ABSTRACT

Title of Document:	Living with Flattened Space
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My work is a source for the expression and communication of the concepts that discuss the fantasy spaces created within the mind. It engages the rapidly expanding geographical space of the digital realm that encroaches on our material existence. Digital technology and space has effects on almost all our daily happenings from the products we buy to how we get them, not to mention the dramatic expansion of diversity in the products offered in the marketplace. Other effects such as how we create films or create architecture or design have become all but digitized. Much of the imagery presented in my work is flattened, fractured, broken and separated. Similar to that of information gathering on the internet, one clicks back and forth through multiple frames of reference or existence coming from unknown distance later to be flattened by the nature of the media. The works ebb and flow from illusionary spaces to plastic spaces of flattened abstraction.

With a world based in complex ever-changing visual symbols and rapid image reproduction, our language doesn't evolve at the same rate our image culture does. One is left with only image construction as way to interpret data into information. I choose painting and drawing as a way to communicate and come to terms with the time and space in which we live. I believe my work is a point of departure not a location of fact. It is inspired by subcultures, many of which I have been a part of such as internet gaming communities to potentially create other ideas about our global cultural net of existence.

Living with Flattened Space.

By

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Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Maryland, College Park, in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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Dedication

To the flies, may you fly towards the ultraviolet light.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to my wife, family and friends without your help this would not have been possible.

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Chapter 1: Farming popular culture art and otherwise

From the age of four or five until now I have been playing videogames. Much of my time has been spent clicking away on a game pad in hopes of exploring new spaces of the digital world. This experience exploring digital space along with varying video game plots has had a great effect on how I and many others understand the space of the physical world.

Along with digital space I also spent a copious amount of my adolescence and adulthood viewing science fiction and fantasy films. The agenda or voice of many of these films was ominous in regards to future hypothetical situations. Situations in the films such as post-apocalyptic happenings or artificial intelligence and the many possible occurrences it could create. The idea of escaping into spaces other than my own was always appealing. One of the main reasons for me to create paintings was my desire to escape into spaces of my own design.

The spaces and aesthetics created within the video games *Mega Man* and *Metroid* are one of the many inspirations for the pod forms and spaces seen in my works. When upon entering game space in side scrolling and third person video games, the figure or main character is the most prominent fixture. The player, spending time with this in most cases guarded figure as the basis for control in the game, is always at safe distance from the negative or violent activity that plays out in both of the aforementioned games. In side scrolling games the focus or control is concentrated on the figure. This format is present in both initial manifestations of the

games *Mega Man* and *Metroid*. The figure in these games is without life and is without animation that is without your help in playing out the varying storylines. With this realization, I began thinking of the figure as a pod, as a symbol of detachment, a fracture of oneself. The figure or pod gives the player a feeling of complete control, thus inspiring my creation of the pod form in my works.

The sci-fi film noir *Blade Runner* has in its techno-robotic-scapes had an effect on the voice and the forms in my works. Although film is quite a different type of entertainment than video games, the presentation of space is reliant upon the use of a screen to communicate ideas. The presentation of ideas in each medium is dependent on visual formal components to present information. The futuristic space of *Blade Runner* was presented as a dark, dingy world on the edge of collapse. Watching this film as a youth affected my views or apprehensions on production and the use of technology. Existing now in a time where much of the world is controlled by virtual technology and many of the decisions and interactions are made virtually, painting is a way for me to reconnect with the tactile, with the world of objects with the world in which my physical body exists.

Artists such as Franz Ackermann and Takeshi Murakami have had an effect on how I see art and its potential for expression. Ackermann's uses painting as a way of creating a dialog about the way contemporary cityscapes are seen. After learning more about the construction of Ackermann's spaces, I gained some insight on the relevance of intuitive creation in regards to art. Many if not all of Ackermann's painted works are created with flat-high color key forms arranged to illustrate various architectural fixtures and cityscapes. The spaces produced in Ackermann's paintings

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are illogical. They do not exist within the rules of singular perspective. These cityscapes roam from simplified representation to fantastical fictional designs. In Ackermann's words "I started redrawing certain aspects of where I liked to be" and "where I hated to be." He calls them "*mental maps*" *(Dervis4)*.

Murakami's use of forms from the anime culture of Japan helped me to grasp the potential for a dialogue about video games in the art world. Being that there is little distinction from the formal qualities in the characters of anime and the characters in video games. Some of this may have to do with the large amount of input executed by Japan on the world of gaming software. Some of the many subjects that Murakami uses in his works are loosely appropriated from anime and other popular cultural sources. Many of Murakami's works from the late 90's contain a brightly colored figure labeled *Mr. Date of Birth*. The works containing *Mr. DOB* are focused around the figure and "castration's dysfunction" in regards to the figures gaze (149 Azuma). Also Murakami's use or creation of an archetype from this otaku culture to symbolize a variety of meanings helped to reinforce my belief in the necessity for symbols in art.

My work is in many ways is an exploration in the spaces connected to my identity and compulsions, as well as the compulsions of the culture at large. Compulsions are at the root of all things such as the desire to create images or to escape into the digital world or even to allow the mind to escape in fantasy. The idea of rational behavior has no bearing; it is like using the term normal to describe someone. There are normative social concepts or behavioral expectations but as far as describing a being in our time there are always fringe behaviors.

For many individuals who retreat into fruitless endeavors, such as video gaming, are seen as having no value. For some it is the only thing that matters after inescapable needs. For many, painting or the creation of art is also seen as a fruitless endeavor. It doesn't feed the hungry or take care of the sick or even make our lives more efficient. It exists as an image of us, our desires, our fears and thoughts in a time and place. Painting, fantasy and science fiction in cinema and virtual digital endeavors allow one to partake in these frontier compulsions without the harm of anyone other than possibly themselves. Many of the things learned in gaming are quite invaluable and not just a loss or useless input. If we are lost to the value in ideas and decisions above production we are not in the advanced civilized culture we claim to be in. The author Steven Johnson believes that there are intellectual benefits in regards to the decision-making facet of playing video games. He sees these decisions made while playing as a "fundamental virtue, because learning how to think is ultimately about learning to make the right decisions: weighing evidence, analyzing situations, consulting your long term goals, and then deciding" (Johnson 41). Painting illusionary space is similar in this respect, while creating a painting one must constantly create rules, weigh options, think critically and inevitably make decisions. I like to think of art as a crucial document of our expansive world and what it is like to live in it.

Chapter 2: Representing our space as a series of fictions and symbols

"Painting has created imaginary spaces for a very long time, but ultimately nearly always in connection with people located in space or with space as a metaphor of people's location in it." (Goetz 15)

Figure 1.

Much of my work spawns out of drawing, initially I thought of these drawing as ambiguous abstract sketches. As the drawings progressed I began to seriously consider what they meant and where they came from. I began to make connections to games that I played and films that I watched. The connections were based on certain formal characteristics that started bubbling up to the surface in my drawings and paintings. I instigated an internal dialog about what was happening with these forms

and what they could represent. I came to the conclusion after a great deal of thought

and works that the forms were similar to robotic cases or protective armor. Most of

the forms were modular and at points architectural in appearance. I began to think of

these forms from my drawings as pods or containers and I felt they actively

represented a guarded humanoid robotic form. Through drawing these forms

repetitively, to the point of redundancy, I felt as if I had created an archetype. This

archetype I began to use in masses as being representative of a symbol for individual

behavior within our digital culture. The connection of the pod to our isolating

digitally obsessed culture started when considering the representational characteristics

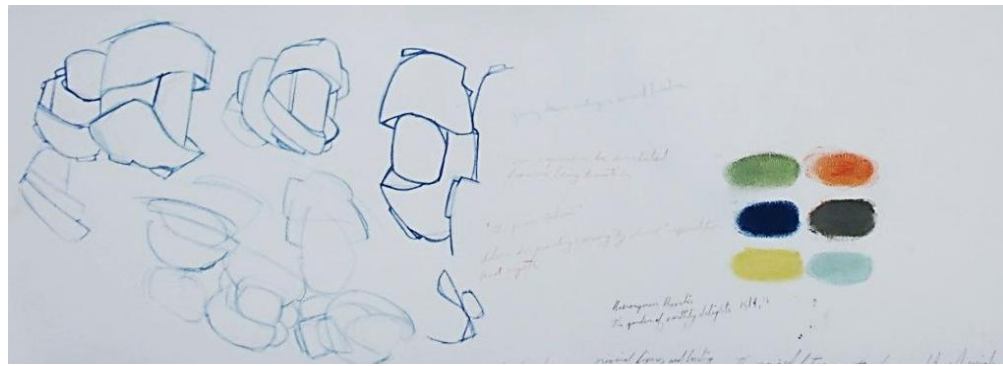of the form and what I needed to place them in a context.

Figure 2.

The choice to use powered mechanical devices such as the airbrush into my

studio practice was difficult; I felt a lot of apprehension in adapting it to my practice.

The connection to a material that I could create work under any situation was in prior

years of great importance. For me, one of the great strengths in painting is the core

connection of the materials to the natural technology free world. The choice to use

power in my practice allowed me the ability to connect closer with the world of

synthetics that I wanted to have a dialogue about.

Figure 3.

Initially with <u>Second Wave</u> I attempted to create a field of pod forms in various colors and levels of opacity arranged as if they were about to topple over. The collapse of this massive build- up is created to reference the instability created by the control of the space of the virtual world upon our lives. <u>Second Wave</u> is the earliest work in my thesis and has the first use of an airbrush in my studio practice. I felt as if this work was less about a dialogue in synthetic space and more about the creation of space, creating discomfort and fracture with implied movement.

Figure 4.

       I started to arrange the pods in various spatial scenarios connecting to painted spaces. _Modern Entropy_ consists of painted spaces of hard edged geometric forms which are brightly colored in varying hues and tints. This work is unlike all the works in my thesis. The base layers for the work were not grounded in reference to sketches but in reference to a photograph of a broken down utopian modernist piece of architecture. The building in the photo resembled many of the pod forms in my sketches and obviously was empty and uninhabited like that of the pod archetype. The previously mentioned film, _Blade Runner_ has in its environments similarities to spaces in _Modern Entropy_ with its polluted qualities of smudged charcoal and re-opened black and blue airbrush paints. The spaces were constructed using formal cues from books on the introduction of the graphical user interface upon traditional design as well as various other sources. Cues such as simple three dimensional illusions, digital gradients, flattened bands of color and hard-edged geometric forms are all synonymous with this time period in design.
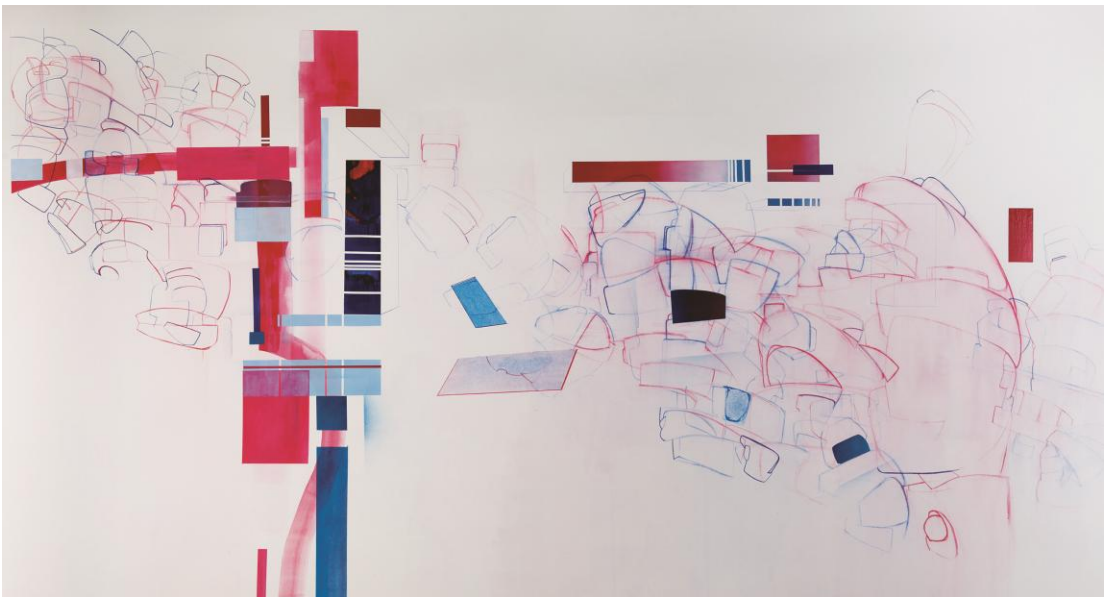
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Figure 5.

Figure 6.

The *Untitled* works in the thesis contain a range of rectangular colored bands of paint which are applied to visualize or symbolize data and its transmission. The bands have multi-purposes, not only as symbols but as controls or guides through the illusionary spatial compositions. These bands on occasion are coupled with lines which allude to a space created by single point perspective. This illusion allows the viewer to enter the space later to be pushed away by contradictory pod forms of varying spatial orientation. This illusionary visual tension is intended to lead the viewer on a path of disorientation. This disorientation is meant to symbolize the confusion felt by many in our current time in relation to the tension felt by entering and exiting digital spaces.

The use of a simplified pallet of red and blue hues in three of four *Untitled* works in the thesis gives me a great deal more control. This control brought on by this simplified pallet, specifically to control the viewer, will allow a number of situations to occur. Using the most spatially powerful, illusionary colors allows me the ability to abruptly dislodge the viewer from spatial comfort. Also a red and blue hue, when executed with washes from watercolor pencils roughly alludes to a sort of schematic or a design. This can be a directive for the viewer to think of the pods forms as some sort of design or symbol or at best an archetype. This build-up of layered washes of pod forms also makes reference to time or history, a bizarre future past of sorts.

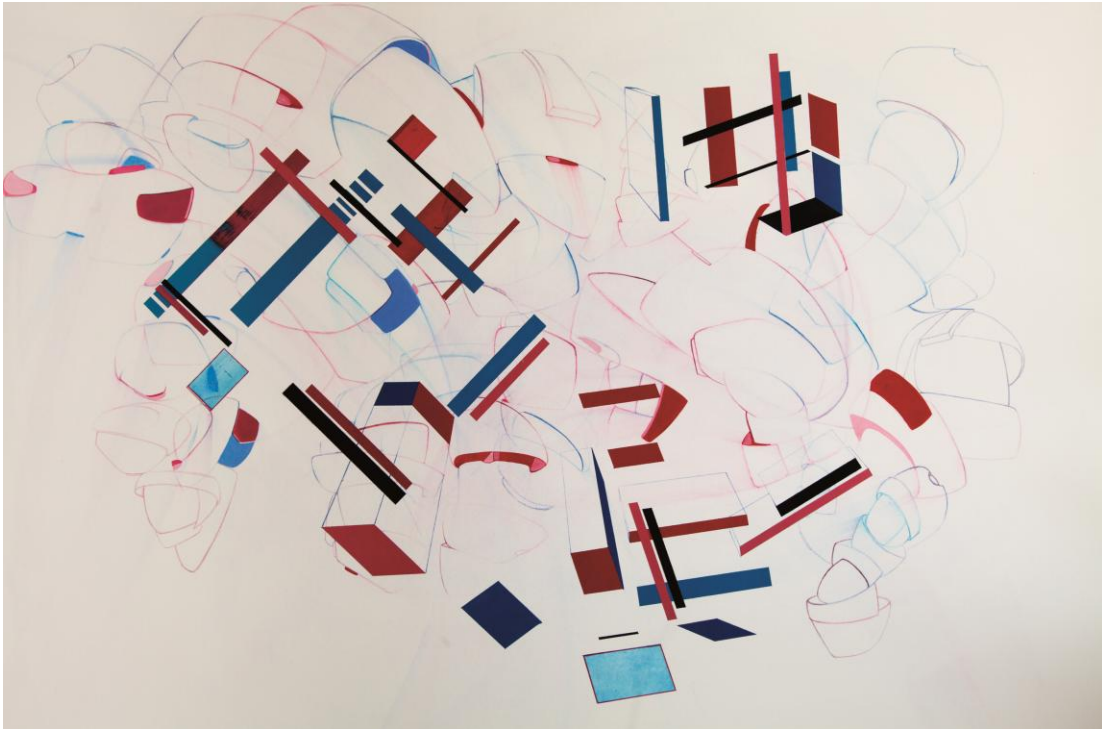# Chapter 3: Irresolvable space as resolution (conclusion)

Figure 7.

     As I have mentioned in the above chapters art or painting in art exists as an image of us, our desires, our fears and thoughts in a time and place. In other words art is a document, a less traditional record of the way we are in time and place. I also believe contemporary works of art have a responsibility to help create a dialogue about our current or past compulsions. I believe my thesis works embody a time and perspective relevant to the digital cultures of the world. My work brings up questions about what we are and what we might become. Recording time from a historical stand point leaves many things and ideas out of the picture. Art is a way to recuperate some of this loss in our past and evaluate by a completely different set of terms.

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