

**Up Close** with Distance  
**The Unstable Space in Contemporary Painting**





**Up Close with Distance:  
The Unstable Space in Contemporary Painting**

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## Abstract

The way we experience space has a direct relationship to the way we perceive it, as evidenced by the ways that space has been represented in painting throughout history. My research is concerned with the representation of space in contemporary painting. Contemporary experiences of space through new media screens offer painters a unique challenge that requires them to think about representing space in new ways. My research focuses on the role of the window in painting, a device that has confirmed painters' preoccupation with representing space on a two-dimensional plane. I provide an historical overview that establishes the window as an important spatial and metaphorical concern within painting. I draw a connection between the window and Plato's cave as a frame of representation.

In the context of this research, 'space' refers to a painterly space which includes both illusory space and actual physical/material space. Whereas Gilles Deleuze defines these different kinds of space as either 'haptic' or 'optic space', I use the term 'unstable space' to describe that which occurs when both 'haptic' and 'optic space' coexist on a picture plane.

In considering Plato's cave as a window or frame of representation, I recognise the demarcation of key spatial and representational concepts related to the window in painting. As with Plato's cave, the window demarcates binary opposites that have structured much subsequent thinking about art, such as interiority/exteriority, nature/culture, illusion/reality.

Through Plato's theories, I specifically draw attention to the dualist structure of his belief system that posits tensions between interior and exterior, reality and illusion, nature and culture. I establish the term 'unstable space' through examining the theories of Deleuze and Jacques Derrida that deconstruct Plato's writing. Their theories offer a means by which to construct new meanings within the space of painting, as they emphasise the instability of the binaries afforded by Plato's philosophy and instead suggest the possibilities of multiplicity.

The contemporary 'windows' of media screens significantly shift the metaphor of the singular window to the multiplicity of windows within windows. This multiplicity reflects the way we currently experience space and the effect this has on the thinking of space in contemporary painting practice. In this way, painting's material dimension and illusory space can be explored not in terms of binary oppositions but as complementaries.

Having traced the development of the window as an important representational device in painting, I propose that the window can be used as a mechanism to explore the 'unstable space' through painting. This space operates between spatial and representational theory. Through the analysis of specific works of art by contemporary artists chosen as exemplars in the field of painting, I argue that the unstable space can be created solely in the medium of paint.

My research extends understandings of space as represented within the limits of a two-dimensional surface. The representation of space within my painting practice results from my reimagining of the window as an unstable space, my exploring of the perception and representation of ambiguous space, and my engaging with pictorial illusion through abstraction. Explicitly, the studio research found that the screen or window was able to act as a metaphor for the body and as such effectively articulate the experience of interiority and exteriority, surface and figure, ground and distance.

## **Statement of Originality**

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

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Michelle Mansford



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# Introduction

## Introduction



*Up Close with Distance: The Unstable Space in Contemporary Painting* is a doctoral research project that, in the broadest sense, is concerned with the representation of space in painting. More specifically, it focuses on the role of the window in painting, a device that has confirmed painters' preoccupation with representing space on a two-dimensional plane. I draw on both representational and spatial theories to provide this context. My research asks how painting can reconcile the dead-end of illusion and modernism's essentialist reduction to flatness to create new spatial relations that speak to a contemporary experience of space.

This research is not concerned with the practice of painters associated with the expanded field of painting, such as Katharina Grosse, but with those that remain inspired to explore spatiality in two dimensions. Therefore, rather than concentrate on "the transformation of painting into a three-dimensional object or a spatial entity",<sup>1</sup> this research focuses on the multiplicity of spatial concepts represented within the confines of a two-dimensional surface. As expressed by painter Mari Slaattelid, "it is precisely a painter's experience that two-dimensional representation can provide a more profound understanding of space than the object itself".<sup>2</sup>

This exegesis is divided into three chapters. The first chapter provides an historical overview that establishes the window as an important spatial and metaphorical concern within painting. In addition, it develops the idea that the window can be used as a mechanism to explore what I call 'the unstable space' in painting. In doing so, it provides a theoretical framework for the discussion of my painting practice. The chapter is divided into two parts. In part one, I examine the philosophy of the window dating back to Plato's cave. I explore the painted window, as opposed to the architectural window, from early Roman frescoes to Alberti's metaphor of the open window—exemplified

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<sup>1</sup> Anne Ring Petersen, "Painting Spaces," in *Contemporary Painting in Context* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2010), 126.

<sup>2</sup> Mari Slaattelid, "Painting Abides," conference paper presented for the occasion of the exhibition *An Appetite for Painting*, the Museum of Contemporary Art, the National Museum, Oslo, Norway, 2014.

in the Renaissance painting of Fra Angelico—in order to establish the significance of the window as a metaphorical device. I consider developments in the accuracy of representations of space through a discussion on the painting of Johannes Vermeer and his use of the camera obscura, which provides a useful link between painting and photography. The metaphorical window in paintings from nineteenth-century Romantic and Realist movements saw the window play a major role in painting and later in the medium of photography. I discuss photography and the window in order to address photography's influence on the representation of space in painting. Following this, I explore the window as an icon in modernism, which rejected illusionistic art, through the paintings of Matisse that blurred the distinction between interior and exterior space. In the last section of part one, I discuss the contemporary 'windows' of media screens which significantly shift the metaphor of the singular window to the multiplicity of windows within windows. This multiplicity reflects the way we currently experience space through screen media and the effect this has on the thinking of space in contemporary painting practice.

The second part of Chapter 1 draws on post-structural discourse as a critique of the dominant Western view of art through considering the writings of Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze on Plato. Derrida and Deleuze provide the philosophical terms with which to describe the unstable space. Drawing on the science of perception, I use the concept of multistability to address how we can perceive of such an ambiguous space. I interpret Derrida's conception of idiom in language in such a way as to illuminate visual ambiguity in relation to the language of painting. What Derrida calls 'difference', or the instability of meaning, is significant to understanding the unstable space with which my practice is concerned. I also draw on Deleuze's concept of 'difference in itself' to further explain my idea of unstable space as a space of multiplicity. Whereas difference is often expressed in binary opposition to something else, Deleuze's concept asks us to imagine difference as a thing in itself.

The second chapter of this exegesis analyses specific works of art by two contemporary artists chosen as exemplars in the field of painting. German artist Gerhard Richter (b. 1932) and Swedish artist Andreas Eriksson (b. 1975) both engage with the representation of spatial concepts through the materiality of their painting and photographic practices. In doing so, both also reference the window as a motif in spatial relations. In the case of Richter, I focus my analysis on his overpainted photographs which provide a case study through which to examine the roles that painting and photography play in the representation of space. I argue that the relationships that play out between the mediums of photography and painting, as revealed by Richter, demonstrate possibilities for the expression of new spatial relationships in painting. In the case of Eriksson, my analysis focuses on his frieze artworks titled *Promenad* (2008, figures 28 & 29), which combine both photography and painting, and his painting *Trädstam (grå)* (2010, figure 30). I argue that through an understanding of multiplicity, the unstable space can be created solely in the medium of paint, as is the case in Eriksson's work *Trädstam (grå)*. Richter and Eriksson are central and revealing examples; however, the issues they address are present across the work of a range of art practitioners, such as Slaattelid, Vija Celmins, and Günther Förg.

This studio-based doctorate has relied heavily on the relationship between practice and theory. In Chapter 3 of this exegesis, I discuss the studio outcomes of my research, providing a chronological overview of the work. I emphasise how this practice-led research developed from each preceding body of work, demonstrating how my practice operates as a valid mode of enquiry. As Barbara Bolt argues, the studio outcome as a “visual argument demonstrates the double articulation between theory and practice, whereby theory emerges from a reflexive practice at the same time that practice is informed by theory. This double articulation is central to practice-led research.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Barbara Bolt, “A Non Standard Deviation: Handability, Praxical Knowledge and Practice-Led Research,” *Speculation and Innovation: Applying Practice-Led Research in the Creative Industries, Conference RealTime Arts* 74 (August–September 2006).



# Chapter 1

# Chapter 1      **The Window as an Unstable Space**

This chapter will establish the window as an important spatial and metaphorical concern within painting. The first part of this chapter will provide a brief overview of Plato's theories of representation in relation to the window as well as examining the historical significance of the painted window as opposed to the architectural window. In tracing the development of the window as an important representational device in painting, I will look to examples from Ancient Rome to modernism in order to argue the significance of this motif in representing the dualist tendencies of interiority and exteriority and of reality and illusion in art. In particular, I highlight Leon Battista Alberti's Renaissance metaphor, which positioned the window as an analogue for the perspectival frame of the painting; since then, the window and its common metaphysical corollary—perspective—have remained central to theorisations of the space of vision. By highlighting the direct relationship between the window and painting, I argue that the window can be understood as an unstable space that operates between spatial and representational theory. In making this argument, the second part of this chapter establishes the term 'unstable space' through examining the post-structural critique of Plato's cave. The deconstruction of Plato's writing through the theories of Deleuze and Derrida offers a means by which to construct new meanings within the space of painting.

### ***Part 1: The Window***

The window is an opening, an aperture for light and ventilation. It opens, it closes; it separates the spaces of here and there, inside and outside, in front of and behind. The window opens onto a three-dimensional world beyond: it is a membrane where surface meets depth, where transparency meets its barriers. The window is also a frame, a proscenium: its edges hold a view in place. The window reduces the outside to a two-dimensional surface.<sup>4</sup>

The painted window is a motif that is both spatial and visual. The primary significance of the window to my work is its relation to space—both its formal construction of space in painting and its conceptual role in conveying the

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<sup>4</sup> Anne Friedberg, *The Virtual Window: From Alberti to Microsoft* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 1.

spatial concepts of interiority and exteriority. The window is pertinent to concepts of visuality and representation in painting, providing a condition of seeing that simultaneously limits and permits our view.

### *Plato and the Philosophy of the Window*



**Figure 1** Jan Pietersz Saenredam after Cornelis Cornelisz van Haarlem, *Plato's Cave*, 1604

The window's conceptual history is far-reaching. The philosophy of the window dates back to the Greek philosopher Plato and is best recognised in "The Allegory of the Cave"<sup>5</sup> within his work *The Republic* (514–520). The relevance here is that Plato's cave has in many ways structured all philosophical discourses on art, the meaning of art, and meaning itself.<sup>6</sup> In considering Plato's cave as a window or frame of representation, I recognise the demarcation of key spatial and representational concepts related to the window in painting. As with Plato's cave, the window demarcates binary opposites that have structured much subsequent thinking about art, such as interiority/exteriority, nature/culture, illusion/reality, and model/copy. These concepts will be explored further after revisiting Plato's allegory.

<sup>5</sup> Also known as "Plato's Cave" or "The Parable of the Cave".

<sup>6</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 45.



### *Plato's Allegory of the Cave*

Plato's "Allegory of the Cave", at the beginning of book VII in *The Republic*, is told through a dialogue between Socrates and his interlocutors. It commences: "I want you to go on to picture the enlightenment or ignorance of our human condition..."<sup>7</sup> Socrates then describes a scenario in which a group of people have been prisoners in a cave since their childhood and know nothing of the outside world. There is no natural light in the cave and all that the prisoners see are shadows cast by the light of a fire. The whole of the prisoner's reality consists of these shadows on the wall; knowing not otherwise, their assumption is that these shadows are real things. Socrates then describes the outcome if one of these prisoners were let loose and compelled to turn around, look, and walk towards the fire. Having spent his life almost completely in the dark and immobile, the prisoner would find these actions painful and would be too dazzled by the light to see properly the objects that he once saw the shadows of. The prisoner is told that these objects are nearer to reality than the mere shadows he had experienced during his existence in the cave. Feeling lost and confused, the prisoner wants to retreat back to the cave but is forcibly dragged out into the sunlight. The painful glare of the sun once again is dazzling to the prisoner, so he is unable to see a single object. Eventually, the prisoner becomes accustomed to the daylight and is able to see the objects outside the cave and is even able to look directly at the sun. For the first time, things are properly illuminated. Eventually, his eyes adjust and he experiences the true forms of all the things he'd previously only known as shadows.<sup>8</sup>

Socrates tells us of the prisoner's path to enlightenment, from inside the cave to his release to the outside world. Through his initial experience of fear and confusion and his desire to return to the comfort and safety of what he once knew, the prisoner undergoes an awakening: an awareness of a more beautiful and real world far different from his previous domain of shadowy

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<sup>7</sup> Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Desmond Lee, 2nd ed. (London: Penguin Group, 2007), 241.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 240-48.

illusions. Socrates then speculates on what would happen if this newly enlightened prisoner was to return to the cave to tell his fellow prisoners of what lay beyond the darkness of their experience. Coming in from sunlight, he would be blinded and unaccustomed by the surrounding darkness. Unable to discern the shadows of things, his fellow prisoners would think he was a fool. They would think the outside world had ruined his sight; that it was not worth going there themselves; and that, if he attempted to free them, they would kill him.

In the broadest sense, Plato's cave is an allegory of the life of all enlightened people. He likens our experience of reality to a cavernous existence in which all that we can observe and describe are shadows on the wall, our heads turned away from the light of truth and knowledge. For Plato, these shadows are merely illusions of an ideal reality that exists outside the cave. The prisoner is a philosopher in search of truth, whose purpose in life is to teach this truth to others; the fellow prisoners are humans before philosophy; and the sun the light of reason. However, beyond the quest of the philosopher, the allegory demonstrates Plato's Theory of Forms. Of relevance to this research within this theory is the idea of 'mimesis' on which representation depends. Mimesis is sometimes translated as 'representation'; hence, imitation theory is also known as the representational theory of art.<sup>9</sup>

Plato's cave can be understood as a window where the entrance to the cave is a frame of representation and a site of demarcation, the cave parable establishes much of Western thought of painting. Notably like the window, Plato's cave demarcates the interior space from the exterior space. The interior space in the case of the cave consists of the shadowy representations of the exterior reality. Thus, for Plato, the cave represents a world of illusion. From the allegory of the cave, we learn that Plato was suspicious of representation, where the shadowy representations on the cave wall create a world of illusion that is removed from the 'real'. Plato articulates these ideas further in his Theory of Forms.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

### *Plato's Conception of Reality: Theory of Forms*

In understanding Plato's theory of art, it is necessary to account for his conception of reality, which is closely linked to his Theory of Forms. For Plato, the phenomena that we call 'nature', 'experience', and 'reality' belong to the world of appearances. The world as we perceive it, he argued, is in constant flux and so we never perceive the same object in the same manner twice.<sup>10</sup> The objects we perceive, the point of view from which we perceive them, and the perceiver are all subject to constant change, and yet we identify similar objects in all of our perceptions. This led him to think that in the phenomenal world, there are similarities that keep returning despite these constant changes—objects, acts, or phenomena that apparently have the same properties. Plato's belief was that we can form an idea of perfection even though the acts and objects we observe fall short of it. How we are able to imagine such perfect or absolute forms when they do not exist in the perceptible world, Plato argues, is by assuming that outside of the world we perceive is an ideal world containing the absolute forms of which the perceptible objects and/or acts are but imperfect reflections. This world of ideal forms is the true, actual and authentic reality, for it is eternal and unchanging. Furthermore, nature, made up of imperfect and variable manifestations, is therefore less real than the world of forms.<sup>11</sup>

### *Plato's Theory of 'Mimesis'*

Based on this conception of reality, Plato set out his theories of art in book X of *The Republic*. Through his ideas about mimesis, he makes his fundamental contribution to representational theory, or imitation theory, which is relevant in understanding representations of space in painting.

In characteristic dialogue form, Plato makes a comparison between the craftsman and the artist. The craftsman, he proposes, forms a mental image of an ideal form and uses it as a model to make a specific, perceptible, and

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<sup>10</sup> Antoon van den Braembussche, *Thinking Art: Introduction to Philosophy* (Brussels: Springer, 2009), 18.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 17–18.

tangible copy that can be readily used in this world. In this sense, the copy is like nature in Plato's conception, in that it is an appearance, an imperfect copy of an ideal form. The artist, however, copies nature and crafted objects of this world, thus imitating the appearance of things. In doing so, he is merely making a copy of that which is already a copy of a removed ideal form.<sup>12</sup> For Plato, in this sense, art imitates physical things that are themselves imitations of the ideal forms; for him, art is thus always a copy of a copy and leads us (dangerously) further from truth and reality and towards illusion.

The concept of mimesis is prominent in the philosophy of art. The Greek word *mimesis*, originally meaning 'imitation', 'representation', or 'copy', specifically relates to nature. The mimetic quality of a painting, for example, generally refers to the way in which 'reality' is represented in the work of art. This concept dates back to classical antiquity. As outlined in Plato's theories on art,<sup>13</sup> mimesis, as a direct unmediated imitation, is the primary aim and destiny of a work of art. Embedded in an idealist point of view, Plato's theory of mimesis identifies actual reality within the world of ideas or forms. Thus, all imitation traces back to this supernatural world. Subsequent representational theory, however, invariably takes sensibly perceptible reality as its sole model or criterion. The subsequent theory falls completely within the perspective of 'realism', which sees a work of art as *a copy* of sensibly perceived reality.<sup>14</sup>

In this section, it has been necessary to outline Plato's philosophy of art and the nature of 'reality' that have had a consistent influence on Western discourses of art. I have drawn a connection between the window to Plato's cave as a frame of representation. In revisiting Plato's theories, I specifically draw attention to the dualist structure of his belief system that posits tensions between interior and exterior, reality and illusion, nature and culture. This foundation will prove beneficial in the following sections of this

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>13</sup> Book X of *The Republic*.

<sup>14</sup> van den Braembussche, *Thinking Art: Introduction to Philosophy*, 16–17.

exegesis, which, through the post-structural critique offered by Deleuze and Derrida, revisits Plato and the binaries afforded by his philosophy. As I will demonstrate, their work emphasises the instability of these binaries and instead suggests the possibilities of multiplicity.

Before I argue for the possibility of understanding the window as an unstable space, it is necessary to overview the history of the window in painting as a spatial and representational device.

### *The Painted Window*

#### *Roman Frescoes*

Early Roman examples of painted windows demonstrate the concept of extending the interior space beyond the walls to create the illusion of space. In these Roman frescos (*buon fresco*), we see a view of the outside world painted on the interior walls of private villas with the aim of expanding the interior space by the use of *trompe l'oeil*, which gives the illusion of an exterior space. These paintings counteracted the claustrophobic interiors that were otherwise windowless and dark.<sup>15</sup> As such, this form of painting demonstrates an early desire for the expansion of the interior world to include exterior vision through the mechanism of the window as both a motif and a conceptual form.

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<sup>15</sup> A compluvium, an aperture, or opening in the roof at the centre of the building acted as a main source of light by day, provided ventilation, and also let the rain in.



**Figure 2** Example of Second Style Painting, Cubiculum (bedroom), Villa of P. Fannius Synistor at Boscoreale, (50–40 BCE).

Art historian August Mau classified the Roman wall paintings of Pompeii into four distinct and consecutive styles based on developments in form and technique. For example, the Second Style, which dominated the first century BCE, aimed to create a three-dimensional world on a two-dimensional surface. The style was characterised by realistic painted depictions of architectonic features, such as pillars and columns, and the use of *trompe l'oeil* compositions that created the illusion that the wall had receded (figure 2). The painted 'window' was implemented as a framing device. However, these picture window vistas, along with other illusionistic architecture, were soon replaced with landscape scenes that took over the entire wall. Rather than a framed view through the 'window' to an exterior space, the painted wall now opened up the space further to the scenes of nature and the exterior world. The triclinium<sup>16</sup> painting of a garden scene (ca. 30–20 BCE, figure 3) in the dining room of Livia, wife of the Emperor Augustus, is one such example of this Second Style painting; the landscape is the entire subject covering the wall. Here, depth is achieved through the atmospheric use of perspective, rather than linear perspective later established in the Renaissance. With aerial or atmospheric perspective, the foreground is painted in sharper detail

<sup>16</sup> *Triclinium* (dining rooms) were named after the couches arranged in groups of three.

than the background, and the illusion of distance increases as forms lose clarity. An example of the Pompeiian Fourth Style is seen in the Ixion Room (Triclinium), House of the Vettii (AD 70–79, figure 4). This example shows how the Fourth Style is the aggregate of features from the preceding styles. It includes the First Style's emphasis on surface effects and structural division; the Second Style's *trompe l'oeil* compositions featuring architectonic forms and aerial/atmospheric perspective; and the Third Style's multiple framing devices, picture windows, ornamental details, and solid blocks of colour. From these examples, we see not only the early development of perspective in painting, but also the role of the window in conceptually enabling painterly illusion in early Roman times, which would be further developed during the Renaissance.



**Figure 3** Example of Second Style Painting, Triclinium paintings from the villa of Livia at Prima Porta



**Figure 4** Example of Pompeian Fourth Style painting, Ixion Room (Triclinium), House of the Vettii AD 70–79

### *Alberti's Metaphor: Painting as an 'Open Window'*

*Let me tell you what I do when I am painting...on the surface I draw a rectangle of whatever size I want, which I regard as an open window through which the subject to be painted is seen.*

—Leon Battista Alberti<sup>17</sup>

Since the fifteenth century, the open window (*aperta finestra*) has been regarded as a metaphor for the painting (*pictura*). In his treatise on the theory of painting, *De Pictura*<sup>18</sup> (1435), Leon Battista Alberti (1404–72) describes how he applies his perspectival theory: “[O]n the surface on which I am going to paint, I draw a rectangle of whatever size I want, which I regard as an open window through which the subject to be painted is seen.”<sup>19</sup> As art historian Anne Friedberg argues, Alberti “invokes the image of the window as an

<sup>17</sup> Leon Battista Alberti, “On Painting,” in *On Painting and On Sculpture: The Latin Texts of De Pictura and De Statua*, trans. and ed. Cecil Grayson (London: Phaidon, 1972), 55.

<sup>18</sup> The text “On Painting” was originally written in Latin in Florence 1435 and titled *De Pictura*; the Italian translation titled *Della Pittura* followed in 1436.

<sup>19</sup> Alberti, “On Painting,” 55.



instructive substitute for the rectangular frame of the painting.”<sup>20</sup> The appearance of a three-dimensional space on a two-dimensional surface required the logic of mathematics to construct and control space. Alberti’s treatise calculated the recession of orthogonal lines that converge at a centric point, often referred to as the vanishing point. Figures and forms rendered on the picture plane proportionally diminished toward the centric point. Alberti’s formulation of the one-point perspective system in his treatise was familiar to nearly every Florentine painter by the end of the fifteenth century and is widely considered his most recognised contribution to the art of painting.

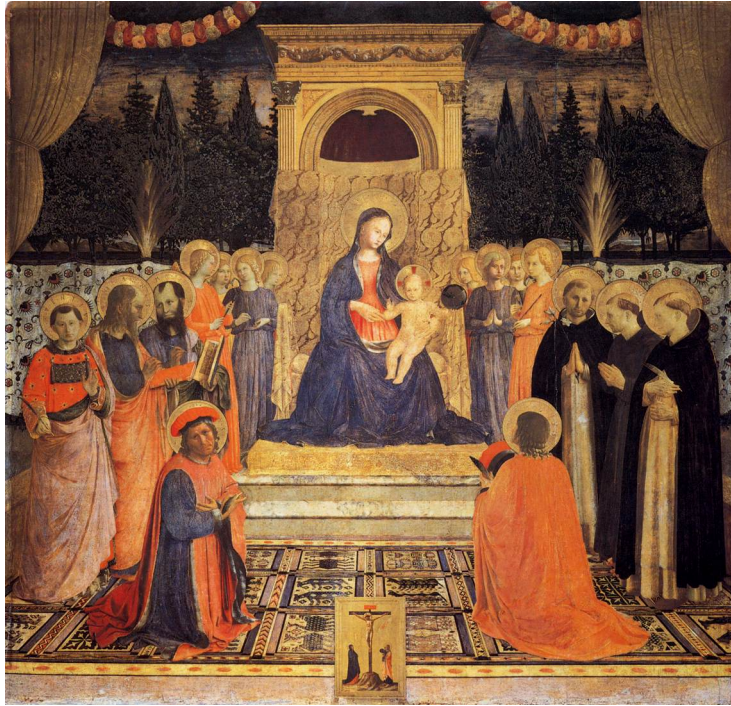
In *De Pictura*, Alberti references the power of metaphor to enrich his abstract reduction of the phenomenal world of vision to the mathematics of point, line, and surface. His geometrical account of vision was supplied solely through language, not images; no diagrams were supplied for *De Pictura*.<sup>21</sup> However, Alberti’s one-point perspective can be exemplified through such Renaissance paintings as Fra Angelico’s *San Marco Altarpiece* (1438–40, figure 5). Here Alberti’s perspective, which calculated the recession of orthogonal lines mathematically so that they diminished in proportion, converges on the single point near the head of the Virgin. What is of particular significance is the spatial depiction; rather than a heaven-like setting in which saints and angels hover in space as divine presences, this is a realist space, where the saints are standing, grouped naturally. The *San Marco Altarpiece* is arguably the first painting in Florentine art to reflect Alberti’s theories.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Friedberg, *The Virtual Window*, 12.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 26–27.

<sup>22</sup> Diane Cole Ahl, *Fra Angelico* (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 2008), 120.



**Figure 5** Fra Angelico, *San Marco Altarpiece*, 1438–40

Alberti's "subject to be painted" refers to his theory of *historia*—a style of painting. *Historiae* were imaginative narrative paintings of great events and classical heroes, and were not landscapes or direct records of nature. Alberti's text has often been misunderstood on this point; his intended meaning was a formula for representation of narrative *historia*, not of empty landscapes or window-views.<sup>23</sup> The window was deployed as a figure for the frame and did not imply that the "subject to be painted" should be a mimetic rendition of what one would see out of an architectural window, looking out onto the natural world. Rather than a model for realist representation, Alberti's window provides a Renaissance root for the concept of a windowed "elsewhere"—not a realism of subject matter, but a separate spatial and temporal view.<sup>24</sup> As Friedberg argues, it is important to emphasise this significant distinction "between the window-view as determinant of the realism of representation and the window-view as the determinant of the spatial experience of the spectator".<sup>25</sup> While the spectator's experience of 'gazing' through the window had its own spatial effect, Alberti's new

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<sup>23</sup> However, this is seen later in paintings from the Romantic period of the eighteenth century.

<sup>24</sup> Friedberg, *The Virtual Window*, 32.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

perspectival realism of representational space did not imply realism of subject matter.<sup>26</sup>

This realist representational space was a significant turning point in the development of perspective in painting, as it assigned the viewer a new role in art—a central position in front of a pictorial world as well as the measure of that world. The presence of the viewer in this way reflected the growth of humanism in this period. Humanism can be understood as a system of thought that attaches prime importance to the human rather than to the divine or supernatural. Specifically, it describes a vision of the world from a position that centres/prioritises the human.<sup>27</sup>

Alberti places the human figure in the frame as a key measure for correct proportion. The *braccia*<sup>28</sup> of the human body serves as the standard of reference for the relative size of all objects in the frame. The human height establishes the centric point “no higher from the base line than the height of the man to be represented in the painting”.<sup>29</sup> The viewer is to be at the same height as the figure in the picture, so that “both the viewers and the objects in the painting will seem to be on the same plane”.<sup>30</sup> In this way, the body of the viewer suggests the scale for the bodies in the painting. The painter’s position was also to be the position of the viewer, framing and delimiting the image.<sup>31</sup>

Noteworthy is a misnomer in the perception of the spatial experience first encountered by the painter. As presented in *De Pictura*, Alberti intends for the eye of the viewer to take up a position in relation to the scene that is identical to that originally occupied by the painter. Hence, the painter and the viewer were in a fixed position in relation to the picture plane. Perspectival

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ian Buchanan, *Oxford Dictionary of Critical Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 235; Richard Osbourne *Megawords* (NSW: Allen and Unwin, 2001), 156.

<sup>28</sup> Alberti explains his use of the unit of measure *braccia* in the following way: “I divide the height of this man into three parts, which will be proportional to the measure commonly called a *braccia*; for, as may be seen from the relationship of his limbs, three *braccia* is just about the average height of a man’s body,” in Alberti, “On Painting,” 55.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Friedberg, *The Virtual Window*, 33–35.

representation in this case was reliant on a significant divergence from actual human vision. As Friedberg argues: “The mobility and binocularity of vision was reduced to a static, monocular ‘point’ of view. The vertex of single-point perspective took on the monocular view of the painter and positioned the viewer to share its vantage.”<sup>32</sup> Contemporary art theorist Norman Bryson elaborates on this through a discussion of the gaze, which:

operates by abstracting from the physical practice of painting and of viewing a valorized moment when the eye contemplates the world alone, in severance from the material body of labour: the body is reduced (as in Alberti) to its optical anatomy, the minimal diagram of monocular perspective. In the Founding Perception [the point from which the scene was observed by the painter], the gaze of the painter arrests the flux of phenomena, contemplates the visual field from a vantage-point outside the mobility of duration, in an eternal moment of disclosed presence; while in the moment of viewing, the viewing subject unites his gaze with the Founding Perception, in a perfect recreation of that first epiphany.<sup>33</sup>

Here, Bryson regards the scene viewed by the painter as the “Founding perception”, a perception to be united with two other “points” of view: the point from which a spectator views the painting (the “View point”) and the imagined horizon where perspective rays converge (the “Vanishing point”).<sup>34</sup>

While this fixed position of both painter and viewer attends to a single static moment in time and a single space, I am most interested here in the representation of the spatial experience. It is necessary to point out here that the single spatial frame of perspectival representation did not *always* imply a single frame of time, as Renaissance “polyscenic” frescoes, panels, and reliefs attest.<sup>35</sup> (This will be further discussed in a later section on contemporary frames and windows, such as the television, cinema and computer.) What is relevant in moving forward the discussion of representational space is that Alberti’s formula for the rational representation of this single moment in a

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>33</sup> Norman Bryson, *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1983), 94.

<sup>34</sup> Friedberg, *The Virtual Window*, 28.

<sup>35</sup> For further discussion of multiple time frames within Renaissance painting, see Friedberg, *The Virtual Window*, 35–38 and Lew Andrews, *Story and Space in Renaissance Art: The Rebirth of Continuous Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 35.

single space allows for the Renaissance painting to be considered as the proto-equivalent of a photograph.

Alberti's Renaissance metaphor of the window has influenced centuries of subsequent thinking about the humanist subject of perspective and remains a defining concept in theories of painting.<sup>36</sup> His relevance to my research stems from the direct relationship between the window and painting, additionally it traces a significant turning point to the fundamental problem of representing space in painting.

### *The Technical Window: Vermeer and the Camera Obscura*

Advances in realism and accuracy in the history of Western art since the Renaissance were primarily the result of optical instruments such as the camera obscura, a simple device that incorporates a pinhole or lens through which inverted images can be seen projected onto the walls, floor, and ceiling of a completely darkened room. Instruments such as these were the forerunners of the photographic camera.<sup>37</sup>

The use of the camera obscura in the development of painting can be traced back to Leonardo Da Vinci's notebooks around the year 1490.<sup>38</sup> Throughout the sixteenth century, it was used by artists "to enter a newly revealed world of optical phenomena and to explore how these might be recorded in paint".<sup>39</sup> Metaphorically, the camera obscura can be related to the window, as a site of transformation, an opening towards the light in the mode of Plato's cave, and an extension of the eye that supplies a sense of wonder through illusionary qualities. In this section, I will refer specifically to Johannes Vermeer's possible use of the camera obscura to highlight his perspective precision; as art historian Philip Steadman observes, "the essential point is that the perspective of Vermeer's painting is—photographic".<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>37</sup> Philip Steadman, *Vermeer's Camera: Uncovering the Truth Behind the Masterpieces* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 8.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 27.

Numerous art historians, including Steadman, Lawrence Gowing, and René Huyghe have debated whether or not Vermeer used the camera obscura. The accuracy of his spatial representation and lack of any underdrawings planning the composition, combined with idiosyncrasies which seem to mimic the distortions produced by lenses, lend credence to the claim of Vermeer's use of optical instruments in his realist paintings. It is not my purpose to revisit these arguments; rather, by focusing on Vermeer's paintings of interiors, I highlight the relationship between the window and the camera obscura as an early photographic apparatus that operates as a window.

### *Vermeer's Domestic Interiors*

The greater part of Vermeer's oeuvre, that created from the late 1650s up to his death in 1675, shows scenes of domestic interiors.<sup>41</sup> It is in these works that art historians have most often claimed to detect the use of the camera obscura.<sup>42</sup> Strikingly, the twenty-three paintings produced during this time depict only a small number of different rooms. Certain architectural details recur repeatedly; for example, the same or similar patterns of tiles on the floor, similar timber construction in the ceiling, and characteristic patterns of leading in the windows.<sup>43</sup> With some isolated exceptions,<sup>44</sup> there are a large number of other interiors in which the general layout of the room is highly standardised. Each one has a 'central' perspective in which a far wall, without windows, is seen frontally. Often, a wall is positioned at the left, with one or two windows visible; even if the windows are out of view, the light comes from this direction. In this group of paintings, no right-hand wall is visible. *The Music Lesson* (c. 1662–65, figure 6) shares all of these characteristics.

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<sup>41</sup> *A Girl Asleep*, c. 1657; *Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window*, c. 1657; *Officer and Laughing Girl*, c. 1658; *The Milkmaid*, c. 1658–60; *The Glass of Wine*, c. 1658–60; *The Girl with a Wineglass*, c. 1659–60; *Girl Interrupted at Her Music*, c. 1660–61; *Young Woman with a Water Jug*, c. 1664–65; *Woman with a Pearl Necklace*, c. 1664; *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter*, c. 1663–64; *Woman Holding a Balance*, c. 1664; *Woman with a Lute*, c. 1664; *Lady Writing a Letter, with Her Maid*, c. 1670; *The Music Lesson*, c. 1662–64; *The Concert*, c. 1665–66; *Allegory of Painting*, c. 1666–67; *Allegory of the Faith*, c. 1671–74; *The Love Letter*, c. 1669–70; *The Astronomer*, 1668; *The Geographer*, c. 1668–69; *The Guitar Player*, c. 1670; *Lady Standing at the Virginals*, c. 1672–73; and *Lady Seated at the Virginals*, c. 1675.

<sup>42</sup> Steadman, *Vermeer's Camera*, 25–26.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>44</sup> *The Guitar Player*, c. 1670; *A Girl Asleep*, c. 1657; and *The Love Letter*, c. 1669–70.



**Figure 6** Johannes Vermeer, *Music Lesson* c. 1662–65

### *The Music Lesson*

In *The Music Lesson*, separate white tiles are framed in a lattice of black stripes. The windows conform to a pattern typical of Delft houses of the period. Each is divided into four lights. There are two side-hung casements in the lower half of the frame, and two fixed lights in the upper half. Of all of Vermeer's paintings, *The Music Lesson* gives the best view of this arrangement. Such windows were usually equipped with external solid shutters over the lower casement only. Vermeer makes repeated use of these shutters, together with curtains, to control the lighting in his interiors. Steadman suggests that "Vermeer's obsessions with light, tonal values, shadow, and colour, for the treatment of which his work is so much admired,

are very closely bound up with his study of the special qualities of optical images.”<sup>45</sup>

In *The Music Lesson*, as is the case of all of Vermeer’s interiors, the perspective is ‘frontal’ or ‘central’; that is, the plane of the painting is set precisely parallel with the far wall of the room. The result, insofar as the architecture is concerned, is that there is a single vanishing point at which the perspective lines converge<sup>46</sup> (as seen in figure 7).



**Figure 7** *The Music Lesson* with perspective lines converging at a single vanishing point

*The Music Lesson* reveals more about the geometry of the room depicted than any other of Vermeer’s interiors because of the mirror hanging on the far wall. This, among other details, reflects the back wall of the room—that is, the wall behind our viewpoint, behind Vermeer as he painted.<sup>47</sup> Steadman’s assumption is that Vermeer was using a camera obscura and the lens would have been at the theoretical viewpoint. The painting is the same size as its projected image because Vermeer has traced it.<sup>48</sup> Steadman argues that the use of a camera obscura by Vermeer is “the most obvious immediate interpretation of this very curious characteristic of the perspective geometry of the paintings”.<sup>49</sup>

Steadman’s argument for Vermeer’s use of a camera obscura is based largely on the technicalities of perspective geometry and on objective realities;

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<sup>45</sup> Steadman *Vermeer’s Camera*, 2.

<sup>46</sup> For more on Steadman’s perspective analysis, see Chapter 5 “Reconstructing the Spaces in Vermeer’s Painting” in *Vermeer’s Camera*, 73–100.

<sup>47</sup> Steadman, *Vermeer’s Camera*, 83–89.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 83 and 103.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.



however, in his final chapter, he leans heavily on the insights of critic Lawrence Gowing to suggest the influence of the camera obscura on Vermeer's painting style. The camera obscura collapses three-dimensional space onto the two-dimensional plane, disabling the faculties of depth perception, which depends on binocular vision and parallax.<sup>50</sup> Solid objects become flat shapes, and their forms are comprehensible only by their outlines, their tonal modulation, and the shapes and positions of their shadows. The spaces that separate objects are also turned into flat shapes.<sup>51</sup>

Highly significant to my research, Steadman describes the paradoxical quality of Vermeer's paintings as "a perfect perspectival illusion of depth *coexisting* with an effect of surface flatness".<sup>52</sup> This is key to the influence that the camera obscura—and I extend this to modern photography and screens—has on painting. While Vermeer's paintings are described as 'photographic', what is perhaps meant is not, as Steadman explains, to emphasise the "laboured, painstaking accuracy in the minute explanatory transcription of detail", but more the matter of perspective accuracy and the concomitant perspective distortions resulting from taking close-up or wide-angle views. As Steadman observes, "Vermeer manages to achieve 'photographic' results while painting in a way which is often locally imprecise, where focus is sometimes lost, where areas of colour may be simplified and flattened, texture obliterated."<sup>53</sup>

As art historian René Huyghe says, "viewed from close at hand [Vermeer's paintings] give the impression of a slightly blurred not quite 'in register'..."<sup>54</sup> Steadman suggests "Vermeer is true to tonal values, true to the light from objects seen indistinctly, true to the view through half-closed eyes as it were, [but] *not* always true to detail."<sup>55</sup> As Gowing puts it, "at the opposite pole to naturalist tactility", Vermeer creates an illusion "not of closeness but of

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<sup>50</sup> 'Parallax' refers to the apparent displacement of an observed object due to a change in the position of the observer.

<sup>51</sup> Steadman *Vermeer's Camera*, 157.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> René Huyghe, *Vermeer et Proust* (1936), quoted in Steadman, *Vermeer's Camera*, 159.

<sup>55</sup> Steadman, *Vermeer's Camera*, 159.

distance”.<sup>56</sup> Steadman confers that “it is the camera obscura that constrains him to do this”.<sup>57</sup>

Unlike photography as we know it today, to copy or work from an image in a camera obscura is distinctly different in that the process is not instantaneous but protracted. Additionally, working from a printed photograph and a projected image from a camera obscura—which is essentially a moving image—produces very different results.<sup>58</sup>

### *The Window as Metaphor: Romanticism and Realism*

During the nineteenth century, the Romantic (1750–1890) and Realist (1850–1900s) movements saw the window play a major role in painting and in what was to become the medium of photography. The window was considered a “yearning motif” by the Romantics; that is, a space that conveyed unfulfilled longing beyond the material world.<sup>59</sup> Art historian Rolf Selbmann describes the Romantic yearning to transcend the threshold of the window as the desire “to expand the view to include what one cannot see but can only imagine ... Romantic windows therefore stand for a claim to the totality of the process of perception.”<sup>60</sup> The Romantic gaze through the window also opens simultaneous spaces. Selbmann identifies the window as “an ambiguous yet open form of visual experience, in which spaces—and hence reality and illusion—mix”.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Gowing, quoted in Steadman, *Vermeer's Camera*, 159.

<sup>57</sup> Steadman, *Vermeer's Camera*, 159.

<sup>58</sup> For more on this, see Quentin Williams' essay on painting and photography, “Projected Actuality,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 35 (July 1995): 273–77.

<sup>59</sup> Marion Ackermann, “Foreword,” in *Fresh Widow: The Window in Art since Matisse and Duchamp*, ed. Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen (Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2012), 11.

<sup>60</sup> Rolf Selbmann, “Views Out, In, and Through: A Brief History of the Window up to the Modern Era,” in *Fresh Widow: The Window in Art since Matisse and Duchamp*, 41.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.



**Figure 8** Caspar David Friedrich, *Frau am Fenster (Woman at the Window)*, 1822

The isolated figure at the window is typical of this genre, as can be seen in the German Romantic artist Caspar David Friedrich's painting *Woman at the Window* (1822, figure 8). Here, the figure of Friedrich's wife Caroline is shown from behind—*Rückenfigur*<sup>62</sup>—a posture frequently used in Friedrich's paintings. Caroline's unquestionable yearning is set by her immobile posture. She stands at the window in contemplation of the bright exterior reality that lies beyond the frugal interior of the studio. The view from the window is of the Elbe River, the masts, and rigging of boats; and on the other side of the river, green poplar trees stand pale in the light. The subtle tones of blue, green and ochre draw attention through the window.

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<sup>62</sup> A German term which literally translates to "back figure", the term *Rückenfigur* is accepted in art history to describe a viewpoint that includes the figure of a person seen from behind, who is viewing a scene before them.

The boundary between the self and the world is highlighted by the doubled but interconnected channelling of the gaze towards the lower, open window and its scenic vista and the closed, almost empty, upper window with its view to the sky. This view through the larger upper window, alluding to the heavens, is in contrast to the preoccupation with worldly things in the smaller but open window, conveying the idea of a yearning. Friedrich expressly emphasises the space of the window through various optically layered moldings, along with the open side of the window that juts out almost perpendicularly into the image.



**Figure 9** Johann Heinrich Wilhelm Tischbein, *Goethe am Fenster seiner Wohnung in Rom* (*Goethe at the Window of his Apartment in Rome*), 1787

The Romanic era saw an extensive range of paintings featuring the *Rückenfigur* and the window. Variations on the yearning figure at the window can be seen both in Johann Heinrich Wilhelm Tischbein's *Goethe at the Window of his Apartment in Rome* (1787, figure 9) and Moritz von Schwind's

*The Morning Hour* (1860, figure 10). Whereas Friedrich sought an immobilisation at the window in his work, Tischbein's watercolour of Goethe captures the figure pressing outward—although what was outside is not depicted. Schwind, on the other hand, is interested in bringing the light into the room, the incoming light alluding perhaps to the light metaphors of the Enlightenment. Ever present is an ambivalence of interior and exterior.



**Figure 10** Moritz von Schwind, *The Morning Hour* 1860



**Figure 11** Jakob Alt *View from the Artist's Studio in the Alservorstadt towards Dornbach* (1836)

In the Realist period, the figure is no longer present in the image; instead, the window becomes a subject in its own right. The Realist gaze through the window, as Selbmann explains, “is directed at the window frame as the limitation of the field of vision. Windows are means of distancing ... they create boundaries and perspectives”.<sup>63</sup> For example, the watercolour *View from the Artist's Studio in the Alservorstadt towards Dornbach* (1836, figure 11), painted by Viennese artist Jakob Alt, shows how the mysterious window of Romanticism spills over into a reliable pictorial motif. Similarly, in *View from the Artist's Studio (Right Window)* and *View from the Artist's Studio (Left Window)*, Friedrich presents the view from his studio in two window paintings devoid of people (figures 12 & 13). In *View from the Artist's Studio (Right Window)* (figure 13), horizontal and vertical lines intersect in the window frame. In the opened right side of the window, we see the vertical lines of the wall through the glass, with an angled cross visible in the reflection. To the left of the window, a small painting frame and an above-hanging mirror are partially visible, truncated at the painting's edge. Both

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<sup>63</sup> Selbmann, “Views Out, In, and Through,” 41.

objects lead the eye across into the painting of the left window of the studio, which, unlike the right window, is not parallel to the surface plane. The point-of-view for the painter and observer is the same, but the perspective is shifted. In Selbmann's analysis, "Friedrich sets forth the secret of perspective itself."<sup>64</sup> He suggests that Friedrich's choice "to demonstrate this secret in its purest form on the basis of the window [was because], in the window, [Friedrich] finds that infinite, and infinitely refrangible, possibilities await him".<sup>65</sup> Not only are Friedrich's two window paintings examples of the motif of the open window in painting but also they significantly illustrate a shift from the figure and the window to the window becoming a subject in its own right.



**Figure 12** Caspar David Friedrich, *View from the Artist's Window in Dresden on the Elbe (Left Window)* 1805-6

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.



**Figure 13** Caspar David Friedrich, *View from the Artist's Window in Dresden on the Elbe (Right Window)* 1805-6

This shift can be seen to have occurred across the mediums of painting and to the medium of photography, which I will turn to below. The window as subject in photography can be seen in Joseph Nicéphore Niépce's *View from the Window at Le Gras* (figure 14).

### *Photography and the Window*



**Figure 14** Joseph Nicéphore Niépce, *View from the Window at Le Gras*, 1826



In a photographic sense, the window can act as a viewfinder on to the world, offering an edited, framed, fragmented aspect of life to our perception. The window in photography is the aperture that lets light in. The window as source of light plays an essential role in the creation of proto-photographer Joseph Nicéphore Niépce's (1765–1833) *View from the Window at Le Gras* (1826, figure 14). "Claimed by many photo historians as the earliest extant photograph",<sup>66</sup> Niépce's image recalls Alberti's metaphor for painting: "... an open window through which the subject to be painted is seen".<sup>67</sup> The subject in this case is painted by light and the details are somewhat hard to make out. However, the image presents the view from Niépce's studio window. At the center of the image is the sloping roof of a barn, with the top of a pear tree rising above it. To the left is the loft of his pigeon house and to the right a wing of the house.<sup>68</sup> Niépce's photograph echoes the fascination Romantic painters had for images of windows.

The extraordinary thing about Niépce's photograph is its connection to painting. *View from the Window at Le Gras* was created via a long, drawn-out process of viewing light over more than eight hours. Niépce coined the term *héliographie*<sup>69</sup> or "sun-writing/drawing" to describe this process.<sup>70</sup> Because Niépce's photograph involved the long observation of light, it is more akin to the sustained observation of a painter than the idea of a contained instant that would come to be associated with the photographic process. The window thus enables significant connections between the mediums of painting and photography.

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>67</sup> Alberti, "On Painting," 55.

<sup>68</sup> Geoffrey Batchen, *Burning with Desire: The Conception of Photography* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), 125.

<sup>69</sup> The majority of heliographs were created on copper plate. In Chapter 3, I discuss my choice of copper as a painting surface linking to both these early photographic examples and the use of copper as a painting surface by painters such as Rembrandt.

<sup>70</sup> Batchen, *Burning with Desire*, 63.

In addressing photography's influence on the representation of space in painting, it can be said that up until the invention of photography, painting's history is one that strived for optical similitude, akin to that of an open window. However, since photography's invention, the central consideration for painting has been the binary of representation and non-representation. Curiously, as painting progressed technically to render the imaginary real, so the inverse has been true of photography—the real has become imaginary. In so doing, photography came to question its own indexicality. It can be said that photography freed painting from the restraints of realistic representation. One of the most influential painters of today who addresses these particular relationships between photography and painting is Gerhard Richter, whose work I will discuss further in the second chapter of this exegesis.

### *Modernism: The Window as Icon*

Whereas the paintings of the Romantic era brought the interior and exterior together through the illusion of depth, modernism flattens the distance. This can be observed in the window paintings of Matisse. According to Friedberg, "In the centuries since Alberti, single-point perspective and its concomitant symbolic system have been challenged ... by changes in perspective in modern painting".<sup>71</sup> The window in modernism rejected illusionistic art and the metaphor of painting as a window onto the world. Instead, modernism emphasised the material surface of the painting. As Shirley Neilsen Blum in *Henri Matisse: Rooms with a View* (2010) claims, "In the early twentieth century Robert Delaunay, Pablo Picasso, Juan Gris, Marcel Duchamp ... and Matisse made the window an icon of modern art."<sup>72</sup>

*Windows have always interested me because they are a passageway between the exterior and the interior.*  
—Henri Matisse<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Friedberg, *The Virtual Window*, 2.

<sup>72</sup> Shirley Neilsen Blum, *Henri Matisse: Rooms with a View* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2010), 11.

<sup>73</sup> Henri Matisse (1951) quoted in Peter Kropmanns, "Henri Matisse and the Window: A Theme and Variations," *Fresh Widow*, 73.

The window engages with key philosophical ideas from Plato to now about interiority and exteriority. In considering Plato's cave as a window, which is indicative of spatial demarcation, it is important to understand the concepts of interiority and exteriority. A basic understanding of these concepts starts with the notion of thought as 'interiority' and the body and the physical world as 'exteriority'. In other words, the term 'interiority' is indexed to things that transcend the external world around them (such is the case of Plato's Ideal world of Forms), whereas 'exteriority' refers to the physical world. Modernist painting challenges this dichotomous relation by blurring the distinction between the interior and the exterior.

The window plays a key role in Matisse's oeuvre, featuring "in nearly one hundred of his paintings",<sup>74</sup> and is highly significant to his thinking about interior and exterior space. For Matisse, the window "represented neither a gateway of the spectral or of the spiritual. Nor did he view it as a barrier between the domestic and the outside world ... For him, the window linked the exterior to the interior."<sup>75</sup> Abiding to the rules of modernism, "Matisse searched for ways to compress depth against the plane of a canvas, the very opposite to the aim of the Renaissance. Flat by definition but deep by virtue of its view, a window for Matisse linked the distant to the close at hand."<sup>76</sup>

Matisse's methods for blurring the distinction between the interior space and the exterior space involved using the same intensity of colour for both the outside scene and the space of his studio. This can be seen in *La fenêtre bleue* (*The Blue Window* 1913, figure 15), where interior and exterior are indivisible. Elements of the external landscape were painted in blocks of colour piled on top of one another, eliminating perspective; rather than painting only the view through a window. As Blum observes, "Matisse included an indication of the window itself, making the frame a part of the

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<sup>74</sup> Blum, *Henri Matisse: Rooms with a View*, 7.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

picture and ensuring that one would have to take into account both the interior and the exterior world.”<sup>77</sup>



**Figure 15** Henri Matisse *La fenêtre bleue* (*The Blue Window*) 1913

While the window is virtually synonymous with Matisse’s paintings it mostly features as an element within the interior space of his studio. Only rarely is the window isolated in Matisse’s paintings, serving as the sole subject in which the window frame and the edge of the canvas almost align. However, this is the case in Matisse’s most abstract window paintings, *Porte-fenêtre à Collioure* (*French Window at Collioure* 1914, figure 16) and *Composition* (*The Yellow Curtain* 1915, figure 17).

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid.



**Figure 16** Henri Matisse *Porte-fenêtre à Collioure* (*French Window at Collioure*) 1914

Composed of vertical bands of colour and only rudimentary figurative elements, *French Window at Collioure* is one of Matisse's most abstract paintings. However abstract the composition seems, the figurative elements, such as the horizontal markings on the blue curtained window panel, and the suggestion of depth via the oblique angle of the folded shutter which opens out to darkness, suggest that the painting remains concerned with representation. In *French Window at Collioure*, Matisse reverses the concept of a window and its view by eliminating the view entirely and building his painting with the parts of the French window itself.

*The Yellow Curtain* represents a view from the window of Matisse's home in Issy-les-Moulineaux. The yellow ochre of the flowering trees and the blue sky outside are framed by a curtained window. Despite the title of this work, which Matisse called *Composition*, the curtain is red with green flowers. The

glimpses of the yellow lining of the curtain to the left of the canvas echoes the yellow of the trees outside, thus drawing together the interior and exterior spaces, making this painting relevant spatially to this research. As Blum describes, “The exterior is so wedded to the interior that one can no longer define the ‘view’ as something apart.”<sup>78</sup>



**Figure 17** Henri Matisse *The Yellow Curtain* 1915 oil on canvas

Matisse states that, in his painting, the “space is one unity from the horizon right to the interior of my work room ... the wall with the window does not create two different worlds”.<sup>79</sup> The window here is a means to conjoin dualities previously associated since Plato. By blurring the distinction

<sup>78</sup> Blum, *Henri Matisse: Rooms with a View*, 77.

<sup>79</sup> Jack D. Flam, ed. *Matisse on Art*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Phaidon Press Limited, 1978), 93.

between the interior and exterior spaces, the window is a means for Matisse to create a single unified whole. The key significance of Matisse’s approach to space is in the flatness of his paintings; the compression of space and structure of elements are premonitory of aspects in abstract painting that appeared half a century later. His profound influence on artists such as Ellsworth Kelly and other Colour Field and Minimalist painters of the 1950s and 1960s is well documented.<sup>80</sup>

### *Contemporary Windows: Screens and Frames*

*What one can see in the light of day is always less interesting than what happens behind a pane of glass.*  
—Charles Baudelaire<sup>81</sup>



**Figure 18** Michael Leunig *TV Sunrise*

Like the window, the screen is at once a surface and a frame—a reflective plane onto which an image is cast and a frame that limits its view. The screen is a component piece of architecture, rendering a wall permeable to ventilation in new ways: a “virtual window” that changes the materiality of built space, adding new apertures that dramatically alter our conception of space.<sup>82</sup>

<sup>80</sup> Blum, *Henri Matisse: Rooms with a View*, 77.

<sup>81</sup> Baudelaire in Friedberg, *The Virtual Window*, 5.

<sup>82</sup> Friedberg, *The Virtual Window*, 1.

The window has been taken up as a metaphor in areas of visual media from painting to television and computer interfaces. The window as a concept has been related to seeing and visual perception throughout history—from the medium of painting to television and computer interfaces. In this regard, I am indebted to Anne Friedberg’s text *The Virtual Window: From Alberti to Microsoft* (2006), where she examines the window as a key measure of epistemic changes in representational systems from painting to photography to moving-image media and computer display.

Friedberg argues that “[p]erspective may have met its end on the computer desktop”,<sup>83</sup> and likens the space of the computer screen to the “surfaces of cubism—frontality, suppression of depth, overlapping layers—[rather] than with the extended depth of Renaissance perspective”.<sup>84</sup> Unlike Alberti’s single-point perspective, the computer as window “shifts its metaphoric hold from the singular frame of perspective to the multiplicity of windows within windows, frames within frames, screens within screens”.<sup>85</sup> This multiplicity offers an alternative, multiple experience of space and an opportunity for contemporary paintings to provide a rupture to the homogenous surface of new media screens. Painting responds to the dematerialised reality framed on the screen through the material dimension of its production.

To summarise, this part of the chapter has established the long historical presence of the window in painting. Its relevance to this research stems from both the window’s function in terms of the construction of space (such as perspective) and also conceptually in terms of interiority and exteriority, illusory space, and the reality of material space. The window’s shift into contemporaneity says much about the way we see and about how our representations have altered as a result. As a contemporary painter, I identify with “[a]rtists’ enduring interest in the motif of the window as a point of departure for complex contemplations on the image at the threshold between

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 1–2.



illusionistic depiction and non-representational painting”.<sup>86</sup> It is my primary interest to explore this unstable space through my research and painting practice.

## ***Part 2: The Unstable Space***

A challenge for this research was in naming the space I am driven to explore in my painting practice. The space I have come to name “unstable” derived from my earliest readings, which found me searching in optical science journals for the terms with which to describe how we visually perceive such a space. The term was found within an analogy relating our perceptual system to that of the physical system of a trap door, which is only stable when it is either open or closed. The multistable states of our perception discussed in the journals aptly described the space that I continue to be intrigued by. Despite negative connotations that one might associate with the unstable, this is a space that is open to new possibilities and, I argue, new relations in painting.

### ***Multistability in Perception***

Painting can only be viewed through the meeting of two perspectives: that of the viewer and that of the artist. How we interpret what we see is the role of our perception; thus, it plays a major role in the understanding and creation of a painting. My creative practice has led me to question how we perceive a space that is ambiguous. What happens in perception when the stimulus is open to multiple interpretations? Drawing on the science of perception, I have discovered that it is within our perception of ambiguous figures that the workings of the perceptual system are most evident. This is discussed by Fred Attneave in his article “Multistability in Perception”, written in 1971. For the purpose of my research, the phenomenon of multistability in perception is referred to only in its relation to visual perception rather than other recognised occurrences in auditory and olfactory percepts. The concept of

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<sup>86</sup> Müller-Schareck, “Fresh Widow: The Idea of the Window as a ‘Point of Departure’,” 23.

multistability is a gestalt concept and is aligned within the discourse of deconstruction. Gestalt itself is defined simply as something that is made of many parts and yet is somehow more than or different from the combination of its parts. This concept is taken up by Derrida's 'idiom' and Deleuze's 'difference', which are also defined as being different to the sum of their parts. While I explore this later in this chapter, I now turn to the concept of multistability.

Multistability in perception is the spontaneous alternation between two or more perceptual states that occurs when sensory information is ambiguous. Visual science offers several examples of when this perceptual phenomenon occurs. Ambiguous figures, figure-ground reversal, and ambiguities of depth are some such cases. It is evident that ambiguity plays a key role in multistable perception.

According to Attneave, "It is the business of the brain to represent the outside world. Perceiving is not just sensing but rather an effect of sensory input on the representational system."<sup>87</sup> In the case of an ambiguous figure, the viewer is provided with:

an input for which there are two or more possible representations that are quite different and about equally good, by whatever criteria the perceptual system employs. When alternative representations, or descriptions, of the input are equally good, the perceptual system will sometimes adopt one and sometimes another. In other words, the perception is multistable.<sup>88</sup>

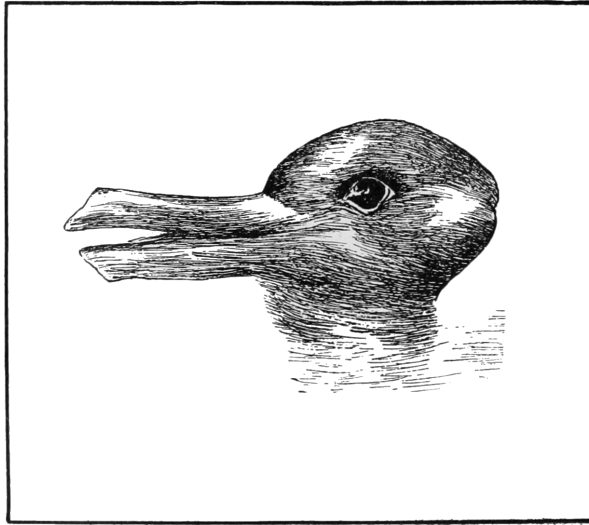
While Attneave refers to a figurative ambiguity, one can posit a spatial ambiguity in the rival or opposing systems of representation, such as photography and painting. This is further explored in Chapter 2 when I discuss the overpainted photographs of Richter.

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<sup>87</sup> Fred Attneave, "Multistability in Perception," in *Reading from Scientific American: Image, Object and Illusion* (San Francisco: W. H. Freeman and Company, 1971), 91.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

The most classic example of multistable perception is Joseph Jastrow's rabbit-duck figure (figure 19), where one can see a rabbit facing right or a duck facing the left, but it is difficult to see both duck and rabbit simultaneously.<sup>89</sup>



**Figure 19** *Rabbit-Duck* example of rival-schemata ambiguity

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<sup>89</sup> This is also known as rival-schemata ambiguity.



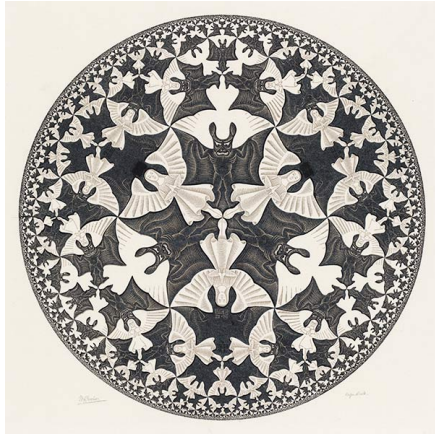
**Figure 20** Salvador Dali *Slave Market with Apparition of the Disappearing Bust of Voltaire* (detail) 1940

An example of where figural ambiguity occurs in painting is in Surrealist Salvador Dali's *Slave Market with Apparition of the Disappearing Bust of Voltaire* (1940, figure 20). In this painting, Dali's wife Gala gazes at a sculpted bust of French philosopher Voltaire. The figures of two merchants standing in a slave market create the illusion of the sculpture of Voltaire's head and shoulders. The merchants' heads form Voltaire's eyes. When viewed at close range, the two figures predominate, but when viewed at a distance, the bust of Voltaire becomes apparent.

An example of figure-ground reversal is the woodblock tessellation of Dutch artist Maurits C. Escher *Circle Limit IV (Heaven and Hell)* 1960, figure 21). When viewed, its appearance alternates between a white angels and black devils. It is impossible to see both figures at the same time; in other words, each is seen alternately, not simultaneously. The devils and angels compete in a battle of figure and ground, alternating repeatedly in what Attneave describes as a "competition between rival-object schemata [in which] neither seems to be able to overpower the other".<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Attneave, "Multistability in Perception," 92.



**Figure 21** M.C. Escher, *Circle Limit IV (Heaven and Hell)* 1960

One particularly relevant point that Attneave raises in the case of figure-ground reversals is that, unlike the complex figurative tessellations of Escher, the components of a figure-ground reversal needn't be either complex or familiar figurative objects. In other words, figure-ground reversal also occurs in simple abstract images. He explains that a scribbled line down the middle of a circle creates a perfectly good example of a reversing figure, as the line will be seen to be either a contour or a boundary. The line in this respect is a shared edge. Its appearance depends on whether the viewer sees the contour as either inside or outside the object/form. The case of the line through a circle, Attneave explains, is tristable because the third possible perception is that the line is seen as a thing in itself rather than the boundary of a figure. He writes:

The point of basic interest in figure-ground reversal is that one line can have two shapes. Since an artist's line drawing is readily identifiable with the object it is supposed to portray, and since a shape has much the same appearance whether it is white on black, black on white or otherwise coloured, many workers have suggested that the visual system represents or encodes objects primarily in terms of their contours. As we have seen, however, a contour can be part of two shapes. The perceptual representation of a contour is specific to which side is regarded as the figure and which as the ground. Shape may be invariant over a black-white reversal, but it is not invariant over an inside-outside reversal.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

Ambiguities of depth characterise a great number of multistable figures, with the Necker cube<sup>92</sup> (left in figure 22) being a familiar example.

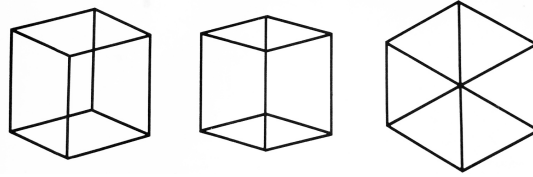


Figure 22 Projections of a cube

To understand how depth relationships can be multistable, Attneave explains how the perceptual system can derive a three-dimensional representation from a two-dimensional drawing:

A straight line in the outside world casts a straight line on the retina. A given straight line on the retina, however, could be the image of any one of an infinite number of external lines, and not necessarily straight lines, that lie in a common plane with one another and the eye. The image on a single retina is always two-dimensional, exactly as a photograph is. We should not be surprised, therefore, that depth is sometimes ambiguous.<sup>93</sup>

From the above, I surmise that the wide use of photographs as source images for paintings may be a contributing factor in the ongoing fascination of some painters' explorations of ambiguous spaces within their work. Indeed, exploiting the ambiguous spaces that occur within photographic source images plays a major role in my own creative research. A photographic source image captures interacting spaces such as the reflections of a train interior onto the windowpane, superimposing ghost-like shapes onto the exterior landscape. Scratches and graffiti on the glass can become accentuated features of a landscape. Examples such as these are further discussed in relation to my studio practice in Chapter 3 of this exegesis.

In addition to our perceptual system's ability to perceive depth from a two-dimensional representation, it is also able to select a particular orientation, or may vacillate between two or three orientations, out of the infinite number of

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<sup>92</sup> The Necker cube is named after Swiss crystallographer and geographer Louis Albert Necker (1786–1861). Necker devised the ambiguous line drawing of the cube in 1832 in order to demonstrate the optical illusion he reported to occur in the line drawings of crystals, which appeared to reverse in depth spontaneously. The cube has since become a classic example of perspective reversal.

<sup>93</sup> Attneave, "Multistability in Perception," 95.

legitimate possibilities that exist. The answer to how the perceptual system makes this selection can be found within the Gestalt theory's principle of *Prägnanz*, which explains the tendency for multiple sensory perceptions to be unconsciously organised in accordance to specific criteria, such as simplicity, regularity and stability. In other words, a viewer perceives the simplest figure that is consistent with a given image. Attneave emphasises the important role that simplicity plays in 'ambiguous depth', also known as 'perspective reversal':

One observes a particular configuration of lines on paper, such as the Necker cube (left in figure 22), and assigns a three-dimensional orientation to the lines such that the whole becomes a cube (although an infinite number of noncubical forms could project the same form) because a cube is the simplest of the possibilities. In a cube the lines (edges) are all the same length; they take only three directions, and the angles they form are all equal and right angles. No other interpretation of the figure, including the two-dimensional aspect itself, is as simple and regular. In cases of reversible perspective two maximally simple tridimensional constructions are permissible, each being symmetrical with the other in depth.<sup>94</sup>

Relatively complex projections are nearly always perceived in depth. A figure such as a regular hexagon divided into equilateral triangles [as seen on the right in figure 22], which is simple and regular in two dimensions, stays two-dimensional because seeing it as a cube does not make it any simpler.

Intermediate figures become tristable; they are sometimes seen as being flat and sometimes as being one or another aspect of a cube.<sup>95</sup>

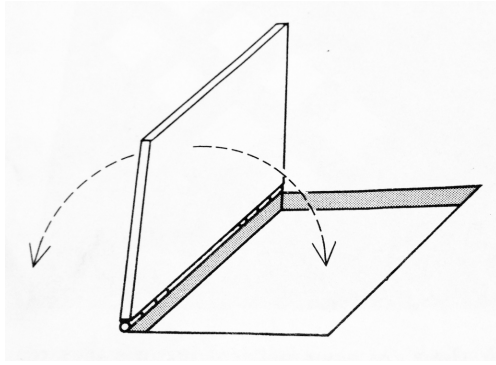
As Attneave recognises, many physical systems possess the same multistable characteristics, the relevance of this being that a "comparison of multistability in physical and perceptual situations may yield some significant clues to the basic processes of perception".<sup>96</sup> In considering the phenomenon of perceptual multistability to describe the space I explore in my paintings, I found Attneave's analogy of a trapdoor useful. The trapdoor (figure 23), a simple form of multistability, is stable only when it is either open or shut. Hence, the space that is neither closed nor open is an unstable space.

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 95-96.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 91.



**Figure 23** Trapdoor

The idea of a space that is neither open nor closed but multistable is significant to understanding the spaces that drive explorations in my studio practice. Multistability is the ambiguous perceptual experience of alternating between two or more interpretations of that experience. It is an unstable space of interpretation that relies on understanding all possible interpretations of that experience at once. Thus, I arrive at the term ‘unstable space’ as a means to describe the space that I am driven to explore in my creative research.

### *Derrida’s Idiom: The Unstable in Language*

Visual ambiguity shares similarities with the ambiguities inherent in our use of language. Derrida’s conception of the idiom in language, articulated in “Passe-Partout”, the preface to his book *The Truth in Painting*, can be interpreted in such a way as to illuminate this idea in regard to the language of painting. If we consider the sentence such as that provided by Derrida, “I am interested in the idiom in painting”<sup>97</sup>, alternative meanings result from alternative parsings based, in turn, upon linguistic structure.<sup>98</sup> In other words, is the interest in a) the painted expression of idiom “in painting”; b) the words “in painting”; c) the idiomatic trait or style in the domain of painting; d) “the singularity or the irreducible specificity of pictorial art, of that ‘language’ which painting is supposed to be”;<sup>99</sup> or e) any number of other possible translations? No single definition can derive from this sentence, as multiple

<sup>97</sup> Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, 1–13.

<sup>98</sup> Richard Held, “Form Analysis,” *Image, Object and Illusion* (San Francisco: W. H. Freeman and Company, 1974), 89.

<sup>99</sup> Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, 1–2.



meanings infinitely diverge. As Derrida states, “each one divides again, is grafted and contaminated by all the others, and you would never be finished translating them”.<sup>100</sup> This divergence of meaning is what Derrida calls difference, or the instability of meaning.

The idea of difference as an unstable space in meaning is significant to understanding the unstable space that, I argue, is present in the overpaintings of German artist Gerhard Richter and in the paintings of Swedish artist Andreas Eriksson. In considering Derrida’s conception of idiom beyond mere rhetoric, I am indebted to art historian Rosemary Hawker, who has notably drawn on Derrida’s concept in her analysis of the artworks of Richter,<sup>101</sup> which considers the idiomatic difference specific to the mediums of photography and painting. While Hawker predominantly refers to the idea of translation (from photography into painting) in regard to Richter’s photo paintings, my analysis focuses on Richter’s overpainted photographs. I recognise the idiomatic difference of these opposing systems of representation and consider the potential of these new relations as a site in which to further explore the idea of an unstable space that is more than the sum of its parts: a space of difference.

### *Deleuze’s Difference in Itself: The Abstract Line*

Derrida’s idea of difference can be further understood through Deleuze’s concept of ‘difference in itself’, to which he dedicates the first chapter in his text *Difference and Repetition*.<sup>102</sup> Despite the fact that we are most familiar with difference being expressed in binary oppositions, Deleuze states that instead of distinguishing one thing from another, we should understand something that is distinguished in itself. That is, he asks us to imagine ‘difference’ as a thing in itself.

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>101</sup> Rosemary Hawker has written extensively on the relationship between photography and painting in the works of art by Gerhard Richter. See: “The Idiom in Photography as the Truth in Painting,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 101, no. 3 (2002): 541–54; “Painting over Photography: Questions of Medium in Richter’s Overpaintings,” *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art* 8, no. 1 (2007): 43–59; “Idiom Post-Medium: Richter Painting Photography,” *Oxford Art Journal* 32, no. 2 (2009): 263–80.

<sup>102</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), 36–89.

Deleuze relates 'difference in itself' to the concept of the 'abstract line'. Here, it is worth recalling the ambiguity in figure-ground reversal; specifically, the case of the line through a circle, where the line is seen as a thing in itself rather than the boundary of a figure. This idea of the line is akin to Deleuze's concept of difference in itself. The line is the difference in itself regardless of how abstract or indeterminate that line may be. The concept of the abstract line in painting is exemplified when Deleuze recalls Antonin Artaud's idea that "cruelty is nothing but determination *as such*, that precise point at which the determined maintains its essential relation with the undetermined, that rigorous abstract line fed by *chiaroscuro*".<sup>103</sup> As the treatment of light and shade in an image, *Chiaroscuro* serves Deleuze's concept well, *chiaro* meaning 'clear, bright' and *oscuro* meaning 'dark, obscure'.<sup>104</sup> I am certain that I am not alone among painters in spending time with my nose up close to the surface of a painting, searching for the point at which the form distinguishes itself from the background and yet failing to locate it. This is the experience of the abstract line, the indeterminate line in which the clarity of the form meets the obscurity of the background.

Deleuze explains that difference is made when the determination of the figure in the painting is combined with the indeterminate ground. He argues, "it is better to raise up the ground and dissolve the form" and cites Odilon Redon's use of *chiaroscuro* and the abstract line. The aim for Deleuze's philosophy of difference is for difference to "become a harmonious organism and relate determination to other determinations within a form".<sup>105</sup> In this regard, I interpret difference to be a space of possibility for new relations to occur within painting.

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<sup>103</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), 37.

<sup>104</sup> "Chiaroscuro," *Oxford Dictionary* online, 2017, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/chiaroscuro>.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*

## Chapter 2

## Chapter 2 Spatial Relations

*Perhaps the doors, curtains, surface pictures, panes of glass, etc. are metaphors of despair, prompted by the dilemma that our sense of sight causes us to apprehend things, but at the same time restricts and partly precludes our apprehension of reality.*

—Gerhard Richter<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Gerhard Richter, *Text: Writings, Interviews and Letters 1961–2007* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2009), 57.

Gerhard Richter and Andreas Eriksson engage with the representation of spatial concepts through the materiality of their painting and photography practices. In doing this, both also reference the window as a motif in spatial relations.

### ***Gerhard Richter***

The work of German painter Gerhard Richter (b. 1932) is critical to contemporary understandings of painterly space. In particular, his overpainted photographs provide a case study through which to examine the roles that painting and photography play in the representation of space. In focusing my analysis on these works, I argue that the relationships that play out between the mediums of photography and painting, as revealed by Richter, demonstrate possibilities for the expression of new spatial relationships in painting, the central concern of my research.

Richter is widely regarded as one of the most important painters working today. His life and work are the focus of extensive literature, ranging from exhibition and collection catalogues to monographs, documentary films and articles. An array of international critics, such as Benjamin Buchloh,<sup>107</sup> Robert Storr,<sup>108</sup> Dietmar Elger,<sup>109</sup> Hans Ulrich Obrist,<sup>110</sup> have analysed Richter's practice.

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<sup>107</sup> Benjamin Heinze-Dieter Buchloh (b. 1941) is a German art historian. His publications on Richter include *Gerhard Richter: Documenta IX 1992* (New York: Marion Goodman Gallery, 1993), *Gerhard Richter: Large Abstracts* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2008), and *Gerhard Richter: 18 Oktober 1977* (London: ICA, 1989).

<sup>108</sup> Robert Storr (b. 1949) is an American critic and former senior curator for the Department of Painting and Sculpture at The Museum of Modern Art, New York. His publications on Richter include *Gerhard Richter: Forty Years of Painting* (New York: MOMA, 2002), an exhibition catalogue from the largest retrospective of Richter's work to date, held at the Museum of Modern Art; *September: A History Painting by Gerhard Richter* (London: Tate Publishing, 2009); *Gerhard Richter: The Cage Paintings* (London: Tate Publishing, 2009); *Gerhard Richter: Doubt and Belief in Painting* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2003); and *Gerhard Richter: October 18, 1977* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2000).

<sup>109</sup> Dietmar Elger (b. 1958) is a German archivist; he is currently director of the Gerhard Richter Archive at the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden. He authored the biography *Gerhard Richter: A Life in Painting*, trans. Elizabeth M. Solaro (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

<sup>110</sup> Hans-Ulrich Obrist (b. 1968) is a Swiss art curator, critic and art historian; he is currently co-director of Exhibitions and Programmes and Director of International Projects at the Serpentine Gallery, London. He edited *Gerhard Richter: The Daily Practice of Painting: Writings 1962-1993* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995) and co-authored with Richter the artist book *Obrist-O'Brüst* (Cologne: Walter König, 2009). Richter dedicated this book to Obrist.

Throughout his oeuvre, Richter has continually interrogated painting's material status, the medium's history and role in confronting history. He has questioned painting's ability to represent historical experience—specifically, German political life.<sup>111</sup> Richter has been applauded for his “deconstruction of the languages and histories of painting”<sup>112</sup> as well as criticised for “lacking commitment to any one practice”.<sup>113</sup> He challenges notions of representation in his refusal to maintain a polar opposition between abstraction and figuration. He maintains that “the abstraction/figuration polarity is a false one”.<sup>114</sup>

Questions of representation remain a constant theme throughout Richter's creative practice, specifically where painting and photography converge with ideas of representation. Since 1989, Richter has been working on several series of overpainted photographs.<sup>115</sup> These are highly significant to his oeuvre because they raise new questions about the material relations between photography and painting, abstraction and illusional images. These works are an important link to the spatial concerns explored in my research, where the problem of extending painterly space beyond the dead-end of illusion and beyond modernism's “essentialist reduction of painting to flatness”<sup>116</sup> is a shared concern. The overpaintings are made through relatively simple means; the artist applies paint to a variety of snapshots such as intimate family photographs, touristic images, landscapes, buildings and interiors.

Here, I focus my analysis on one particular series of Gerhard Richter's overpainted photographs, *Firenze (Florence)* 1999, comprising 103 photographs, mostly snapshots of Florence, Italy, painted over by the artist.

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<sup>111</sup> I refer the reader to both the *Atlas* project, in which a collection of images of private family photographs are juxtaposed with images of public German history, and the *October 18, 1977* series of paintings that focus on events of German political life in the Baader-Meinhof era.

<sup>112</sup> Mark Godfrey, *Gerhard Richter: Panorama* (London: TATE Publishing, 2011), 12.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

<sup>115</sup> Dietmar Elger, “Epilogue,” *Gerhard Richter: Florence*, ed. Dietmar Elger (Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2001), np.

<sup>116</sup> Rosalind Krauss, *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*, The Walter Neurath Memorial Lectures (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2000), 6.

My analysis explores how new spatial relations are created through Richter's use of both the illusory means of the photograph that 'indexically' represents space, and the immediate space of the material surface and texture of paint.

My analysis will draw upon three critical approaches in order to examine questions of medium in Richter's overpainted photographs. Firstly, Rosalind Krauss' meditation on medium that looks beyond modernist essentialism; in particular, her concept of 'differential specificity' through which the structure of Richter's overpainted photographs can be understood as aggregates of interlocking supports and layered conventions.<sup>117</sup> Secondly, Derrida's concept of 'idiom', as discussed by art historian Rosemary Hawker in "Painting Over Photography: Questions of Medium in Richter's Overpaintings",<sup>118</sup> which serves to describe the relations that occur between mediums and considers how these relations "communicate beyond the sum of their parts".<sup>119</sup> Hawker proposes that "Derrida's conception of idiom in language offers a new inflection on understanding the contemporary role of the medium in art. Questions of idiom and medium are staged almost schematically in Richter's 'overpaintings'."<sup>120</sup> Finally, Deleuze's concept of the 'haptic' and optical vision helps to elucidate how both the photographic and painterly elements of these artworks create a spatial depth through the palpable tactility of the smeared paint laid over the homogeneously smooth surface of the photograph.

The centrality of medium relations to recent discussions of art confirms Krauss as key to updating Greenberg, and Derrida is essential to thinking about the bringing together of mediums without conflating them into hybrids. However separate, these three critical approaches—Krauss's differential specificity, Derrida's concept of 'idiom', and Deleuze's concept of the 'haptic' and optical vision—are nonetheless interrelated. Krauss' differential specificity and Derrida's idiom both find meaning in difference and untranslatability. My reading of Deleuze brings me more specifically to the

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Hawker, "Painting over Photography."

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 43.

relevant mediums of photography and painting through his concept of 'haptic' and optical vision, which describes the specificity of the visual experience of each medium. Here 'haptic' serves well to address painting and optical vision serves the photograph.

The polarising binary that separates art into representational and non-representational spheres has been a central consideration for painting since the invention of photography, and "it is well known that Richter built his work on these two poles from the outset, not coming down on one side or the other, representational or non-representational".<sup>121</sup> Richter's overpainted photographs present these as conjoined polarities, linking the reality references between the illustrative photograph and the presence of paint in order to immediately question both of them fundamentally.<sup>122</sup>

### *Krauss: Differential Specificity*

Richter's oeuvre has consistently engaged with questions of medium and his overpainted photographs break from the model of a medium-specific modernism. As Krauss rightly points out, it is virtually impossible to raise questions of medium without invoking American art critic and central theorist of late modernism, Clement Greenberg. The modernism formulated in his writings is defined "as the historical tendency of an art practice towards complete self-referential autonomy, to be achieved by scrupulous attention to all that is *specific* to that practice: its own traditions and materials, its own *difference* from other art practices".<sup>123</sup> As one of Greenberg's main critics, Krauss argues for a "different specificity" in what she deems "the post-medium condition" in her essay "A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition".<sup>124</sup> Krauss argues that "specificity" can no longer

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<sup>121</sup> Uwe M. Schneede, "Reality, the Photograph, the Paint, and the Picture," in *Gerhard Richter: Overpainted Photographs*, ed. Markus Heinzemann (Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2008), 201.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 201.

<sup>123</sup> Victor Burgin, "Figures of Difference," in *Art in Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 1069.

<sup>124</sup> Krauss, *A Voyage on the North Sea*.



be located in the materials or methods, but in “Art Itself”.<sup>125</sup> In contrast to late modernism’s medium specificity that Greenberg championed, artists such as Richter have contributed to the post-medium condition that Krauss discusses. Our post-medium era sees a great deal of artists engaged with multiple mediums and hybrid media. In an early interview, Richter provocatively states: “I’m not trying to imitate a photograph; I’m trying to make one. And if I disregard the assumption that a photograph is a piece of paper exposed to light, then I am practicing photography by other means.”<sup>126</sup> Richter’s claim clearly outlines the challenge of medium specificity.

### *Derrida’s Idiom*

Hawker draws on Derrida’s discussion of language and translation to understand that which Richter articulates in the bringing together of painting and photography. Summarising Derrida’s essay “Des Tours de Babel”,<sup>127</sup>

Hawker explains that:

[T]ranslation will always fail to communicate all that is entailed in the other language. Yet, it is this impossibility that enables translation to produce meaning. It is translation’s inability to thoroughly remake a meaning from another language that enables it to make yet another meaning, to produce something else again through the process of translation. This is what we can see at work in Richter’s taking photography into painting.<sup>128</sup>

Hawker explores Derrida’s conception of idiom, which is defined in the following way: “what does not survive of the original in its translation is idiom, and therefore it is idiom that distinguishes the original and the new”.<sup>129</sup>

In her analysis of Richter’s ‘photo paintings’, Hawker states “In the strictest sense, his translation of one medium into the other fails.”<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>126</sup> Gerhard Richter in an “Interview with Rolf Schön” (1972), in *The Daily Practice of Painting: Writings 1962-1993*, ed. Hans-Ulrich Obrist (London: Thames and Hudson and Anthony d’Offay Gallery, 1995), 73.

<sup>127</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Des Tour de Babel,” in *Difference in Translation*, ed. Joseph F. Graham (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985), 170.

<sup>128</sup> Hawker, “Painting over Photography,” 46.

<sup>129</sup> Derrida, “Des Tours de Babel,” 192.

<sup>130</sup> Hawker, “Painting over Photography,” 46.

While this idea of translation serves well to describe Richter's 'photopaintings' wherein the photographic medium is translated into paint, there is a point in Richter's oeuvre where this methodology, together with the idea of translation, is exhausted. When Richter brings together the medium of paint and photography in such a direct way in his overpaintings, there is no longer a translation occurring from one medium into the other medium. Rather, there is a resistance. If we understand idiom to be the part of language that resists translation, what is occurring in Richter's overpaintings is a case of making the functioning of idiom visible. As Hawker asserts, the conjunction of the two visual languages "opens the work to meaning in a way that neither means of expression could achieve alone".<sup>131</sup> So, while there is no translation occurring as with Richter's photopaintings,

Idiom enables us to know something of individual media in their irreconcilable multiplicity, [or in Krauss' terms] their 'differential specificity' and, at the same time, to know something of what is common to all languages and media: the space of their difference. Derrida describes this when he writes: "Through each language something is intended which is the same and yet which none of the languages can attain separately...They complete each other."<sup>132</sup>

The concept of idiom as interpreted by Hawker is highly relevant to my painting practice. In this way, the visual language of painting at the threshold between abstract and illusionistic space can be understood to generate new meanings and relations.

### *Deleuze's Difference in Itself*

Deleuze's idea of the space of difference is particularly relevant to my discussion and can be further understood through his major work *Difference and Repetition* in which he establishes the concept of "difference in itself".<sup>133</sup> Deleuze's 'philosophy of difference' proposes the question, "Cannot difference become a harmonious organism and relate determination to other

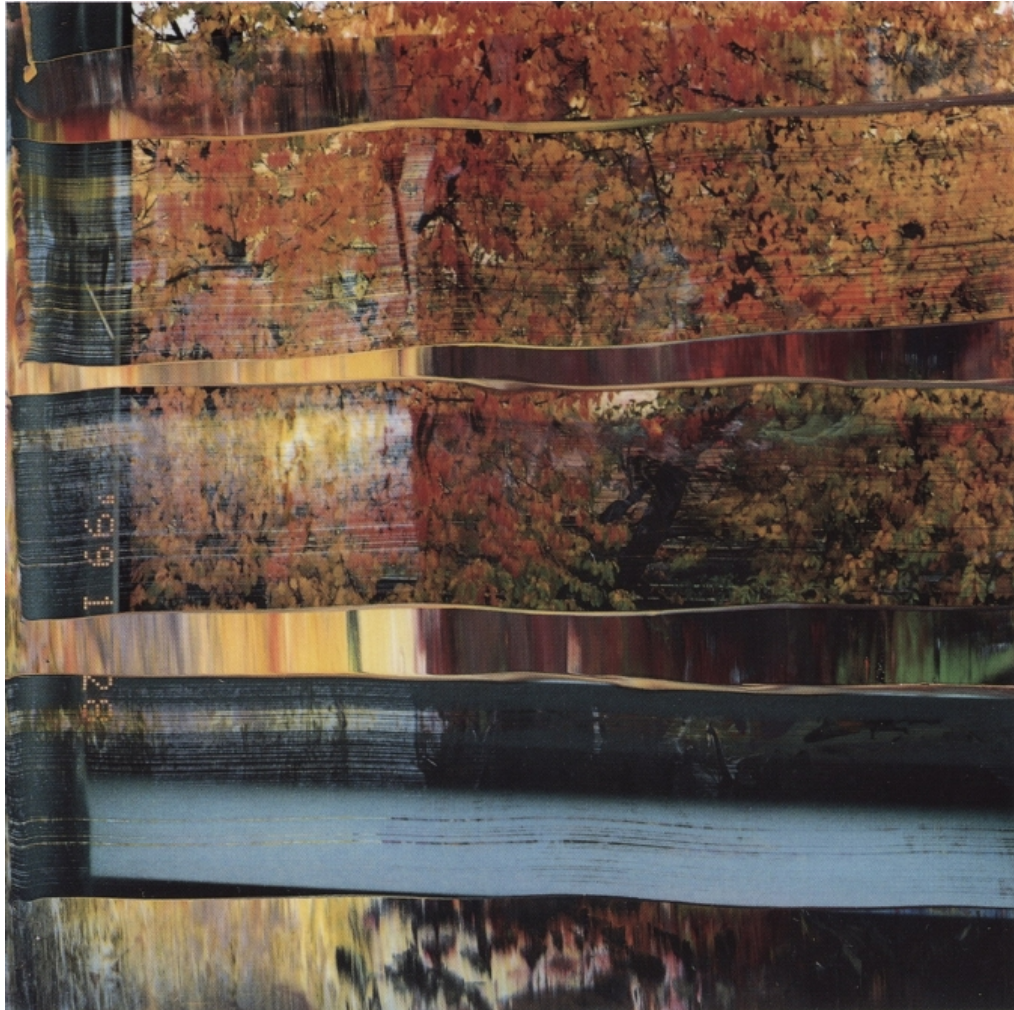
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<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>132</sup> Krauss and Derrida in Hawker, "Painting over Photography," 47.

<sup>133</sup> Gilles Deleuze, "Difference in Itself," in *Difference and Repetition*, 36-89.

determinations within a form—that is to say, within the coherent medium of an organic representation?”<sup>134</sup>



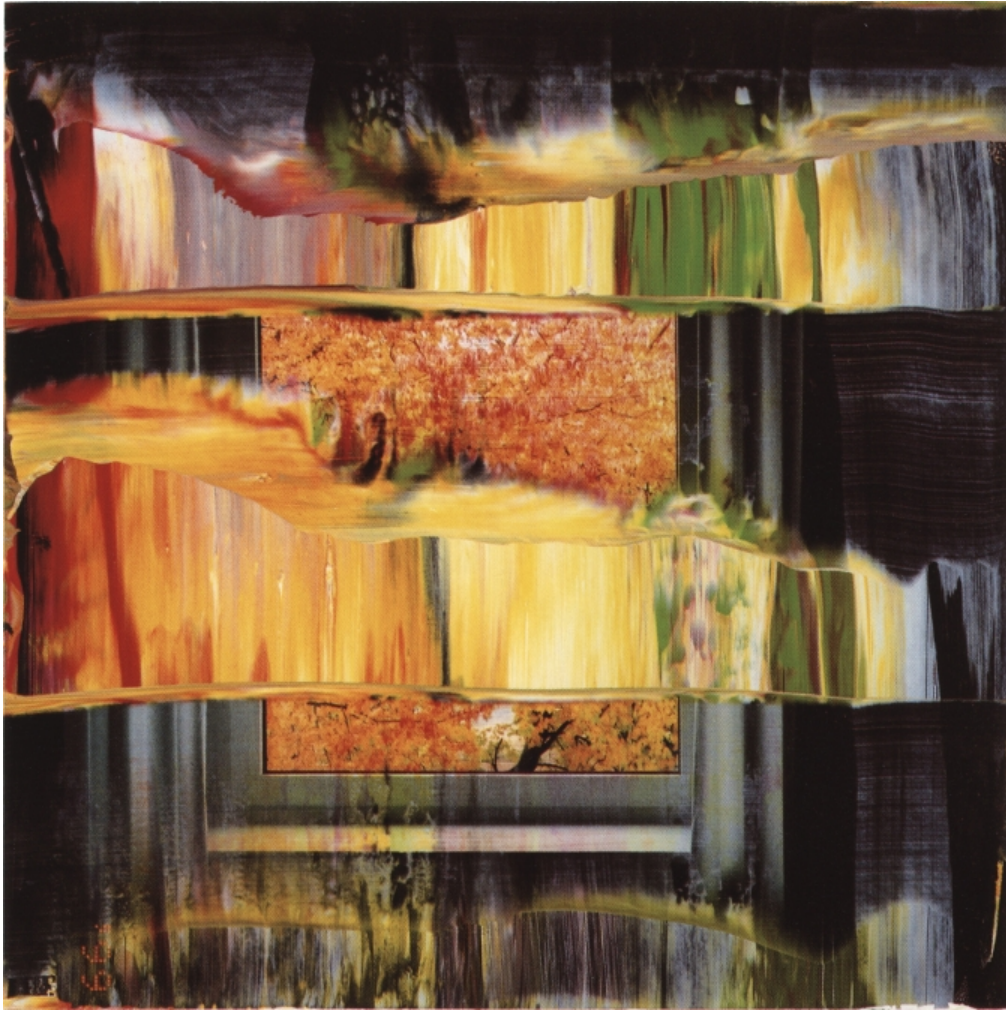
**Figure 24** Gerhard Richter *19.12.1999* 1999

Richter’s overpainted photographs bring together two opposing visual systems, highlighting their ‘medium specificity’ through their juxtaposition. The concept of the idiom visibly manifests itself, creating a space of difference. However, there are moments in these works where the painted elements in the foreground and the photograph as ground, through colour and/or form, coalesce indeterminately, as seen in *19.12.1999* (1999, figure 24). It is unclear where one dimension ends and the other begins; that is to say, where the painting and photography and the figure and the ground begin and end. Deleuze’s elucidation of the transition that occurs between figure

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 37.

and ground in *chiaroscuro*,<sup>135</sup> as discussed in Chapter 1, is useful in understanding this aspect of Richter's work. He states, "both determinations [figure and ground] and the indeterminate combine in a single determination which 'makes' the difference".<sup>136</sup> In these terms, we can assert that Richter's overpainted photographs create a 'space of difference' in the terms that Deleuze establishes.



**Figure 25** Gerhard Richter *1.12.1999* 1999

Many of Richter's overpainted photographs are based on commercial 10 x 15 centimetre photographic prints. The still wet paint that remains on the wide rubber squeegees that Richter uses for his large abstract paintings is dragged over the pictorial face of the photograph.<sup>137</sup> The *Firenze* series differs from

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<sup>135</sup> Deleuze uses the paintings of Goya and Odilon Redon as exemplars; see Deleuze, "Difference in Itself," 37.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 36–89.

<sup>137</sup> Elger, "Epilogue," np.

Richter's other overpainted photographs in that he has gained more control through modifying his technique to use a palette knife to apply the paint to the photograph and then scrape it off again.<sup>138</sup> Here, according to Elger, Richter "achieves a balance between structures arrived at by chance and deliberate graphic interventions and corrections".<sup>139</sup> Additionally, Richter has controlled the format of the *Firenze* series by trimming the originally rectangular prints down to a unified 12 x 12 centimetre format.<sup>140</sup>

In *1.12.1999* (1999, figure 25), in which the photographic image is a view from Richter's former studio on Bismarckstrasse in Cologne, the artist responds to the geometry of the window.<sup>141</sup> With a comparatively stringent colour application in horizontal and vertical bands, his colouring takes up the autumnal splendour of the trees in the window frame.<sup>142</sup>

The eye is unsettled as its focus alternates from the up-close encounter of the smeared paint's material surface to the illusory space of the photograph. As Siri Hustvedt observes, the dynamic between photograph and paint becomes one of seeing and blindness, of playing one dimension against another, and creating ambiguities between them.<sup>143</sup> What occurs here for the viewer can be described by what visual scientists call multistability in perception: "when alternative representations are presented, the perceptual system will sometimes adopt one and sometimes another. In other words, the perception is multistable."<sup>144</sup> As discussed in Chapter 1, the rabbit-duck figure (figure 19) is a classic example used to describe this perceptual phenomenon, where it is hard to see the rabbit and duck simultaneously. In a similar way, the

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., np.

<sup>140</sup> The *Firenze* series was created as a tribute to the music of Steve Reich and Florence-based musicians Contempoartensemble. Originally intended as an edition with accompanying music CD, the *Firenze* series of prints were trimmed down to the dimensions of a CD cover—12 x 12cm.

<sup>141</sup> This is also the case in the overpaintings titled *17.12.1999*, *18.12.1999*, *19.12.1999*, and *20.12.1999*, all of which show views from the same studio window in Cologne.

<sup>142</sup> Elger, "Epilogue," np.

<sup>143</sup> Siri Hustvedt, "Truth and Rightness", *Gerhard Richter: Overpainted Photographs*, ed. Markus Heinzelmann (Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2008), 77.

<sup>144</sup> Fred Attneave, "Multistability in Perception." *Reading from Scientific American: Image, Object and Illusion* (San Francisco: W. H. Freeman and Company, 1971), 91.

painted and photographic elements of Richter's overpainted photographs are difficult to see simultaneously. Attneave explains that:

the multistable behavior of the perceptual system displays two notable characteristics. The first is that at any one moment only one aspect of the ambiguous figure can be seen; mixtures or intermediate states occur fleetingly if at all. The second is that the different percepts alternate periodically.<sup>145</sup>

In the case of Richter's overpainted photographs, this ambiguity is less a figural ambiguity than the creation of spatial ambiguity. Stability occurs only when the space is either open or closed, but with Richter's overpainted photographs, the space is both opened and collapsed (that is, the photographic element collapses space) and thus creates an unstable, ambiguous space. An analogous physical system, as Attneave offers, is as a trapdoor that is stable only when it is either open or closed.

The questioning of reality is a prominent concern in Richter's practice, and his overpainted photographs, I believe, address this concern most directly.

As Elger describes,

[T]hese overpainted photographs concentrate Gerhard Richter's main artistic concept: a skeptical questioning of our experiences of reality and an attempt to grasp that reality with the help of different painterly processes [Richter states that] "photography has almost no reality, it is quasi just picture. And painting always has reality; the paint is tangible, has presence; but it always results in a picture...I have taken small photographs which I then smeared with paint. This brought aspects of the problem together."<sup>146</sup>

While Richter discusses these artworks through questions of reality, I focus on the spatial aspects of the coming together of these disparate elements, where photographic space collides with painterly space to create a new space, or, as Elger writes, "the illusionist depiction melds with the materiality of the paint to form a new indissoluble /(inextricable) pictorial unit".<sup>147</sup> This new space, as previously discussed, is an unstable one.

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>146</sup> Richter in Elger, "Epilogue," np.

<sup>147</sup> Elger, "Epilogue," np.

### *The Haptic and Optic: Painting and Photography*

In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari develop an aesthetic concept around the haptic.<sup>148</sup> They do this by distinguishing optical vision (*regard optique*) and haptic vision (*regard haptique*). Whereas optical vision enables us to perceive depth, haptic vision explains our perception of that which is in proximity. The *haptic* is defined by Deleuze and Guattari as “close-range vision, as distinguished from long-distance vision. [It is] ‘tactile,’ or rather ‘haptic’ space, as distinguished from optical space”.<sup>149</sup> Deleuze prefers haptic over tactile vision as “it does not establish an opposition between two sense organs but rather invites the assumption that the eye itself may fulfill this nonoptical function”.<sup>150</sup> That is to suggest that the eye has the ability to perceive texture without physical contact with the object.

This distinction is important to understanding the different kinds of space evident in Richter’s overpainted photographs, where the haptic can be used to describe the painted elements in contrast to the photographic elements in these works. Deleuze’s aesthetic concepts of the ‘haptic’ and optic help to elucidate how both the photographic and painterly elements of these artworks create a spatial depth via the palpable tactility of the smeared paint over the homogenously smooth photograph. In considering the painted element of Richter’s artwork, we can understand the smears of pastose paint as close vision–haptic space, whereas the photographs present a distant vision–optical space. In understanding how these concepts are important to our perception of space, we can then further consider how the bringing together of these concepts of space in Richter’s compositions generates new spatial relations.

Through this analysis, we can understand Richter’s overpainted photographs as ‘making difference’—a space of difference that is more than the sum of its

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<sup>148</sup> As discussed in Chapter 1, Deleuze’s development of the concept of the haptic owes much to Riegl.

<sup>149</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 572.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*

parts—offering possibilities for creating new spatial relations within painting. Through Krauss' 'differential specificity', we can understand the space of difference in Richter's work, as created by the juxtaposition of opposing mediums—photography and painting. Through Hawker's re-reading of Derrida's concept of idiom, the space of difference is conceptually understood through the failure of translation. Finally, the perception of the space of difference can be understood via Deleuze's concept of the haptic.

### **Andreas Eriksson**

*The body is like a windscreen for the mind against the infinite.*<sup>151</sup>  
—Quentin Meillassoux

The work of Swedish artist Andreas Eriksson (b. 1975) provides another example of contemporary painting concerned with both matter and space. Despite there being very little critical writing about this artist in English, I will explore the spatial and aesthetic concepts Deleuze describes regarding the haptic in relation to Eriksson's artworks. While his oeuvre spans the mediums of painting, photography and sculpture, I am specifically concerned with his frieze artworks *Promenad* (2008, figures 28 & 29), which combines both photography and painting, and his painting *Trädstam (grå)* (2010, figure 30). I argue that new spatial relations occur in the composition of Eriksson's frieze artworks, where both the photographic illusion of space and painting's material space appear together. In comparison, I argue that Eriksson's painting *Trädstam (grå)* creates new spatial relations within the single painted canvas. Through an understanding of multiplicity, the unstable space is created solely in the medium of paint.

Certain events in Eriksson's recent history serve to contextualise the recurring themes of his practice. Afflicted by a hypersensitivity to electromagnetic radiation, Eriksson is not able to live in large cities. At its

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<sup>151</sup> Excerpted from "The body is like a windscreen for the mind against the infinite: whereas in every parcel of matter, however minute it might be, we can envisage an infinity of information, the body conquers finitude through the power of refusal." Quentin Meillassoux, "Subtraction and Contraction: Deleuze, Immanence, and Matter and Memory," *Collapse Vol. III: Unknown Deleuze [+ Speculative realism]* 3, no. 1 (2007): 74.



worst, his condition has meant he can hardly be near electricity at all.<sup>152</sup> For this reason, Eriksson “moved to a forest, far away from any electronic devices”, in Medelplana, Sweden, surrounded by nature, and in “involuntary isolation” from the outside world.<sup>153</sup> As Jennifer Higgle argues, this move had a significant impact on Eriksson’s practice, whereby “the natural world became, to a certain extent, a place of both safety and imprisonment; this echoed in his work ... express[ing] both a connection to and ambivalence toward his surroundings”.<sup>154</sup>



**Figure 26** Andreas Eriksson *Content is a Glimpse no. 10* 2008

What first drew me to explore Eriksson’s practice was his sculptural series entitled *Content Is a Glimpse*<sup>155</sup> (2008, figure 26). This work is composed of bronze casts of birds that died when colliding into the window of the artist’s studio, believing the illusive reflection of nature on the glass. Eriksson

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<sup>152</sup> Magnus af Petersens, "In the Pavilion," in *Andreas Eriksson* (Sweden and Berlin: Moderna Museet and Sternberg Press, 2011), 126.

<sup>153</sup> Andreas Eriksson, Daniel Birnbaum, and Hans Ulrich Obrist, "Andreas Eriksson Interviewed by Daniel Birnbaum and Hans Ulrich Obrist at Moderna Museet on 11 February, 2011," in *Andreas Eriksson*, 145.

<sup>154</sup> Jennifer Higgle, "Andreas Eriksson," in *Andreas Eriksson*, 165–66.

<sup>155</sup> The title of Eriksson’s series is a quotation by Willem de Kooning: “Content is a glimpse of something, an encounter like a flash. It’s very tiny—very tiny, content.” De Kooning quoted in David Sylvester, *Interviews with American Artists* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001), 50.

describes that what the birds did by way of believing in illusion “is the perfect circumstance for looking at art...to be able to walk into the room or to believe so much in the room that you accept the picture ...and you go into it”.<sup>156</sup>

As Hawker states, “at the most fundamental level, the ‘success’ of representation lies in its being *taken for* the object or idea it represents”.<sup>157</sup> This idea, of course, has been the desire of figurative painters throughout history, as well as many contemporary abstract painters from Frank Stella to Julian Opie, the latter stating “what I would really like to do is make a painting and then walk into it”.<sup>158</sup>

Eriksson’s colliding birds recall the oft-cited anecdote that tells of the competition between rival Greek painters Zeuxis and Parrhasios. As the story goes:

Zeuxis produced a picture of grapes so dexterously represented that birds began to fly down to eat from the painted vine. Whereupon Parrhasius designed so lifelike a picture of a curtain that Zeuxis, proud of the verdict of the birds, requested that the curtain should now be drawn back and the picture displayed. When he realized his mistake, with a modesty that did him honour, he yielded up the palm, saying that whereas he had managed to deceive only birds, Parrhasius had deceived an artist.<sup>159</sup>

Essentially, this “parable of realism”<sup>160</sup> describes how illusionism, as a mode of representation, elides the picture plane. The illusion of space afforded by the reflection on Eriksson’s studio window thus parallels the realism of Zeuxis’ grapes. Dominant analyses of the classic Greek myth have fixated on the illusion of reality via the trick of the eye, *trompe l’oeil*; however, what occurs here is the active process of selectivity in perception. Eriksson’s ‘window’ functions at another level to the mere positioning of classical mimesis. I explore this process of selection shortly through the writing of Meillassoux.

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<sup>156</sup> Eriksson, Birnbaum, and Obrist, “Andreas Eriksson Interviewed,” 152.

<sup>157</sup> Hawker, “The Idiom in Photography as Truth in Painting,” 552.

<sup>158</sup> Julian Opie quoted in the exhibition catalogue *Julian Opie* (London: British Council, 1997), 52.

<sup>159</sup> Pliny quoted in Bryson *Vision and Painting*, 1.

<sup>160</sup> Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 30.

As Norman Bryson states, the topic of the competition between Zeuxis and Parrhasios is illusionism, “but it is illusionism of a very particular kind”.<sup>161</sup> One must ask the question, what does the bird in the Eriksson example see? If what the bird sees is merely the illusory space—a continuation of the space it is in—this would imply that the bird does not see its own reflection or register that the reflection it sees is a reversal of the space it is in. This implication further suggests that this experience of illusion cannot be a purely optical one, for, if it were, then the bird could not avoid its own image once it came within a certain refractive field. Thus, something else is at play. The illusion in this case is not a trick of the eye, *trompe l’oeil*, but is in fact to do with the reality of our selective perception. This is based on equal suppression as well as reception of visual data. Thus, what the bird is seeing in the case of Eriksson is an extension of the space it is already in but it is suppressing the visual cues present in the reflected space—that of its own reflection and that of the space in reverse.

In Meillassoux’s critique of Bergson’s theory of pure perception—which Meillassoux terms a subtractive theory of perception—he seeks to establish that what we perceive is “but a tiny part of the images which form our environment”.<sup>162</sup> This is in part due to our selective perception. Meillassoux explains that firstly “the body selects a finite number of options at the expense of an infinity of images which pass through it without trace”,<sup>163</sup> and secondly, “the mind chooses an option at the expense of a finite number of equally possible options.”<sup>164</sup> Thus, via this highly selective process, what remains of reality is somewhat diminished, or, to use Meillassoux’s term, an ‘impoverished’ version of reality. This is contrary to how we are conditioned to think of perception. Our assumption is that the external world (physical reality) is mapped out perfectly onto our internal view of it. However, we cannot experience physical reality directly and so we live inside the world of

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<sup>161</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>162</sup> Meillassoux, “Subtraction and Contraction,” 73.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

our perceptions. Our perceptual system is constructed so that what we *experience* feels like physical reality.<sup>165</sup>

What I find of particular interest in the *Content Is a Glimpse* series is not so much the specificity of the sculptures but the link in the process of creation to the indexical and illusory, similar to that discussed in Richter's overpainted photographs. After the birds meet their fate, Eriksson casts their dead bodies in bronze; as a form of imprint, the cast can be likened to a photograph. The indexical in the case of Eriksson's series is the literal transmigration of death through the casting process of the birds that paid the ultimate price of illusion, whereas in Richter's case, it is the frozen/captured in the analogue photographs created by the traces of light on sensitive emulsion.

*Shadows are transient, evasive and if we are to believe in Plato's cave metaphor, unreal. Above all they are evanescent.*

—Magnus af Petersens<sup>166</sup>



**Figure 27** Andreas Eriksson *Car Passing by at 20:36 h, 07.07.2007* 2007

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<sup>165</sup> Christof Koch, "Looks Can Deceive: Why Perception and Reality Don't Always Match Up" *Scientific American Mind* 21, no. 3 (2010): 20–21.

<sup>166</sup> Petersens, "In the Pavilion," 125.

In another series, Eriksson painted the shadows on the walls at night from passing cars whose headlights illuminated the night for a moment and cast shadows of the objects on his windowsill or the artist himself standing by the window. The titles of these paintings, such as *Car Passing by at 20:36 h, 07.07.2007* (2007, figure 27), refer very specifically to the moment in time when the projection of light from the cars outside enters the interior space of Eriksson's living room. This fleeting event is photographed then painted with an airbrush pen and pigment without a binder. Eriksson then had a professional spray painter spray over the entire surface with water-based grey paint. The result is that the pigment of the underpainting dissolves, allowing the shadow shapes to bleed through and appear again on the surface. Eriksson describes this as "a physical process, not a painting",<sup>167</sup> somewhat like the developing of a photograph. The spatiality in these works is both formal and conceptual; through its material means, Eriksson achieves "a spatial depth in an otherwise relatively flat image [and] the space that must exist between objects and their shadows and the light outside the window is created on a more conceptual than visual plane".<sup>168</sup> According to curator Magnus af Petersens, Eriksson's 'shadow paintings' are "a lucid play between depth and surface, one of the fundamental problems of painting".<sup>169</sup> These paintings also engage explicitly with the concepts of interiority and exteriority.

### *The Window*

Windows are a recurring presence in Eriksson's works and a provocative means for exploring material and spatial concepts. I have long been fascinated with the idea of painting as a transparent window to the world versus painting as an opaque object. As identified in Chapter 1, the window is significant to the spatiality that concerns my research and engages with key philosophical ideas from Plato to now about interiority and exteriority, the 'real' and the illusory.

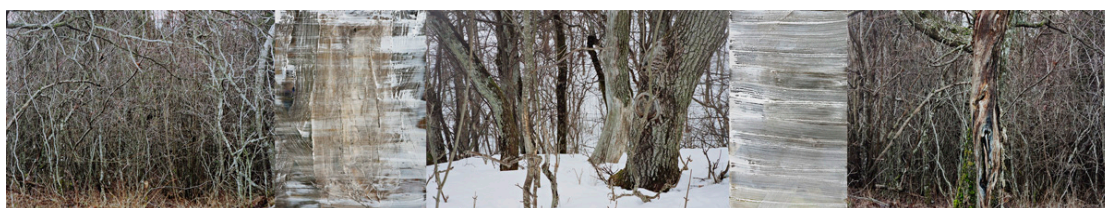
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<sup>167</sup> Eriksson, Birnbaum, and Obrist, "Andreas Eriksson Interviewed," 151.

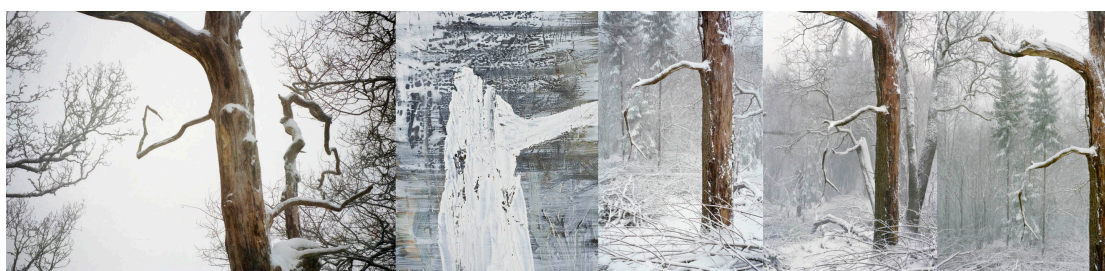
<sup>168</sup> Petersens, "In the Pavilion," 125.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid., 124.

Much of Eriksson's work refers to the window in both a metaphorical sense and as a physical truth. The canvas as a window is a painterly convention going back half a millennium when artists began striving for illusion in their painting, an ideal that was denounced by modernism, which instead stressed materiality and flatness. This modernist re-evaluation of the canvas is present in Eriksson's painting, which applies the flat and material qualities, but also distinctly plays on the idea of the canvas as window.<sup>170</sup> To use Buchloh's terms, Eriksson's work achieves a "dialectical synthesis of two seemingly incompatible epistemes of painting".<sup>171</sup> The spatial concerns within Eriksson's works engage with concepts of interiority and exteriority through reference to the window, both the canvas as a window and as a space before or between space.



**Figure 28** Andreas Eriksson *Promenad* 2008



**Illustration 29** Andreas Eriksson *Promenad* 2008

In figures 28 and 29, both titled *Promenad*,<sup>172</sup> Eriksson explores spatial concepts on both a material and conceptual level. As the title suggests, the images in these artworks are identified on the artist's daily walk. Deleuze's concepts of repetition and the haptic are visibly manifest in *Promenad*, and are also central to my analysis of these two artworks.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, 123–24.

<sup>171</sup> Buchloh quoted in Stefan Gronert, "Demonstrations of Sight: The Transformation of Image and Object in Gerhard Richter's Windows," in *Fresh Widow*, 191.

<sup>172</sup> *Promenad* 2008 is two artworks. These are the only ones (to date) with the title *Promenad* (Walk). Eriksson often works with these types of frieze-works where he combines photography with painting. In his exhibition *Landskap (till Kjarval)* at Galleri Riis Stockholm in 2013, he made a very large frieze, covering a whole room. This work contained photography, painting, and plaster and textile works.

*Promenad* (2008, figure 29) is composed of five images. Read from left to right, the parts alternate from photographic image to painted surface in a seamless composition. I use the word seamless in that, while the surfaces differ from the smooth surface of the photograph to the tactile painted surface, the recurring motifs and subdued palette are continuous. As Petersens writes, "Both painting and photography are based on the visual sensations experienced by the artist on observing his immediate surroundings."<sup>173</sup> On his daily walks, Eriksson has photographed details and fragments of the nature that surrounds his studio, including tangled branches, layers of snow, and moss-covered tree trunks. The presence of the painted surface enhances the abstract and painterly qualities of the snow and the trees within the photographs. As each image relates to the next, a dialogue between the photograph and the painting occurs on a material level as well as in the shift of spatial relationships. Surface tension is created as the eye traverses from left to right and is pushed and pulled in and out, focusing on the distant and close elements in turn. What interests me most about this work is the creation of spatial relations. Arrhenius describes this by saying "[o]n the one hand, we have the painterly, material qualities of the painting and its capacity to create an entirely new image space. On the other hand, there is the accentuation of the photograph's aura of bearing witness and being an index, of having been there."<sup>174</sup>

Deleuze's conception of the haptic and repetition assists in exploring not only the material space that Eriksson makes in these works but also a conceptual space. By conceptual space, I am referring to that which occurs in the mind/imagination: "The role of the imagination, or the mind which contemplates in its multiple and fragmented states, is to draw something new from repetition, to draw difference from it."<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> Petersens, "In the Pavilion," 124.

<sup>174</sup> Sara Arrhenius, "Migration through Materials," in *Andreas Eriksson: Roundabouts* (London: Koenig Books, 2014), 9–15.

<sup>175</sup> Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 97.

## *Difference and Repetition*

*Repetition changes nothing in the object repeated, but does change something  
in the mind which contemplates it.*  
—Gilles Deleuze<sup>176</sup>

Deleuze's discussion of repetition and its haunted relationship to thought processes offers an effective way of interpreting *Promenad*. Originally, I tried to describe what was happening between the elements in Eriksson's *Promenad* in terms of space—space that exists conceptually between the elements that are in themselves representations of space. That is, the painting's optically perceived space and photography's indexical capture of space. However, a more eloquent description might be Deleuze's defining statement of difference: "difference lies between two repetitions".<sup>177</sup> He goes on to question "is it not also to say, conversely, that repetition lies between two differences, that it allows us to pass from one order of difference to another?"<sup>178</sup>

In *Promenad*, we witness the relationship between the idea of the painted equivalent and the photographic image. The asymmetrical relationship between one thing and another problematises our relationship to repetition. Eriksson's repetition is in the image as each image relates to the next. The asymmetry is profoundly related to how we experience reality. For example, in figure 29, photographs show slightly different perspectives of the same branch of a tree. The painting horizontally flips the branch, creating arrhythmia in the pattern of repetition: what occurs within this one part of

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<sup>176</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid.



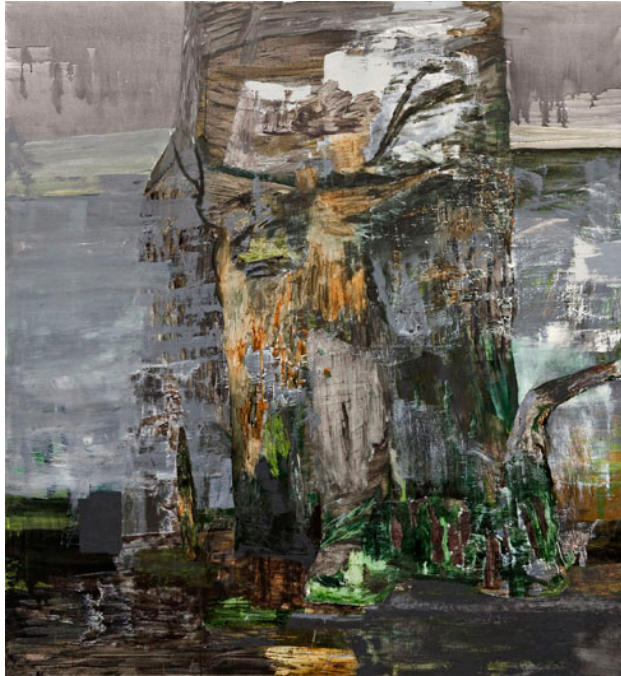
the composition does not occur in the next. This is less about a material capture of time as in a photograph, and more to do with the spectre of shifts in how we experience different points of perspective.

Repetition, in this sense, functions as a value. Eriksson is not simply repeating subject matter or repeating the material; rather, what he repeats is an abstract value, an unseen element. In Deleuze's text *Difference and Repetition*, repetition is likened to the unconscious of representation, meaning that there is another text being evoked. Or, as I argue, this abstract value that is being evoked is an unstable space of possibility.

To briefly revisit Deleuze's concept of the haptic and optic, as discussed in my analysis of Richter's overpainted photographs, it can be said that the painted elements of *Promenad* present a close vision-haptic space, whereas the photographs present the viewer with a distant vision-optical space. What is interesting about this combination is the relationship that develops between these elements. While the "tactile quality of painting is generally absent in photographs, where all information is visual, Andreas Eriksson's photos in many ways reflect the aspects found in his paintings".<sup>179</sup> The abstract qualities in the photographs are represented in the painting. The resultant spatial reading of the totality of these elements cannot be located in painting or photography, illusion or abstraction, not one or the other, but both. Thinking occurs in the interstice; thus, the work is completed by the viewer's perception.

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<sup>179</sup> Petersens, "In the Pavilion," 124.



**Figure 30** Andreas Eriksson *Trädstam (grå)* 2010

### *Smooth and Striated Space*

The comparison of *Promenad* and *Trädstam (grå)* (2010, figure 30) reveals an interesting shift in Eriksson's landscapes that moves away from the overt use of photography and painterly elements that are composed beside one another in *Promenad* to the multilayered, striated space of the single painted canvas. What Eriksson explored in *Promenad* through divided means, and the conclusions he made from this work, are now seen combined on a single canvas of monumental scale. Still, as with *Promenad*, the eye moves in and out of the space; however, the single canvas affords for additional interpenetration of the foreground and background. The grey horizontal streaks of paint suggest movement that is in contrast with the stasis of the vertical trunk.

The woven space Eriksson has created can be illuminated by Deleuze's concept of striated space, which constitutes both vertical and horizontal elements that intertwine perpendicularly. These two elements have different functions: one is fixed, the other mobile, passing above and beneath the

fixed.<sup>180</sup> In *Trädstam (grå)*, what we can recognise as a tree trunk acts as the fixed and vertical element, while the horizontal striations are mobile.

Dispensing with Deleuze's term 'striated space' and preferencing the term 'streaking of space', Austrian theorist Gerald Raunig draws from Deleuze's ideas of 'territorialisation' and 'reterritorialisation'<sup>181</sup> in order to argue for a reassessment of the importance of cultural and knowledge production. He draws on Deleuze's concept of reterritorialisation to chart alternative horizons for resistance in the art world. Within Raunig's text *Factories of Knowledge: Industries of Creativity* (2013), he asks "how to connect smoothing and streaking, how to mutually interweave the fabrication of smooth and streaked spaces."<sup>182</sup> Synonymous with Deleuze's 'striated space', Raunig's 'streaking of space' describes a space not in opposition to 'smooth space'; rather, both Deleuze and Raunig confirm a multiplicity of space. Raunig describes "reterritorialisation and deterritorialisation not as opposite, but rather as complementary, even simultaneous".<sup>183</sup>

### *Multiplicity*

Eriksson's *Trädstam (grå)* (2010, figure 30) contains the residual elements of a tree trunk that operates as an encounter between heterogeneous elements that separate and weave to create a space that can be understood as a kind of multiplicity. It is fragmented, multiple and heterogeneous—the present condition of abstract painting, it is connective, rather than essentialist or reductive.<sup>184</sup> As we know, Greenberg sees abstraction partly defined by the suppression of illusionistic space or of any particular form that might allude to such space. Modernist essentialism was defined by what painting should avoid: illusionism, transparency, narrative, and figuration. In John Rajchman's re-reading of Deleuze, he argues for a sense of abstraction that is opposed to

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<sup>180</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 552.

<sup>181</sup> See Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*.

<sup>182</sup> Gerald Raunig, *Factories of Knowledge, Industries of Creativity*, trans. Aileen Derieg (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e) / Intervention Series, 2013), 16.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>184</sup> David Ryan, *Talking Painting: Dialogues with Twelve Contemporary Abstract Painters* (London: Routledge, 2002) 2.

this “via negative”.<sup>185</sup> Instead, Rajchman’s point is to stress the differences between an abstraction that is bound up with saying ‘not...’ and one that enunciates ‘and...’. The relation between mediums, he argues, “is one not of negation but of connection.”<sup>186</sup> Thus, the ‘stripping down’, ‘clearing-away’ process of formalist modernism is replaced with an “abstraction that consists in an impure mixture and mixing up. Prior to Forms, a reassemblage that moves towards an outside rather than a purification that turns up to essential Ideas or in toward the constitutive ‘forms’ of a medium”.<sup>187</sup> As we witness in *Trädstam (grå)*, Eriksson creates a space that is heterogeneous and incongruous. This is a space of multiplicity that moves away from modernist essentialism via negativa. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari declare that multiplicity, more than a matter of logic, is something one must make or do, and learn by making or doing—*le multiple, il faut le faire*. We must always *make* connections, since they are not already given.<sup>188</sup>

Through my analysis of these selected artworks by Eriksson, I have come closer to understanding the questionings of space that have arisen in my own studio research. Through Deleuze’s concepts of the haptic/optic and smooth/striated, I argue that one can locate unstable space in the spatial relations in Eriksson’s frieze artworks, where both the photographic illusion of space and painting’s material space appear alongside one another. Lastly, I argue that the unstable space need not only occur in the opposing mediums of photography and painting but that through an understanding of multiplicity, the unstable space can be created solely in the medium of paint, as is the case in Eriksson’s *Trädstam (grå)*. This is a point of departure for my own creative research, which is concerned with the reconciliation of illusion and materiality solely through the medium of paint and presented for the most part on a single canvas. The representation of this unstable space is the driving force behind my research practice.

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<sup>185</sup> John Rajchman, *Constructions* (Cambridge, MA; London: MIT Press, 1998).

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>188</sup> John Rajchman, *The Deleuze Connections* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 6.

The focus of my critique throughout this chapter has been to establish and analyse what I term 'unstable space'. It is this space that I have explored in my own creative practice and will discuss in detail through examples of my creative research output in the following chapter.



# Chapter 3

## Chapter 3 The Unstable Space in Contemporary Painting

*Space—it is always in the process of being made. It is never finished; never closed. Perhaps we could imagine space as a simultaneity of stories-so-far.*

—Doreen Massey<sup>189</sup>

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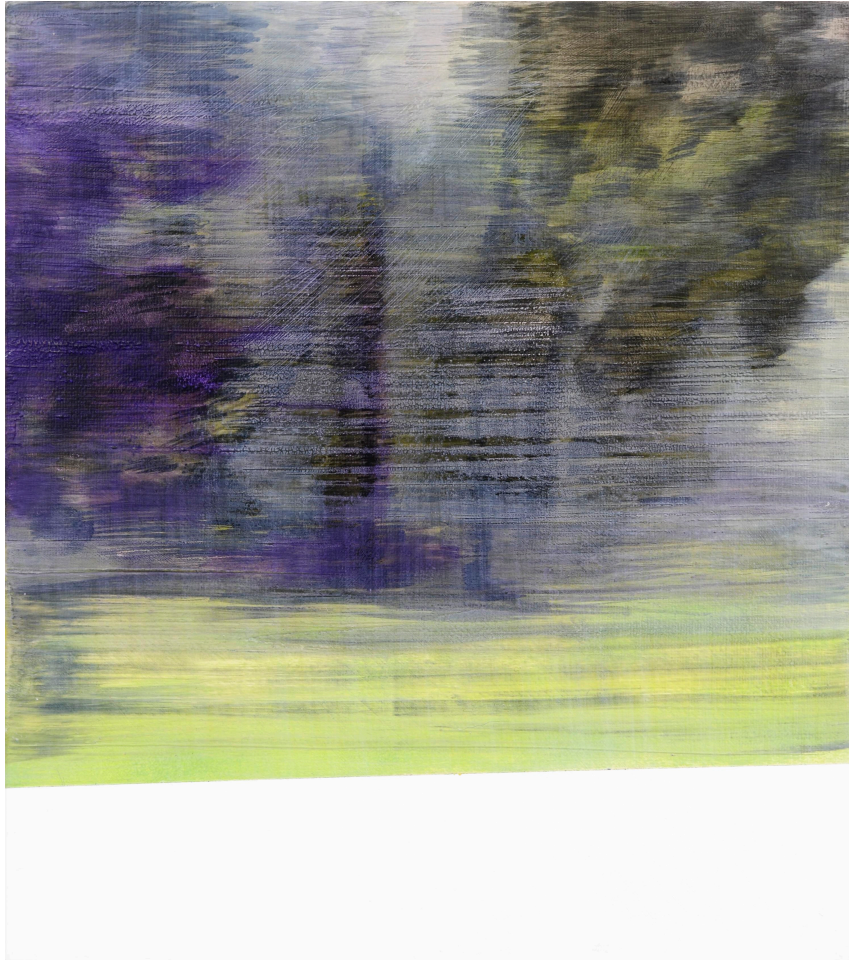
<sup>189</sup> Doreen Massey, *For Space* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2005), 9.



This chapter will examine the creative outcomes of my research, focusing on the representation of 'unstable space' within my painting practice. It will provide a chronological overview of the studio project, placing emphasis on how this practice-led enquiry developed from each proceeding body of work.

### ***How We See What We See***

The first series of paintings that engaged with concepts related to the window were created in 2011 and exhibited in the Project Gallery, Queensland College of Art (QCA), Griffith University, Brisbane. These paintings engaged with the everyday distant experience of the landscape through the windows of buses, cars and trains and extended to include the 'windows' of cameras and on mobile phones. Specifically, the work was concerned with the way that we are accustomed to view the landscape at this distance. Obscured by the very frame that presents it, the landscape as subject becomes secondary to ideas of visual perception, that is—*how* we see what we see. Rather than using the landscape as subject, I exploited the conditions of my place in relation to the landscape in order to explore, through material means, the phenomenon of this type of visual perception in the context of the everyday. Contemplating *how* we look through windows as frames or veils. I perceived this process of looking as the creation of a formless blur, an obscurity of colour and abstraction. I used a line in my paintings to demarcate and emphasise the boundaries between the infinite exterior landscape and the viewer's interior position.



**Figure 31** Michelle Mansford *Untitled 7:55 2011*

Derrida's delineation of the Kantian sublime in *The Truth in Painting* offers valuable insight to the polemic of the frame (*parergon*), while Friedberg's *The Virtual Window: From Alberti to Microsoft* has been an important text with which to understand *how* we see through both the past and present frames and windows, both as metaphor, and architectural component. In order to discuss spatial experience, I draw on Raunig's concept of streaking of space, Deleuze's concept of smooth and striated space, as well as Deleuze's re-reading of Henri Bergson's *Matter and Memory* to help elucidate the notions of interiority and exteriority.



**Figure 32** Michelle Mansford *Untitled* 2011

In an early experience of travelling in the back seat of my parents' car, I became aware of my reflection in the glass. This reflection of myself was outside myself as "an image in the world".<sup>190</sup> Tracing with my eyes the contour of my physical self and simultaneously feeling my physical self seated, I realised that I occupied more space than my junior mind had thought up until that point. This experience had a profound effect on me: an awareness of occupying both interior and exterior space. Bergson explains that the surface of the body's skin, "the common limit of the external and the internal, is the only portion of space which is both perceived and felt".<sup>191</sup> As such, interiority and exteriority are conflated on this surface. To put this experience another way, the presence of oneself appears as both reversed

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<sup>190</sup> Henri Bergson *Matter and Memory* (New York: Zone Books, 1991).

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

image and visage as well as the presence of oneself as active visual scrutineer. This is a momentary encounter—seeing your own seeing—within the active pluralistic and dynamic field of the real as well as the return of one’s own gaze through the intermediary of the screen/window.

It was not until many years later, while commuting to my studio with my head tiredly resting on the train window, that I recalled this experience and began to question how I could explore this conscious viewing of active sight in my painting. I began by photographing the landscape (exterior space) through the windows of buses, cars, and trains—particularly on my hour-long-train journey to and from my studio. Having photographically captured fragments of my journeys, I began to reflect on these images. The experience of a distant engagement of the landscape obscured by the very frame that presented it was intriguing on one level, but it was the undefined landscapes that *appeared*<sup>192</sup> to hurtle by and the streaks of colour passing my lens, rendering the landscape formless, obscured by reflections, shadows and scratches on the window pane. The landscape was held at a distance behind this veil and I became acutely aware of the different spaces that played a role in this experience.

My perception of scratches on the surface of the window highlighted the presence of the frame and emphasised distance. Like the status of the bacteria that float across the fluid surface of the eye or like dust in the air, these phenomena are a meta-reminder of distance. This distance must function as something like a fiction inside the experience of our seeing: a radical compression of the pluralistic and active spaces in operation. As such, I developed a series of paintings that explored the screen or window as a metaphor for the body to examine the experiences of interiority and exteriority, surface, figure, ground and distance.

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<sup>192</sup> I emphasise ‘appeared’ here as we know this is not the case; the landscape is in stasis, the train is in motion and myself as the viewer is static.

In questioning this experience and rejecting any romantic notions of displacement,<sup>193</sup> I was interested in the tension between the photographic apprehension of this experience, which is defined by the complexities of motion—rest, stasis and flux—and my perceptual apprehension of this phenomenon through the screen or window. In a sense, the window becomes a metaphor for the turbulent space between my interiority and exteriority. I recognise this space to be where my actual experience of this phenomenon was occurring.

The photo image/screen is always at one remove. The camera or screen captures the fictive disarrangement of complex and interacting spaces through the brutal imposition of time as an arrested fusion of dynamical elements, compressed and flattened into a new stasis that is itself unseen or experienced except for as a fleeting coupling and temporary unity between dynamic spaces in flux.

Locating the experience within striations that appear as visual data on the screen of viewing engages with Deleuze's ideas of reterritorialisation. Gerald Raunig's interpretation of reterritorialisation in *Factories of Knowledge, Industries of Creativity* states that "reterritorialisation emerges in streaking the territory".<sup>194</sup> He suggests that reterritorialisation exists as "a stream of streaking spaces, sometimes subterranean, sometimes sweeping everything along on the surfaces of material and media spaces..."<sup>195</sup> This idea of 'streaking of space' to assemble, condense and intensify, not as familiar territory, stable and originary but rather as a reterritorialisation occupying space and its striations, is most relevant to my work as, in this sense, the seemingly fugitive marks that I have painted can be understood as reterritorialisation. Importantly, Raunig differentiates reterritorialisation from 'stable' space, confirming that the streaking of space in these paintings is an unstable space.

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<sup>193</sup> Valid as they might be in another context, they are not relevant to this particular research.

<sup>194</sup> Raunig, *Factories of Knowledge*, 14.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

While travelling on a train or in a car, we are reconciling that space but also reconciling the idea of something that seems to move itself. That is to say, the space outside seems to move. Paradoxically, one's space of viewing seems to be stable or in stasis. This movement seems to move itself, deterritorialising or reterritorializing, not as opposites but as simultaneous complementaries. The effect is the rush/flux and stable/stasis somehow equate to each other.

My methodology reflects the everyday experience of accessing the world through screens, using the camera on my mobile phone as well as an inexpensive low-resolution digital camera to gather my source image photographs. In my work, I have embraced the imperfections of my amateur photography, using blurring and cropping as strategies for further abstraction. Specifically, I have repeated the blur of movement witnessed as a visual experience on the train and the harsh cropping performed by the frame of the train window.

Reading the series that is hung horizontally from left to right, the viewer is able to experience the rhythm and movement of the train, the streaking of the landscape reconstructed into abstract form. This 'abstraction' is itself particular, carrying the residue of multiple elements and presences, some seen and some not. The use of the frame in these paintings adds to the disruption of the picturesque. As a flat formal device, it confronts the picture with abstraction. The frame thus serves to abstract while simultaneously existing as a flat abstract form in and of itself. The frames within my paintings have been created by masking an area from the remaining surface that is then painted. This leaves the masked frame as a smooth matte non-colour, contrasting with the colour and gloss finish of the illusory painted space. The bands of non-colour function here as a spatial division, where the edge of the illusory space meets the hard abstract edge and evokes the presence of another space. The band of non-colour is a static element within the painting's composition.

The paintings create an ambiguous space of movement and transition—this is not a non-place as a negative, but in Deleuzian terms, a space of becoming. The paintings comprise both close vision and far distance to suggest to the viewer space that exists between these two points. It is a turbulent space, an unstable space.

The frame creates a spatial awareness of interior and exterior. In his essay “Parergon” in *The Truth of Painting*, Derrida explains how when we are looking at a painting, the frame is taken to be part of the wall, but when we look at the wall, the frame is taken to be part of the painting. The frame “stands out against two grounds, but with respect to each of these two grounds, it merges into the other”.<sup>196</sup> The frame demarcates that which is interior and exterior to the work; yet, in our understanding and response to the work, this boundary becomes invisible:

There is always a form on a ground, but the *parergon* is a form which has as its traditional determination not that it stands out but that it disappears, buries itself, effaces itself, melts away at the moment it deploys its greatest energy. The frame is in no case a background in the way that the milieu or the work can be, but neither is its thickness as margin a figure. Or at least it is a figure which comes away of its own accord.<sup>197</sup>

Although Derrida is referring to the external frame of paintings, it is equally relevant to address the internal frames within my paintings in a similar way. He goes on to state that the frame “in its purity ... ought to remain colourless, deprived of all empirical sensory materiality”.<sup>198</sup> The deprivation of the empirical sensory materiality and the non-colour of the internal frames within my paintings heighten the visual experience of *what* we see; that is, that which remains visible. Importantly, this idea carries with it the status of the looked at but not seen, a presence that oscillates between the visible and invisible.

The concept of “seeing through” is directly relevant to what I am exploring in my work. For Derrida, we choose to see or not see (the wall). This occurs

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<sup>196</sup> Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, 61.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

before the frame and after the edge of the eye, or the field of vision of the body, has already determined what is included or excluded. We turn our head and impose limits on the reception of both what is there and what is part of the experience of our seeing, as well as presenting for interrogation those phenomena occurring within this new rarefied field extracted from the dynamic of what is everywhere at once. The frame, thus being neither figure nor ground, becomes a space.

In Friedberg's discussion of the window, she states that the window is not only an architecture of space, but also of time. In this respect, each painting in the series *How We See What We See* captures a fleeting moment, suspending and compressing time and space. The contrast between the flux and stasis is attempted by the representation of the frame. What is seen and not seen becomes a metaphor of the dynamic processes of selective observation. The spatial ambiguity existent in this experience was a portent to ideas that drove the next series of paintings, *For We Are Where We Are Not*.

### ***For We Are Where We Are Not***

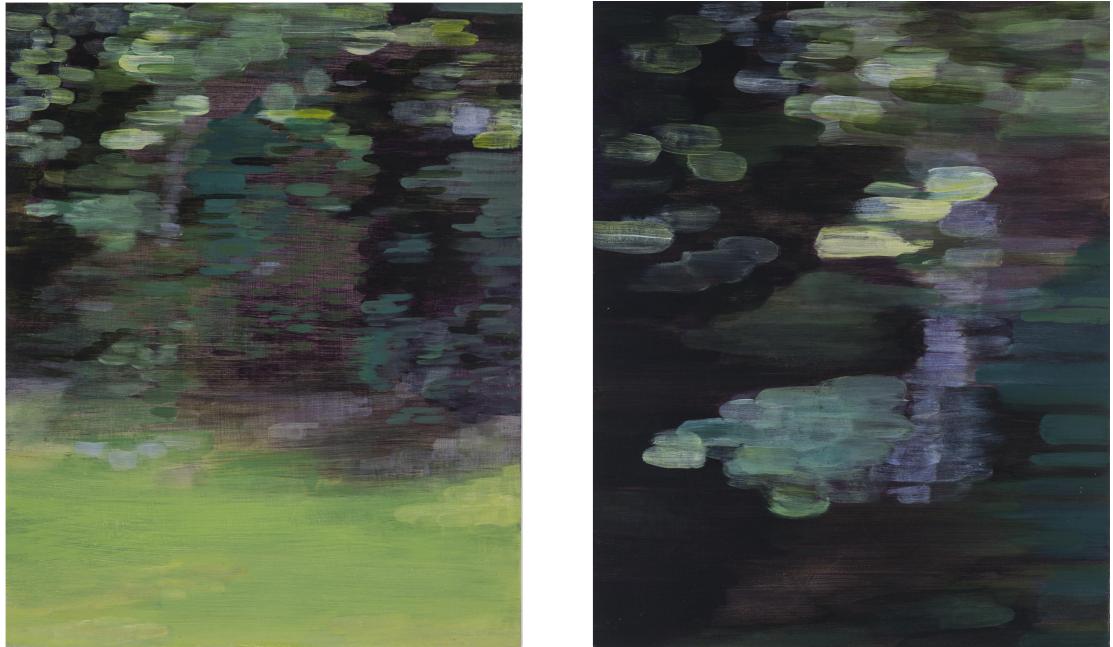
Upon reflection of the *How We See What We See* series, it became apparent that the striated space is where the actual experience of this phenomenon is occurring, in the turbulence between my interiority and my exteriority. The paintings that followed were primarily concerned with representing, through striated marks, an ambiguous and turbulent space grounded only by a horizon line that appears continuous throughout each of the paintings. While the paintings were intended as autonomous works, through test installations, it became apparent how they aggregated together to form a series. This series of paintings, comprising seven small-scale panels, was exhibited in a group exhibition at the Woolloongabba Art Gallery, curated around the varying ideas of time, space and place.





**Figure 33** Installation image of 5 x paintings

Two of the paintings resisted this aggregation and were thus exhibited apart from the series of five. Similar to the previous body of paintings, all of these paintings used various photos taken of the landscape through the window of a moving train. However, these works focused on the landscape without formal demarcations of interior and exterior present in the paintings themselves. Areas of the source photographs were masked out to form the composition of the painting. A slightly different approach was used in the two resisting panels where *Tremolo* (figure 34 on the left) was composed from the masking of a photograph yet *Up Close with Distance* (figure 34 on the right) was composed from the masking of *Tremolo* and is thus an up-close view, a detail of this painting. This method of using the painting as a source is one I develop in later works. The up-close encounter of the illusion of space, not only in my own paintings but historical paintings becomes a source for further exploration.



**Figure 34** (Left) Michelle Mansford *Tremolo* 2013, (Right) Michelle Mansford *Up Close with Distance* 2013

This set of paintings aimed at representing the unstable space of the landscape in flux. A turning point that arose through them was that the frame was no longer a useful reference for my paintings; rather, demarcations become suggestions of another space. These paintings made no literal reference to the window; rather, the focus was the moving landscape. This is not the movement of the passenger of a train in motion but the movement occurring in the landscape. In this conscious decision to remove any literal reference to the window, what is achieved is a significant shift in our perception of movement.

### ***The Ambiguous Space of Reflections***

The unstable space in my work is further emphasised by adopting the mechanisms of reflection. An ambiguous space, afforded by reflection, features in the *Reflections on Brown Lake* series and the *How We See What We See* series of paintings and can be understood by referring to the ambiguity that I explored through Attneave's writings in Chapter 1.



**Figure 35** Installation image *Reflections on Brown Lake* 2015

This series of paintings aimed to push my practice closer toward abstraction in order to engage with pictorial illusion through abstraction. Additionally, I explored the visual space within the reflective copper surface juxtaposed with the materiality of the applied paint. The selection of copper as a support for this series of oil paintings makes reference to the history of painting as well as to the relationship between painting and photography.

Painting on copper is a practice that dates back to the early sixteenth century when a small number of artists in Europe began making oil paintings on relatively thin sheets of copper. Later in the century, painters in the Spanish New World followed suit.<sup>199</sup> Copper's much smoother, harder and non-absorbent surface, which allowed for more precision compared to the surface of wood or canvas, led more and more artists to use copper as a support.<sup>200</sup> The availability of copper plates is likely related to their widespread use for

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<sup>199</sup> Michael K. Komanecky, *Copper as Canvas: Two Centuries of Masterpiece Paintings on Copper 1575–1775* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 3.

<sup>200</sup> Edgar Peters Bowron, "A Brief History of European Oil Paintings on Copper, 1560–1775," in *Copper as Canvas*, 16–17.

etching and engraving. Typically, the copper sheets used for etching and painting were small in scale. The practice of painting on copper “flourished in the climate of appreciation for the precious and remarkable, the rare and the unusual, the refined and exquisite that developed in cultivated humanist circles in late sixteenth-century Europe”.<sup>201</sup> Artists such as Rembrandt (Dutch, 1606–69) used copper to paint on as well as for etching (figure 36); other practitioners include Jan Brueghel the Elder (Flemish, 1568–1625) and Paul Bril (Flemish, 1554–1626), to name but a few.<sup>202</sup> Interestingly, there are instances of artists reusing copper etchings by painting over them: “An artist in the circle of Pieter Gysels’ reusing a Rembrandt etching plate to paint a landscape is one such example.”<sup>203</sup>

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<sup>201</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>202</sup> In 1998–99, an exhibition developed by Phoenix Art Museum curator Michael K. Komanecky as a joint venture with Kansas City’s Nelson-Atkins Museum and the Royal Cabinet of Paintings Mauritshuis in The Hague featured ninety-one copper paintings by sixty-five European and Latin American artists active between 1575 and 1775.

<sup>203</sup> Isobel Horovitz, “The Materials and Techniques of European Paintings on Copper Supports,” in *Copper as Canvas*, 64–65.



**Figure 36** Rembrandt Harmensz. van Rijn *Rembrandt Laughing*, c. 1628

Aside from painting and etching, copper was used in early photographic processes. Proto-photographer Joseph Nicéphore Niépce used copper plates in his process of *héliographie* to create pioneering photographs such as *View from the Window at Le Gras* (1826 figure 14), as discussed in Chapter 1.

Beyond historical reference, copper was selected as a support because of its reflective qualities. The dynamic convergence of the copper surface and the oil paint provided a means for exploring spatial ambiguity within the confines of the two-dimensional space. The surface texture within my paintings ranges considerably from the hard and glossy to the soft and matte. The reflective variability of the copper added to the complexity and ambiguity of the paintings space, impacting on the viewer's perception of depth. Undefined light and shadow were presented as the copper surface reflected any movement within the space of viewing. This movement contrasted with the

stasis of the applied oil paint which like a window, performed the role of framing, permitting and obscuring the view of the reflected image in motion.

### ***Up Close with Distance***

The series of paintings *Up Close with Distance* were inspired by up-close engagements with my previous works as well as historic examples, such as Rembrandt's *Rembrandt Harmensz Van Rijn (studio of)* (1660s) and Jean-François Millet's *Susanna and the Elders* (c.1846–48) viewed at the National Gallery of Victoria.

I painted the up-close visual encounter of existing paintings, focusing on the ambiguous space that exists between the recognisable representation of illusion and the materiality of the paint. This space can be thought of in relation to Deleuze's term "the abstract line",<sup>204</sup> at which point the illusion disseminates to reveal the materiality of the paint as mere abstract blobs or smears of paint. This space exists between illusion and material reality, and is the very space I have aimed to represent in the *Up Close with Distance* series of paintings: the quintessential unstable space.

I consider aspects of my creative practice to demonstrate how painting can reconcile the dead-end of illusion and modernism's essentialist reduction to flatness to create new spatial relations that speak to a contemporary experience of space.

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<sup>204</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), 37.



## **Conclusion**



## Conclusion



Illustration 37 Andy Warhol *Suicide* 1964, silkscreen on paper, unique print, 101.6 x 76.2 cm

What sustains painters' enduring interest in exploring space in two dimensions, I believe, is painting's unique potential to create both visual and spatial tension through the materiality of its production. Both visual and haptic sensations confirm painting's material specificity and pronounce its significance in the face of the homogenous and disembodied nature of new media screens. Because art's role is to address the dominant ways of thinking within our time, painting should be evaluated in relation to technological developments that change the way we perceive the space around us.

Contemporary experiences of space through new media screens offer painters a unique challenge that requires them to think about the representation of space in new ways. The philosophies of Gilles Deleuze and Jacques Derrida both offer a means for contemporary painters to re-think space and its representation in painting. Deleuze's writings in particular advance the image of abstraction; he presents a novel view of what abstraction means in art that

is more chaotic or formless and no longer defined in opposition to figure or image.<sup>205</sup>

This exegesis began with an historical overview that established the window as an important spatial and metaphorical concern within painting. I drew a connection between the window and Plato's cave as a frame of representation. I revisited Plato's theories to specifically draw attention to the dualist structure of his belief system that posits tensions between interior and exterior, reality and illusion, nature and culture. I established the term 'unstable space' by examining Deleuze's and Derrida's deconstruction of Plato's writing; both theories offer a coherent and creative means through which to discuss the exploration of this space within my painting practice.

Given Deleuze's own writing about the window, some have questioned what was the fatal lure of penetrating that space in 1995, when French radio announced "S'est défenestré".<sup>206</sup> Deleuze had committed suicide by throwing himself out of a window of his Paris apartment after his lengthy suffering with severe respiratory problems. Some interpreted his suicide as his final philosophical gesture, an anecdote of thought occasioned by his thought.<sup>207</sup> Perhaps in this final act, Deleuze did embody the very concepts he created.

Also in Chapter 1, I discussed how the contemporary 'windows' of media screens have significantly shifted the metaphor of the singular window to the multiplicity of windows within windows. I highlighted that this multiplicity reflects the way that we currently experience space and the effect this has on the thinking of space in contemporary painting practice. Given the contemporary experience of space, I argue that its representation can be explored through painting's material dimension and illusory space, not in binary opposition to each other but as simultaneous complementaries.

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<sup>205</sup> Rajchman, *Constructions*, 55.

<sup>206</sup> Friedberg, *The Virtual Window*, 241.

<sup>207</sup> See Jean-Pierre Faye and André Pierre Colombat in Friedberg, *The Virtual Window*, 347n1.

Having traced the development of the window as an important representational device in painting, I argued that it can be used as a mechanism to explore what I term the unstable space in painting, which operates between spatial and representational theory. Through my analysis of specific works of art by Gerhard Richter and Andreas Eriksson in Chapter 2, I asserted that while the unstable space becomes present through the relationships that play out between the mediums of photography and painting within these artists' practices, the unstable space can be created solely in the medium of paint, as exemplified through Eriksson's painting *Trädstam (grå)* and through my own painting practice.

In Chapter 3, I related the findings of the research to my creative output so as to evaluate my original contribution to this field. My work makes advances to contemplations on the multiplicity of spatial concepts represented within the confines of a two-dimensional surface. The representation of unstable space within my painting practice results from my reimagining of the window as an unstable space, my exploring of the perception and representation of ambiguous space, and my engaging with pictorial illusion through abstraction.

I believe the unstable space in painting can provide new and meaningful relations embodied within its material and visual dimensions and operational beyond its mere representation. I understand the unstable space to be a space of connection and one that not only embraces difference but also celebrates difference in itself.



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