What is Art to Me?

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A General Comment

I paint and draw my actual experience of existence, not the appearances of form. All my paintings are portraits of vibrant unform, what I essentially experience in life.

Many of the great American painters of the 1950s and 60s, people like Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, Ad Reinhardt, and Agnes Martin, were doing the same.

They would regularly attend the talks of the independent philosopher Jiddu Krishnamurti and the Zen teacher D.T. Suzuki whenever they lectured in New York. They followed philosophers and philosophies that spoke of life as undivided movement and fluctuation.

The public doesn't understand that these painters were trying to express their deepest experience of existence. They didn't view their work as being abstract. They felt that they were presenting a much clearer picture of what life is.

Jackson Pollock's action paintings were the movement of nature itself. Agnes Martin said of Rothko and Newman, "Rothko's painting is pure devotion to reality." "Barney Newman's paintings are about the joy of recognition of reality."

Einstein once pointed out that art is the same process as science. It's an attempt to capture the essence of existence.

A painting is an equation and an equation is a painting.

I would say that artists are actually more successful in their attempt to capture the essence. Most scientists seem to think they're expressing a truth in their ideas and their equations fall flat to most of us.

Most artists, however, know they're composing experiences of something that can't be explained, but, when it's done well, many viewers get to actually feel the immense mystery that everything is.

That's why hundreds of people find themselves breaking down in tears when they first stand in front of some of Rothko's best pieces, like his Seagram Murals at the Tate gallery in London. Looking at them, you feel like you're touching the vast mystery of existence and that you are part of it. Your little life is part of it.

This can happen to people who have never thought about things like this ever before.

Others have had the same experience in front of a truly great painting by Agnes Martin. Her paintings reflect the moments when one senses the greater mystery of life and what that feels like emotionally.

Or maybe it's the first time you actually see Barnett Newman's Vir Heroicus Sublimis, an 18-foot-long field of red paint with a few vertical lines in it and you realise that one of those thin lines could be your entire lifetime, or the entire history of the Roman Empire, or the entire time that human beings have existed, but whatever time period it is, one hundred years, a thousand years, a million years, it's just a skinny little blip, a zip, in a vast vibrant openness, the mysterious energetic unform of existence.

In photographs these things may look like nothing, just empty fields of colour or horizontal lines, but in real life they have great power.

There's a story about an Agnes Martin painting in a Swiss art museum, in a room next to another room filled with wildly aggressive and frenetic art pieces. The Agnes Martin piece is very quiet, just faint bands of horizontal

colour, but when people catch sight of it, the story is that they are pulled to it like moths to a porch light. They leave all the other art and move towards it. Apparently, the museum workers never get tired of watching this happen.

Agnes Martin's writings, which accompany her paintings in Arnie Glimcher's book on her life and work, are equal to any great spiritual teaching from any point in history.

Maybe even better than some.

You might find yourself looking online at Renaissance art and as you scroll through, you're amazed at the colour and grandeur of it all. It's like the grandeur of the great cathedrals of Europe, the gold and marble and beatific visions of a greater glory, and then you stumble across a couple of pieces by Giotto and as you sit there looking at them a stillness descends on you and it feels like you are in the quiet company of something sacred and still.

You're looking at paintings of form, paintings of people interacting, but you're feeling the stillness of life's mystery.

Everyone knows of Van Gogh's tortured existence. Laughed at, ridiculed, selling only one painting in his lifetime, living on the verge of madness … and for what?

Look at his paintings. Look at The Starry Night, or Wheatfield with Crows, and you know "for what." It's his deep connection with the great spirit, the vibrant living unform that everything is. And it's his joy in feeling that he is part of it all.

And Paul Cézanne … Paul Cézanne blew the doors open for everyone. His landscape paintings and his paintings of bathers gave Picasso, Matisse and many other greats the permission to be everything they could possibly be.

Rejected by the Paris art world, never given a show until his mid-sixties, forced to retreat to the countryside to paint in obscurity for forty years … laughed at, ridiculed, and rejected. Forty years later, Picasso was saying, "He's the father of us all."

Look at Cézanne's best landscape paintings and you feel the essential vibration that nature is.

We find J.M.W. Turner doing a similar thing. As he grew older, his paintings became ephemeral movement, the movement of the cosmos.

Matisse … by the end of his life his paintings had become simple bursts of energy, light and colour on a wall. An unexplainable vibrant occurrence that was the energy of everything in existence.

Monet's Water Lilies Triptych at MoMA is similar. As you stand in front of it, it's difficult to know if you're looking at flowers and water or if you're looking at the flowing of the entire universe.

Stanley Whitney and Helen Frankenthaler are some other wonderful examples of this type of art.

Stanley Whitney's mature work is expressing the wonky dance that existence is. It's wildly colourful, moody, spontaneous, fun and mysterious. He is also incredibly pure in his expression. I know of no other painter with that kind of purity.

Helen Frankenthaler is often showing you the flooding movement of the colorful and mysterious ocean that existence is.

James Turrell is maybe the most outrageous example of someone trying to share this ephemeral movement of life. He has now spent over 50 years and tens of millions of dollars on his Roden Crater project to give people a direct experience of flowing unform.

He has gone through four major relationships and is millions in debt, but he wants people to experience the wonder of life that he experiences.

It's the same experience that the others I've mentioned were painting. Only a small percentage of people have seen the interior of Roden Crater to this point, but when it's done the public will have access to it. Those who have seen it say it's one of the wonders of the world, a truly spiritual place.

James Joyce painted the same mystery in words. In Finnegans Wake (FW) he expresses the free-flowing nature of existence, a movement that can't ever be explained, but is always explained in stories that are essentially false. Stories that create a lot of confusion and emotional pain.

Link Phillips and I have pointed to how Joyce has done this in our article "A Sutra for the West".

But it's not easy to enter Joyce's flow. You really have to give up your attachment to ideas and relate to words as the flow of meaningless sound that seems to have meaning, but doesn't really. Joyce, who loved to sing, suggested reading FW out loud to catch the melodic rhythms.

It took me two years and four attempts to read FW and when I finally managed it, it just seemed like I was reading 628 pages of gibberish.

And then … a week and a half later … I woke up one morning and could understand that he was pointing to the unexplainable flow of existence and the falseness of any description of the flow.

He even somehow managed to explain the fundamental structure of all of our concepts and why they don't apply to our experience of life, as Link and I point out in our article.

He did so much more than that, as the article states. But again, it seemed like gibberish when I was trying to read it.

It probably helped that in our once-a-week coffee meetings, Link would hit me with a stick and scream, "Just read the blasted thing!!!"

Nah, just kidding.

These artists are great prophets and poets. As James Baldwin once stated, "The poets, by which I mean all artists, are finally the only people that know the truth about us."

I don't particularly agree that they are the only ones who know this truth, but great artists live as the mystery that everything is.

They don't try to understand it. They just are it.

The art process allows us to drop our usual focus on thought, reason and apparent understanding and feel our way through life instead, in a safe way.

Feeling the mystery of it, feeling its inherent urges that move us in directions to make art, directions that seem to make no sense, but eventually make more sense than anything we've encountered before. That's the process of painting or sculpture or dance or any other art form.

It's a safe way of following something mysterious, a freedom to make mistakes without worry, a freedom to be exactly what we need to be and do what we need to do, even if it feels like it's not making sense and then discovering that it somehow does make sense.

It's a chance to feel this unformed flow of existence moving to its inherent urge, a chance to feel it and be it, in action … very clearly. It doesn't have to make sense. We just have to be the movement that we are.

Perhaps one of the greatest artists in this regard was Marcel Duchamp who realised that everything in existence is the art process. It's the movement of something mysterious moving to its inherent urges. It's life itself. That's just as true in the production of

commercial urinals as it is in da Vinci painting the Mona Lisa. So, Duchamp put a urinal in an art museum and called it art.

Duchamp realised that even your next breath is a work of art, or your relationship, or your lifestyle, your next meal, your next walk, your next burp … and so on … and so on … and so on.

He eventually declared, "My art is living. Each second, each breath, is a work which is inscribed nowhere, which is neither visual nor cerebral."

What is Art to Me?

If I had to say what art is to me, it's the overwhelming urge to do something. Initially, art was the urge to do something with paint. I didn't know why I had that urge. I've had it for most of my life, but between the ages of sixty-three and seventy-five that urge became so strong that it actually made me paint.

I didn't know what I wanted to do with paint, but there was a strong urge to find out. It had always been a

mysterious part of me that I didn't understand and the urge to explore it just became too strong to resist.

I found that I had an urge to approach it in a very particular way. I needed it to be simple. I needed only the basics and nothing more. I was in art school when I was in my twenties, but nothing I was taught back then really applied to what I needed to do at age sixty-three.

I purchased a set of true primaries, not red, yellow, blue, but rather magenta, lemon yellow, and cyan, along with titanium white and Mars Black, and a few basic brushes. I used acrylic paint because it's water-soluble, easy to clean up, and quick to dry, so I could paint over it if I wanted to change something. And with that, I started to paint.

I painted on wooden panels because I didn't want to be bothered with stretching canvas. I started painting small, on eight-by-ten-inch panels, so I could experiment quickly with small paintings.

There's a kind of quality in art that is described as wabi-sabi. It comes from a Japanese sense of transience and imperfection in life. The Japanese crafters wanted things to have a sense of being imperfect, impermanent, and

incomplete. At the same time, they had a very sophisticated sense of beauty.

My own sense of wabi-sabi is that it always has a quality of rough sophistication. It's like a kimono that has been patched so many times it looks patched and poor. The patching is done in such a way that it is very obvious and yet, the result has an incredibly sophisticated beauty to it.

It's like Bob Dylan's music. His chord changes and rhythmic patterns can be unusually sophisticated, quite rare, but he doesn't want it to sound polished and slick. He wants it to sound like a bunch of skilled amateurs are playing together on somebody's front porch. He even wants the players to make mistakes, because it adds to the wabi-sabi quality.

Anyway, I didn't know what I wanted to paint, but I knew it had to have a wabi-sabi quality and a kind of prehistoric cave marking quality. Not cave painting, but the markings scratched in the stone long before anyone started painting.

These were just vague urges when I first started, but I could feel them and had no idea where they were going.

I was also looking at all the paintings I could from history, online, to see what really appealed to me out of what everyone had done in the past.

Artists like Mark Rothko, Suzan Frecon, Agnes Martin, and Barnett Newman jumped out at me, but I didn't really want to paint like them.

Maybe the one that stood out the most was Stanley Whitney, but again, I didn't want to paint like him. What I wanted was the purity and innocence of his expression.

It eventually became clear that none of the art I looked at really appealed to me. It wasn't what I needed to experience. I didn't know exactly what I needed to experience; I just knew that I had an overwhelming urge to experience it.

There's something about paint and certain muted colours that touches me profoundly. The paint on the door jambs of very old buildings that have been painted many times without being sanded down properly is one of my favourite paint experiences. Much better than anything in an art gallery. Also, the uneven washes of paint on badly repaired plaster walls in Italy. There's something in those experiences that overwhelms me in a joyful way.

So again, I didn't want to experience any of what I've mentioned above, but there was a feeling that if I could find the right combination of absolutely all of it together, that would be right.

Early on I read somewhere that one should paint five hundred paintings very quickly to get all the bad paintings out of the way, so I started painting very quickly … and very quickly I started suffering.

Back in art school, I thought of art as what the art market said art was and I had looked at art that way for most of my life. We live in a world where images of art are everywhere and there is a commercial art market that tells us what it should look like.

When I was in art school, I could paint something so that it looked like a photograph, but I didn't find that interesting. I wanted something rougher, wilder, more experimental, and I got pretty good at experimenting with wild approaches … art school was pretty wild.

I thought my time in school was the time for experimentation, but at some point, I would have to settle down to do real art. The kind of art that everyone generally thinks art should be.

However, in art school I never had a big urge to create. I didn't have any real thirst for it at that time, so I eventually focused more on design work rather than "art".

Design work was a form of problem-solving that I enjoyed and could be applied to any part of my life. By the time I got my degree, I only wanted to meditate and left for California.

I know … that seems to have left out some important things … but I've covered those things in one of my books so there's no need to go into it here. I had some other things going on in my life at that time and you can find those things written about in "What the...": A Conversation about Living.

In any event, my life went in a very different direction after I got my degree and basically, over the next forty-four years, I didn't really paint at all.

At sixty-three, I had forty-four more years of seeing all the styles and images that most people call art and I can mimic almost any style in paint.

So, when I started painting again, all of those styles came pouring out in the early quick paintings that I was doing. I didn't want those styles to come out; I wanted to go in a

totally new direction, but no matter what I did, I couldn't get there.

Years and years of familiar art styles started pouring out of me, but I didn't want familiar art styles; I wanted some kind of wabi-sabi cave scratching.

Those early small paintings were getting a lot of praise from friends and some of those paintings could impress me too, for about thirty minutes, and then I would despise them, because I had seen them so many times before and they weren't what I needed to experience.

Again, I didn't really know what I needed to experience, but it wasn't any of the next three hundred and fifty small paintings that I did.

It was nothing but one frustration and disappointment after another. And I destroyed those three hundred and fifty paintings, one after the other.

Friends were wincing and moaning over me destroying them, but I couldn't stand those paintings even existing. I needed something different.

I definitely wanted something simpler and quieter. I had quickly moved to abstraction, but it felt like there was too much busyness in them and I needed something quieter. So, I drifted towards minimalism.

But minimalism seemed too simple; there was nothing meaningful in them, no matter how much I got the colour right or played with different brushwork and surface treatments.

I bought bags of sand to mix with the paint, so that it had more of a rough quality, but that just felt like some cheap trick, so I threw the sand away.

I mixed in dust balls from under my bed to get something interesting going, but none of it worked. None of it felt right.

I thought that maybe I should work larger, so I switched to canvas as my painting surface. I bought house painters' canvas drop cloths to paint on. I didn't want to waste money on expensive canvas or linen because I didn't want the finished product to look like good-quality canvas or linen.

I needed it to look like some unskilled housepainter had painted it in his backyard on scraps of canvas drop cloth that he had lying around. I had no idea why I needed that experience, but that's what I needed.

I started painting on canvas that I had stretched on frames that I had made myself, but after a while I just

stopped stretching it and tacked it to a piece of plywood instead.

Instead of painting on eight-by-ten-inch pieces of thin wood panelling, I was painting on four-foot-square canvases, and some of those paintings worked well enough for me to keep them for a short time, but they still weren't right.

So, I destroyed them too.

I bought more sand and threw away that sand. I bought plaster dust and threw away that plaster dust. I tried painting with brushes that had dried paint on them. I tried letting the paint almost dry and then dragged brushes through it to roughen the surface, but I threw all of those ones away too.

I was reading the words of famous painters throughout this entire process and eventually found the writings of Philip Guston and Agnes Martin who both gave brilliant advice on following your own intuition … your own need … your own gut … above everything else.

Somewhere around the 400th painting that I was destroying, I ran across some advice from the painter, Peter Joseph, who talked about how he had stopped painting quickly and started painting very slowly. He

talked about how he would live with one painting for months at a time to see if he could live with it.

“To see if he could live with it.”

When I read that, I realised my difficulty. I could rattle off a painting very quickly and it could look impressive to almost anyone who saw it, even me, but for me it only lasted thirty minutes. It was never anything I wanted to live with. I would destroy it a day later.

I had a tendency to be very graphic in my images. They could have an immediate sensual impact but they didn’t have much more to them and after a short while they just felt shallow and empty and I couldn’t figure out how to get rid of that shallowness and emptiness.

I wish I could tell you all of the agonising things that I tried, but I can’t remember all the mental pain of it, and experimentation, so I can only offer this little memory of it, the nights of frustration and sweat, the many, many times that I was going to give up.

Ten years had gone by and I wasn’t any closer to experiencing what I needed to experience. There was just a driving urge to get to some experience that I had never had before, but I had no idea what that was.

By then, I was painting on two-foot-square pieces of canvas and I started working very slowly … living with the painting for a long time.

I would not do anything to that painting until I had an irresistible urge to do it.

I would start with the first thing I was urged to do and when that urge faded, I would simply wait. I would just sit looking at the piece and waited for the next irresistible urge.

In that approach, the paint started telling me what to do.

It would feel like I needed to adjust something in a certain way. I would do that and then I'd wait.

After a while, it would feel like I needed to add or adjust something else. I would do that and then I'd wait.

Sometimes nothing would come for hours. Sometimes nothing for days. Sometimes nothing for weeks.

Sometimes I would get so frustrated with it all that I would dip a large brush in white paint and wipe out everything I had done.

I got to the point where I was painting very slowly and it seemed like the paint was indicating what to do, or at

least my response to the paint was telling me what to do, but something in that didn't feel right.

I wasn't just responding to the paint; I was also putting down the paint that I would be responding to.

Right from the very beginning of the painting there was an urge to put down certain paint, so it seemed that I was being pushed by this urge. But that didn't feel right either.

I wasn't being pushed by the urge; I was the urge. I'm a movement of some kind with an inherent urge to move in certain ways. The movement and the urge are the same thing.

At first, I had the impression that I had to feel my deepest need in order to feel what to paint next, but that wasn't correct. It became clearer that I have a built-in urge to act. I simply happen the way I happen. The urge to act and the action simply arise.

The paintings were occurring the only way they could. It was all on automatic. It was an unexplainable movement with an inherent urge to occur the way it occurred.

Painting wasn't about me doing anything. There was an urge to paint, so I sat down in front of a blank canvas

with some paint and waited. I didn't have to do anything.

There was an irresistible urge to make some marks in certain colours. It was the only thing possible. And when it didn't feel right, there was an urge to change it. It simply occurred.

The painting process brought me back to the one thing that life always reveals … a happening simply happening.

It was exactly the same process as having the urge to eat certain foods at a meal and then preparing the food the way I felt urged to prepare it. If along the way something didn't feel right, the urge would change.

It was the same as going for a walk. I walk because I have an urge to walk. I walk when I feel most urged to walk. I walk somewhere where I feel urged to walk. And I walk at a pace that I feel most urged to walk. If something doesn't feel right, the urge changes, but I don't have to work at changing it; it simply occurs.

Then I ran across the writings of Marcel Duchamp who explained that art is what occurs in the gap between the first urge and the finished product and no one can possibly understand or explain what occurs in that gap.

So, I just sat in front of my paintings, waiting to see what would happen. A lot of times there was an urge to do things with the paint that made no sense, because I had never done it before. It just happened.

There was simply an urge to do it. I would find myself leaning forward with an inclination to move the brush a certain way, but I wasn't sure where it was going even as it was moving.

The more I didn't try to cause anything to happen and the more I was willing to trust the next urge, the better I liked the paintings.

But I would always have to wait for the urge. I had to wait for it to happen. If I tried to push it faster, with some idea in my head, some idea that I should be doing something faster, nothing worked.

The more I simply let it happen at its own pace, the more I liked the paintings and the more I could live with them.

I eventually began painting nothing but images of "vibrant unform" … in endlessly different ways.

It snuck up on me, almost without me seeing it, but it felt incredibly right. I was expressing my deepest and most loved sense of existence. Each time the painting was something different, but it felt totally right.

And I wanted to live with it.

So … at this point … what is art to me?

Art is an unexplainable movement with an overwhelming urge to move in a certain way. It's the vibrant happening of the moment. It's the cosmos expressing itself in endlessly unique ways. It's not a movement being pushed by an urge; it's movement that is an urge to move in endlessly varied ways.

It's the urge of breathing, the urge of eating, the urge of caring, the urge of living, it's the movement of everything occurring in endless variety.

Art is life. Art is the cosmos. Art is nature expressing each of us as the unique expression we are, expressing us uniquely in each moment.

But of course, it really isn't "art", in the same way it really isn't "me", and it really isn't the "cosmos". It's a totally unexplainable occurrence with an inherent urge to occur the way it occurs.

At this point, my painting urge is gone. I've experienced all that I needed to experience from that. What I needed was to feel the raw, unvarnished movement of life for a very long time, without a focus on thought. To feel the wabi-sabi of it, transience and imperfection. I needed to

experience my own pure sense of it and my simplest, most primitive, expression of it … my particular cave scratching.

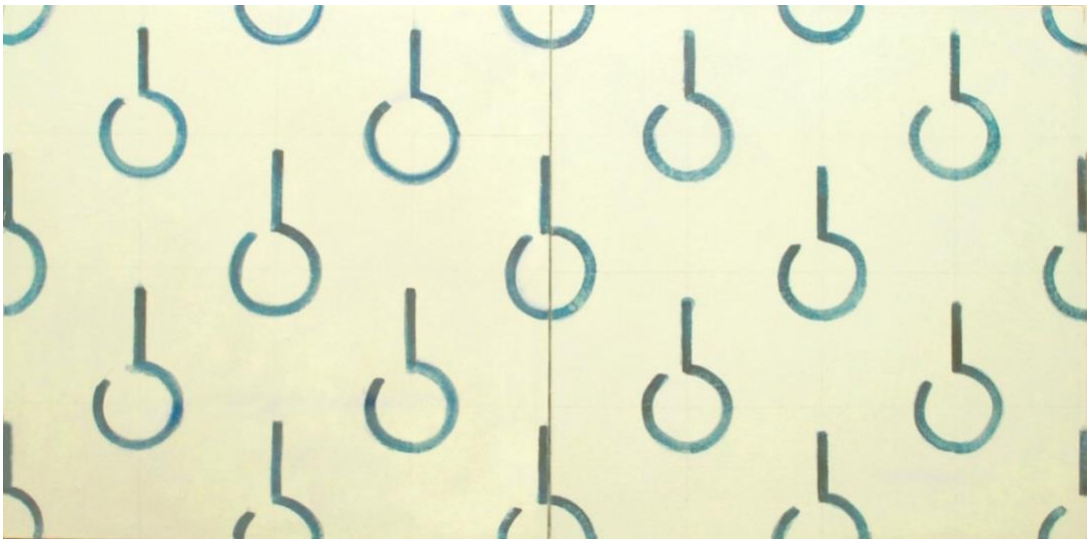
The painting process pulled me away from a focus on thinking. I stopped writing through most of the twelve years that I was painting. I stopped focusing on thought and focused on feeling instead, feeling a mysterious, vibrant occurrence and its deepest urges.

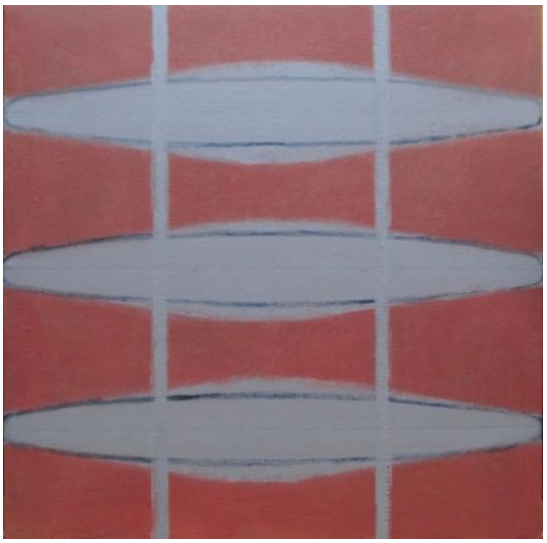
And that moved into everything else in my life. I only do what I'm most urged to do in any moment. I'm not even doing it. There is no "me" doing anything.

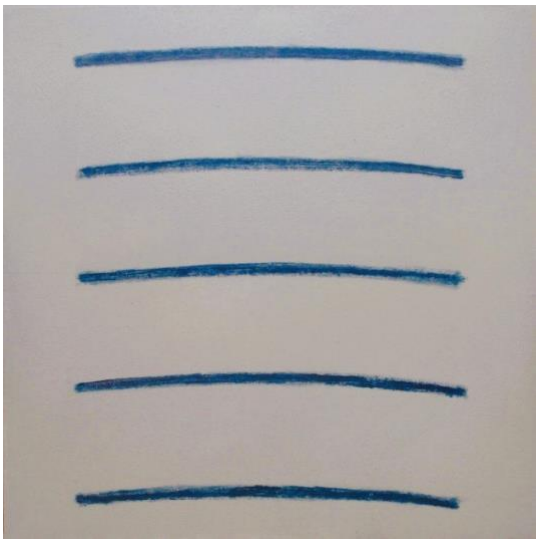
It's the dance of this immediate vibrant occurrence, right now … beyond measure, beyond explanation. It's all that ever is. It's moving on its own.

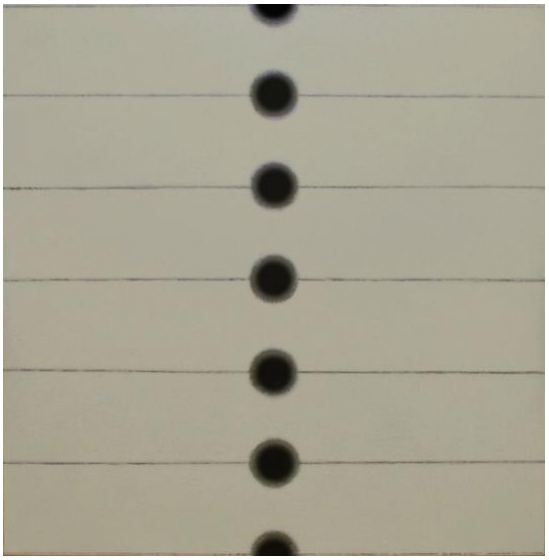




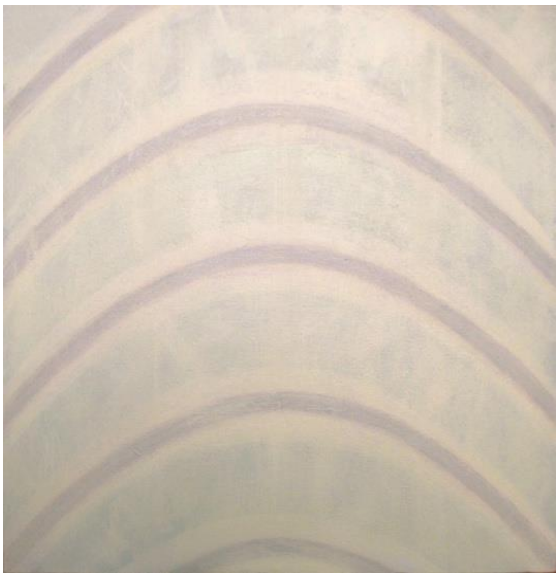


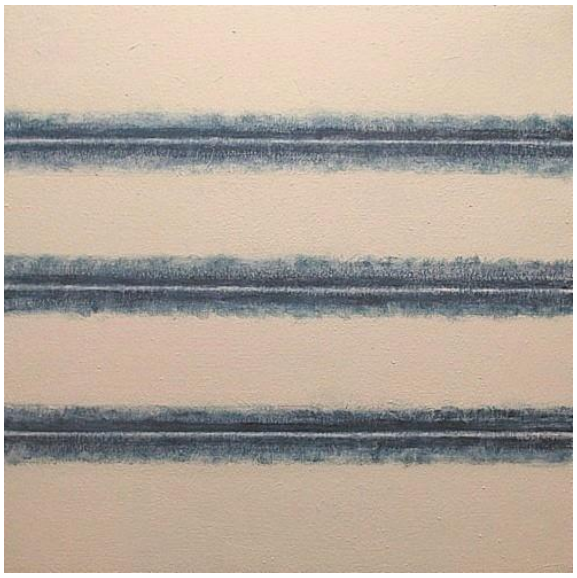


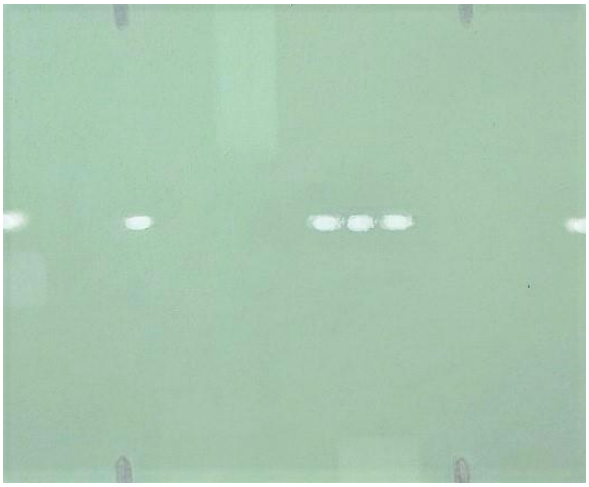


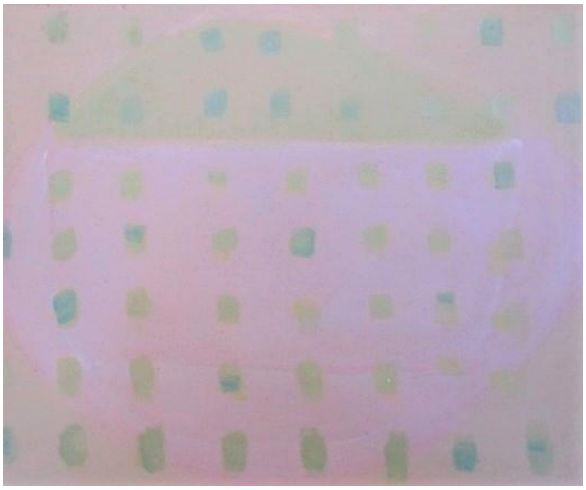






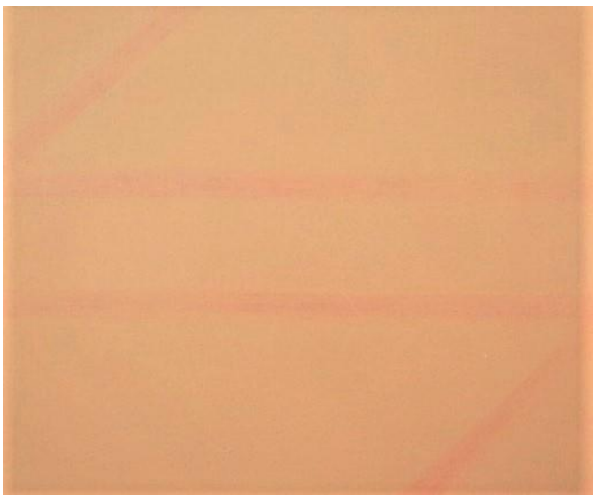










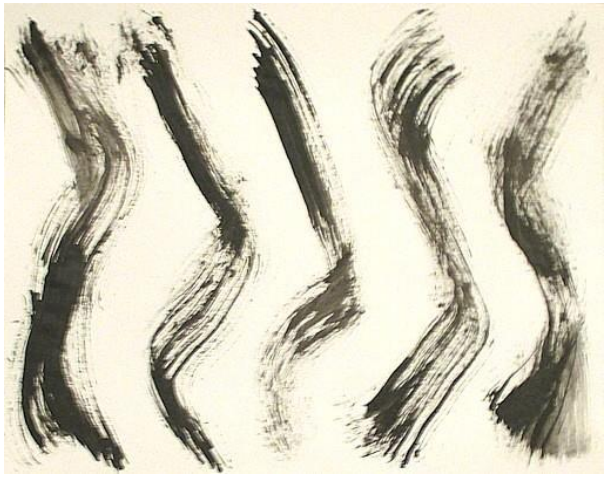














“vibrant unform”

My thanks to Link Phillips and Marcus Fellowes

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