

Thinking Through Painting

I have to start somewhere. Like when I paint, I embark on this essay by colouring the paper with words, stacking sentence upon sentence and moving sections of text around until what was fragmentary gradually begins to take shape and find structure. This is to say, I write like I paint. The words become my material. I pour them out, observe and rework them through rewriting. Since I started painting for my exhibition, words and thoughts have come to me, stopping me in the process and demanding to be written down. It's as if painting activates the words. I continue to paint in anticipation of them, hoping to arrive at an understanding.

To prepare for this writing, I've read through my studio diaries, from before my time at art school up until now. In them, I've recorded all the thoughts that have surfaced during my process. Since reading these notes, I've had the feeling that my thoughts are circulating. Or rather that there is a *secret core* around which my words orbit, one that I can never quite manage to reveal. My notes become various attempts to dress that core in words. I've realised that what I've been trying to formulate for several years revolves around the same interest. While it has evolved in pace with my work, the core of that interest is *elusive* in nature. The more I try to put my finger on it, the further it withdraws.

I want this essay to be both inviting and elusive. Transparent yet secretive. My painting originates and exists in a languageless world. My artistic practice is an attempt to approach something I can't express in any other way. There is a core, which for me is clear and self-evident. It can be touched upon but never specified. I can talk about it by wrapping myself around it. The difficulty arrives the moment I have to translate it for others, when I come into contact with an external world. Will I be able to write about a place that for me is wordless? I make an attempt: I lumber around and let the fumbling gesture speak for itself, as I do when I paint.

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In truth I'm still not quite seeing properly the thread of what I'm writing you. ... I'll keep talking to you and taking the risk of disconnection. ... I write to you because I don't understand myself.

But I'll keep following myself. Elastic.¹

Clarice Lispector has been important to me. The first writing of hers that I read was the novel *Near to the Wild Heart* (1944). I was immediately captivated by the language; I'd never read anything like it before. It was as if the words took shape as sentences in the moment of reading, as if she were sculpting with clay. In her book *Água Viva* (1973), I find many beautiful formulations that could have been descriptions of the painting process. The title *Água Viva* is fitting because the text flows freely and washes over you, and even after you've reached the end, you don't fully understand what's happened. The plot is unremarkable, but the gravity of the text lies in its ability to reshape itself with each sentence. It manages to make the reader feel as if they are right behind a preformed thought. You can follow the creation of the text, down to its heartbeat.

There is an incompleteness in Lispector's intuitive, fluid writing, a sketch-like approach that is the result of her search for "the feeling beyond thought."² Therefore, the text feels like it's in a state of

¹ Clarice Lispector, *Água Viva*, trans. Stefan Tobler (New York: New Directions, 2012), 21–22.

² Lispector, *Água Viva*, 61.

re-examination, and that it's describing something in its purest form. Lispector creates a concept that she calls "it," which she uses in several places in the novel. It's unclear what she's filling the concept with. Sometimes she seems to allude to the transcendental, other times to the sensory. In my interpretation, "it" alludes to the essence of something. It's the core of content that has not yet been translated into thought and language. "It" is the intangible that cannot be spoken about, and that disappears as soon as it is put into words. Yet Lispector manages to put words to the unspeakable. The reader is invited into a stripped-down and powerful centre, the core, *it*.³ She writes:

But the most important word in the language has but two letters: is. Is.
I am at its core.
I still am.
I am at the living and soft centre.
Still.
It sparkles and is elastic.⁴

Água Viva's boldness also fascinates me—though the text is melodic and pleasant to read because of the beautiful language and flowing prose, it dares to trust its own expression. It's not concerned with being comprehensible to the reader but is instead fully engaged in its own exploration. The writing leads the way. But there is also something frightening about her writing. It sits in a borderland, close to tipping into a state of dissolution or incomprehensibility. The writing invites structured and rhythmic thought while revealing the chaos from which the words originate. This sense of being in a precarious position may be precisely what gives the words their magnetism.

As many other painters have felt and noted before me, I find it difficult to write about my painting. If I fail to do it justice, the words can feel too concrete, too banal, too close to something that needs a certain distance to breathe. This isn't to suggest that I don't want to write about painting. *On the contrary*. Writing helps me grasp something otherwise inaccessible. It reveals unconscious aspects of my practice that would otherwise have remained invisible.

When I read Clarice Lispector, I'm inspired, because her writing shows that text can be used to describe something alive without casting it in a fixed form. Her writing has a quality that reminds me of the painting process. I think it has to do with the fact that she wants to capture something in motion and something that is in the process of describing its own creation. She uses the text as a fluid, pliant material—and that's how I see painting. Like Lispector thinks through words, I think through painting.

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Merleau-Ponty writes about the relationship between the visible and the invisible in his essay "The Intertwining—The Chiasm."⁵ He begins the text by identifying the two parts that constitute this intertwined relationship: the seeing body (which perceives) and the visible things (which can be perceived in the world). According to Merleau-Ponty, our body is separate from things because it has *flesh*. At the same time, it is inseparable from what is visible around us because our body is also a thing in the world, perceptible to others and also to ourselves. Together, the body and the thing are

³ Lispector, *Água Viva*, 39.

⁴ Lispector, *Água Viva*, 21.

⁵ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "The Intertwining—The Chiasm," in *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1969), 130–55.

two parts of the same being, like “the two halves of an orange.”⁶ He gives an example: we can feel the touch of our right hand when we touch the right hand with our left hand. So, at that moment, we have access to the dual sensation of feeling the visible while experiencing ourselves doing so. We then become seers of things and visible to ourselves simultaneously—he calls this “the reversibility of the visible and the tangible.”⁷

But this reversibility can never take place over a long period of time, because we’re separated from things by our *flesh*. The gap between us and things means we can never merge and become one. However, Merleau-Ponty does not see this as a failure; he suggests that the gap between our flesh and the flesh of the world is our entry point to understanding the world around us. Our body is the tool we can use to approach things. He writes:

We understand then why we see things themselves, in their places, where they are, according to their being which is indeed more than their being-perceived—and why at the same time we are separated from them by all the thickness of the look and of the body; it is that this distance is not the contrary of this proximity, it is deeply consonant with it, it is synonymous with it. It is that the thickness of flesh between the seer and the thing is constitutive for the thing of its visibility as for the seer of his corporeity; it is not an obstacle between them, it is their means of communication. ... The thickness of the body, far from rivaling that of the world, is on the contrary the sole means I have to go unto the heart of things, by making myself a world and by making them flesh.⁸

I see this interactive relationship between the body and the world as closely linked to painting. This is because painting requires a close connection between the visible (in this case the painting) and me (the seer). The act of painting is an attempt to approach the core of the visible, the means I can use to approach the world and understand it. Once I have grasped it, it transforms through me and the movement of my body. You could say that painting is the *point of contact between an inner and outer world*. And through painting, I reveal the invisible in both things and myself, because my body is also a thing, per Merleau-Ponty. So, my seeing—*my gaze*—is what grants me access to the invisible that inhabits our world.

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In my third year of the bachelor’s program, I started making paintings that were chopped up parts of the same motif, where one painting continued into the other. I showed a work that consisted of four paintings in my BFA-3 exhibition.⁹ I think my work from that period was grounded in a desire to break with the idea of the finished painting as fully formed. This found its expression in my making several paintings that were inseparable from each other, different parts that together create a unit. But I think it was also an attempt to make my organic working process visible in the final result.

During my first year of the master’s program, I unconsciously continued to work in a similar way. Looking back, I see a pattern: several paintings from the MFA-1 year are part of a pair. Not a diptych, however, but independent works. Their associated parts are more like the continuation of a gesture. But that exploration had a different basis than what drove me in my third year—instead, I

⁶ Merleau-Ponty, “The Intertwining—The Chiasm,” 133.

⁷ Merleau-Ponty, “The Intertwining—The Chiasm,” 142–43.

⁸ Merleau-Ponty, “The Intertwining—The Chiasm,” 135.

⁹ Carin Alegre Castegren, *Unravel (that which is tangled, that which is twisted)*, 2022, a work consisting of four paintings shown at the 2022 BFA Graduation Exhibition at KHM1 Gallery, Malmö Art Academy. 18 March 2022–2 April 2022.

believe it stemmed from the desire to depict something *in motion*, something that is between two states.

The book *I Paint What I Want to See* (2022) brings together several interviews with Philip Guston alongside his writings. This book has become a kind of painting manual for me, a compilation of texts that attempt to put words to the various stages and mysteries of the painting process. When I read it for the first time, I recognised my own process in many of his quotations. Many pages in my copy of the book are dog-eared and heavily underlined. Reading it, I get the sense that Guston is speaking from an inside perspective. He's in the middle of a process, attempting to translate it for others.

With my paintings, I want to portray a kind of moving mass that has been captured in a specific moment but that, in the next second, can be transformed and remade into something else. Something on unknown ground, not yet moulded into a shape. I think a painting depicts a fragile moment—an image that is on a fine line between existence and dissolution. At various points in the book, Guston expresses a similar desire: to capture in painting something that is in the process of becoming. He writes, “And where the line is alive. Where the line is making the form at the moment of doing it. I enjoy the feeling of the thing being caught at a very special certain moment. At a split-second moment the thing is caught, like it just came into existence. And it's about to change into something else.”¹⁰ Also, “It vibrates! In other words, it's like nailing down a butterfly but the damn thing is still moving around. And this seems to be the whole act of art anyway, to nail it down for a minute and not kill it.”¹¹

Virginia Woolf manages to capture a similar feeling by different means in her modernist novel *The Waves* (1931), that is, the fragile changeability of the world around her. Writing in a stream of consciousness, Woolf follows the lives of six characters, from childhood to old age, and their commonalities in the various search for their identities. The passage of time is a central theme in Woolf's novel—the characters' inner monologues are interspersed with sections about the cycles of nature and its transience, like waves breaking and infinitely receding into the sea.

I'm interested in how Woolf manages to portray identities that are in a constant state of becoming, taking shape and shifting as they grow up and age. Their voices are like an orchestra of six that together represent the different sides and nuances of the individual. Inner monologues weave in and out of each other and show the complex, contradictory emotions a person can have. Woolf sensitively portrays how delicate our identities are, and with that as a starting point, how it feels to search for a foothold in an unstable world. I think what Woolf captures in *The Waves* is a fundamental part of the human condition.¹²

Reading fiction is an important complement to my process. When I read novels such as *The Waves*, I get inspiration and nourishment for my painting. It's not easy to specify the influence literature has, but there are modes of expression in fiction that expand my world and my perception of it—which in turn influence my artistry. It's difficult to say if impressions from my daily life influence my painting. It's even more difficult, if not impossible, to say *which* impressions affect me and exactly *how* they are expressed in my painting. What I do know is that painting, for me, is strongly linked to being in contact with an inner source, and that inner source is linked to the outer world and the impact it has on me. When I read books by authors such as Virginia Woolf, Joan Didion, and Dulce Maria Cardoso, I find new impressions and angles. In everyday life, certain

¹⁰ Philip Guston, *I Paint What I Want to See* (London: Penguin Books, 2022), 197.

¹¹ Guston, *I Paint What I Want to See*, 141.

¹² See: Jenny Tunedal, foreword to *Vågorna* [*The Waves*], by Virginia Woolf, trans. Jane Lundblad (Stockholm: Albert Bonniers Förlag, 2009), 7–12.

associations lead me back to the stories. Phrases and passages stay with me and appear when I least expect them to.

My work has become more prominent in my everyday life since I started working on my graduate show. It was as if the conversation I started in the studio was unfinished, and while the painting is as yet incomplete, the dialogue seeps into my everyday life and demands my attention. The line between the inner and outer world is momentarily dissolved. One morning, my first thought upon waking was that the format of one painting was not right. I had a strange sense that I'd been dreaming about the picture, almost as if I'd been working on it passively, in my sleep. Sometimes when I'm in a work-intensive period, I see the images when I close my eyes. Out of the corner of my eye, different options roll by like a slideshow.

Glenn Gould, a prominent pianist best known for his recordings of Bach, had a way of practising that became renowned. He said that he practised by reading the pieces and thinking about them for days, and only after doing so did he sit down at the piano keys to practise. Gould found that his playing improved after he'd had distance from the instrument. According to Gould, the concept of technique goes beyond the practical, physical exercise; it's as much about the mental preparation ahead of playing.¹³ He has even suggested that a person doesn't play the piano with their fingers; they play the piano with their mind.¹⁴

To suggest that Glenn Gould did not practise his piano playing would be an exaggeration and would only contribute to a declaration of his genius. But I do understand his relationship to the instrument. What he describes sounds like what a painter does—constantly moving between the mental and the physical. In other words: thinking and doing. In this way, some of a painter's work also happens outside the studio, by *thinking* about the paintings. Even in the painting process, imagining is important because it creates the distance needed to maintain an ongoing dialogue. The constant movement: I approach, I step back, approach again, and step back.

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27/7/2023

I'm sitting in the project room feeling like a failure because I've just painted over a large canvas, erasing what I've been working on for the past few weeks. Right now I can only describe it as painful—the feeling when a painting stubbornly refuses to conform to your hand and your expectations of it.

... But at the same time, the unpredictability of the process is alluring. It manifests as small shocks, a growing sense of losing control. And finally—if you're lucky enough to get a painting on the right track—the sense of emerging from a fog. I leave the studio feeling like the process is guiding me rather than me guiding it.¹⁵

The painting process is delicate. During the process, a painting can quickly shift from one state to another. You could almost say that it is left vulnerable to your every whim. Until the painting has “settled,” everything is open and in flux. It's constantly being rewritten. What was just on the surface can be destroyed or completed in the next second—I'm constantly oscillating between

¹³ Kevin Bazzana, *Wondrous Strange: The Life and Art of Glenn Gould* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2003), 424.

¹⁴ Bazzana, *Wondrous Strange*, 430.

¹⁵ Excerpt from my studio diary. My translation.

impulsiveness and restraint when painting. Philip Guston also mentioned this shifting state in an interview with Clark Coolidge:

Clark Coolidge: Well, you were thinking about what I said about the image.

Philip Guston: When you looked at the picture (Paw, 1968) you were saying that it's incredible what it takes to make an image, no?

CC: How close you could come to having it not be an image and yet still be one.

...

PG: But it came, as my images always come, very rapidly, and that rapidity has to do with the image and what it is as you're doing it. Which has to do with when you stop, because you stop the moment you recognize it. I don't mean recognize it as a noun, or as an image either, but recognize the minimum of what you need of what's there to make this thing exist. ... What's exciting about an image is that at any given moment it would take so little to wipe it out completely, to have chaos, to have nothing there.¹⁶

I'm wandering around, fumbling in the darkness, unsure of what I'm looking for. Maybe I just want to find anything, something to grab hold of. An organic mass grows on the canvas, a layer is applied like a membrane, and a line begins to form in the top corner. I lay out my cards, so to speak, building up the painting with lines and shapes, hoping to create relationships between the various parts of the composition. Sometimes I glimpse a direction to follow, other times I paint over it all. Doubt plays a central role in my process; doubt is humbling. From this sense of being lost, I search for glimmers of light.

As I write about this, I realise that it may sound odd to the reader that a practice such as painting, which I have explored continuously for years and which should almost be inherent to my hand movements, can still give rise to so much uncertainty. One might think that the security of having done it for a long time would make it easier to control the process. But I'm serious when I say that I can't activate it at will. Every time I take an extended break from my painting process, distance is created, both physical and mental, which makes me feel alienated from what I've done before. This alienation brings with it the feeling that I'll never be able to paint again.

I've realised that in my process I have to work my way to a flow state, and there are no shortcuts. Starting to paint can feel like cranking a heavy machine until it gathers speed and can run on its own. Only being in the studio and dedicating time to painting can bring me closer to my practice again. To be able to paint, I have to put myself in the mental space of working in my studio. The inner space I'm trying to describe is ever present—sometimes it's inaccessible, but it is unshakeable. When I have a slump and can't paint, it's because I need to find my process again and regain my confidence in it. I have to find my way back to that space in order to have the conditions to be able to paint. Only then can I look painting right in the eye, with a clear and critical gaze.

Here Clarice Lispector resurfaces:

All that's guiding me is a sense of discovery. Beyond what's beyond thought.

Following myself along is really what I'm doing when writing to you and now: following myself without knowing where it will lead me. Sometimes it's so hard to follow myself

¹⁶ Guston, *I Paint What I Want to See*, 113–15.

along. Because I'm following something that's still nothing more than a nebula. Sometimes I end up giving up.¹⁷

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*"I advance error by error, with erring steps, by the force of error. It's suffering, but it's joy."*¹⁸

The painter Amy Sillman curated an exhibition at MoMA New York in 2019, *The Shape of Shape*, which was an exploration of how artists have used *shape* throughout history. Sillman argues that shape is an often overlooked but elemental ingredient that artists inevitably relate to. In her essay "Further Notes on Shape," she questions why shape does not make up a larger part of the discussion and dialogue in the art world. She suggests, "Maybe shape is just too vast to talk about, or resistant to language."¹⁹

In this context, shape is linked to the unknown, a non-verbal subjective exploration—and is thus connected to knowledge that lies in the hand and in the body. Sillman problematises the idea that artists who have devoted themselves to the search for shape in various ways have traditionally been seen as being alienated from larger societal issues. In her essay, she argues that the subject should be more nuanced—placing shape and content in a binary relationship simplifies its complexity. She argues that the exploration that begins with our own body and subjectivity can yield insight into our relationship with the world at large.²⁰

As a painter, shape is one of the most important components I contend with. That's why I'm trying to put words to how I arrive at a shape in my paintings. I want to describe why it can be so difficult to find the "right" shape. In my painting, the right shape is the one that I keep after my re-examinations—a shape that has been carved out during the process. It can take time to find; some shapes are awkward and move around the surface of the painting. I feel that a painting "settles" when the shape has landed in its place. Here Sillman's words come to mind: "trimming, adjusting, editing, messing around with shapes ..."²¹

In an essay from the book *Stigmata* by feminist author and playwright Hélène Cixous, she writes that mistakes are a necessary consequence of the search for truth in the creative process. This quotation exemplifies how she experiments using words:

It's like this: I grope. I try the word "hesitation." I taste it. No pleasure. No taste. I cross out. I try "correction." I taste. No. I taste ten words. Finally I fall on the word "essay." Before even trying I already sense a pretaste. ... I taste. And, that's it! Its taste is strong and fine and rich in memories of pleasure.²²

Cixous's search for a word that sounds right reminds me of my search for the right shape. I move it around until it lands. It couldn't have been placed anywhere else after all these attempts. I have doubted my way forward either in the painting or in my sketches, until the shape ends up in a place where it feels natural, as if it has always belonged there. At the same time, painting always requires adapting to the material, where there will inevitably be changes from the original idea. I allow those

¹⁷ Lispector, *Água Viva*, 59.

¹⁸ Hélène Cixous, "Without End, No, State of Drawingness, No, Rather: The Executioner's Taking Off," in *Stigmata: Escaping Texts* (London: Routledge, 2005), 29.

¹⁹ Amy Sillman, "Further Notes on Shape," in *Faux Pas* (Paris: After Eight Books, 2022), 94–110.

²⁰ Sillman, "Further Notes on Shape," 109–10.

²¹ Sillman, "Further Notes on Shape," 110.

²² Cixous, "Without End," 29.

changes to be incorporated into the final painting, leaving traces of the changes on the surface. It may sound paradoxical that I want the painting to feel both consummate and searching. However, I think an interesting tension arises if a painting manages to be self-evident in its expression while still suggesting an exploratory process—then it can occupy a kind of ambivalent intermediary state.

Ambivalence is a word that often comes up when I think about painting. The word often has a negative connotation because it suggests indeterminacy, wavering. Conversely, I see it as a necessary consequence of honest questioning. By this I mean that if the painting process embodies a dialogue, by implication it also embodies the development of one's thoughts along the way. Painting represents the inconstant in a constant way, by freezing something in motion in a still image. A painting could be discussed as a container that collects various traces of conversations, as in an archive, and remains visible for others to partake in. I think this ambiguity brings an equivocal quality to painting, an enigmatic allure.

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It's difficult to talk about how a painting comes to be; for me, the process is never predictable or linear. My experience is that it rarely goes from A to B. Each day in the studio is different, and no painting follows the same method. Even if I try to repeat an approach that worked with the last painting, it'll fail with the next one. I'm constantly reminded that it's not that simple. I have to work my way to the next step. What I do know is that all the paintings are connected in some way, and one leads to the next, in an organic sequence.

Lately, I've been spending more time painting over "failed" paintings, for lack of a better word. Having the ability to paint over what I've done gives me freedom in my practice. When a piece doesn't work, I paint over it with white oil paint and start again. Layers of paint are allowed to grow and mingle—the final image is painted on like a thin film over a thick, oily surface. But not all paintings offer resistance. Some can be done quickly, almost in one go. Others grow into themselves over a longer period of time. The quick ones may have been painted on canvases that have four paintings underneath. Images on top of images. Others have only one layer, painted directly on a coat of gesso.

Over the past year or so, sketching and preparing for a painting have taken on more important roles in my process. Drawing is the tool I use for visualisation, but it is in painting that the processing takes place. I'm convinced that certain things can only become apparent to me in the process of painting. There are shapes and planes that I couldn't have drawn my way to. It's by being in contact with the material of painting that I get my ideas.

The artist Agnes Martin has been on my horizon for as long as I can remember. She wanted her paintings to be representations of abstract emotions such as happiness, joy, and beauty. To channel these feelings into painting, she waited for *inspiration* to find her. The documentary *With My Back to the World* (2003), directed by Mary Lance, provides a more in-depth look at her approach and her thoughts on inspiration. According to Martin, *inspiration* is a state to which one becomes receptive after clearing the mind of distractions and noise. For Martin, this was an extremely important state and a prerequisite for creating. She only painted once inspiration arrived, no matter how long it took. When it finally did, the images were small, about the size of a postage stamp, which she took as visions. She then transferred those images into paintings.²³ If she couldn't recreate that vision, she considered the painting a failure. She would discard it and start again.²⁴

²³ "Artist Agnes Martin—'Beauty Is in Your Mind'—TateShots," with excerpts from *With My Back to the World*, YouTube video, 0:57, posted by Tate, 5 June 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=902YXjchQsk&ab_channel=Tate.

²⁴ "Artist Agnes Martin—'Beauty is in Your Mind,'" 5:57.

Although Agnes Martin's work has been important to me, my way of working is almost the opposite to hers. In a way, I relate to her conception of inspiration: I also find it necessary to filter out thoughts from the external world and clear distractions in order to paint. But unlike Martin, I don't visualise finished images and go on to depict them. Instead, I paint my way to an image using the materials as tools. Only once I've begun to apply colour to the canvas can I begin to imagine things. For me, *idea* and *material* are in a kind of symbiotic relationship. It is in the interaction between the material and me that I manage to visualise.

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I saw Torsten Andersson's exhibition *Rotverket* (The root work) at Tomelilla Konsthall.²⁵ I was already familiar with his paintings, but what surprised me was how raw the paintings felt in person. Although the background is often unpainted, the canvas is not white—it is coloured by charcoal, dirt, and traces of his work in the studio. Andersson has been described as painting “abstract objects in a realistic way.”²⁶ The objects stand proud and bold on the surface, belonging to another universe. His subjects look like sculptures or objects, but they seem to be in their own dimension, a place where they are floating in between reality and abstraction—his paintings follow their own logic.

Andersson's paintings have been a great source of inspiration for me because I feel that they are charged with honesty and urgency. When standing in front of the paintings, I get the feeling that they were necessary for him to make. The forms that he depicts are enigmatic but at the same time they seem to belong on the surface, perfectly in place. I think this friction is puzzling but fascinating.

Andersson has built up a world of faithful continuity that resembles itself alone. He is said to have had a long and demanding process. There is an account of him making hundreds of drawings to find the form he wanted to paint and burning those he felt didn't meet the standard. Those that passed the screening process were later transferred to paintings on canvas.²⁷ He was not afraid of questioning his work in service of its development. In an interview, he explained that burning drawings and paintings was a way for him to move forward and make space for better and more insightful work. He said that, for him, having this critical approach to one's work was the most challenging part of his working process.²⁸ This rigor in selecting and examining the work is one of the reasons I admire his artistry—he was brave in his pursuit of the right expression.

I think that Andersson's total immersion in his own work is what made him build up his unique painterly language. I can see this as a common thread going through the artists that I'm drawn to. They each have their own universe, and their works are segments that give us an insight into their different worlds.

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²⁵ Torsten Andersson, *Rotverket* [The root work], Tomelilla Konsthall, Tomelilla, Sweden, 12 November 2022–8 January 2023.

²⁶ Torsten Andersson, “Det är därför jag har isolerat mig här ute—ett program om konstnären Torsten Andersson” [That's why I've isolated myself out here—a program on the artist Torsten Andersson], interview by Tor Billgren, radio broadcast, *PI Kultur Reportage*, Sverige Radio, originally aired 1 June 2009, 19:24, <https://sverigesradio.se/artikel/711730>. Translated by Saskia Vogel.

²⁷ Torsten Andersson, “Det är därför jag har isolerat,” 35:40.

²⁸ Torsten Andersson and Magnus Bons, “Samtal mellan Torsten Andersson och Magnus Bons” [Conversation between Torsten Andersson and Magnus Bons], in *Torsten Andersson* (Stockholm: Sveriges allmänna konstförening, 2022), 107.

While writing this essay, I've moved through different phases of my process. At first, I was deep inside painting. Since then, I've installed my graduate exhibition and overseen it for many hours. My position has shifted from an inner perspective to being a viewer of my work, like a camera lens zooming out. As I sit here overlooking it now, it is at once obvious and strange that I'm the one who made the paintings.

I wonder why I'm so interested in this gesture—approaching and distancing. It seems to be a recurring gesture, my way of relating to everything: the world, the material, and the writing. This is what I wrote in a diary entry last year:

30/1/2023

Basically, the inner mechanisms of painting are somewhat hidden from me. Different things become visible to me at different stages of the process. I'll never be able to get a complete picture of what I'm doing from within a process—and I think that lack of overall perspective is rather what is needed to be inside the painting. I often catch sight of that overall perspective afterwards, when the paintings are finished. On the other hand, it's the distance that makes me lose contact with painting and making. So there's always something that will remain elusive to me because I move between these two isolated spheres.²⁹

If I can't enter into a state of attuned concentration and establish a dialogue with the work, I won't be able to understand what I or the work want to communicate. Entering into solitude and listening to my painterly process as it slowly unfolds seems to be my way of placing myself in the world. But this is as much about the impossibility of relating to other ways of working. Deconstructing things and stripping them down to their component parts seems to be a prerequisite for me to get to grips with the material.

My graduate show was the first exhibition I curated in its entirety. I was struck by how similar hanging paintings felt to being in the studio. It required a similar mindset: understanding the relationship between different elements and making decisions accordingly. Attending to the room, in this case, meant that I needed to familiarise myself with its structure. I began to notice the perspectives and relationships created in the space and noticed how the light fell on the pillars and walls. I found an anchor in the exhibition space, an obvious place where a painting needed to be, and started building around that centre point. Slowly but surely, the corners and nooks of the room began to make sense; my body could locate and understand them in relation to and as an extension of itself.

*

Throughout my life, words have seemed like an insufficient means of expression and of making myself understood by other people. I think this comes from my personal experience of growing up in a bilingual household, which at times made me experience a lack of deep-rooted understanding of either of the languages I spoke. As a child, I often felt that I lacked words in conversations or that I only remembered them in the opposite language—they became stuck or lost in the translation process. I also became aware that words could shift in meaning and carry different connotations, depending on which culture I used it in. I remember this being interesting but mostly disconcerting to me—this feeling of not being able to grasp all the layers of meaning and be as precise as I wanted to be.

²⁹ Excerpt from my studio diary. My translation.

Although I don't experience this difficulty when expressing myself as strongly now as I did when I was a child, I think this way of relating to language can be a part of why I'm so persistently drawn to painting as a medium of expression. For me, painting is also a language. It has become a language that I feel fluent in and that I can work with from the inside out. For me, it has different qualities: it's fluid and malleable in its nature. Not yet solidified. I see it as originating from a place where everything is in flux and being reshaped. When painting, I am able to test my way forward to what I want to express, remaining in the unknown and the incoherent. My thoughts can find their right expression at a slower pace, grow into themselves in the ongoing dialogue that happens in the studio.

At the end of the essay "The Intertwining—The Chiasm," Merleau-Ponty writes that when you try to hone in on certain ideas, such as art, literature, and music, those experiences slip away from you. To talk about immaterial ideas is to give them a body. But that body will be a version of the idea and different to the original experience. Therefore, some ideas must appear *in disguise* when speaking or writing about them. According to him, some experiences, art included, are only available to us because we have a sentient body with which we can feel and participate in their expression.³⁰

I can relate to the notion that some ideas have to appear in disguise. In writing this essay, I feel that I'm getting close to my process and my painting, almost too close in certain sections in a way that makes me feel exposed. Still, there is a veil that separates my bodily experience of painting from that of writing about painting. Or maybe if you manage to get very close with the words, it can become a transparent membrane. I hope my writing will give the reader access to that place, as well as the tools to understand its depth and nuance. Though, in the end, painting is ultimately experienced through the sentient body.

I can't put my finger on what happens inside me when I paint; something in that process is untranslatable. I think that gap exists because I work from a place inside me that, while recognisable, originates from a place that is partly unknown even for myself. I see painting as an attempt to give body and order to our immaterial experiences of the world—and as a consequence, it reflects our states and predicaments. Our body becomes the channel through which we can capture the perceptible in all its subtleties, before it passes us by.

³⁰ Merleau-Ponty, "The Intertwining—The Chiasm," 150.

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