accepted that the underlying drive between this work and others is a reaction to German history since WWII, despite the distance deployed through the formal qualities.

Julia Gelshorn, 'Not Bad Painters: Ethics and Aesthetics in the Work of Polke and Kippenberger', in *Bad Painting Good Art*, ed. Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, Eva Badura-Triska, and Susanne Neuburger (Köln: DuMont, 2008).

substrate. Isabelle Graw writes that with Kippenberger “one never knows whether he’s serious — maybe one should imagine quotation marks around his art? Or perhaps his project is serious in that he gives us permission to not take it too seriously.”<sup>35</sup> If we go back to the central notion of *Foolishly Camp*, perhaps having that frivolous mindset allows the painter to engage the medium in an ad hoc manner, liberated from the rigid constraints of the medium. The use of quotation marks relates to a sense of irony in that it’s not a painting; it’s a ‘painting’. As Sontag notes, “Camp sees everything in quotation marks. It’s not a lamp, but a ‘lamp’.”<sup>36</sup> To put painting in quotation marks allows the maker to gain more of an outlook on the medium, in an attempt to exhaust it, antagonise it.

### **1.5: The Absurdly Awkward Paintings of Dana Schutz**

The clashing, cloying, and vibrant painting practice of New York-based artist Dana Schutz came to my attention when I was a painting student in my undergraduate years.<sup>37</sup> This writing will focus on a single painting from 2003 which encapsulates the style of her practice which I became enamoured with when she rose to prominence, a style which has changed and morphed over the intervening years.

I write about Dana Schutz’s *Death Comes to us All*, 2003, (figure 6) in relation to the idea of absurdity. Both in relation to the representational content and the material properties of the clashing, cloying painterly marks deployed within this image. This painting presents a man wearing a chicken-like mask and costume. “An uncanny relationship transforms the man and inanimate object, connecting them to a potentially inseparable state.”<sup>38</sup> The subject matter of this human-turn-chicken-turn-costume looms in superhuman size considering the scale of the painting. This painting therefore embodies the idea of absurdity through the ridiculous subject matter of beautifully rendered red short shorts and sheer excess of scale.

I think about the transformation and mutation within the human and inanimate object of the chicken mask. The human-turn-chicken-turn-costume blurs the boundary between machine, animal and body. This transformation occurs through the figurative breakdown between representational signs dissolving into painted pigment upon the surface of the substrate.

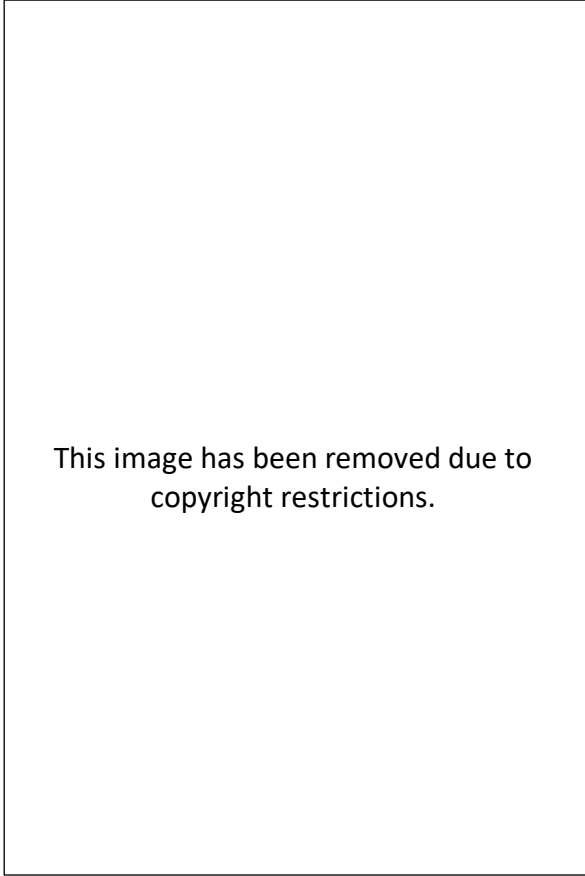
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<sup>35</sup> Isabelle Graw, *The Love of Painting: Genealogy of a Success Medium*. 164.

<sup>36</sup> Susan Sontag, Notes on “Camp”. 280.

<sup>37</sup> This writing focuses solely upon a single painting of Dana Schutz which encapsulates her style when she rose to prominence. This project wilfully ignores her work after this period, side-stepping the controversy of her contribution to the 2017 Whitney Biennale. While I acknowledge the importance of the debate, it is beyond the scope of what I can address in this paper.

<sup>38</sup> ‘David Altmejd, Dana Schutz and Kirsten Stoltmann. Material Eyes.’, Zach Feuer Gallery, accessed 18 July 2019, [http://www.zachfeuer.com/wp-content/files\\_mf/1285105507PressReleaseDADSKS2003.pdf](http://www.zachfeuer.com/wp-content/files_mf/1285105507PressReleaseDADSKS2003.pdf).



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copyright restrictions.

**Figure 6** Dana Schutz, *Death comes to us All*, 2003, Oil on Canvas, 3048x1981mm.

Dana Schutz's *Death Comes to us All*, 2003, (figure 6), occupies a figure and ground relationship which is slightly different to Laura Owens' *Untitled*, 2013, (fig 1), discussed in chapter 1.3. *Death Comes to us All* has a spatial depth with a vast sprawling lawn painted using tones of green and yellow which cascades towards the viewer before becoming a solid form of painted concrete referencing the rural-urban split. The human figure stands at the forefront of the painting, red shorts and tonal modelling of the flesh executed through flat painterly strokes. The chicken mask dissolves into pure painterly strata, pink, grey, yellow and blue slapped defiantly on top of the image, reducing the representational space to mere illusion as if Schutz were saying this is a 'painting' as opposed to a painting.

What tickles the retina the most about this painting, and what excited me about Schutz's early work is the jarring concussion of colours which rampages over the image. Jörg Heiser describes the colours Schutz uses as "a carefully chosen palette of vomit and [mould] and rot, between pink and purple, turquoise and olive, [ochre] and crap."<sup>39</sup> To adhere to a colour palette that mixes crap, canary yellow, rot and luminous turquoise together in a bizarre soft serve of a painting presents as a wilfully

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<sup>39</sup> Jörg Heiser, 'Bodiless Elegance versus Pungent Physicality The Painting of Decisions'. 122.



antagonistic approach to colour combinations; is this Bad Painting? Whilst Owens has a similar approach to colour combinations with her honking high key colour choices, it seems that Schutz is the best at being *Bad*.

Amy Sillman asks what passion compels the painter to push “toward contingency, clumsiness, strangeness or even brutality? Awkwardness is that thing that is fleshy, funny, downward-facing uncontrollable . . . against the great and noble, and also against the cynical.”<sup>40</sup> To push towards this arena again, reveals the antagonistic approach of the *Foolishly Camp* painter to wilfully attempt to plunder ground which is seemingly out of bounds.

I would muse that the idea of awkwardness is present in all of the paintings I discuss in this writing. It is inherent within the practice of Schutz, less so in Owens, but is applicable to paintings discussed later in this writing as well. Sillman goes on to clarify that awkwardness is “a moment of tension between the ideal and the real, where what’s supposed to happen goes awry”.<sup>41</sup> Awkwardness is unexpected. I think about the ad hoc nature of the colours and marks and forms within *Death Comes to us All* and how they seem to be spur of the moment decisions. This tension between the ideal and the real according to Sillman can be translated within the realm of painting within Schutz through the representational marks dissolving into pure painterly strata. For Owens’ *Untitled* this tension manifests within the relationship between figure and ground, through the erasure of the grid and the drop shadow of the mark at the fore of the image; this creates tension between the figure and ground as they push and pull each other.

Yes.

Perhaps Laura Owens courts a sense of mild unease after all.

### 1.6: Right, Wrong and Bad

In spite of discussions around *The Fool*, sloppy marks and clunky forms, it would be misguided to say that this project was in the pursuit of ugliness. Chris Sharp bemoans the commodification of Bad Painting stating that it has become “replete with a mappable genealogy and codified discourse, and has, as such, forfeited its cherished brinkmanship to vex and offend.”<sup>42</sup> He describes the type of painting that fits in this school as being comprised of artists such as Owens along with the figurative

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<sup>40</sup> Amy Sillman, ‘Shit Happens: Notes on Awkwardness’, in *Amy Sillman: The All-Over*, ed. Karen Kelly, Fabian Schöneich, and Barbara Schroeder (Frankfurt, New York and Milan: Portikus, Dancing Foxes Press and Mousse Publishing, 2017), 110.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. 111.

<sup>42</sup> Chris Sharp, ‘Bad Painting Gone Wrong’, accessed 13 August 2018, [http://www.metropolism.com/en/features/23675\\_bad\\_painting\\_gone\\_wrong](http://www.metropolism.com/en/features/23675_bad_painting_gone_wrong).

paintings of Merlin Carpenter and London-based Allison Katz. So if Bad Painting is no longer at the vanguard of contemporary making, what is? Sharp jettisons the binary of 'good' and 'bad' in favour of another one, 'right' and 'wrong'.

Sharp writes that "[wrong painting] has a will to preserve, uncover, and continuously stake out new, if forbidden ground. Where bad painting may edge inexorably towards a cliff, wrong painting moves laterally; one pushes the envelope forward, the other sideways, even backwards."<sup>43</sup> This is a type of painting that artists enter into to spin the cogs of change to produce a different outcome to the one before, painting enters into this state so that we may see a better return. A new aesthetic knowledge with all its social implications.

When I reflect upon elements of *Bad Painting* I would attest that the defining characteristic of this type of making involves an antagonistic painterly approach, wilfully able to seek out 'wrong' in an attempt to dream up new images to render in paint. My painting *Dancing with a Stranger*, 2019, (figure 7), went through numerous phases as I pushed and pushed the image until it arrived at the finished painting. This work began as a still life complete with stereotypical table. I was bored and felt the urge to flip it to portrait, immediately undoing the composition of the painting.



**Figure 7** Fu-On Chung, *Dancing with a Stranger*, 2019, Oil on Canvas, 1680x1530mm

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

Faced with this painting anew it opened itself up; I overlaid circular forms which appeared to hover *out* of the representational space of the painting. I utilised a frosty lime green to overlay elements of the picture. Overpainting as provisional painting is explored by Raphael Rubinstein in relation to the large sweeping gestures of Christopher Wool. Rubinstein writes that Wool brings us “paradoxical pictures in which the artist seems to have obliterated a painting-in-progress and then presented this sum of erasures as the finished work.”<sup>44</sup> My painting *Dancing with a Stranger*, 2019, (figure 7 ), presents itself as the sum of its erasures, all of the missteps and mishaps wrapped together elegantly through luminous strokes of pigment. This painting is both still life and landscape, courting a sense of illusionistic space whilst denying any straight forward representational modelling.

### 1.7: Camp as Aesthetic Rebellion

I conclude this chapter’s discussion by returning to the sensibility of *Camp*. Emphasising its use within this project as an aesthetic which is freed from its roots as a queer rebellion is mused upon by Chris Sharp in his text *Camp + Dandyism = Neo-Camp?*.<sup>45</sup> Sharp discusses an aesthetic of art-making which has emerged from male artists based in western cultural art capitals. The link between this aesthetic and the urban cultural climate is no chance encounter. Sharp describes this sensibility as having an “air of euphemism [that] lingers over it all, which is perhaps why the serenity found here feels less like the by-product of wholesome living than a beguiling ruse, a highly stylized wish fulfillment, or, say, the complete and total domestication of camp”.<sup>46</sup> Sharp is attempting to put into words an aesthetic that is evasive and difficult to pin down. He mentions a group of artists within his argument, one of them being the New-York based artist Matthew Cerletty whose paintings are typified by the presence of figures and objects rendered in serene tranquillity, the style is slick and veers towards pop art, even bordering on illustration. The implication by examining male artists in western art capitals concerning *Camp* infers a queer aesthetic, which could link to the notion of this aesthetic as a beguiling ruse, like the closeted queer who puts on a heteronormative front. Sharp goes on to align this highly stylised use of *Camp* with Dandyism.

Sontag herself makes the link between *Camp* and Dandyism stating that the “new-style dandy, the lover of Camp, appreciates vulgarity. Where the dandy would be continually offended or bored, the connoisseur of Camp is continually amused, delighted.”<sup>47</sup> Sontag refers to an appreciation of vulgarity, an antithesis to the standard canon. Sharp adds that “vulgarity seems to have yielded to a marked

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<sup>44</sup> Raphael Rubinstein, ‘Provisional Painting’, *Art in America* 97, no. 5 (May 2009): 126.

<sup>45</sup> Chris Sharp, ‘Camp + Dandyism = Neo-Camp?’, *Kaleidoscope* 14, no. Spring (2012), accessed 2 March 2019, <https://officebaroque.com/media/files/Fragment/0/Kaleidoscope-Brannon-Cerletty-Sinsel.pdf>.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. 48.

<sup>47</sup> Susan Sontag, Notes on “Camp”. 289.

precocity, while nevertheless maintaining its link to the everyday . . . this shift gestures not so much towards a reversal, as a perfect fusion between camp and dandyism”.<sup>48</sup> To appreciate vulgarity is a rebellion within taste and an appreciation of vulgarity within painted pictures. One can make the link of vulgarity to Dana Schutz’s subject matter in how the figures morph and dissolve into painterly marks and non-human aspects and the colour combinations of discord and dirt and muck.

This chapter has sought to lay the foundations of this project, by fusing notions of *The Fool* with its connotations of wayward thinking and the ability to outwit and outsmart, with the seriously frivolous sensibility of *Camp*. Through a discussion around Laura Owens and Dana Schutz, I posit that by folding *Foolishly Camp* into the medium of painting results in the school of making known as *Bad Painting*. I utilise Chris Sharp in this discussion to unmoor “camp from its provenance in homosexual culture, while nevertheless exploiting its bond to artifice.”<sup>49</sup> Instead of positing *Camp* as a queer rebellion, I position *Camp* as a rebellion within the aesthetics of painting. I articulate a system of painting which favours a playfully antagonistic approach to the medium. To reference the sphere of the technological within an analogue medium and make sizeable paintings around digital swooshes like Owens. Or to take the Schutz approach and throw everything at the canvas. *Foolish Painterly Conundrums* articulates a wilfully foolish and antagonistic approach to painting in an attempt to unsettle and reinvigorate the constraints of the medium. And to return to *Romy and Michele’s High School Reunion*, our heroic pair unsettle and reinvigorate the hierarchies and feuds with the ‘popular’ group of yesteryear, they tumble and stumble into comedy. The closing sequence of the film shows Romy and Michele ascending towards the heavens in a private helicopter leaving their terrorist high school bullies upon the ground below, inverting the former high school hierarchies which were formed in the past.

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<sup>48</sup> Chris Sharp, ‘Camp + Dandyism = Neo-Camp?’ 48.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. 57.

# Super Paper Mario

## The Shimmering Pixels of Painting

The idea of *artifice* cements itself with authority within an urban cultural environment. It is this *artifice* which has bled into the vocabulary of contemporary painting. Images and photographs and reproductions are flattened into inkjet prints and flood the internet via backlit screens. Jörg Heiser considers this as part of the nature of being a painter in the age of the internet: “Good painting stretches and contracts between two – and four – dimensionality to escape, at least for moments, from its fate as a JPEG file circulated to stimulate the wet dreams of speculative collectors.”<sup>50</sup> This chapter will use the video game *Super Paper Mario* to discuss this idea of *artifice* in relation to figure and ground.<sup>51</sup> This chapter will discuss Katherine Bernhardt and Phoebe Unwin in relation to David Joselit’s concept of *painting as a network* to bridge the divide between the urban cultural environment and the act of painting.<sup>52</sup>

### 2.1: The Shimmering Pixels of Virtual Worlds

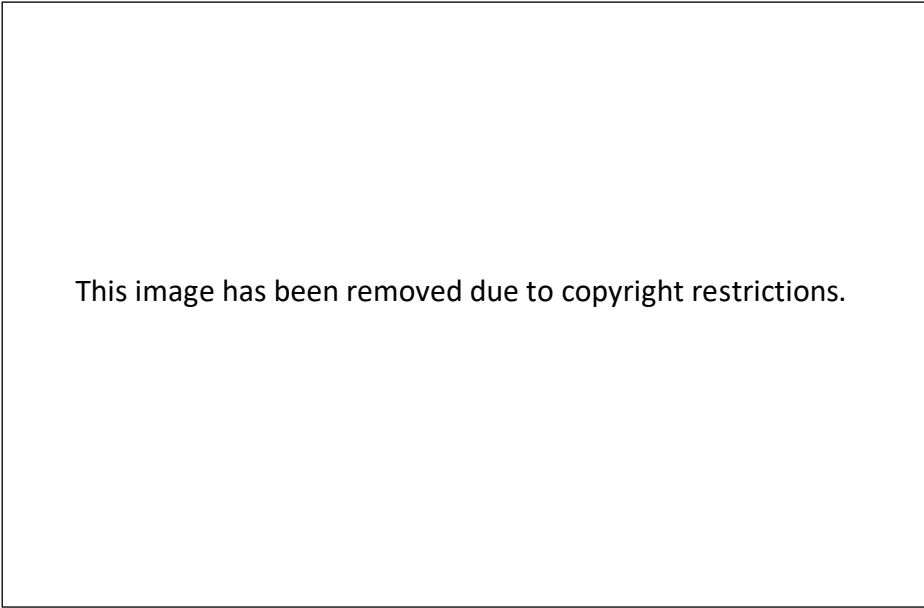
Video games allow players to become subsumed within a world of shimmering pixels. Like film, they offer a fabricated world appearing as forms and colours on a flat surface. In this instance, the pixels operate as pigment and the television screen is the canvas. The 2016 video game *Super Paper Mario* is interacted with through a game pad consisting of joysticks and buttons. Through the action of pressing these buttons, electrical circuits are completed within the game pad which translate into pre-programmed movements in the virtual world of the game as it is represented on the television screen. The gamer plays as the famous Nintendo character *Super Mario*, the aesthetic of this video game is two-fold. Firstly, aspects of the game are rendered in small pixelated squares referencing 8bit technology. Secondly, this game leans into an aesthetic of cardboard school props, revealing that everything within the game is ‘paper-thin’ as expressed in the title. This is a video game which is self-knowing, it’s not a video game – it’s a ‘video game’ It is aware of its own artificiality nodding towards itself ironically.

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<sup>50</sup> Jörg Heiser, ‘Bodiless Elegance versus Pungent Physicality The Painting of Decisions’. 154.

<sup>51</sup> *Super Paper Mario*, directed by Ryota Kawade, Nintendo, 2007).

<sup>52</sup> David Joselit, ‘Painting Beside Itself’, in *Painting*, ed. Terry R. Myers, Documents of Contemporary Art (London: Cambridge, MA: Whitechapel Gallery & MIT Press, 2009).



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**Figure 8** *Super Paper Mario*, directed by Ryota Kawade, Nintendo, 2007, (game still)

David Joselit's text *Painting Beside Itself* initially published in 2009 has become a widely referenced text within writings about painting. Joselit positions the medium of painting within a network, relating to both the immediate physical surroundings of the work of art as well as the conceptual elements contained within a work. Isabelle Graw summarises this text by writing that under "the aegis of the network, painting is conceived as – in Joselit's term – 'transitive', which is to say, as overflowing into its environment, and so the boundary between its inside and what's outside it has become . . . [and] has always been – fundamentally unstable."<sup>53</sup> This very simple notion of painting and culture in synchronicity and influencing each other is important to emphasize as *Foolish Painterly Conundrums* arises from an urban cultural backdrop, influenced by films claimed as *Camp* such as *Romy and Michele's High School Reunion* and escapist self-referential cartoon- video games such as *Super Paper Mario*.

I acknowledge the digital networks at play within an urban environment, such as the internet. The term network refers to "the impossibly small microchip to the impossibly vast global Internet, [both of which] truly embody the contemporary sublime".<sup>54</sup> For Joselit and this project, this 'contemporary sublime' is characterised by the circulation of images and the flattening of history and the speed at which information can be acquired. Within this 'contemporary sublime', videos and films from all eras and categories are available with one mouse click.

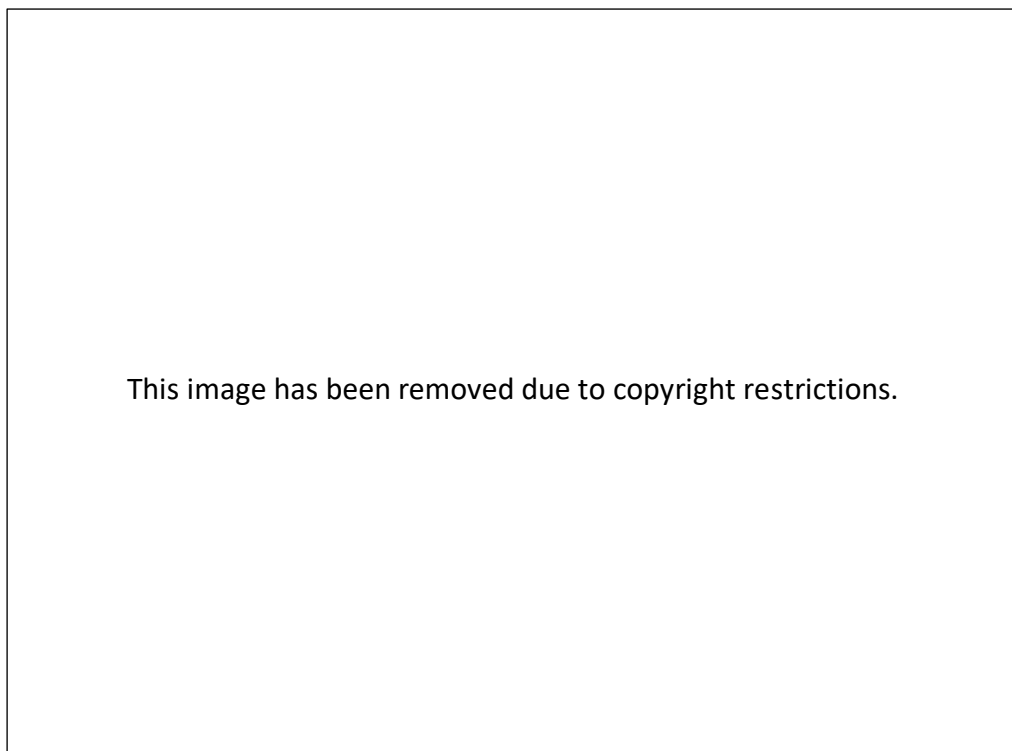
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<sup>53</sup> Isabelle Graw, *The Love of Painting: Genealogy of a Success Medium*. 265.

<sup>54</sup> David Joselit, 'Painting Beside Itself', in *Painting*, ed. Terry R. Myers, Documents of Contemporary Art (London: Cambridge, MA: Whitechapel Gallery & MIT Press, 2009), 219.

## 2.2 The radiant Flatness of Katherine Bernhardt

The work of New-York based Katherine Bernhardt arrived into my vision as I was scrolling through the internet. I stumbled upon the paintings of Bernhardt as a result of some sort of technological algorithm based on my previous internet searches. The internet, as it would happen, was correct. I was immediately seduced by the seemingly thin application of paint, mesmerised by this luminous flatness. Upon further research Katherine Bernhardt works in large-scale however, it is through the backlit screen of my phone and computer where these reproductions are reduced to mere centimetres that they really dazzle. These chromatically radiant pixels ignite my retinal senses.



**Figure 9.** Katherine Bernhardt, *Lisa Simpson, watermelon, cantelope, cigarettes, and Chapstick*, 2016. Acrylic and spray paint on canvas, 2438x3048mm, image credit: Allard Bovenberg

A slightly shonky rendering of the cartoon character Lisa Simpson looms like a deity in Bernhardt's *Lisa Simpson, watermelon, cantelope, cigarettes and Chapstick*, 2016, (figure 9).<sup>55</sup> Lisa Simpson is surrounded by a constellation of objects, which are directly referenced in the painting's title, watermelons, rock melons, cigarettes and lip balm. What is evident in this painting and a lot of other Bernhardt's is the presence of an outline. A fluorescent pink outline surrounds each object, one would assume that the outline came first, and that everything else was subsequent. The notion of an outline

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<sup>55</sup> Lisa Simpson is a fictional character on the animated show *The Simpsons* which was created by Matt Groening. She is the middle child and known as the voice of reason for the dysfunctional family the show centres around. She is the lesser known protagonist to her father Homer Simpson, and her brother, Bart Simpson. Since Bernhardt is deceptively coy in interviews, I can only suggest that the presence of the character of Lisa Simpson is a championing of feminist ideals in flattened yellow form, or a position of similar value.

has a tendency to flatten into cartoon. As if Lisa Simpson with her watermelons and cigarettes were flattened by the weight of the global internet.

The accompanying gallery text at Xavier Hufkens Gallery in Brussels, states that Katherine Bernhardt's "large-scale pattern paintings [depict] constellations of everyday items that have been isolated from their original context . . . Executed in acrylic and spray paint on canvas, in a spontaneous and fluid style".<sup>56</sup> The idea of a constellation is alluring with its connotations of shimmering stars in a night sky. A constellation could go some way towards discussing the seemingly nonsensical juxtaposition of the inherent subject matter within the painting. Perhaps Bernhardt's constellation marks a waypoint for a type of Western urban cultural condition. A condition which is informed by what I can only assume is a slightly punk, feminist position.

In a review of this exhibition, Aaron Peck describes that Bernhardt's "large-scale spray-paint-and-acrylic canvases feature grafitti, cartoon characters and emoji . . . [presenting] as visual and verbal puzzles. They achieve this semiotic ambiguity because her simple renderings of things don't always make it clear what is being represented."<sup>57</sup> I fuse this notion with the idea of constellation, perhaps this scramble of objects rendered by painterly signs recognise a Western urban cultural condition. Bernhardt's work is resolute in its reference to consumer culture and distribution. For example, the character of Lisa Simpson possibly once rooted within the American vernacular is now an international commodity. Growing up within an Australasian environment, this character is immediately recognisable – as is the brand of lip balm *Chapstick* represented in the painting, these are representations of cultural icons of this generation. This constellation of signs speaks to the distribution and trade of cultural commodities which have become globalised.

Bernhardt's work seems deficient of a finished polish. The character of Lisa Simpson is clunkily rendered, cigarettes are comically out of proportion, and the brand name of Chap Stick is barely legible upon the lip balm. It is almost as if Bernhardt had become bored and chose to walk away from the easel mid-painting. Raphael Rubinstein writes about Provisional Painting in relation to Christopher Wool, Mary Heilmann, and Albert Oehlen. Rubenstein describes this collective school of painting as characterised by a look that is "casual, dashed-off, tentative, unfinished or self-cancelling. . . deliberately [turning] away from 'strong' painting for something that seems to continually risk in consequence or collapse".<sup>58</sup> To favour this mode of painting seems almost as if Bernhardt were to

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<sup>56</sup> Xavier Hufkens Gallery, 'Product Recall: New Pattern Paintings', accessed 13 August 2019, [https://www.xavierhufkens.com/exhibitions/2016-05-katherine-bernhardt/download/bernhardt\\_press.pdf](https://www.xavierhufkens.com/exhibitions/2016-05-katherine-bernhardt/download/bernhardt_press.pdf).

<sup>57</sup> Aaron Peck, 'Katherine Bernhardt: Xavier Hufkens Gallery', *Artforum International*, September 2016.

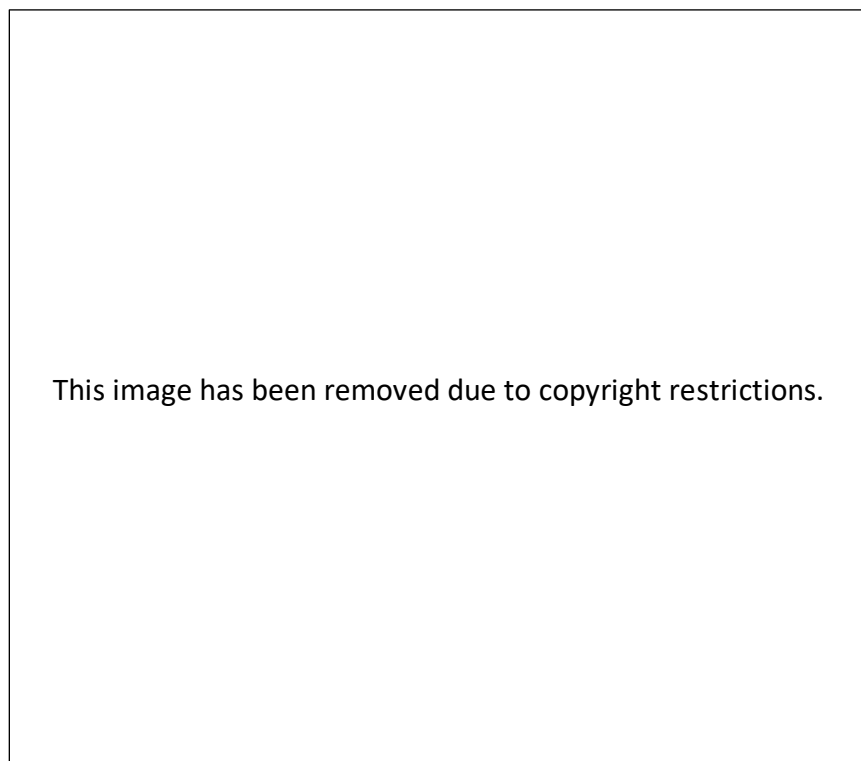
<sup>58</sup> Rubinstein, 'Provisional Painting'. 123.



self-sabotage, this aesthetic of instability creates a sense of the painting wobbling off the substrate, as if the sloppy lines holding Lisa Simpson together could slide off the substrate entirely.

### **2.3: Phoebe Unwin's floating Figures and Grounds**

The enigmatic paintings of London-based Phoebe Unwin offer a counterpoint to Katherine Bernhardt. Whilst Bernhardt points directly to the digital networks of distribution by painting very direct objects, Unwin creates enigmatic paintings which offer hints of figuration, implying the presence of a body in relation to these objects. If Bernhardt presents constellations of objects emphasising the distribution of consumer objects, Unwin creates a relationship between these objects and the body.



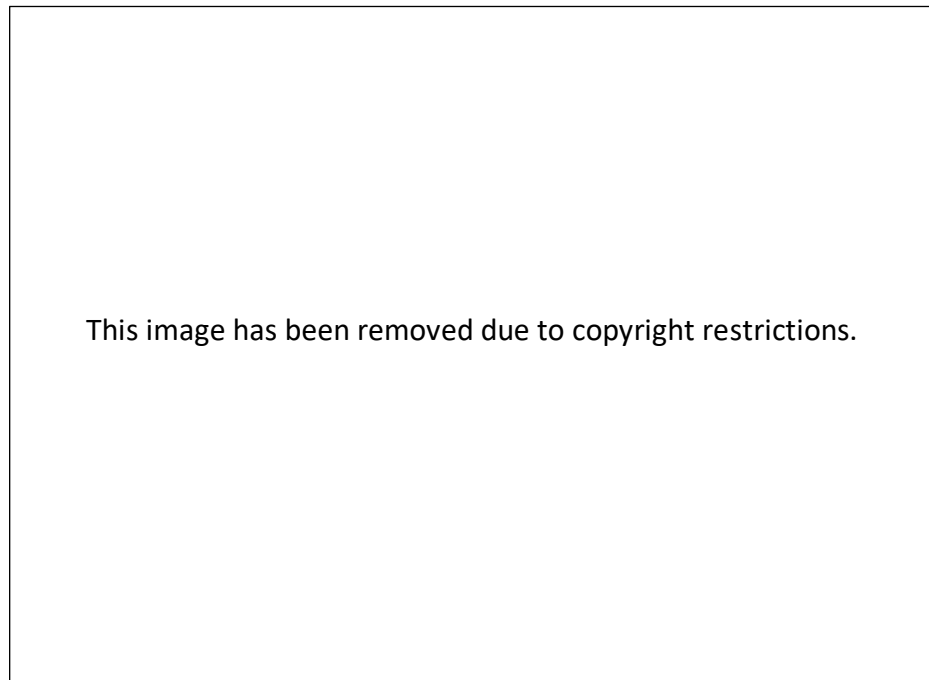
**Figure 10** Phoebe Unwin, *Key*, 2010. Acrylic on Canvas, 705x805mm

Unwin's *Key*, 2010, (figure 10) features a background that is seemingly thin, soft grey modulated with a salmon pink. There are areas where blue blurring into yellow blurring into red emerge from this haze, offering a complexity within this built-up ground. These chromatic elements which are built into the modulated surface could represent rainbows emerging from rain. The notion of a rainbow appearing after rain due to the refraction of light from the haze of dispersed water, makes me think about this image as an after-image, a hang-over from a past scene. Areas where the paint has pooled, and dripped

down the surface vertically – a characteristic of watered down acrylic paint, breaks this representational illusion.

Yes.

the hand of the artist is present illuminating the willingness to exploit the watery properties of acrylic paint.



**Figure 11,** *Super Paper Mario*, directed by Ryota Kawade, Nintendo, 2007, (Video-Game Still)

The notion of figure and ground is pivotal within the production and examination of paintings. It is also crucial to *Super Paper Mario* and its side-scrolling gaming mechanic.<sup>59</sup> In this game, *Super Paper Mario* is on a mission to foil the evil plot of the tyrannous Count Bleck, the game's antagonist. Count Bleck has the desire to conjure a black hole to destroy the fictional town of *Flipside* in which Mario inhabits. As Mario is plodding along his linear path from left of screen to right of screen, he gains the magical ability to literally turn this two-dimensional world sideways, so what was flat is fully realised in three-dimensionality. Mario ends up navigating a world of pixels where this fictional town of *Flipside* constantly flips itself between two and three-dimensions. If Mario is the figure, and the town of *Flipside*

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<sup>59</sup> The 'side-scrolling' video game format is one where the player navigates a course from the left of screen towards the right. Typically, a level would consist of the player moving towards the right of screen as they fight enemies or solve visual riddles in order to advance forwards through the video game.

is the ground, then through this constant shifting dimensionality opens up possibilities for complex relationships to be elaborated upon within painting.

James Elkins writes that the figure-ground relationship within painting is premised upon the notion of contrast, he writes that contrast is the “basis of understanding and meaning itself. Without contrast between one thing and another, I cannot know anything.”<sup>60</sup> To think about the figure-ground relationship in terms of contrast through colour, through forms and motifs is a simplistic and straightforward approach to a convention within painting which forms the very foundations for the image. The figure and ground relationship in *Super Paper Mario* however is far from simplistic. Since the central character of Mario and the town of *Flipside* are perpetually in a state of flux through the shifting dimensionality, the contrast is constantly shifting. The differing states of contrast allows for this video game to conceive of a figure and ground relationship which is both charming and dynamic. It is through these shimmering pixels that represent plunging and shifting perspectival planes within the game that inspire my painterly fabrication when negotiation forms and planes in relation to figures and grounds.

The figure-ground relationship in Bernhardt’s *Lisa Simpson, watermelon, cantelope, cigarettes and Chapstick*, 2016, (figure 9) is condensed. Even though there are darkened marks which run around the perimeter of the painting implying some kind of representational space, this is a space which is still decisively and intentionally thin. This deficient spatial contrast between figure and ground focuses the viewer upon the iconography of the figures: the icon of the lip balm with brand name emblazoned combined with the cultural icon of Lisa Simpson leans into the urban cultural condition and the objects which signify as such.

In relation to Phoebe Unwin, Anthony Byrt states that “Unwin lays thin, watery images on top of one another, a technique that results in a strange ghosting in her paintings, and a wobbliness that places her figures in a kind of jet-lagged middle distance.”<sup>61</sup> In Unwin’s *Key*, there are seemingly two main layers that overlay each other. The swooping form is darker and more concrete, and contrast brings this form closer to the viewer, igniting a sense of representational space. The translucent nature of this swooping form allows for shifts in perception where this can be close to the viewer or close to the ‘canvas’ so Byrt’s relationship to a feeling of ‘jet-lag’ seems apt with its connotations of being mired in differing states of time and place.

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<sup>60</sup> James Elkins, ‘Figure and Ground in Philosophy, Neurophysiology, Phenomenology, Psychology, Painting, and Psychoanalysis’, in *On Pictures and the Words That Fail Them* (Cambridge University Press, 1998). 79.

<sup>61</sup> Byrt, ‘Phoebe Unwin’.

## 2.4: The Artifice of Colour

The way in which colour arrives into the urban cultural environment is decisively artificial, which has informed the way in which painters engage colour relationships. Michael Taussig writes that “we now live in an artificial world without much awareness as to its artificiality. . . and this applies especially to the way we have recast the color of the world”.<sup>62</sup> I think about the way colour relationships have been formed within an urban cultural environment, I think about the way that colours call for my attention from billboards and how luminous pixels on my screens seduce the retina. Bernhardt’s *Lisa Simpson, watermelon, cantelope, cigarettes and Chapstick*, 2016, (figure 9) is based around a bright luminous pink which contours each flat shape encasing each object. Through the backlit illumination of my computer screen, this pink fluorescent tube throbs white hot, as if to decisively state ownership over each painted motif.

Phoebe Unwin’s *Key* also utilises pink as a throbbing element of chromatic kick. The figurative form of the key is rendered in a watery pink which stands out in contrast to everything else. This pink which differs in tone to everything else in the painting gives the image a sonorous quality. As my attention is drawn to this luminous colour I can hear the *ping* of the light hitting the metallic edge. As if this pink key were to *clang* as if it were to be dropped upon asphalt.



**Figure 12** Fu-On Chung, *Heart to Break*, 2019, Oil on Canvas, 1360x1680mm

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<sup>62</sup> Michael Taussig, *What Color Is the Sacred?* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009). 44.

I would like to bring into this discussion my painting *Heart to Break*, 2019, (figure 12). I was sitting in my studio staring at this flat, blank whiteness when the thought of painting a flat surface amused me greatly. I set about painting a wall with grooves and curves which gently implied brick and mortar, I chose to render this wall in a honking tone of Vanadium Yellow because of its brash, confronting tonality. I align this with the flatness of Bernhardt as the illusionistic space within my painting is a centimetre at most if our eyes are to believe that the marks upon the painting represent grooves upon a brick wall. Whilst I had intended for this to be the underpainting for a more complex one, this flat (wall) upon flat (substrate) seemed too perverse to paint over, and too wilfully simple and light to burden the painting with cumbersome marks.

This painting *Heart to Break*, (figure 12), has potential reference points to the urban cultural landscape just like the icons of Bernhardt's *Lisa Simpson*. Within my painting, the reference to the 1939 film *The Wizard of Oz* is unavoidable.<sup>63</sup> Within the narrative of the film, the main character of Dorothy is set upon the path of the 'yellow brick road' to locate the almighty Wizard who possesses the ability to spirit Dorothy back home to Kansas. This 'yellow brick road' has come to symbolise a 'road to salvation', and it is through *The Wizard of Oz*'s popularity that my painting will undoubtedly be linked to such. This painting is part monochrome, part pseudo-representational. This vertical painting with its allusions to a 'yellow brick road' becomes horizontal opening up a new spatial plane. So perhaps, not only am I Dorothy, but I am also *Super Paper Mario* constructing a painting which operates as a catalyst to flip between the vertical and horizontal and, between monochrome and representation.

It is important to note that the paintings which I have discussed in the writing thus far have only been viewed through reproductions. It is through the internet, printed matter and library books that these artists have arrived into my sphere of influence. Hito Steyerl's *In Defense of the Poor Image* defines 'the poor image' as the countless reproductions that circulate on the internet.<sup>64</sup> Steyerl writes that the poor image "is no longer about the real thing – the originary original. Instead, it is about its own real conditions of existence: about swarm circulation, digital dispersion, fractured and flexible temporalities."<sup>65</sup> The reproductions point to the digital network they are dispersed by, as a result they

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<sup>63</sup> *The Wizard of Oz*, 1939, cultivates a sensibility of exuberance and excess through its use of colour and overblown costume and make-up. I choose to contextualise the importance of this film to queer culture within this footnote (as opposed to the main text) to continue my position of unshackling *Camp* from its origins as a queer rebellion, discussed in Chapter One. The film's campiness is also due in part to the actress Judy Garland's enduring popularity within the queer community.

*The Wizard of Oz*, directed by Victor Fleming. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1939.

<sup>64</sup> Hito Steyerl, 'In Defense of the Poor Image - E-Flux 10, November (2009), accessed 10 October 2019, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/10/61362/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/>.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

undoubtedly influence the two-dimensional surface of painting. Bernhardt's flat constellation paintings of international icons speak to this 'circulation' and 'digital dispersion' of images. Whilst the fading and ghosting within the paintings of Unwin speaks to the 'fractured and flexible temporalities' present within the urban cultural environment.

This chapter has sought to muse upon the idea of artifice, how it is omnipresent within an urban cultural context, and discussing how the nature of artifice influences painting. Through the shifting two- and three- dimensionality of *Super Paper Mario*, I discussed the notion of figure and ground and how grounded in contrast it creates meaning. I discussed two works by Bernhardt and Unwin respectively in relation to these formats and concerns. Overall, what has become apparent through this writing, is the presence of the internet and of the distribution of the image and how it has informed the relationship to figure and ground, either by the deceptively shifting planes of Phoebe Unwin or the complete and utter flatness of Katherine Bernhardt.

# Call me by your Name

Painterly conundrums that emerge through time

This chapter seeks to explicate the process of painting within *Foolish Painterly Conundrums*. The preceding chapters explored the notion of *Foolishly Camp* and how this notion when applied to the practice of painting creates a school of painting that is *bad*, underworked and digital. This chapter marks a slight shift in tone as I diverge from *Camp* and videogames to the conundrums that emerge within painting. I engage a discussion of the novel *Call me by your Name* by André Aciman, this writing will explore themes of yearning for love across time.<sup>66</sup> I will alloy this with Jan Verwoert's writing about the paintings of Tomma Abts to articulate the painterly conundrums that arise within the process of making.<sup>67</sup>

## 3.1: Unrequited Love that persists across (imagined) Time

Melancholic ideas surrounding reminiscing about past love and yearning for an alternate future are embodied by André Aciman's novel *Call me by your Name*. The emotive and poetic tone of the prose startled me when I read this for the first time as a young painter no older than nineteen. The novel is narrated by Elio who is an unknown age, but he reminisces about a summer in Italy where he met twenty-four-year-old American academic Oliver. What follows is a romance charged with infatuation and passion. The first-person narrative allows the reader and Elio to become one.

From the outset of the novel, Elio's words are tinged with melancholy, so that the reader knows that this was a romance which was doomed from the outset. As, the reader, I was seduced by the words of Aciman, as Elio states that "I shut my eyes, say the word, and I'm back in Italy, so many years ago . . . watching him step out of the cab, billowy blue shirt, wide-open collar, sun-glasses, straw hat, skin everywhere."<sup>68</sup> What tethers this memory of the past with the present is this deep yearning, yearning for a different time, yearning for an object of affection. Yearning for love.

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<sup>66</sup> André Aciman, *Call Me by Your Name*.

<sup>67</sup> Jan Verwoert, 'Choosing to Choose', *Parkett*, no. 84 (2008): 49.

<sup>68</sup> André Aciman, *Call Me by Your Name*. 3.

Isabelle Graw states that painting and love are interconnected and interwoven, citing the example of the widespread notion of the (historically) male painter inspired by the love of painting. “Once love is declared as the driving force of [the painter’s] practice, the painting resembles a projection of [their] love.”<sup>69</sup> For Graw, and for myself, the love of the medium becomes the impetus to propel a painter forward along their trajectory, negotiating the materiality of the paint, the wayward influences that amount to painted forms, and the passages of speed that inform figure and ground.

Yes.

Perhaps, love and painting are interwoven after all.

When engaged within a process of painting I am faced with a similar feeling of longing, or yearning. Auckland-based artist Ian Jervis writes that while “painters habitually project a way forward, this is a *retrograde* trajectory that has been reflected forward into an *imaginary* future – a phantasm acting as a surrogate for what is not yet available.”<sup>70</sup> Jervis writes about a methodology of painting where the end result is not formed from the outset. Therefore, the painter must work towards an imaginary image of what the finished painting *could* look like. This imaginary image is the ‘phantasm’ that Jervis describes, which constantly morphs as the painter makes considered decisions within the duration of the process of painting, responding to the conditions, desires and thoughts which present themselves.

The idea of an image outcome which acts as a phantasm is similar to Elio’s yearning for an alternate future in *Call me by your Name*. Elio’s narration of the story about his sudden romance with Oliver is tinged with melancholy, so that as the reader you cannot help but gain an insight into the (fictional) future. Near the conclusion of the romance Elio laments, “I suddenly realized that we were on borrowed time, that time is always borrowed . . . I began, reluctantly, to steal from the present to pay off debts I knew I’d incur in the future.”<sup>71</sup> The idea of borrowed time, that time was slipping away from Elio bears resemblance to the conundrums that impose themselves upon the painter. When the painter is engaged within the process of painting, the compositional and chromatic conundrums that arise exist within a window of time. And it is this window of opportunity that galvanises the process as the painter must act accordingly before the paint dries, or worse – the ideas dry up.

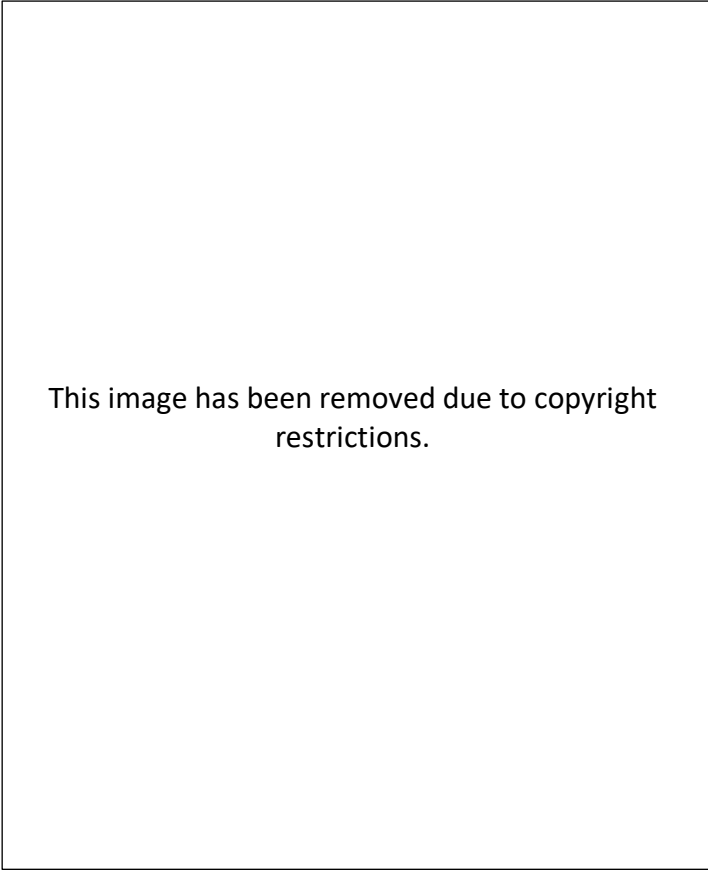
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<sup>69</sup> Isabelle Graw, *The Love of Painting: Genealogy of a Success Medium*. 9.

<sup>70</sup> Ian Jervis, ‘Of Painting’, in *Painting: A Transitive Space* (Auckland: AUT University/ St Paul Street Gallery, 2016.). 66.

<sup>71</sup> André Aciman, *Call Me by Your Name*. 162-163.





This image has been removed due to copyright restrictions.

**Figure 13** Tomma Abts, *Hebo*, 2013, Acrylic and oil on canvas, 480x80mm

### **3.2: Painting as a series of choices**

The Berlin-based art theorist Jan Verwoert has written extensively about the process of painting when the painter doesn't know the final image outcome at the outset of its inception. Verwoert's text *Choosing to Choose* examines this process of decision making in real time in relation to the London-based painter Tomma Abts. Abt's *Hebo*, 2013, (figure 8), is a portrait-oriented painting featuring a predominance of burnt orange. Through the reproduction on the internet, it isn't clear whether the orange is the uppermost layer, with sharp lines zig-zagging through dissecting and opening up the body of the painting, or if it operates as the backdrop with the converging lines skimming over the surface. Jorg Heiser writes that Abts' paintings are typified by "polygonal volumes flattened and pressed into the surface [of the painting], as if a cosmic steamroller had run over constellations of wildly orbiting planets".<sup>72</sup> Heiser's notion of this painting as being flattened would go some way towards describing the representational space within the painting as seemingly thin, so that the scumbled tonality of the rounded shapes seem to both advance and recede into the distance of the painting.

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<sup>72</sup> Jörg Heiser, 'Bodiless Elegance versus Pungent Physicality The Painting of Decisions'. 107.

Jan Verwoert alloys the act of painting with the act of writing, stating that both acts are a series of decisions and the very first decision which is made is to commit to the act of choosing. *Choosing to choose*, Verwoert describes the paintings of Abts as being defined by a

“kind of retroactive temporal logic: the movement that leads to the finished picture is movement that keeps flowing back on itself in the process of over-painting so that what was possible in the beginning becomes tangible by very virtue of the fact that it has been revoked.”<sup>73</sup>

Verwoert’s idea of a ‘temporal logic’ is guided by decisions made in the past; previous marks and forms which inform the present conditions for the painter. Verwoert writes about revoking ‘what was possible in the beginning’ which is aligned with Ian Jervis’ writings about the surrogate image that acts as a phantasm guiding the painter along their trajectory.<sup>74</sup> Verwoert is discussing how jettisoning this finite image and engaging in the process of ‘choosing’ opens up possibilities for the future image to emerge in its totality as the painting becomes complete.

This process of ‘choosing to choose’ as Verwoert writes is a process I engage for the production of paintings within this project. Even though every painting that I have willed into existence has subscribed to this methodology, I will write about *Electric Fields of Solace*, 2018, (figure 14), in particular. This painting which was completed in a single sitting, existing as an outlier from the numerous layers which have been applied to other neighbouring paintings. I remember this day in the studio fondly, as I had just bought a new liquid acrylic with a pigment I had not used before, a shimmering, luminous purple. I prepared the canvas with an absorbent ground, to replicate paper so that the acrylic purple would pool and run as it would upon paper.

This painting began with horizontal sweeps of luminous purple, which were built up gradually so that these shifting planes of colour became hazy. In the case of this painting the ‘surrogate image’ which I was initially working towards to use Ian Jervis’ words, was a purple void. I speckled the painting’s surface with luminous pink and slabs of turquoise in order to modulate this surface. The fact that this painting was completed in a single sitting is unusual, Jan Verwoert writes that painting and writing are similar in that the “only real possibilities are those we project ourselves . . . canvas and page are like hermetically sealed surfaces; the longer we stare at them, the more they close themselves off.”<sup>75</sup> This painting came into existence because I didn’t linger and stare at the surface, I kept moving, laying down

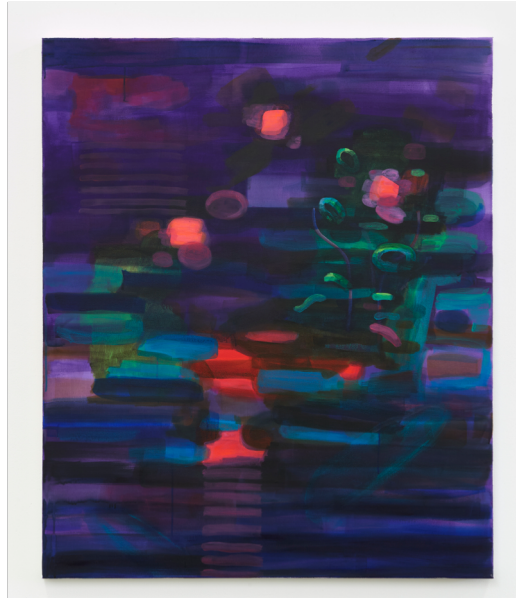
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<sup>73</sup> Jan Verwoert, ‘Choosing to Choose’. 52.

<sup>74</sup> Ian Jervis, ‘Of Painting’. 66.

<sup>75</sup> Jan Verwoert, ‘Choosing to Choose’. 49.

washes and responding to the conditions of the purple void which was present. This was a painting where I wasn't *really* thinking, I was engaging in the process of applying thin acrylic wash upon thin acrylic wash.



**Figure 14** Fu-On Chung, *Electric Fields of Solace*, 2018, Acrylic on Canvas, 965mmx863mm, image credit: Christo Crocker

Whilst *Electric Fields of Solace*, 2018, (figure 14), was completed in a single sitting it seemed to have reached an end point naturally as if it had fallen into place. In other paintings it takes time, observation and almost a will to defiantly state to myself that the painting is *finished*. Laura Owens describes that the paintings she has viewed that have really shaped her as an artist have ignited a “thrilling, buzzing feeling inside [her] body. It’s like you’re confounded, attracted, repulsed, confused, alerted.”<sup>76</sup> I would then say that for myself, I am constantly pausing within the layers of this painting asking myself am I feeling this ‘buzz’ or ‘confusion’?. If the answer is no then I carry on painting, if the answer is yes I ask myself if it is possible to exaggerate and push this further. Therein lies the risk within painting as I am constantly dreaming about using the painting in its current form as a bartering chip for a greater image.

### **3.3: Painting united as a Formation**

Whilst it is clear that *Foolish Painterly Conundrums* considers a concrete rationale of painting as pigment applied to a substrate, Isabelle Graw’s concept of a *Formation* is an interesting proposition to unite the ideas put forth thus far within this writing. Graw writes that the term, *Formation* focuses on “the historical changes [painting] has undergone, and on its enduring characteristics. In conceptual terms, the advantage of the formation is that it allows us to conceive of changes, openings, and

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<sup>76</sup> Enright, ‘Painting in an Expanded Field.’ 86.

boundary shifts, alongside aspects that persist over time.”<sup>77</sup> Painting can be *Foolishly Camp* (Laura Owens), subscribe to Bad Painting (Dana Schutz) and engage with the digital networks of the urban cultural environment (Katherine Bernhardt) and still subscribe to the poetics of letting the image outcome of the painting emerge through the process. The idea of *Formation* is considerate to the artists discussed in terms of the paintings which exist as an arrangement of forms and marks, plundered from history and contemporary urban culture.

Yes.

*Formation* proves to be the conceptual olive branch to bridge the divide between inverted hierarchies, shimmering pixels and a *Foolish* painterly drive.

This chapter has fused together themes of yearning for love, with a yearning for an image within the process of painting which unfolds before the painter in real time. When I think about *Call me by your Name*, I think about the climax of the novel, which is the final weekend of the central character’s romance. Where Elio and Oliver spend one last romantic weekend together, Elio writes that,

“I can, from the distance of years now, still think I’m hearing the voices of two young men singing . . . towards daybreak, neither realizing, as they held each other and kissed again and again on the dark lanes of old Rome, that this was the last night they would ever make love again.

‘Tomorrow let’s go to San Clemente,’ I said.

‘Tomorrow is today,’ he replied.”<sup>78</sup>

My long-lasting memory of this novel is typified by those three words, ‘tomorrow is today’, which evokes the nature of time and how it speeds beyond our control. Within painting, ‘tomorrow is today’ may refer to the ‘surrogate image’ that I am painting towards as it ultimately dissolves before my eyes in the present. And for Elio, ‘tomorrow is today’ refers to an ending of a significant romance as his stargazing towards the past combined with his yearning for an alternate future causes this clash of memory and fantasy to come crashing upon the shores of the present.

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<sup>77</sup> Isabelle Graw, *The Love of Painting: Genealogy of a Success Medium*. 14.

<sup>78</sup> André Aciman, *Call Me by Your Name*. 207.

# Curtain Call

*Foolish Painterly Conundrums* was conceived by forming and exploring the notion of *Foolishly Camp* through painting. This notion centred upon the idea of *The Fool*, formed through history as a character with the inherent impulse to “subvert the established order”.<sup>79</sup> I found this impulse of subverting and acting against normative canon bewitching, enticing my ever so slight rebellious streak. It is through the nature of *Camp* being “serious about the frivolous” in which I bound these two ideas.<sup>80</sup> *Foolishly Camp* is the foundation of this writing because it mirrors my playful and slightly antagonistic approach to image-making within the realm of painting. Painting which is bound by the conventions of pigment applied to a substrate.

In Chapter One, I used *Romy and Michele’s High School Reunion* to discuss how the two central characters embody a contemporary take on *The Fool*. With their perceived dim-witted nature acting as a guise for their potential to usurp their former high school fiends within the storyline of their ten year reunion. The heroic pair of *Romy* and *Michele* invert the social hierarchies within the narrative structure of the film which in turn illuminates the potential for the painter to give rise to heroic paintings through rebellious and foolishly playful decisions within the process of making. Decisions that involve toying with figure and ground and experimenting with materiality in regards to form, mark and motif whilst still adhering to the traditional structure of pigment applied to a canvas.

The practice of Laura Owens assisted in elucidating how *Foolishly Camp* may manifest within painting. I discussed how Owen’s approach to painting could be described as foolish, Robert Enright writes that Owens had “avoided trying certain things in her paintings, and the realization that they were doable revealed wholly unoccupied imaginative spaces.”<sup>81</sup> Laura Owens is willing to defy her initial impulse and to act against normative structures within the logic of her process, similar to the impulse of *The Fool* who seeks to unsettle normative structures and hierarchies. Assuming the role of *The Fool* proves a valuable opportunity to liberate the painter and their practice. As a result of this approach the “sense of freedom that emanates from her work is exhilarating, because of what she achieves and because of what she risks in the achieving”.<sup>82</sup> This sense of freedom that exudes from her work may be due to its

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<sup>79</sup> Hill, ‘The Foolish Dramatherapist? An Exploration of the Role of the Fool.’ 5.

<sup>80</sup> Susan Sontag, ‘Notes on “Camp”’. 44.

<sup>81</sup> Enright, ‘Painting in an Expanded Field.’ 82.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid. 82.

staggering scale, its vivid colour or the authority within the marks and forms deployed upon the surface. This sense of freedom may point towards the attitude of the painter, who is decisive and resolute in her doggedly playful approach.

I proposed that *Foolishly Camp* with its allusions to undoing and inverting hierarchies reverberates with the school of *Bad Painting*. The artists that engage this school of making don't necessarily share a definitive overall aesthetic style. Instead, *Bad Painting* is better described as an particular attitude towards painting. Chris Sharp describes the artists that engage this school of making as having the "will to preserve, uncover, and continually stake out new, if forbidden ground."<sup>83</sup> This will to seek out forbidden ground is similar to the toying with taboo that *Camp* offers. I used Dana Schutz as an example to illustrate how *Bad Painting* operates as an antagonistic approach to the medium. Her paintings are "sceptical and at times bad-tempered, the way intelligent teenagers are in their loathing of the bland aestheticism and brash sexuality of pop-modernity."<sup>84</sup> *Bad Painting* is an attitude characterised by a wilfully antagonistic impulse combined with a deep commitment and affection for the medium of painting. This oxymoron of sorts emanates as a hilariously tantalising prospect indeed.

The idea of artifice within an urban cultural context and how it has bled into painting was discussed in Chapter Two. The video game *Super Paper Mario* was used to discuss this idea of artifice through its self-referential aesthetic of pixels and flat cardboard construction reminiscent of a school play backdrop. I proposed through this chapter that painting has been informed by the saturation of flat backlit pixels of colour, such as video, billboards and video games. I introduced the paintings of Katherine Bernhardt whose practice is typified by "grafitti, cartoon characters and emoji" as a means to illustrate the way in which painting responds to the internet.<sup>85</sup> It is through this decisive flatness within Bernhardt's painting, the luminous pink outline that surrounds the shonky Lisa Simpson and a gaggle of consumer objects that are readily recognisable from the western cultural vernacular that imbeds these paintings within the cloud of the internet.

I brought into this chapter the practice of Phoebe Unwin in relation to artifice and colour. The urban environment has "recast the colour of the world", as in the colour combinations that exist within the digital image pool are decidedly artificial.<sup>86</sup> These colour combinations of concrete sidewalk greys intermixed with a radiant neon pink allow for a complexity and visual ghosting within Unwin's paintings which are both enigmatic and mysteriously magnetic. The use of colour within Bernhardt's

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<sup>83</sup> Chris Sharp, 'Bad Painting Gone Wrong - Features - Metropolis M'.

<sup>84</sup> Jörg Heiser, 'Bodiless Elegance versus Pungent Physicality The Painting of Decisions'. 122.

<sup>85</sup> Peck, 'Katherine Bernhardt: Xavier Hufkens Gallery'.

<sup>86</sup> Michael Taussig, *What Color Is the Sacred?* 44.

practice places high key colours against each other united by wonky highlighter as an outline, to create paintings which are truly and decisively flat, as if it were itself a backlit illuminated advertisement.

*Foolish Painterly Conundrums* exists within Joselit's notion of "the contemporary sublime".<sup>87</sup> Which is characterised by reproductions, video-games and films that scroll before our eyes upon backlit illuminated screens. Heiser proposes that to make "interesting painting today means to challenge the historical amnesia and visual entropy of the digital image pool."<sup>88</sup> Whilst the artists discussed in this writing may be challenging the digital image pool, in a way I feel that they are responding and succumbing to this 'digital image pool'. It is through Owens' brushmarks which resemble a computer paint tool, and Bernhardt's super flat paintings with its origins from popular culture and advertisements which show that painters today are very much engaged with this 'contemporary sublime'. History is flattened, with images and films ranging across time and culture are embedded within the technological cloud and accessible from an illuminated screen anywhere.

The final chapter utilised the love story of *Call me by Your Name* as a means to discuss an approach to painting where the image outcome isn't predetermined. This chapter referred to the writing of Ian Jervis who describes this method of painting as working towards a 'surrogate image' which acts as a placeholder for an eventuating image. He writes that "Painters are not soothsayers. The illusion that a future can be imagined is an artifice of conceiving time as progressing through a homogenous medium."<sup>89</sup> It is through the decisions calibrated in the present that chance and serendipity happen, making it so that surprising decisions that startle and shock may will themselves into existence upon the picture plane.

To conceive of the finished image at the painting's inception, and to follow this through in a 'paint-by-numbers' manner would completely stymie the opportunities of fortune and chance. Jan Verwoert builds upon this discussion by writing that "there is no predetermined plan to be executed step by step. And there is no clear-cut beginning that would serve as a necessary springboard for all that follows."<sup>90</sup> *Foolish Painterly Conundrums* engages a mode of painting which revels in the decisions and choices made in the present, guided by an idea of a future as yet unknown painting. As referred to in my discussion of the novel *Call me by Your Name*, this longing for a future image is not unlike a yearning for a significant lover.

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<sup>87</sup> David Joselit, 'Painting Beside Itself'. 219.

<sup>88</sup> Jörg Heiser, 'Bodiless Elegance versus Pungent Physicality The Painting of Decisions'. 122.

<sup>89</sup> Ian Jervis, 'Of Painting'. 66.

<sup>90</sup> Jan Verwoert, 'Choosing to Choose'. 52.

As this writing reaches a close, I remark upon the tone of this dissertation. I stated in the introduction that *Foolish Painterly Conundrums* is first and foremost a painting project. It is in this conclusion that I restate the importance of this. This is a piece of writing that builds upon a body of paintings which led the research, the writing acts as both an auxiliary for the practice and a means to talk *through* the logic of decision making and the influences present within an urban cultural context.

Yes.

Perhaps, this is very much a *painter's dissertation*, for I dare not moonlight as a theorist.<sup>91</sup>

Through *Foolish Painterly Conundrums* I have engaged chance, decisive marks, missteps and foibles. There is a love and playful approach to painting. This writing has sought to describe the journey of the painting so as not to predetermine the final destination. On this journey I am *The Fool* striding elegantly forth unencumbered by fear or worry. I am both *Romy* and *Michele* resolute in overturning and dissolving the hierarchies present upon the arena of the canvas. I am *Super Paper Mario* responding and adding to the digital pixels which I am surrounded by. And I am *Elio* in the novel *Call me by your Name* navigating a yearning for a future image, considering paintings from the past whilst calibrating my decisions in the present. It is through this speculative journey that I am tumbling, wobbling and falling foolishly into painting.

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<sup>91</sup> Gleaned from an email exchange with Dr Tessa Laird, 21 October 2019.



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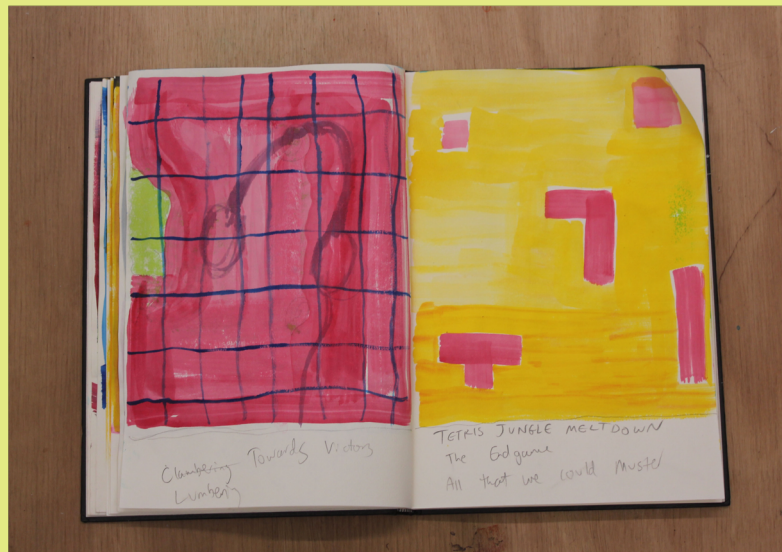
### **Epilogue of Figures from the Studio**

What follows is a compilation of selected documentation of the work and process of *Foolish Painterly Conundrums*. This edited documentation is positioned in a loose chronological order. This includes documentation and accompanying exhibition text from my show *Fumbling Calamities*, Bus Projects, Melbourne, 2018.



**Figure 15** Fu-On Chung, *Untitled Drawings (compilation)*, 2018, acrylic on paper, dimensions variable.





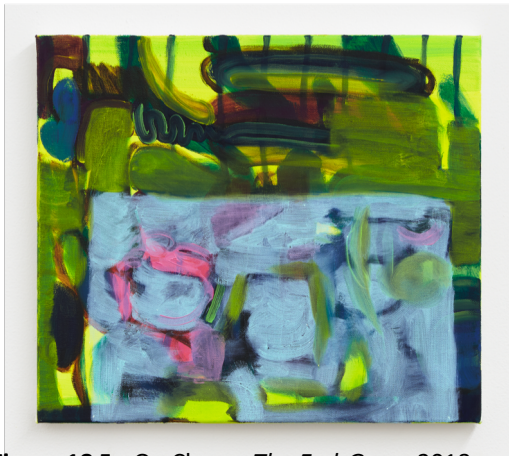
**Figure 16** Fu-On Chung, *Untitled Drawings (compilation)*, 2018, acrylic on paper, dimensions variable.



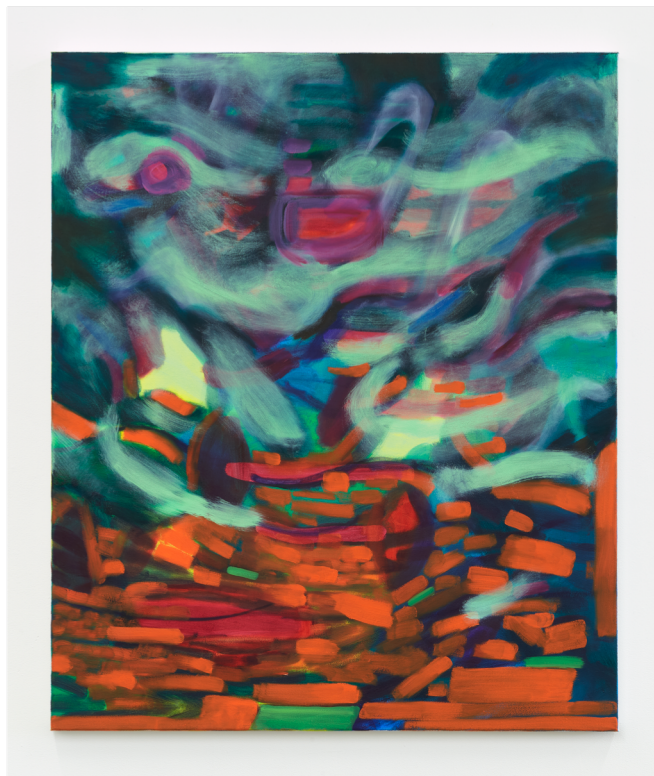
**Figure 17** Fu-On Chung, *Installation view of Studio 2018*.



The Following images documents the solo show, Fu-On Chung, *Fumbling Calamities*, Bus Projects, Melbourne, 2018. This exhibition featured a selection of works which were the culmination of the first year of the Master of Fine Arts. I have reproduced the accompanying exhibition text by New Zealand based writer and curator Lucinda Bennett.



**Figure 18** Fu-On Chung, *The End-Game* 2018,  
Oil on canvas, 400x350mm. Image credit: Christo Crocker



**Figure 19** Fu-On Chung, *Storming the Palace*, 2018,  
Oil on canvas, 1016x1219mm. Image credit: Christo Crocker



**Figure 20** Fu-On Chung, *Archaic Skies*, 2018,  
Oil on canvas, 460x380mm. Image credit: Christo Crocker



**Figure 21** Fu-On Chung, *Daring to Dream*, 2018,  
Oil on canvas, 1016x1219mm. Image credit: Christo Crocker



**Figure 22** Fu-On Chung, *Electric Fields of Solace*, 2018,  
Acrylic on canvas, 1016x1219mm. Image credit: Christo Crocker



**Figure 23** Fu-On Chung, *Continue to Tumble*, 2018,  
Oil on canvas, 400x350mm. Image credit: Christo Crocker

### **Accompanying Exhibition Text by Lucinda Bennett**

“I look at the painting and my tongue stays firmly inside my mouth.

My look is greedy enough, my eyes roving around the canvas, hungrily searching for something I could never describe. I look at the painting and my tongue stays inside my mouth. It does its own thing in there, roaming the damp halls between teeth and cheek, finding a word to thrust against my front teeth, dissipating in pools of saliva when my mouth stays closed, not ready to utter, still just looking.

The painting is violet. I think about the times I’ve closed my eyes and seen patterns of light swirling against the purple-black of my eyelids. I think about the protein in the human retina that allows us to see in the dark, a pigment called visual purple which filters green-blue light so the world after dark looks mauve. I try think how to describe the forms that swim across the purple painting, and I keep coming back to the word lozenge, as in pink lozenges that glow, that seem to be emerging from within a dark bruise, that are perhaps the only healthy cells left in a cluster of the dead and the dying. Fresh saliva secretes into my mouth in anticipation. I have no lozenges to suck, I am just looking at a painting.

The mouth is a place of superlatives. Your jaw muscles are the most powerful in your body, your tongue the most flexible smooth muscle. Even the enamel on your teeth is the hardest substance your body can produce. It contains more nerve endings than almost anywhere else in your body, and this can make everything that happens there feel like the very best, or the very worst. Eating chocolate mousse, its texture so light and unctuous, the way it sweetly coats your tongue. Sucking on a smooth candy disc. Crunching through the crisp shell of a deep-fried wonton. Cutting the roof of your mouth on a crusty baguette, the ragged rawness colouring the rest of your day. Getting a flake of almond skin wedged between your molars, your tongue straining to dislodge something no bigger than a grain of rice that has somehow swollen to what seems like the size of a planet, impossible to ignore.

It's not that I think these paintings need to be experienced with tongue and lips, licked and sucked, teeth mashing against the canvas grain. It's more that I suspect lushness and excess could have the same affects across visual and oral forms, and that the language surrounding the oral – voluptuous, fleshy language – feels peculiarly appropriate for these paintings that feel liquid, that swill and swallow.

For Fu-On Chung's paintings give us sensations, not answers. They are the spoonful of chocolate mousse inside your mouth, not the recipe, nor the bowl sitting in front of you. They are theatrical, exuberant, more than you're usually given. But in their exuberance they are also enigmatic, swirling sensuality offering nothing concrete to grasp onto. It is in this soup of ambiguity and excess that I search for something to hold, and it is here that I find the body, or rather, see into the body. I look at *Storming the Palace* and see into my gut, or into my skull where the grey matter has turned sky blue and synapses are firing orange. A pink lozenge glows in the centre and it looks to be a way out (or a way in, depending where you're going), an orifice where the light comes in to reveal that our insides are rainbow.

I look at the painting and I open my mouth."<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Lucinda Bennett, 'Fumbling Calamities Accompanying Text', Bus Projects, 2018, accessed November 3 2019, <https://busprojects.org.au/library/fu-on-chung>.

What follows is an edited selection of documentation from 2019. This documents drawings and paintings which represent the body of work that directly preceded the final body of work for the exhibition.



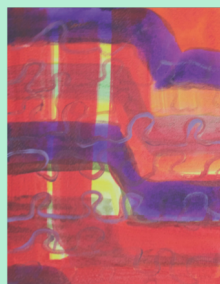
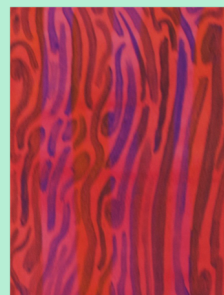


**Figure 24** Fu-On Chung, *Untitled Drawings (compilation)* 2019, Acrylic on Paper, Dimensions Variable





**Figure 25** Fu-On Chung, *Untitled Drawings (compilation)* 2019,  
Acrylic on Paper, Dimensions Variable



**Figure 26** Fu-On Chung, *Untitled Drawings (compilation)* 2019, Acrylic on Paper, Dimensions Variable



**Figure 27** Fu-On Chung, *Untitled Pair*, 2019,  
Acrylic on Canvas, Oil on Canvas, 1016x1219, image credit: Eric Jong



**Figure 28** Fu-On Chung, *Untitled Pair*, 2019,  
Oil on Canvas, 510x610mm, image credit: Eric Jong

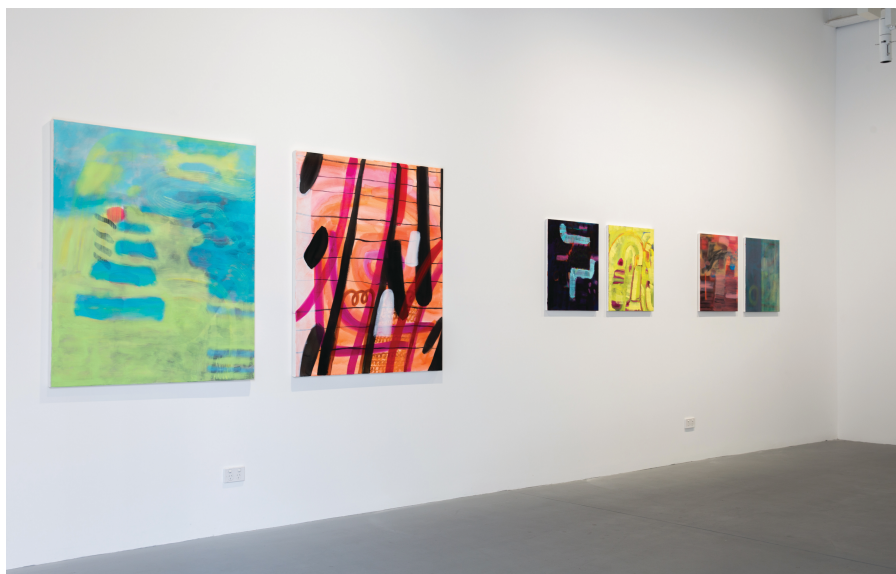




**Figure 29** Fu-On Chung, *Untitled Pair*, 2019,  
Oil on Canvas, Acrylic and Oil on Canvas 510x610mm, image credit: Eric Jong



**Figure 30** Fu-On Chung, *Untitled Pair*, 2019,  
Acrylic on canvas, oil on canvas, 510x610mm, image credit: Eric Jong



**Figure 31** Fu-On Chung, *Artspace Test Install (Installation View)*, 2019,  
Image credit: Eric Jong



**Figure 32** Fu-On Chung, *Artspace Test Install (Installation View)*, 2019,  
Image credit: Eric Jong



**Figure 33** Fu-On Chung, *Artspace Test Install (Installation View)*, 2019,  
Image credit: Eric Jong

### **Masters Exhibition Documentation**

The Following images documents the Masters Graduating Exhibition. These eight paintings are the culmination of this two-year project. These paintings were installed within 'The Stables' building.

## Masters Exhibition List of Figures

34.) Masters Exhibition Installation View, 2019, image credit: William Normyle

35.) Masters Exhibition Installation View, 2019, image credit: William Normyle

36.) Masters Exhibition Installation View, 2019, image credit: William Normyle

37.) Masters Exhibition Installation View, 2019, image credit: William Normyle

38.) Masters Exhibition Installation View, 2019, image credit: William Normyle

39.) Masters Exhibition Installation View, 2019, image credit: William Normyle

40.) Fu-On Chung, *That, Which Beggars Belief*, 2019

Acrylic & oil on canvas, 1680x1530mm, image credit: William Normyle

41.) Fu-On Chung, *Storms*, 2019

Oil on canvas, 1680x1530mm, image credit: William Normyle

42.) Fu-On Chung, *Dancing with a Stranger*, 2019

Oil on canvas, 1680x1530mm, image credit: William Normyle

43.) Fu-On Chung, *Green Light*, 2019

Acrylic & oil on canvas, 1680x1360mm, image credit: William Normyle

44.) Fu-On Chung, *Hang with Me*, 2019

Acrylic & oil on canvas, 1680x1360mm, image credit: William Normyle

45.) Fu-On Chung, *Imagined Time*, 2019

Acrylic & oil on canvas, 1680x1530mm, image credit: William Normyle

46.) Fu-On Chung, *Heart to Break*, 2019

Oil on canvas, 1680x1360mm, image credit: William Normyle

47.) Fu-On Chung, *Platonic Lovers*, 2019

Acrylic & oil on canvas, 1680x1360mm, image credit: William Normyle





**Figure 34** Masters Exhibition Installation View, 2019, Image Credit: William Normyle



**Figure 35** Masters Exhibition Installation View, 2019, Image Credit: William Normyle



**Figure 36** Masters Exhibition Installation View, 2019, Image Credit: William Normyle



**Figure 37** Masters Exhibition Installation View, 2019, Image Credit: William Normyle

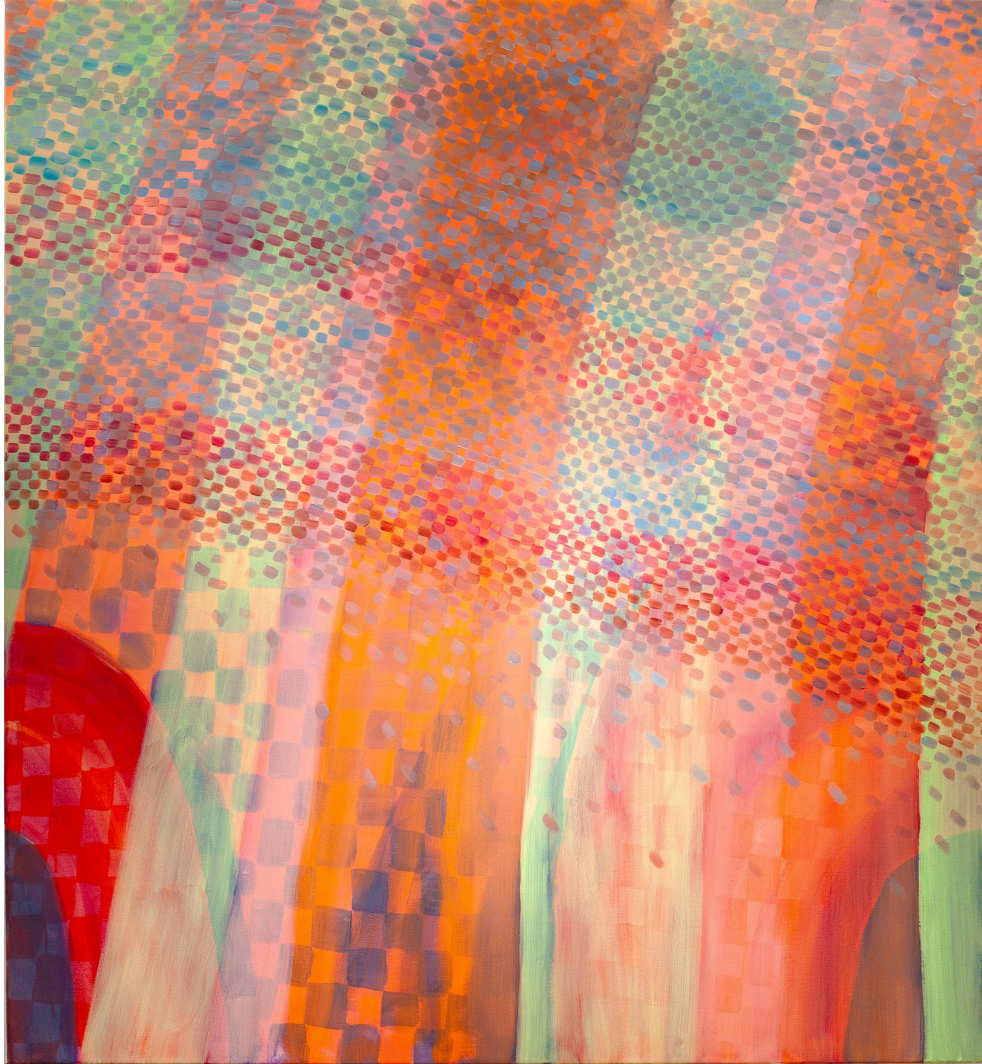




**Figure 38** Masters Exhibition Installation View, 2019, Image Credit: William Normyle



**Figure 39** Masters Exhibition Installation View, 2019, Image Credit: William Normyle



**Figure 40** Fu-On Chung, *That, Which beggars Belief*, 2019,  
Acrylic & oil on canvas, 1680x1530mm. Image credit: William Normyle



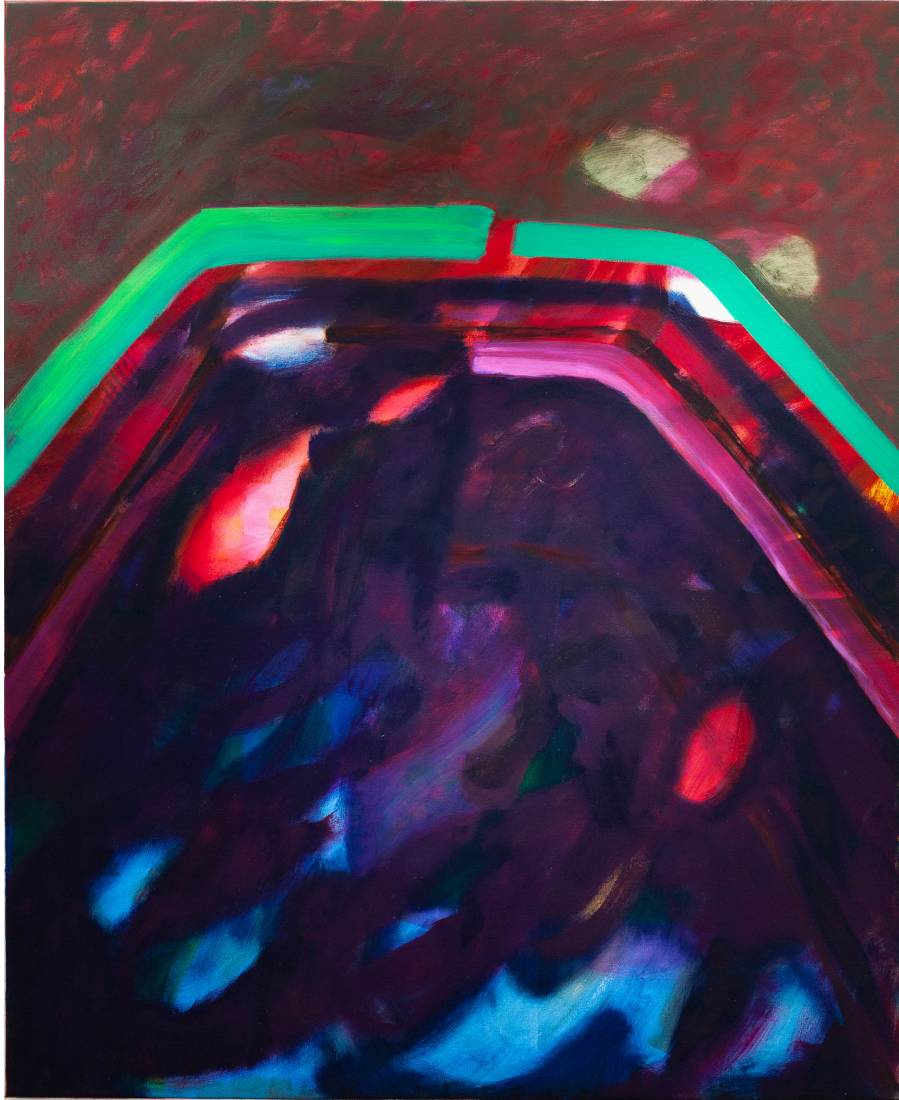


**Figure 41** Fu-On Chung, *Storms*, 2019,  
Oil on canvas, 1680x1530mm. Image credit: William Normyle



**Figure 42** Fu-On Chung, *Dancing with a Stranger*, 2019,  
Oil on canvas, 1680x1530mm. Image credit: William Normyle





**Figure 43** Fu-On Chung, *Green Light*, 2019,  
Acrylic & oil on canvas, 1680x1360mm, Image credit: William Normyle

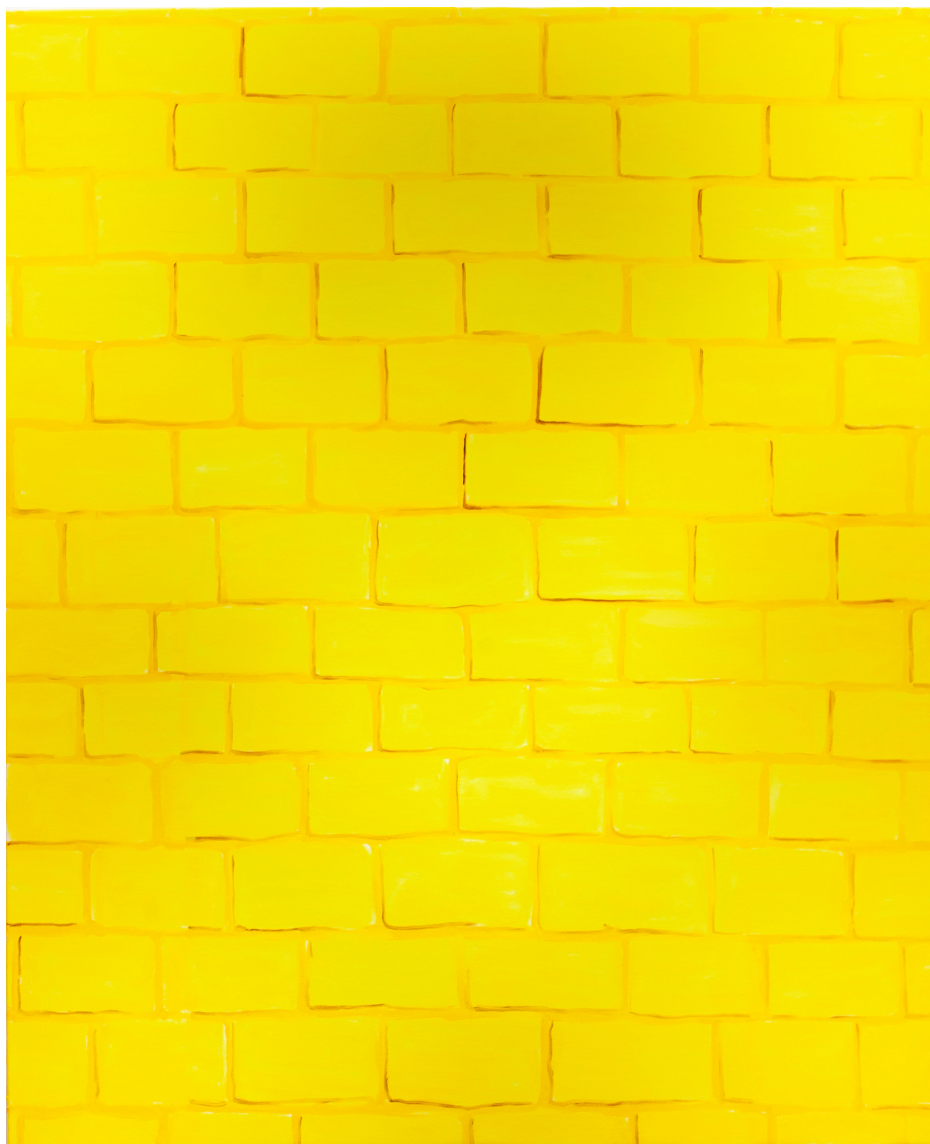


**Figure 44** Fu-On Chung, *Hang with Me*, 2019,  
Acrylic & oil on canvas, 1680x1360mm, Image credit: William Normyle



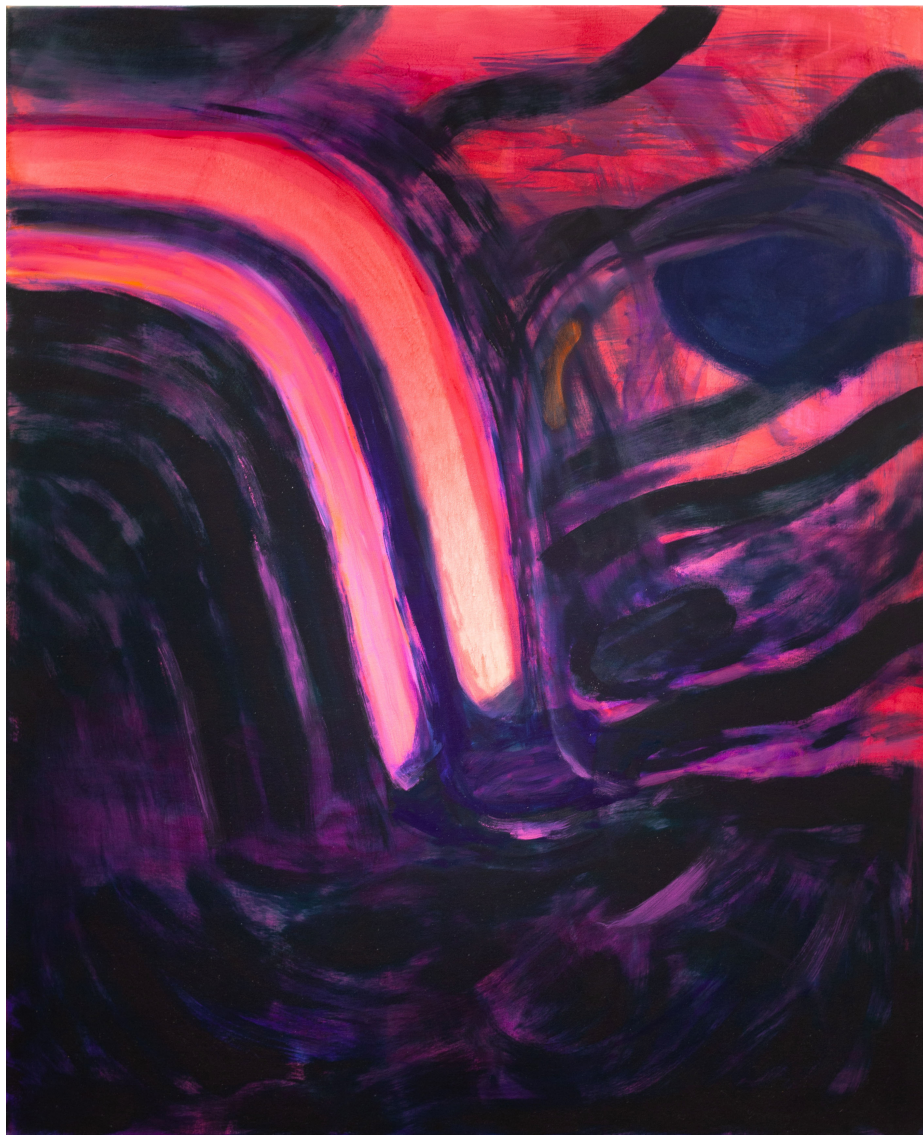


**Figure 45** Fu-On Chung, *Imagined Time*, 2019,  
Acrylic & oil on canvas, 1680x1530mm, Image credit: William Normyle



**Figure 46** Fu-On Chung, *Heart to Break*, 2019,  
Oil on canvas, 1680x1360mm, Image credit: William Normyle





**Figure 47** Fu-On Chung, *Platonic Lovers*, 2019,  
Acrylic & oil on canvas, 1680x1360mm, Image credit: William Normyle