Beauty and the Synthetic

by Heather Sandy, Bachelor of Fine Arts

A Thesis Submitted in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in the field of Art

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May 2015





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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis exists thanks to my large support network that has encouraged me throughout this entire process: my family, mentors, and friends. I can't even begin to count the number of times I called my mother, Zena, panicking about a deadline or assignment. Words cannot express the love and gratitude I have for my mother's patience and wisdom, without which I could not have survived this experience. My sister Jillian was also on the receiving end of those phonecalls, and in addition to to moral support, I appreciate the Youtube videos and internet memes sent to distract me. I am also grateful to my father, Michael, who first introduced me to resin and mold-making, and has offered me help, wisdom, and humor when I needed it.

I also owe eternal thanks to my partner Charlie – he has been my rock ever since I met him. He has given me a shoulder to cry on, brainstormed ideas with me, and helped me with all my framing and woodworking needs. Also, many thanks to the purring of Duke Silver and Kitler who were a reassuring source of stress relief.

Many thanks go to my committee – Jane Barrow, Brigham Dimick, Thad Duhigg, and Katie Poole-Jones for their help and guidance during my program. My faculty mentors have provided endless challenges, and I would not be the artist or writer I am today without them. Thank you.

I moved to Edwardsville without knowing anyone in the area, and I quickly acquired a studio family. Sarah Gillespie, Melissa Hampton, Lacey Kirkwood and Erin Rice have lived through this experience with me, and have become sisters. Words cannot express the love and respect I have for you as artists and as friends.

*Thank You.*

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# CHAPTER I

# INTRODUCTION

*"What I dream of is an art of balance, of purity and serenity devoid of troubling or depressing subject matter - a soothing, calming influence on the mind, rather like a good armchair which provides relaxation from physical fatigue."* [1]

-Henri Matisse

*Color and beauty, pattern and paint.* I create colorful, abstract collages that weave layers of plastic shapes together into rhythmic, complex compositions. The organic shapes within my artwork are created by pouring paint, and the smooth, plastic surface often lends itself to comparisons of colorful taffy. Smooth surfaces paired with seductive color palettes inevitably lead to the question: Can I touch this? The tangible use of material dances in front of the viewer, begging them to touch the piece despite the fact they are in a gallery.

I am often told that my work is happy and beautiful. This is because I love color, and I love beauty. People are programmed to desire beauty. This is a universal truth, buried deep within ourselves, part of our primal instincts to keep our population alive. Beauty, or more specifically *"the beautiful,"* seduces. I strive to create artwork that seduces the viewer, with its intensely saturated color palettes and whimsical shapes. I have discovered that my role as an artist is to create moments of beauty in an overly bleak world. Without beauty, there can be no hope and it is my intention to give my viewers that moment of hope.

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[1] Henri Matisse and Jack D. Flam, *Matisse on Art*, Rev. ed. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995, 35.

I use color and poured paint as a means to create beauty. Perhaps the first thing viewers tend to notice about my artwork is my use of color. I use a high proportion of warm, saturated colors - pinks, oranges, and turquoises - lending to a happy feeling within my work. It is as Henri Matisse states, “Purer colors… have in themselves, independently of the objects they serve to express, a significant action on the feelings of those who look at them.” [2] Not only do they influence the feelings of those who look at them, but they have a compelling action on the feelings of those who work with them! My undergraduate painting professor Jennifer Rosengarten first introduced me to the idea of color being “yummy”, to the inexplicable urge to lick paint off a canvas for the love of color. This notion has remained with me, perfectly verbalizing the seductive nature of color.

My thesis body of work has also developed around a love of process as a means to create beauty - specifically, an obsession with pouring paint. I discovered Liquitex Pouring Medium at the beginning of my second year of graduate school, when I was seeking an alternative to resin, a material I used to represent the synthetic world. At the time, I was researching the effects of chemicals on the natural landscape and soon began to realize the artificial beauty present within our everyday world. While it is difficult to mix color in resin, the pouring medium is easily compatible with acrylic paint. Prior to pouring the medium, I mix fluid acrylics into the medium, which allows me to alter the properties of the original hue. I then pour the paint on sheets of printmaking paper, which creates deep pools of color when the paint puddles on the paper.

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[2] Dani Cavallaro. "Reception." In *Synesthesia and the Arts*. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2013, 173.

After the pours have dried, I cut out the shapes from the paper using an Xacto knife and assemble the shapes into a collage. There are three main techniques I use to assemble my artwork: (1) pours collaged together, weaving layers of color into a larger composition; (2) singular pours of analogous colors, created by pouring wet paint into wet paint and; (3) pours collaged with layers of fabric or decorative pattern. Ultimately, the success of the initial pour dictates which of the three main techniques I utilize to create the piece.

The conceptual aims of my work parallels my artistic process of using collage to unify disparate formal elements. Each chapter within this thesis aims to unpack and explore the multiple dichotomies at play within my work.

Attraction versus repulsion often takes the form of beauty versus the grotesque within Chapter Two: *The Synthetic Domestic.* I mock the women, lifestyles, and products present in the magazine *Better Homes and Gardens*, yet I also feel myself desiring these middle-class pleasures. Although my artwork provides a criticism of middle-class consumerism fueled by synthetic beauty, I also find myself longing to have the products and lifestyle present in the magazine. Chapter Three: *On Beauty* examines how the use of pattern juxtaposed against Abstract Expressionism recalls the dichotomies of fine art versus craft, the decorative versus the art object, and British tradition versus the American contemporary. Chapter Five: *The Pour* examines how the uncontrolled organic pour versus the precise cutting of the shapes pushes the tensions of the geometric versus the organic. The material and shapes of the pours themselves also beg comparisons between the organic versus the synthetic. My approach to painting leaves my work

lingering between two-dimensions and three-dimensions, further explained in Chapter Six: *Painting Sculpturally*.

# CHAPTER II

## THE SYNTHETIC DOMESTIC

> *"'There's nothing more generous than inviting people into your home,' says Bunny. When it comes to entertaining, outdoor living, and overall style, design luminary Bunny Williams makes elegant effortless. Follow her lead, and you'll be… in good company".* [3]
>
> *-Better Homes and Gardens September* 2014

Fig. #1, *Bunny Williams*

*"Well golly, I can't wait to pretty up the table or create a foolproof centerpiece,"* I exclaim while turning the pages of the September edition of *Better Homes and Gardens. "French Influence! The 'flatware Bunny bought at a Paris market' really gets my goods!"* At first glance, Bunny Williams represents the key demographic *BHG* is trying to reach (fig. #1). The original founders of *BHG*, E.T Meredith and Chelsea Sherlock established the magazine as, "[…] a cozy, homey guide appealing to 'ordinary folks,' with stories and projects designed to improve their domestic life."[4] While the magazine continues to market itself as a cozy guide with stories and projects, the "ordinary folks" like Bunny that appear in the magazine hardly represent the increasingly struggling American middle class.

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[3] Jody Garlock. "In Good Company." *Better Homes and Gardens*, (September 1, 2014), 87.

[4] Kathleen Endres, "Better Homes and Gardens." In *Women's Periodicals in the United States Consumer Magazines*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press,1995, 22.

Bunny's glamorous lifestyle is definitely not typical of the middle-class female reading the magazine. As a successful New York interior designer, Bunny is based in Connecticut, with a product line aimed towards the middle-class American housewife so that she, "[...] can pull together a table in minutes."[5] I certainly cannot identify with her daily life. Bunny is a slender woman whose tailored clothes highlight the curves of her body. She is pictured in the magazine wearing a light blue button up shirt with the collar popped and a pair of blue jeans. Her clothing is neatly pressed and totally in-fashion. Bunny is a well-groomed lady, with a hip hairstyle and perfectly coiffed hair. We both might be Caucasian, college-educated woman but the similarities end there.

Fig. #2, *Duke Silver and Hitler*

While I am a white woman, I have always had a weight problem and can label myself obese at this moment in my life. I do not own a home or garden nor do I have children. I am a first generation American, as the majority of my life both of my parents have held a green card and have been considered "Resident Aliens." My parents are divorced, and my

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[5] Jody Garlock. "In Good Company." *Better Homes and Gardens*, 88.

father is remarried to a woman twenty years younger than him. I am twenty-seven years old and have a seven-month old half-sister in addition to my twenty-four year old sister. Most importantly, I fully embrace the possibility of being eaten by cats after I die, as the status of my romantic life more closely resembles that of crazy cat lady than a *BHG* housewife. I currently live with Adolph Hitler[6], who follows my art career with interest and enjoys sitting on my lap (fig. #2). Instead of resembling the families found within the pages of *BHG*, my family more closely resembles the cast of *Modern Family* making it difficult for me to take the magazine seriously as a legitimate depiction of reality.

Fig. #3, *Dimitra Anderson*

*"Her long-term devotion to white walls notwithstanding, Dimitra Anderson spices things up with juicy colors, like tangerine and cornflower blue, that look even better together. 'You don't have to be married to one color,' she says. In other words, you can have a colorful house without going all in."*[7]

*"Dimitra Anderson sure has some great pointers,"* I marvel to myself as I admire her seemingly perfect family and home. *"Her professional opinion is don't commit - How youthful! How fun!"* Just like Bunny, Dimitra is a white, perfectly put together female with a beautiful home and garden (fig. #3). She has been happily

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[6] "Cats That Look Like Hitler!" Accessed April 30, 2015. http://www.catsthatlooklikehitler.com.

[7] Kennedy, Kristine Kennedy, "Orange Crush." *Better Homes and Gardens*, (April 1, 2014), 50.

married to her husband Jevan for 16 years and has an interior design business with partner Nancy Evars. She is pictured lounging on the couch with two of her children, one boy and one girl. Her daughter Charlotte is perched next to her mother, quietly reading a book while brother Jack rowdily tosses a football around the living room.

Dimitra's flawless home and garden is recorded in the magazine by photographs that do not reflect the chaos of everyday living. Instead, these photographs depict "frozen moments" in time. In reality, these "frozen moments" are artificially constructed snapshots promoting an ideal American culture, encouraging a healthy dose of middle-class consumerism. The target: Moms, dads, and grads. Brides and birthday girls. The mentality: If the family pictured on the glossy pages looks happy and has a beautiful home and garden, then surely these products will help me attain this lifestyle and make my family happy as well. *Better Homes and Gardens* exists ostensibly to "help" the middle class with simple home projects and healthy meals, and by extension to promote the middle-class ideals of family, but the magazine also serves as a way to encourage the embrace of a cheap, synthetic aesthetic that enhances the ideals of consumerism. The world illustrated within the pages of *BHG* is literally artificial, as the constant desire for the next best thing simply creates more and more consumer products and consumer solutions that are made of cheap materials, plastic and synthetic.

Perhaps what is so fascinating about Dimitra's house is the evidence it offers of the disposable culture in suburbia. Pictures of her home reveal that the family room, kitchen, living room, and bedroom all have walls that are painted a stark white. She limits "[…] 'crazier' colors to pillows, rugs, and accessories [because]

they're easy to change when the mood strikes." [8]Her urge to change accessories when the mood strikes is typical of the *Better Homes and Gardens* message, which creates desires within the reader to always have the trendiest and newest "stuff." However, not only do the white walls allow Dimitra to be trendy, but they also could indicate a frequent need to move houses based on either a new job for herself or her husband, or the desire to acquire a bigger home to fill with more "stuff," in order to assert her dominant position as a member of the middle class. Dimitra states that she "'[…] used wall color in all the kids' rooms. That's where you can really have fun, and the kids love it.'" [9]By limiting bold wall color to smaller rooms in the home, Dimitra is minimizing the amount of effort it will take to redecorate her home to sell.

While the ideals promoted within *BHG* link home to a specific location, I grew up in a family that has never really tied the concept of "home" to a specific location. Why would you spend time completing the home projects featured in the magazine if you didn't intend to stay in one place? My parents grew up near London, England and moved to Dayton, Ohio before I was born in order for my father to pursue a position as a professor at the University of Dayton.

Even after my parents established themselves in Dayton, we still moved houses frequently, even relocating to Germany for a year while I was in Kindergarten. My mother always took charge of packing and preparing the house to sell. As an avid reader of *Better Homes and Gardens*, my mother's decorating mantra did not allow my sister or me to paint our walls vivid colors because, *"it will make the house harder to sell"* or *"you don't know when you will get bored of it."*

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[8] Ibid., 52.

[9] Ibid., 56.

Taking cues from the magazine, most of the rooms in our houses were painted in shades of beige or white. She did eventually cave, though, and let me paint my room in our ranch house in Ohio a pale yellow color. I was overjoyed, despite the fact that I was still stuck with two walls of ugly wood paneling.

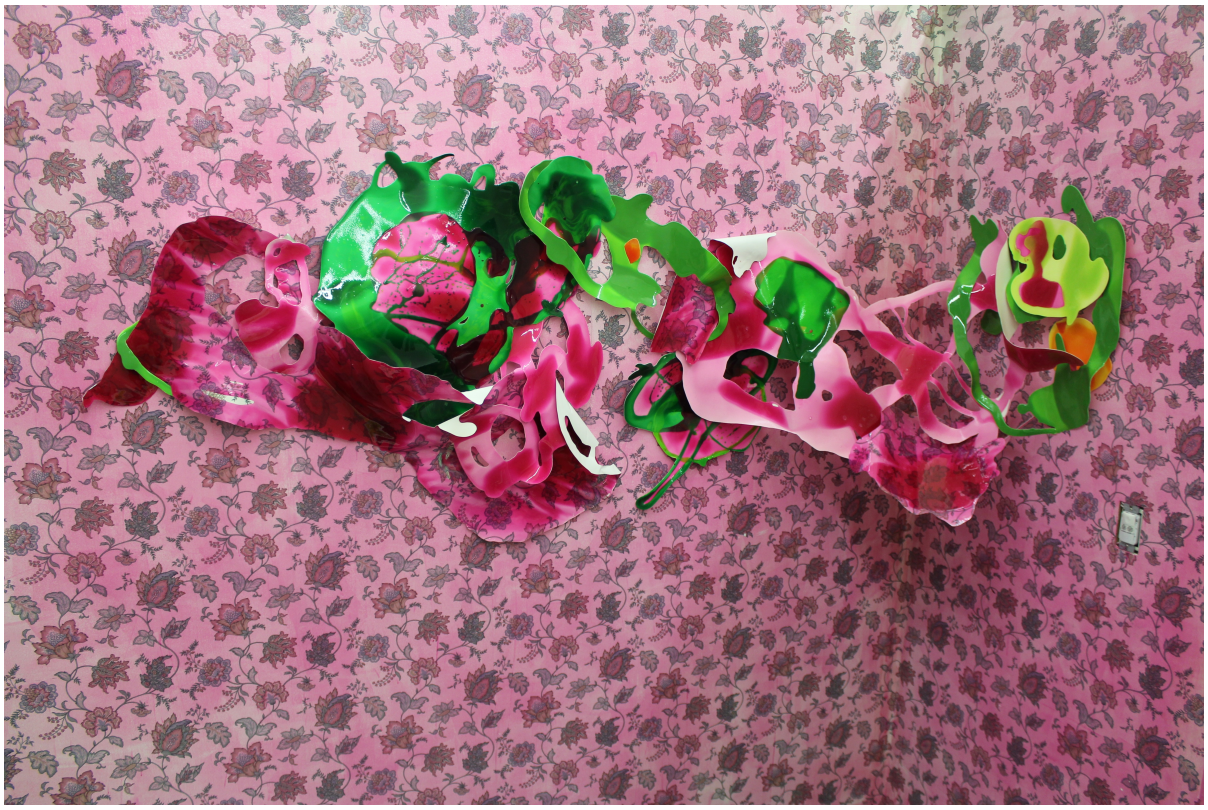

Fig. #4, *Life in Bloom,* Acrylic on Wallpaper, 2014.

My simultaneous attraction and repulsion of *Better Homes and Gardens* manifests itself within my artwork. *Life in Bloom*, an installation I created by intertwining brightly colored acrylic pours on paper and wallpaper, which I then mounted onto the same wallpaper, most successfully illustrates my simultaneous critique of and desire for middle-class America, while also hinting at my psyche (fig. #4). The flowery wallpaper, found at a thrift store, is a familiar pattern to many homes (I think we had the wallpaper in a bathroom growing up). I took the

wallpaper, white originally, and transformed it with a layer of pink, plastic pouring medium.

The transformation of the wallpaper through the use of pouring medium plays an important part in illustrating my attraction and repulsion of consumer culture. Images of flowers peek from beneath the pink, luring the viewer of the piece to examine the multiple layers. The unusual bright pink wallpaper attracts the viewer, as the transformation of the walls rejects the neutral paint color typical in a middle class home. In the corner of the piece, bright pink and green pours mounted to the wallpaper further captivate the viewer. Pretty wallpaper, intertwining organic shapes and bright colors establish the piece as beautiful, thus illustrating my desire for the lifestyle of middle-class America; I want pretty things! However, the sickly, saccharine use of color and plastic materiality of the acrylic mirrors the repulsion that I also experience regarding the overconsumption encouraged by consumer culture.

Materiality serves an important role regarding my attraction and repulsion of consumer culture. The pouring medium used throughout the piece is essentially plastic. The plastic nature of the material mimics the plastic present in our everyday homes, like the plastic storage containers used by many to store everything from clothes to chemicals. Jessica Stockholder, an artist that also utilizes a plastic aesthetic, enthusiastically claims that, "Plastic is cheap and easy to buy. And my work participates in that really quick and easy and inexpensive material that's part of our culture".[10] The quick and inexpensive aesthetic of plastic attracts the consumer -

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[10] *Art 21*, Performed by Jessica Stockholder, Art 21, Inc. :, 2005, DVD.

bright, shiny, and new. However, the quick and inexpensive nature of the material is repulsive in mass-manufactured, over produced products, made of cheap materials.

The acrylic pours are mounted to the wall with magnets, a personal reference to the impermanent sense of place in suburbia. As the pours have been directly mounted to the wall, they become part of the wall as they seem to crawl across the surface. The color and form of the pour are beautiful, but the crawling of the forms across the wallpaper are repulsive. The sculptural nature of the pours in this piece allow for a sense of growth and movement, representing the siren's song of *BHG* that simultaneously attracts and repulses me. However, without beauty to draw me in, *BHG*'s siren song would be lost.

# CHAPTER III

## ON BEAUTY

> "[...] I insisted that beauty was not a *thing*--- 'the beautiful' was a thing. In images, I intoned, beauty was the agency that caused visual pleasure in the beholder; and any theory of images that was not grounded in the pleasure of the beholder begged the question of their efficacy and doomed itself to inconsequence." [11]

I can vividly recall being powerfully moved by beauty after an unexpected trip to England occurred in November of 2014 for the funeral of my grandfather. During the trip, my mother, sister and I were also able to explore the area of Bexleyheath, Kent where my grandfather's house stands. To my delight, amongst the crowded rows of houses and busy streets stands William Morris's Red House, a thirty minute walk from my grandfather's house (fig. #5).

We planned our visit to Red House on Saturday, November 29th. At Red House, we were greeted by tall brick walls, separating Red House dramatically from the suburban neighborhood of row houses that surround it. The gravel driveway was muddy from the typically British weather, and as we followed it through a small forest of trees my sister and I hopped along the driveway to avoid puddles. We followed a stone path that led us to a very green lawn and a grandiose brick house. Although the exterior of the house was impressive, the sheer beauty and intricate details of the interior moved me to tears.

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[11] David Hickey, *The Invisible Dragon: Four Essays on Beauty*. Los Angeles: Art Issues, Press, 1993, 22.

Fig. #5, *Red House,* Bexleyheath, Kent. England, 2014.

As we moved from room to room I only fell more in love with the house. The materials from which the house was constructed were exquisite. The brick fireplaces, left unaltered are, "[...] inscribed [with] the Latin motto 'Ars Longa Vita Brevis', meaning 'Life is short, but art endures'"[12] (fig. #6). This phrase captures Morris' mindset while constructing the house. Even the windows, which typically only serve a functional purpose in a middle-class American home, are beautiful (fig. #7). In the first-floor corridor, circular windows filled with colorful glass drawings emit light, joy.

[12] *Red House: Bexleyheath*, Bromley: National Trust, 2003, 3.


Fig. #6, *Fireplace at Red House,* Bexleyheath, Kent. England, 2014.

Although the home is beautiful, its importance is not strictly aesthetic. The National Trust points out that:

> "Red House was the only house Morris ever built, and it embodies many of his ideas about art and life. It was also the first independent architectural work of his friend Philip Webb, one of the most important, and underestimated, figures of the Arts and Crafts Movement. The need to furnish Red House inspired Morris to found the interior design firm that bears his name, giving practical expression to his famous demand, 'Have nothing in your houses that you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful'. The flowers he planted in the garden helped to shape the first of his wallpaper designs, which have come to epitomise British good taste"[13].

[13] Ibid.

Fig. #7, *Window at Red House,* Bexleyheath, Kent. England, 2014

What attracts me to Red House in a way that American decoration does not, is beauty within the context of history and tradition - What Pentreath calls, "the accretion of decades"[14]. Contemporary American decoration's artificiality and plasticity starkly contrasts traditional British decoration. Exactly what is it that distinguishes traditional English decoration from any other country? Tradition, history. Ben Pentreath explains:

> "What is it about this description that lets us know at once that we are in an English room; that we are not in France, say, or in Italy, Holland, Germany, or America? Is it the accretion of decades, the wear and tear, the imperfection, or the calm knowledge and inevitability with which these disparate things have been put together and belong? All these things, yes, and the unstudied way in which we have in an instant

[14] Ben Pentreath, *English Decoration: Timeless Inspiration for the Contemporary Home,* New York: Ryland Peters & Small, 2012, 19.

> achieved both comfort and cosiness, grandeur and simplicity, sense and sensibility: in short, a place the English can call home."[15]

Britain is the land of my family, the land of tradition in relation to me as a first generation American. As I rediscover my relationship with Britain, I uncover beauty, patterns, and colors that dominate my artwork. This intersection of beauty, pattern, and color is *decoration* and it is where my artwork thrives.

One of the primary reasons art exists is to create beauty and fulfill pleasure. *Fabric Piece* is a mixed-media collage created in order to satiate my appetite for beauty (fig. #8). In this particular piece, I re-contextualize the vibrant, plastic pouring medium that is essential to my visual language.

*Fabric Piece* utilizes found patterns within the work, chosen by a intuitive response to the colors, shapes and scale of images within each fabric. These decorative fabrics were specifically picked out at a Jo-Ann Fabric and Crafts Store, hiding between bolts of cat fabrics. A fabric of red roses on a cream background initially caught my eye, as it very closely resembled the pattern of a dress I had worn to a wedding the weekend before that made *me* feel beautiful. Even though it was not used in this specific piece, the fabric of the dress dictated the palette and scale of my remaining choices. Unexpected beauty is created through the amalgamation of vivid colors and busy patterns in *Fabric Piece,* symbolically uniting contemporary American decoration with traditional English decoration.

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[15] Ibid.


Fig. #8, *Fabric Piece*, Acrylic and Fabric on Paper, 2014

Combining patterned fabric with the acrylic pours began as a way to explore the dichotomy between myself, as an American and my family's history in Britain. As I created each piece, found pattern began to symbolize the British history of my family. The synthetic, acrylic pour represented myself, living as an American in the consumer culture of 2015. Although the pairing of found pattern juxtaposed with my acrylic pours originated by examining my personal history, it soon developed into a larger dialogue surrounding the decorative versus the art object, and fine art versus craft.

Traditionally, the decorative arts have been defined by a lack of meaning and created by women, thus rendering them inferior. Real art was thought to be created by men and served a greater cultural purpose than occupying a woman's time. Despite the fact that male artists looked down upon the decorative arts, "[...] Matisse was an artist who learned and borrowed from the decorative arts. He did so, however, without ever allowing his own stature to be diminished because of his association with them." [16] Examining the contemporary art world, there is still a stigma against the decorative. Miriam Schapiro, a female contemporary artist working within the realm of the decorative, transformed the notion that the decorative arts should not be considered real art. In her artwork she coined the phrase, "femmage," playing on the idea of collage within the decorative arts:

> "As 'femmage,' this activity has been practiced for centuries by women, who used traditional craft techniques like sewing, piercing, hooking, quilting and appliqueing. The extensive use of fabric swatches, patchwork and embroidery, as both formal and iconographical elements in Schapiro's femmage, is part of her conscious effort to reestablish her connections with this older and - from the feminist point of view- more authentic tradition with which she, as an artist, identifies." [17]

Femmage aims to unify the false dichotomy set up between the decorative and the art object by declaring the decorative as art. Although the decorative is traditionally defined by its lack of meaning, femmage embraces decorative materials, "[...] as objects of aesthetic value and expressive significance." [18]

Within my own work, *Cactus Garden* pairs decorative materials with pours closely related to Abstract Expressionism (fig. #9). The left two thirds of the square

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[16] Norma Broude, "Miriam Schapiro and "Femmage": Reflections on the Conflict Between Decoration and Abstraction in Twentieth Century Art." In *Feminism and Art History: Questioning the Litany*, edited by Norma Broude and Mary Garrard, 314 -329. New York: Harper & Row, 1982, 320.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Ibid., 322.

composition are floral fabrics, layered on top of one another. The dominant floral pattern has a seventies color scheme, reminiscent of pea-green, mustard-yellow, and salmon-pink Tupperware containers. Parts of the pattern have been carved into, destroying the predictable nature of the pattern, with paper or additional fabrics peeking out from below the negative spaces. A sharp line emphasizes the divide between the fabric materials and the olive-green pour on the right third of the composition.

Fig. 9, *Cactus Garden*, Acrylic and Fabric on Paper, 2015

The compositional technique within *Cactus Garden* illustrates the historical divide between the decorative and the art object, and the feminine versus the

masculine. One way to examine this piece is to view the pairing of the decorative fabric with the abstract pour as a commentary on the relationship between materials. Fabric is typically associated with the feminine, while Abstract Expressionism is associated with the masculine. However, the substantially larger proportion of decorative materials within the piece overwhelms a process that is associated with both the masculine and high art, as the fabric is literally pasted on top of the pour appearing to suffocate it. In this piece, pattern and fabric reclaim their worth as a valid material reinforcing the idea that material does not have to be transformed in order to be art. Simply because artwork is considered decorative does not render it inferior.

*Fig. #10, Detail of Fabric Spacers for Cactus Garden*

An important presentation decision that often categorizes my artwork as decorative is customizing the spacers of the frame for each piece of artwork. The spacers of the frame are located along the interior sides of the frame and exist to separate the plexi-glass from the artwork. I take a slightly unusual approach to spacers, as I match the color or pattern of the spacers to the artwork itself. I often get asked how I decide what color to make the spacers in a frame. I tell people that I

envision my artwork as a living, breathing organism within the structure of the frame, and so my spacer choice reflects what color or pattern I need within the frame to make the artwork seem alive. In *Cactus Garden,* the spacers of the frame match the dominant floral pattern (fig. #10). It was important to use the floral pattern of the fabric on the spacers in order to reflect the substantially larger proportion of fabric within the piece, overwhelming the abstract pour, literally and metaphorically.

Fig. #11, *Catnap*, Acrylic and Fabric on Paper, 2014

*Catnap* is another piece created with a similar technique to *Cactus Garden* (fig. #11). A light blue fabric with red roses is collaged on top of a dark brown fabric with vegetation and animals, although in this piece both fabrics stretch across the entire composition. Pockets of negative space have been carved out with an X-acto knife, again destroying the predictability of the light blue rose pattern and replaced

with the underlying dark brown. Caught beneath moments of the light blue fabric, a teal pour is the focal point of the composition, with the outline of the pour mimicking the cutouts of the blue fabric.

Unlike *Cactus Garden*, the composition of this piece is not sharply divided between fabric and the pour; instead, *Catnap* allows the pour to mingle with the fabric throughout the composition. However, fabric is still placed over sections of the pour, asserting a dominance of the decorative material. Again, the fabric appears to suffocate the pour beneath it.

*Catnap* relies on a much more vivid color palette than *Cactus Garden*. The majority of colors used in this piece are teal and light blue, tending to favor masculine associations with the color itself. However, the shape of the pour and the cutout areas of fabric are soft and curvy, lending themselves to the female form. Red and pink roses rise from the light blue background, colors more typically associated with the notion of the feminine. Two pink roses are cutout from the blue fabric and placed over the blue pour - yet again associating the dominance of the feminine over the masculine, and promoting the idea of the decorative as an art object itself.

# CHAPTER IV

# ON COLOR

*"The chief function of color should be to serve expression."* [19]
-Henri Matisse

Color has captivated many artists throughout history as a vehicle of expression. The list of artists obsessed with the elusiveness of color is endless: Cezanne, Gauguin, O'Keeffe, Rothko, Van Gogh. However, one of the most influential painters regarding color and personal expression is Matisse, declaring, "The chief function of color should be to serve expression." [20] Like Matisse I embrace the joy of color, and focus on the expressive function of color. The unifying force behind my artwork always has been and continues to be color. Jessica Stockholder, my virtual guide and hero for her integration of painting and sculpture describes her love affair with color:

> "I love color because it is localized and fixed to an object as a physical thing, on the one hand, but can appear to jump and move in the air, on the other. Color can be fanciful; it functions well as a parallel to inner life. Our feelings are not concrete - they don't have physical form - but that doesn't make them any less real. It is difficult to articulate what makes color exciting, just what one can do to make color exciting or interesting. Color is not very popular as a place to focus conversation or intellectualize because it is so difficult to articulate. It is subject. We don't know if we see color the same way. We know that some of us don't; some people are color blind. None of this eclipses the fact that color is evocative and that we have powerful and meaningful responses to it." [21]

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[19] Henri Matisse and Jack D. Flam, *Matisse on Art*, 41.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Jessica Stockholder and Nancy Doll. *Jessica Stockholder: Kissing the Wall : Works, 1988-2003*. Houston: Blaffer Gallery, the Art Museum of the Univ. of Houston, 2004*, 19*.

The saturated colors in my artwork began as a way to explore chemicals in the landscape, beginning with awareness of the agricultural company Monsanto, discovered when I moved to the St. Louis region (where the company is headquartered) and again when coming upon the inspiring yet troubling photographs of Edward Burtynsky's [22]. Burtynsky's photographs depict industrial landscapes, which include, "Recycling yards, mine tailings, quarries and refineries [that] are all places that are outside of our normal experience, yet we partake of their output on a daily basis."[23]

Even as my work progressed and the content of my work moved away from the themes of chemical production, the saturated colors remained in my artwork. Although color is no longer a specific reference to chemicals within the landscape, my use of color exaggerates the saccharine world found in *Better Homes and Gardens* and takes advantage of the trendy, designer color palettes that are also showcased within the magazine. My compositions gravitate towards a color palette favoring colors mixed from Quinacridone Magenta, Hansa Yellow Medium, Pyrrole Red, Cobalt Turquoise and Pthalo Blue. There is no greater feeling in the world than mixing Hansa Yellow with Pthalo Blue and ending up with a beautiful, intense green that simply looks "yummy." True to the content of my work, my use of color is intense, artificial, and over-indulgent.

The naming process of my artwork also reflects my love of color. After I have finished creating a piece, I examine the color palette used. I then try to match the colors in my artwork as closely as possible to the paint cards at home improvement

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[22] "EDWARD BURTYNSKY." EDWARD BURTYNSKY. Accessed January 19, 2015. http://www.edwardburtynsky.com.

[23] Ibid.

stores, taking advantage of the absurd names developed for each color by paint manufacturers. Once I have matched each color, I then combine the names together in a manner echoing my process. For example, *Dragon Fire, Peacock Feather, Alligator Skin* refers to the three dominant colors within the piece. *Dragon Fire* is the name developed by Behr paint for a particularly vivid orange. *Peacock Feather* is a deep teal, and *Alligator Skin* is a muted olive-green.

As mentioned in the introduction of this chapter, Stockholder identifies two functions of color that I also use in my artwork: (1) Color as a fixed, physical property attached to an object, and (2) Color as a dynamic, fluid force. When I view color as a fixed, physical property I view color attached to an object. On the other hand, color also exists as a dynamic, fluid force. In my work, color typically cannot exist as a fluid force without also being an object. When I think of color as dynamic, I think about the construction of my abstract pour collages. The intertwining nature of the work allows the process to become dynamic, which cannot exist without the ability to pick up and move around paint objects. Intertwining objects permits the intertwining of color in the composition, as each object tends to be a different color. Just as the collage is dynamic, so is color.

*Dragon Fire, Peacock Feather, Alligator Skin* illustrates how I rely on the two functions of color within my own work (fig. #12). The piece itself is constructed of teal, olive green, bright orange, and pinky salmon pours, woven together in a series of layers. Color itself becomes an object when creating the pours used within the collage, as the viscosity of the pours I make in combination with the paper substrate fixes color as a physical property to the poured shape. The thickness of the paint permanently adhered to the paper gives paint properties of an object. In *Dragon*

*Fire*, color especially seems to function as a fixed property to an object where the viscosity of the pour is thickest - in the deep pools of teal, olive green, bright orange, and pinky salmon.

Fig. #12, *Dragon Fire, Peacock Feather, Alligator Skin,* Acrylic on Paper, 2015

*Dragon Fire* also relies on color as a dynamic force. The way I construct my artwork is key to making color appear as a dynamic force. Before I assemble the collage, a singular pour functions as a static object. Manipulating and arranging layers of pours allows me to make different colors disappear and reemerge within the collage, appearing to jump and move throughout.

For example, the teal color in *Dragon Fire* flows throughout the entire collage, peeking out from behind other colors in certain areas or dominating them in others. Reading the piece from left to right, a small blob of teal in the top left corner of the collage hides at the very bottom of all the layers, pinned beneath a large shape

of vibrant orange. Passing through the orange form, the teal reemerges on top of the orange shape. From there, it spreads on top of the orange until it hits a passage of olive green that sends the teal scurrying beneath. In the center of the composition, it is hidden below several layers of color, and finally emerges in the upper right hand corner of the collage with a deep pool of teal that continues to fight its way to the top of all the layers. On the right hand side of the collage, a band of teal dominates the layers beneath it.

# CHAPTER V

# THE POUR

"Pollock went a step further. He did not just *paint* liquid in motion; he *set* liquid in motion." [24]

Just as color is essential to my artwork, so is process behind the pours. The shapes of the pours are created by the combined forces of the motion of my body and the pooling of paint on the substrate, and the uncontrolled nature of the pour contrasts the precise, controlled nature of my technique. I think of the shapes as living, beautiful, organic forms when I create them, yet I am also aware of the sickeningly sweet color palette, shiny surface and overbearing presence that makes the artwork read somewhere between the desirable and the grotesque.

Pouring paint is an essential technique part of my process. I developed this process during the beginning of my second year of graduate school, as part of a continued exploration of rejecting the paintbrush. Prior to graduate school, I created oil paintings from life, which relied heavily on gestural brush marks. I continued this style of painting once I started graduate school, but quickly became frustrated both with oil paint and using a brush on a two-dimensional surface. As a result, I began an exploration of alternative mark-making techniques, which led me to encaustic paint. Encaustic was a material that allowed me to encompass painting, printmaking, and sculpture, as I could use it both on a flat substrate or within a mold to create objects.

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[24] Claude Cernuschi and Andrzej Herczynski. "The Subversion of Gravity in Jackson Pollock's Abstractions." *The Art Bulletin* 90, no. 4 (Dec., 2008), 616-39. Accessed April 29, 2015. . http://www.jstor.org/stable/20619641., 621.

However, the encaustic medium didn't hold my attention for very long. I quickly became frustrated with the limitations of the medium, and began to focus on types of materials that I could pour into a mold. I quickly became enamored with resin, but was frustrated by the difficulty of adding pigment to the material. A series of experiments led me to Liquitex Pouring Medium, and as I continued to use the product I became less interested in mold-making and more interested in pouring the medium on flat surfaces.

Jackson Pollock and the Abstract Expressionists have forever shaped the process of pouring paint. The fame of Pollock's poured and dripped paintings has created an instantaneous connection to the artist whenever there is poured paint present in another artist's work. While there are frustrations creating under the shadow of Pollock, I must admit that the process of pouring and abstraction unites my work with Pollock's. Like Pollock, I pour paint above a substrate, working with my artwork on the floor. We both rely on gravity to create "gestures [that] range in three dimensions, to rise and fall, as well as span from side to side, all without making direct physical contact with the canvas." [25] While most people typically think of Pollock for his pouring technique, he actually relied on two main processes:

> "All the while, Pollock's process included *dripping* as well as *pouring*. Though both terms are used, often interchangeably, to refer to his technique, it should be emphasized that the dominant effect throughout his mature production is the sweep of continuous lines, not the pointillism of individual droplets. Since the former is the result of pouring and the latter of dripping, the distinction differentiates two physical aspects of Pollock's practice; whereas to drip means 'to let fall in drops' an intermittent process, to pour means 'to cause to flow in a stream,' a continuous process [...]." [26]

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[25] Ibid., 617.

[26] Ibid., 619.

The distance between myself and Pollock is most clear when discussing meaning. Pollock's mindset is best illustrated by, " [...] Clyfford Still who articulated this ambition most emphatically: 'I never wanted color to be color. I never wanted texture to be texture, or images to become shapes. I wanted them all to fuse into a living spirit.'" [27] He followed the aims of the Abstract Expressionists to convey the "equivalent." [28] Pollock embraced the idea of the equivalent by stating that, "[...] 'my concern is with the rhythms of nature,' [...and] what he meant, rather, was that his works were intended to create visual equivalents for the underlying dynamism of nature." [29] Instead of trying to align my work with the "rhythms of nature," I use color and poured paint as a means to create beauty. I have no interest in becoming nature; my interests lie within the creation of synthetic beauty.

My process begins when I place sheets of heavy drawing and printmaking paper (substrate) on the floor on top of a layer of plastic sheeting. This allows me to remove the sheets once the pour is complete. I then manipulate the Liquitex Pouring Medium by mixing Golden Fluid Acrylics into it. After I have mixed the paint and the medium together, I pour the paint onto the paper sheet. Shapes of paint will then be created by both the motion of my body and the type of substrate I pour upon. Depending on the temperature and thickness of the pour, it can take up to two weeks to fully dry. After the pours have dried, I cut out the shapes from the paper using an X-acto knife and assemble the shapes into a collage.

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[27] Ibid., 632.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Ibid.

The very nature of the shapes themselves is controlled chaos. The chaos is created through the paint puddling and rolling across the substrate, forming organic shapes that also serve as a record of the motion of my body. The initial contact of the pouring medium onto the substrate leaves a circular pool of the medium upon the paper, which then dictates my next movement. The pouring act quickly establishes relationships between positive shapes (the pouring medium on the paper) and negative shapes (the paper itself). Once the form begins to feel blobby because I have too much medium in one area, I seek out more negative space by pouring farther away from the form I have created.

Fig. #13, Studio Shot: *Dried Pours Ready for Cutting*

I control the chaos created through the process not only by my body movements, but also by carefully removing the pours from the background paper with an X-acto knife (fig. #13). Initially, I viewed all paper of this support as

unnecessary and removed everything from the shiny organic shapes. However, as I have continued my artistic evolution and exploration, I have begun to leave sections of the original paper within the boundaries of the shape, and sometimes even pouring on top of the remaining paper sections. The inclusion or removal of paper from the final shape is a responsive process that relies on the visual strength of a pour and the overall composition of the piece.

*Peacock Tail, Pineapple Soda* is constructed with mustard yellow, dark teal, and brilliant blue pours intertwined within the rectangular boundaries of cream paper (fig. #14). The composition of this piece pushes the uncontrolled organic pour versus the precise cutting of the shapes, enhancing the tensions of the geometric versus the organic. The left two thirds of the composition layer the individual pours in order to create a larger organic shape. A vertical line that has been cut through the collaged pours abruptly disrupts the flow of the larger shape.

The precise line cut through the uncontrolled pours immediately brings a geometric sense of order to the organic shapes. To the right of the line, a dark teal pour is placed so that the negative shape of the yellow pour aligns itself with the negative shape of the teal pour, uniting the pieces despite the color shift. I have also cut a sharp line across the top corner of the right pour, controlling the pour with a deliberate motion. When I cut a straight line through an organic pour, I emphasize the tension between the geometric and the organic by controlling the uncontrollable properties of the pour.

Fig. #14, *Peacock Tail, Pineapple Soda*, Acrylic on Paper, 2015.

When describing the shapes created by the pours, I often use words such as "synthetic" and "organic." Although my use of the word "organic" is intended to describe the visual properties of the shape (in contrast to geometric), there is an additional contrast that occurs between the synthetic and organic materials that is present in the shapes. How bizarre it is to create a visually organic shape that lacks organic materiality, as it has been created with a synthetic, plastic material. I think of the shapes as living, beautiful, organic forms when I create them, yet I am aware of the sickeningly sweet color palette, shiny surface and overbearing presence that makes the artwork read somewhere between the desirable and the grotesque. As

discussed in Chapter Two: *The Synthetic Domestic,* the tension between the desirable and the grotesque manifests itself as a simultaneous critique of and desire for middle-class America. Intertwining organic shapes and bright colors establish beauty, thus illustrating my desire for the lifestyle of middle-class America. However, the sickly, saccharine use of color and plastic materiality of the acrylic mirrors the repulsion I also experience regarding the overconsumption encouraged by consumer culture.

# CHAPTER VI

# PAINTING SCULPTURALLY

*"The hardening of the categories causes art disease."*[30]
-Harry Holtzman

The early years of my graduate studies were spent trying to conform to the idea that a "painter" works strictly two-dimensionally with paint, a brush, and canvas. I rebelled against the terminology when I realized the limitations of defining painting so specifically. For many, painting and sculpture are often framed as a dichotomy; however for me, painting and sculpture do not exist as a dichotomy. I view my artwork as existing between the overlapping boundaries of both disciplines. The result is painting sculpturally.

Despite the fact that paint and paper are traditionally flat and two-dimensional, my process and use of materials transforms those materials into objects. Paint simultaneously behaves as a verb and a noun. The viscosity of the pours I make in combination with the paper substrate allows the dried paint to be moved around. I relish the flexible nature of poured paint that is easily reposition-able until I finalize a composition. Instead of a traditional working method that relies on putting a layer of paint down on a canvas and letting it dry, the method I use allows me to continue experimenting with different compositions before committing to a final image, again allowing the paint to act as a dynamic and sculptural object.

The ability to pick something up and move it around defines it as an object. It has height, width, and depth, characteristics often considered more sculptural than

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[30] Irving Sandler, *Judy Pfaff,* New York: Hudson Hills Press, 2003, 1.

painterly. However, consider the depth of paint that puddles when a large amount of Liquitex medium is poured; the deepest puddles are about 1/4" thick. Although 1/4" does not seem very deep compared to a sculptural bust, when compared to a sheet of printer paper that is mere millimeters thick it is a considerable amount of depth. The act of painting with a brush on a two-dimensional surface does not create objects, but the paint itself is an object.

While I define the dried pours as objects because of their dimensionality, the very act of pouring paint is also sculptural, existing in three-dimensions. The influence of Jackson Pollock and the Abstract Expressionists is discussed in depth in Chapter Five: *The Pour*, but what needs to be reiterated about Pollock's method of working in the context of the tension between two dimensions and three dimensions is that, "[...] whereas previous artists had no choice but to touch their piece, Pollock was free to paint in the air, allowing his gestures to range in three dimensions, to rise and fall, as well as span from side to side, all without making direct physical contact with the canvas." [31] Like Pollock, my working method relies on pouring paint from a container, oriented above the floor.

The traditional method of painting, in which a paintbrush is loaded with paint and applied directly to a surface, does not allow the paint to exist without the paintbrush. The path of the paint during the painting is never freed from the paintbrush itself. Poured paint does not need to be directly applied, or need an underlying object to guide it to the substrate. The path of the paint during the pour

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[31] Claude Cernuschi and Andrzej Herczynski. "The Subversion of Gravity in Jackson Pollock's Abstractions." The Art Bulletin, 617.

along with the freedom from a brush allows the paint to exist in three-dimensions. In this sense, the act of painting becomes sculptural.

The interest I have in blurring the boundaries between two and three dimensions is partially inspired by contemporary artists working with similar materials and themes. I initially discovered Judy Pfaff for her printmaking, but soon became enamored with her ability to work between two and three dimensions. Pfaff's success working with both dimensions simultaneously is especially apparent when examining her installations.

*Deepwater* is a vivid installation created by Pfaff in 1980 at Holly Solomon Gallery, New York, New York. Typical of her artwork, she utilized a wide variety of materials within the installation: wicker, rattan, wire mesh, paint, and organic matter (tree parts, various woods). The artwork is best described by Linda Nochlin, who wrote:

> "Thin, flexible, stick-like forms cantilevered from the walls, wavered like elongated stalks of coral-pink, pale lemon, yellow and red. A tangled deep-sea mesh of the same unidentifiable material dangled mid-air; other clusters and hazy raffia spokes- blond and pale blue and scarlet - spurted up from the floor, rippling in non-existent currents, or zig-zagged from the ceiling. [The walls were] smeared and streaked with enormous brush strokes of red, blue and more aggressive black paint." [32]

What makes *Deepwater* an excellent example of painting sculpturally is Pfaff's continual exploration between the push and pull relationship of flatness and dimension through the use of material and color. Pfaff's installation is clearly a three-dimensional piece, existing in the round, but her process reflects her relationship with painting:

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[32] Irving Sandler, *Judy Pfaff,* 12.

> "Compared to Action Painting on a two-dimensional surface, 'painting' in a three-dimensional space revealed the process of art-making from an infinite number of angles. Pfaff was free to move through a work, this way and that, thinking her work through physically and mentally - in a kind of hyperactive stream of consciousness." [33]

Fig. #15, *Blue Lady*, House Paint, Found Objects, Plastic. 2013

Within my own work, *Blue Lady* is a similar example of painting sculpturally (fig. #15). In order to create this piece, I purchased a decorative bust from Hobby Lobby and dipped her in a can of teal house paint. The act of dipping the bust into the house paint permanently attached the paint to the bust as a fixed, physical property. The thickness of the paint permanently adhered to the object, giving the teal paint properties of the underlying object. When I pick up *Blue Lady,* I am not only picking up the bust; I am picking up the bust *and* the paint. If you dip an object into a singular color of paint and allow it to dry, the paint also works to flatten the

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[33] Ibid., 13.

object because it eliminates areas of contrast between highlights and shadows that indicate volume, instead of enhancing its three-dimensionality.

*Blue Lady* also relies on color as a dynamic force. On top of the teal layer of paint that transforms the ordinary decorative object into a work of art, are layers of house paint that have been turned into objects in a process similar to the abstract pours. Instead of pouring paint onto paper, I poured latex paint directly onto sheets of plastic that allows the paint to peel off when dry. The dried latex behaves almost like a sticker; it adheres directly to itself and allows me to mold it to the surface. In this sense, color is fluid and dynamic. The reposition-able nature of the paint peels recall my use of paint as an object, as well as uses the paint as a lively, dynamic force that mirrors the process of collaging the paint on top of the bust.

I also paint sculpturally in flatter pieces that hang on the wall. In *Another Round of Roses and Thorns, Mashing Up More Than Your Butternut Squash,* I collaged paint pours together to form one larger design (fig. #16). Although the pours exist as objects by themselves, the act of collaging the pours together also creates an even larger and complex object. The pours are attached to a backing, and the multiple layers within the composition lend the piece a low-relief quality. I applied one green stamp to the top right corner of the backing, serving not only as a bridge between the artwork and the backing but also a bridge between two and three dimensions.

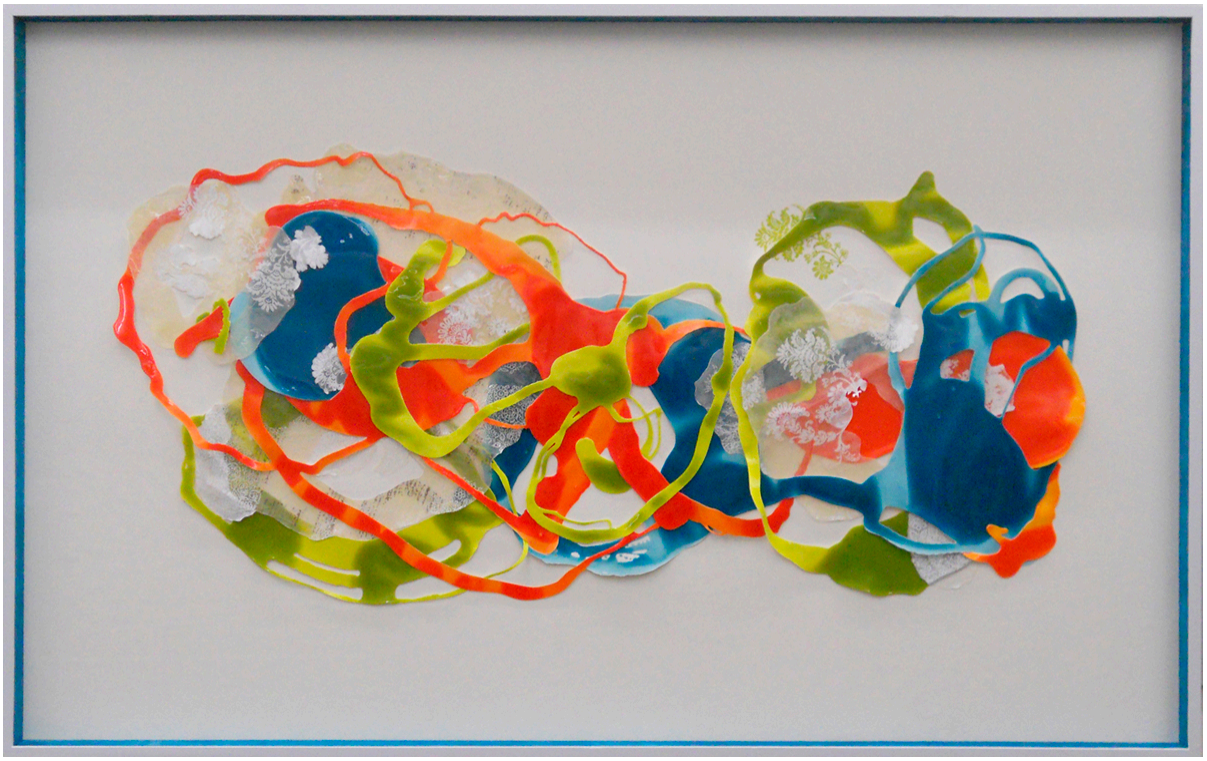

Fig. #16, *Another Round of Roses and Thorns, Mashing Up More Than Your Butternut Squash*, Acrylic on Paper. 2013

There is a tension that exists between my two-dimensional abstract work and my three-dimensional object-based work even though I attempt to blur the boundaries by painting sculpturally. However, despite the differences, each piece I create: (1) relies upon the use of objects, (2) takes advantage of gesture through the use of material, (3) is transformed through a powerful use of color, and (4) is focused not only on themes of artificiality but also upon themes of beauty versus the grotesque.

# CHAPTER VII

# POURED

*Poured*, my solo thesis show, was held at SOHA Studio and Gallery in St. Louis, Missouri, April 18 and 19, 2015. After participating in a group Graduate MFA Thesis show on campus at Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville two weeks earlier, SOHA gave me the exciting opportunity to display my entire body of work as a unified exhibition. Fifteen total pieces lined the walls of SOHA: five large scale pieces (3 foot by 5 foot and 3 foot by 3 foot) and ten small scale pieces (averaging eighteen inches square). The works featured in the show alternated between the three main uses of "the pour" discussed earlier in the thesis: (1) pours collaged together, weaving layers of color into a larger composition; (2) singular pours of analogous colors, created by pouring wet paint into wet paint and; (3) pours collaged with layers of fabric or decorative pattern.

As people passed by the gallery windows, a wall of beauty, color, and joy greeted them (fig. #17)! Many people out for a jog around the neighborhood stopped to enter the gallery, as my artwork lured them in. *Dragon Fire, Peacock Feather, Alligator Skin* made initial eye contact with most viewers as the large, horizontal piece faced the entrance of the gallery. The teal, olive green, bright orange, and pinky salmon pours were woven together in a series of layers that begged the viewer to figure out the construction of the piece. When collaged together, the muted tones of the olive green combined with the complementary orange hue emphasized the teal pours, making teal the focal point of the piece. This particular piece was especially

engaging, because instead of a stark white background, the smoky blue-grey background created the illusion of simultaneous contrast against the vivid pours.

After initial contact with *Dragon Fire, Peacock Feather, Alligator Skin*, viewers gravitated to the vertical pieces hung side by side neighboring the horizontal piece- *Gypsy Magic, Phantom Hue* and *Green Crush, Citrus Splash*. With only six inches separating the two large frames (3 foot by 5 foot), the two works functioned as a diptych despite the fact that one piece was created collaging a series of pours together while the other piece was a singular, analogous pour. *Gypsy Magic, Phantom Hue* was created using a large proportion of muted purple and pinkish salmon pours, while a small amount of saturated red in the lower third of the composition surprised the viewer. *Green Crush, Citrus Splash,* on the other hand, was created by pouring saturated greens and yellows together while the paint was still wet, to create a very intense analogous color palette. Despite the differences in color and construction, both pieces have a similar overall shape that emphasizes the gravity of the pour by focusing on the orientation of the drips of the paint.

The placement of two smaller pieces on the feature wall between the large-scale pieces served two purposes: (1) to add variety to the wall by breaking up pieces of a similar scale, and (2) to serve as a visual link between the wall of large works and the wall of six smaller works to the left of the feature wall. Despite the reduced scale *of Flamingo Dream* (seventeen inches square), the pink sequined piece commanded just as much attention as the neighboring larger works. Placing it next to *Windy Pine, Forest Rain* (eighteen inches square) created an interesting dynamic between the two pieces. *Windy Pine, Forest Rain* contained hints of the same bright pink used in *Flamingo Dream,* but instead of being the primary hue, the pink is hidden

beneath more tranquil layers of olive and jungle greens. The high proportion of pink sequined fabric paired with pink rhinestones in *Flamingo Dream* contrasts *Windy Pine's* more tranquil mood and highlights the sassy energy of the piece.

Once viewers finished examining the main feature walls near the gallery entrance, a break in the wall led the viewer to *Tutti Fruitti, Volcanic Blast*. Centered in the middle of the longest wall in the gallery, the large, horizontal piece served as the focal point of the wall (fig. #19). The six small works also featured on the wall were divided into two groups of three and then placed on either side of *Tutti Fruitti*. Within each grouping of small works, most of the pieces relied on either fabric or decorative pattern collaged with layers of poured paint.

Hiding along the back wall of the gallery, *Fuchsia Kiss* (three foot square) served as a bridge to my last two small works, the only pieces not viewable from the windows of the gallery (fig. #18). *Fuchsia Kiss* lurked in the corner, waiting for the viewer to discover the artwork within the bright pink frame. This particular piece is my most painterly piece, as I used the boundaries of the frame to pour over my composition once I had finalized it. I also utilized a broader range of mark making techniques within this piece, flicking my brush against the artwork in the style of Jackson Pollock. The dark grey pour on top of layers of oranges and pink colors unites the layers below it, and aligns itself more with the singular pour techniques than the collaged pieces.

As I stepped back to admire my artwork, I was overjoyed at the final product of my graduate school thesis (fig. #20). It was *beauty*. It was *color*. It was the *culmination* of three years of research. Attraction versus repulsion. Beauty versus the grotesque. Pattern versus the pour. Fine art versus craft. The decorative versus

the art object. British tradition versus the American contemporary. The uncontrolled organic pour versus the precise cutting of the shapes. Geometric versus organic. Organic versus synthetic. Two-dimensions versus three-dimensions.

*Color and beauty, pattern and paint. A celebration of synthetic beauty*.

Fig. #17, *Feature Walls at SOHA Gallery*, St. Louis, MO, 2015

Fig. #18, *Back and Left Side Walls SOHA Gallery*, St. Louis, MO, 2015

Fig. #19, *Left Side Wall, SOHA Gallery*, St. Louis, MO, 2015

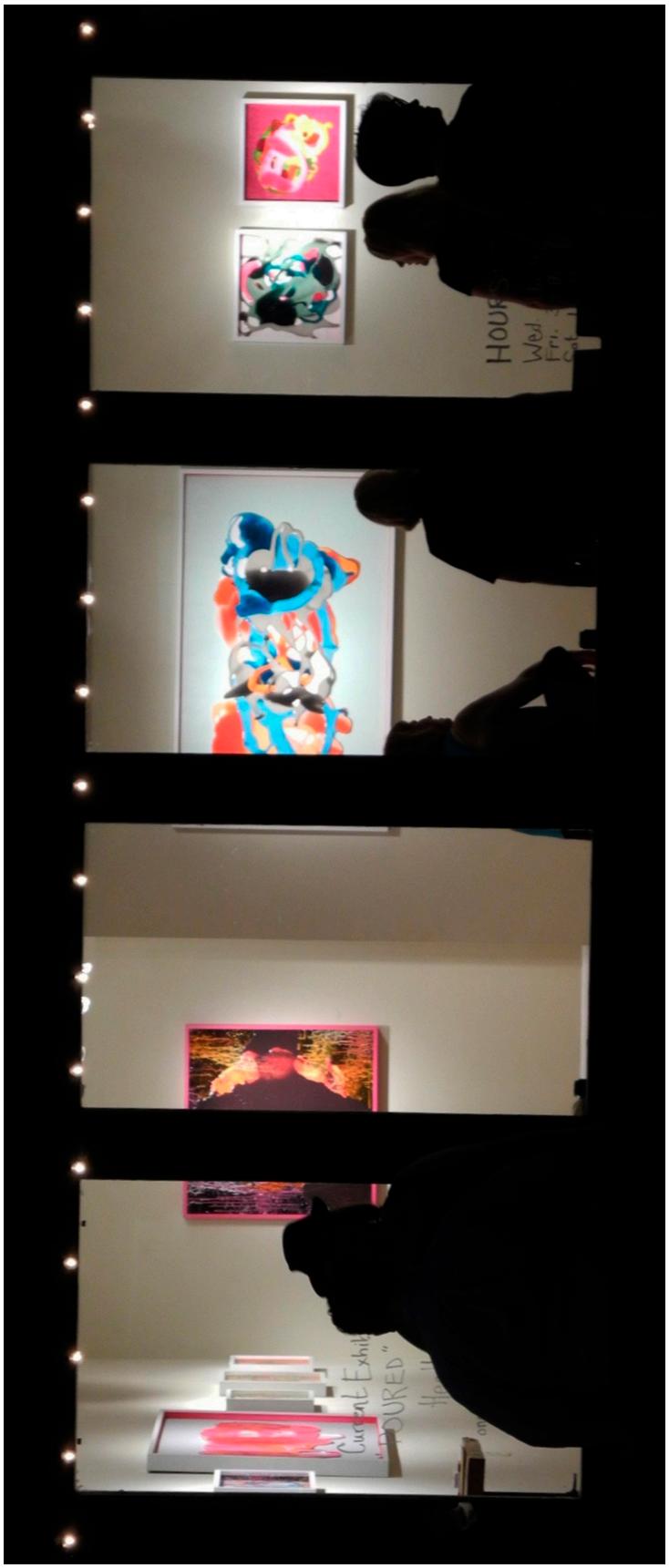

Fig. #20, *Reception for Poured, SOHA Gallery*, St. Louis, MO, 2015

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