

THESIS

ROCK COLLECTION PAINTINGS

Submitted by

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## ABSTRACT

Simply observing the world around me can be fascinating. Patterns and forms I find on stones and pebbles especially provoke my imagination. In my works, I observe and render natural forms onto surfaces; I interpret rocks from my collection into multi-colored, multi-layered, quiet paintings on carefully prepared panels. By translating my experience of these objects into art I am investigating my own perception of such an *other*, the alien rock - what it means to enter into a dialogue with it, subsequently constituting it and reconciling myself with it. Following this activity, a painting is created; an entirely new thing is made that the viewer can then contemplate. What follows is a description of how my work relates to contemporary theoretical considerations of perception, phenomenology, and epistemology.

The rock collection paintings are a visual exploration of theoretical notions including phenomenology of perception, play transformed into structure, and experience of the other. As a result of the process of experiencing and translating a rock into a quiet oil painting I produce a visual playground. What exists is not two closed off subjects: the painting and the viewer, but a playful yet serious dialogue occurring between the two entities. What emerges from the discourse between viewer and painting is a form of self-knowledge. These works of art are forms of truth that, in part, shape the viewer.

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Simply observing the world around me can be fascinating. Patterns and forms I find on stones and pebbles especially provoke my imagination. In my works, I observe and render natural forms onto surfaces; I interpret rocks from my collection into multi-colored, multi-layered, quiet paintings on carefully prepared panels. I decided to designate these mere rocks as catalysts for my paintings after coming across Vija Celmins' *To Fix the Image in Memory I-XI* (Fig. 1). Over the course of five years she replicated in bronze and paint eleven different stones. She describes how she got started:

I would go driving around in the New Mexico desert consoling myself by mindlessly picking up rocks and throwing them in my car. Later, unloading them in my studio, I had this moment of inspiration. They seemed so beautiful, I wanted to make them myself...There was never any symbolism or any real idea. I just went back to looking...Looking at stuff and sort of regenerating something in me that keeps wanting to live...Going back to looking in such a thorough way reaffirmed something about the business of 'making'.<sup>1</sup>

For this body of work I took a cue from Celmins; I started looking closely at the rocks that I had mindlessly picked up along the way, mostly in the Utah desert. These rocks (Fig. 2) occupy the shelves and tables in my studio like still little totems. When I first moved into the studio the rocks were unpacked and in place even before my paints and brushes. I have collected rocks for as long as I can remember, and many of them have so strongly held my attention that I am compelled to create paintings based on them. Rather than striving for a representational quality I render them in my own abstract way. By translating my experience of these objects into art I am investigating my own perception of such an *other*, the alien rock - what it means to enter into a dialogue with it, subsequently constituting it and reconciling myself with it. Following this activity, a painting is created; an entirely new thing is made.

First, what must be questioned is what it means to perceive a thing, like a rock. Rather than perception being related solely to the system of the senses: sight, sound, touch, etc., the phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty would argue that perception is a full body experience, and “in order to perceive things, we need to live them.”<sup>2</sup> We perceive the world with our whole bodies because we live in the world as whole bodies. Merleau-Ponty goes on: “...my experience breaks forth into things and transcends itself in them, because it always comes into being within the framework of a certain setting in relation to the world which is the definition of my body.”<sup>3</sup> As I experience a geode half in my hand, for instance, not only are my hands and eyes reacting, my entire being is experiencing the rock because it is situated in the world through which I define myself. Furthermore, when we come into contact with a thing, “...what is given is not the thing on its own, but the experience of the thing...some kind of natural entity of which a glimpse is afforded through a personal history.”<sup>4</sup> I could not be having this experience with the geode without bringing my past to bear on it and it bringing its past to bear on me; the history of this piece of rock and my own personal history have coincided for a time--experience always involves the element of time, and the time I spend with the piece of conglomerate, for instance, is a different quality of experience than that resulting from time spent with the piece of sandstone. The dialogue I enter into with each rock as I spend time experiencing it is translated into unique paintings.

My paintings begin as smooth, wood panels: the surfaces are coated with gesso and sanded until barely any brush marks remain. The white ground acts as a view from nowhere--a void on which to translate an object in oil paints. In the painting *inside/outside* (Fig. 3) the abstract image of the rock seems to be floating on a cool white surface. Or does

it really float? The form, based on a geode, is sinking into *and* floating on top of the white matrix. The cool, marble-like flatness of the white space, along with its seeping and infiltrating qualities, allow for the painted object's appearance to shift between being on top of to being a part of the white ground. The painted object may appear to be on top of a seemingly unfinished, or simple panel, and the viewer may become more aware of the structure as a whole: the unfinished wood sides and the rounded, soft edges (fig 4) as they catch a glimpse of the sides of the painting. At a closer viewing distance, the viewer might notice varying hues and densities of white paint, which give the impression that the ground is crawling back onto the object in certain areas. This effect is seen with closer inspection of *inside/outside* (fig. 5): the white border around the central blue shape seems to stem from the white ground and grow in density as it curves upward. Due to effects like this, the white gesso becomes an activated surface in which the object is in a state of visual transition.

When initially painting the rock's features on the blank panel, I either set the stone on a surface, slightly turning it now and then as I draw, or I hold it in my hand, which allows for my point of view to easily shift. Through shifting my viewpoint I begin to understand the three-dimensionality of an object; our two-dimensional vision helps us understand our surroundings because we can move our eyes around in space. We grasp the unity of objects and spaces because we understand them through the mediation of our bodies.<sup>5</sup> Holding a liner brush in one hand and a rock in the other, I draw the outline of the form in a single color. Multiple facets of the rock form are painted as if connected; the rock's facades are flattened out or unfolded while its features are simplified. Looking at the work *this, that, the other* (fig. 6), three craggy, pockmarked formations are emerging from the chalky white surfaces, delineated by delicately painted curves and given volume with

layers of thin colors. The lack of a cast shadow or any defined setting increases, within the viewer, a sense of uncertainty about the object and the type of space it resides in. Within the three individual forms, it is difficult to discern where one edge ends and another begins; edges are not always clearly defined and often disappear. In the middle panel, for example, the dark brown outline delineating the top of the form, which is scarcely painted to begin with, is partly obscured by the addition of a white glaze. When lines break up and are rendered incompletely the image begins to mimic how the actual experience of the object's outlines are constantly fluctuating as my body moves in relation to it.

The painted effects and the physical act of painting mimic the act of perceiving a thing. Merleau-Ponty explains what happens when viewing a thing:

I do not have one perspective, then another, and between them a link brought about by understanding, but each perspective *merges into* the other...My point of view is for me not so much a limitation of my experience as a way I have of infiltrating the world in its entirety.<sup>6</sup>

The experience of the shifting three-dimensional object is transformed into a dynamic painting. The inclusion of multiple rock planes and the varying degrees of attention given to different details in the paintings indicates how one's perspective is always varying and coalescing in a similar mode in order to make sense of an object in space. It is this constant shifting and merging of vision that acts as an access point into experience of the world.

Multiple viewpoints and play on perspective are explored not only in the painted imagery but also in the format of *this, that, the other*. Each panel of this work is unique, but articulated similarly enough to the others such that together they make a set. Each single, pock-marked form is defined by line and thin veils of color, and reads as a distinct entity primarily because it rests centrally on the substrate as one thing. But, since the panels are displayed in a row the viewer begins to relate them to one another. The title even suggests

that there are three separate things, but in fact the imagery of all three stems from the same igneous rock sample. How separate, then, are the paintings? Is what is presented just one thing or three separate things or both? This work investigates how differently something can appear when one inhabits multiple perspectives. Painting lends itself well to being a medium in which the presence of a thing can be explored. As Celmins describes, “One of the things I like about painting is that it is so slight a presence...you can’t trip over it like any object. You turn away and it disappears immediately, you know?”<sup>7</sup>

Color is another element whose slight presence can change when experienced under varied conditions. The application of color in these paintings is suggestive of the inexactness of our perceptions of color. Merleau-Ponty tells us that color is never merely a color, but a color of a certain thing, “...and the blue of a carpet would never be the same blue if not a woolly blue.”<sup>8</sup> Not only does the rock’s structure contribute to its perceived color, but its surroundings, its complicated and unique history, its composition, as well as my own faculties contribute to the many hues that I perceive. It is difficult to adequately describe the color of any given rock in words, let alone in paint; therefore, when rendering the form through color I aim for ambiguity. Sometimes the hues loosely refer to the specific rock being observed, but they deviate as the layers are built.

Color is never a completely describable or static thing because the words we use to delineate different colors are applied arbitrarily. “The Maoris have 3,000 names of colours,” Merleau-Ponty explains, “...not because they perceive a great many, but...because they fail to identify them when they belong to objects structurally different from each other...[P]erception goes straight to the thing and by-passes the colour.”<sup>9</sup> Similarly to how color is secondary to the recognition of a thing’s structure, color is secondary to the

immediacy and descriptiveness of the painted lines when I build the painted image. After the initial lines are painted, color is laid down one glaze at a time to build up areas of value and volume. I pick a simple hue like reddish brown, green, or blue-violet, made more unusual by dulling it down with its complement. Each layer of color begins as this type of muddy yet discernable hue. As the layers build up what results are strange areas of obscure colors intermingling with areas consisting of more clarity. The deeply layered colors begin to act as areas of dark value as can be seen in *this, that, the other*. There are certain areas of the paintings where one can point out, “*there* is some green and *here* is some dark blue and *over there* is a warm yellow, “ but as the colors build up what results is a hue that might resist easy categorization. The colors in the painting are characterized by their indefinability and uncertainty as is color in general. Viewing distance also alters one’s perception of the hues: from far away the painting may seem like an achromatic sketch, but the viewer who wanders closer encounters the complexity of colors. The perceived colors shift as the viewer shifts their perspective, perhaps reminding them of this phenomenon in everyday life.

Another phenomenon experienced and also explored in these paintings is the differences in qualities of light reflecting off of different paint surfaces. Each painting has both matte and shiny paint bodies in areas of the imagery. In *lots of thing(s)* (fig. 7) for instance, like in the other paintings a good portion of the surface is flat white gesso. In the thin, dry lines and stains of color, the paint body has been diluted with a fluid medium containing turpentine. Light stains resembling pale washes of watercolor are thin layers of paint that have been rubbed away. In areas of layered colors the thicker paint is shinier, as is the case in the central, brownish green area of the painting. A more viscous medium

thinned the paint, in these instances. The viewer might unexpectedly become aware of this glaring and dulling of paint surfaces as they view the paintings, and the changing qualities in light might create a need of further and closer investigation. The play between light and paint surfaces is one technique used to engage the viewer with the work. A playful dialogue between painting and viewer is my goal. In order to understand how play is related to the experience of art, it is necessary to shift the discussion to another phenomenologist, Hans Georg-Gadamer, and his theories of how art is human play transformed into structure.<sup>10</sup>

When discussing play in reference to the experience of art it is necessary to begin with what Gadamer means by play. As when a game is played, for instance, the player is drawn into the world of the game where there exist both a seriousness and a lack of seriousness, for the player knows not only that there are rules to the game, but also that it is 'just a game'. Play is characterized by a to-and-fro movement between players. There is a sense of ease or effortlessness exerted by the player. Nothing within these back-and-forth movements signifies or brings about the play's end; it happens as if on its own.<sup>11</sup> The same happens when one views a painting: the viewer enters into the world of the painting and into this back-and-forth dialogue with the work.

When it comes to the experience of art, play refers neither to the state of mind of the artist nor the state of mind of the audience, but play is "...the mode of being of a work of art itself."<sup>12</sup> Art exists in a state of play. It is constituted as play transformed into structure. For a transformation to occur, "...something is suddenly and as a whole something else... But also that what now exists, what represents itself in the play of art, is the lasting and true."<sup>13</sup> The artwork has a lasting autonomy amid its state of play. It is independent of its creator,

and of any specific meanings that the creator or other viewers might latch onto the work. The dialogue each viewer enters into with an artwork is a unique experience.

When experiencing the large paintings *it's really just one (thing 1 & thing 2)* (Fig. 9) the viewer enters into the world of the work. These paintings may appear unfinished or in transition: a small, outlined figure dances within a white matrix that is faintly marked with a much larger, fainter and amorphous pattern. The cloudy texture, upon very close inspection turns out to be a much larger, and inverted, veiled version of the small, painted figure. Viewers make their own connections as to what is being represented as they are suspended in the realm of play. Viewers interpret the relationship between the figure and ground, they decide what to make of the paintings being presented as a diptych, they decipher the title, they make judgments about color and form. In short, they experience the work in their own way, questioning what they will of the paintings.

But when, exactly, does the art thing start to exhibit such playful qualities that deem it an artwork? When, during its transformation, does the work's mode of being change from mere materials to play? Although Gadamer discusses play in relation to the viewer and the artwork, I believe that the playful mode of being of the art is also reflected in the studio work. For materials and a rock to be transformed into a painting, someone has to do the transforming. The artist encounters this serious yet playful dialogue with the painting as it grows from wood, nails, gesso, and some liquids from tubes and bottles into a painting. Art exists in a state of play perhaps in part because it arises from this type of play. For instance, I painted the large panels, *it's really just one (thing 1 & thing 2)* in an attempt to explore whether a larger size and scale of paintings would provoke the viewer with a sense of intimacy when viewing the work. On each of the large panels I painted an abstract portrait

of an igneous rock that covered the majority of the surface (fig. 11). When I decided to sand down the surfaces (fig. 12) and then cover them up after weeks of work, it wasn't out of frustration or dislike of the work, but there was something in the painting almost speaking to me telling me that it needed a change, and something in me which agreed. The in-between state of play can be a place where bold decisions are made, as long as one remains open to transitions and the subtleties of the game.

When first venturing into the territory of painting rocks from my collection, my dialogue with the rock resulted in paintings, which were, in some ways, more visually playful than the more recent works. In these early works the compositions are manifest in expansive, open compositions that shift between areas of visual flatness and deeper areas of misty, atmospheric perspective. Although the white ground still holds significance in the earlier paintings, the simplified rock features extend off the edges of the panel in open compositions while colors are not always as muted. In *a'-scape*, (Fig. 12) the same volcanic rock that was used for the right panel of *it's really just one (thing I & thing II)* is painted as an ascending, hazy landscape of sorts in dark purples and browns. *Geodical* (Fig. 13) is a visual rendition of a geode half. The closed form of the blue, crystal cavity towards the top contrasts with the opening movement of the hinge-like brown bands that stream off the bottom of the panel. *Conglum* (Fig. 14) is a rendition of a piece of conglomerate that begins to take on the shape of a geological uplift or some kind of creature.

When first beginning this body of work I was most intrigued with the patterns found on rocks rather than with the rock as an object itself. This is evident in paintings like *conglum*, and especially in the first painting, *untitled* (Fig. 15). A unique piece of sandstone known as "Utah Wonderstone" was the first stone from my collection to hypnotize me with

its surface patterns. In the painting, the concentric bands of light and dark sandstone and its many facades coalesce into a map-like view of intricate, blue-green circular patterns seeping out of the chalky ground. During the course of my explorations in paint and my explorations in reading phenomenological theory I became more interested in the rocks' overall form rather than their patterned surfaces—I became more concerned with the rock as a thing, an other.

What happens when one experiences the other or the non-self? According to Merleau-Ponty, “...the thing holds itself aloof to us and remains self-sufficient...It is then hostile and alien, no longer an interlocutor but a resolutely silent Other...”<sup>14</sup> Experiencing the rock involves reconciliation with the alien thing and myself; I understand it as a single entity and I am more aware of myself as one entity. Not only is the rock sample an alien other, but the painting, which results from my interactions with the rock, also stands as an other. Gadamer describes the experience of the other when it occurs in the form of art:

Our experience of the aesthetic...is a mode of self-understanding. Self-understanding always occurs through understanding something other than the self, and includes the unity and integrity of the other. Since we meet the artwork in the world and encounter a world in the individual artwork, the work of art is not some alien universe into which we are magically transported for a time. Rather, we learn to understand ourselves in and through it...<sup>15</sup>

Although the viewer is transported into the realm of the alien artwork, the art does not exist in an alien universe but rather, it exists within the world we are already familiar with. Since I began seeing the rocks as whole entities (rather than things with patterns on them) the painted compositions began to depict centralized, totem-like figures, which can be seen, amongst others, in the work *more than two sides (to every thing)* (Fig. 16). In each painting stands a brownish purple-and-white striped being, but the title clues us to the fact that

these paintings are two views of the same thing. Realizing that there are two views of the same thing is a conceptual notion; the viewer is confronted by the work with the knowledge that there are two views, but since they are of the same thing, the concept of unity is exhibited by the paintings. Self-awareness occurs when looking at art because the viewer realizes that they are both separate from the work, yet sharing a world with it, and can react to the work in an individual way. Rather than being a means of mental escape or pleasure seeking, viewing artwork is a means of self-awareness; knowledge can be gained from viewing art.

The rock collection paintings are a visual exploration of theoretical notions including phenomenology of perception, play transformed into structure, and experience of the other. As a result of the process of experiencing and translating a rock into a quiet oil painting, I produce a visual playground. What exists are not two closed off subjects: the painting and the viewer, but rather a playful yet serious dialogue occurring between the two entities. This dialogue is the work of art. As Gadamer wrote, “[It] is not an object that stands over against a subject for itself. Instead the work of art has its true being in the fact that it becomes an experience that changes the person who experiences it.”<sup>16</sup> Art is play metamorphosed into structure, and viewers, when confronting the alien paintings, reconcile themselves with this alien. The painting and the viewer are both in constant states of becoming. The viewer is partially constituted by the painting, something other than the self, just as the painting is constituted by the viewer. What emerges from the discourse between viewer and painting is a form of self-knowledge. The work of art is a form of truth that, in part, permanently alters and shapes the viewer.



Fig. 1: Vija Celmins, *To Fix the Image in Memory I-XI*, 1977-82, 11 stones and 11 painted bronzes, sizes variable, Moma, New York.



Fig. 2: My rock collection.



Fig. 3 *inside/outside*,  
oil on panel,  
16.5"x16", 2013



Fig. 4 *inside/outside*,  
view of edges of the panel.



Fig. 5. *inside/outside*,  
detail.



Fig. 6: *this, that, the other*  
oil on three 16"x16.5"  
panels, 2012.



Fig. 7: *lots of thing(s)*,  
16"x16.5', oil on panel, 2013



Fig. 8: *lots of thing(s)*, detail.



Fig. 9: *it's really just one (thing I & thing II)*,  
oil on two 53"x44" panels, 2013.



Fig. 10: *it's really just one (thing I & thing II)*, in-process, oil on two 53"x44" panels, 2012.



Fig. 11: *it's really just one (thing I & thing II)*, in process, oil on two 53"x44" panels, 2012.



Fig. 12: *a'a-scape*, oil on panel, 21.25"x24", 2012.



Fig. 13: *geodical*, oil on panel, 20"x24",



Fig. 14: *conglum*, oil on panel, 24"x20", 2012.



Fig. 15: *untitled*, 25"x24.5", oil on panel, 2012.



Fig. 16: *more than two sides (to every thing)*,  
oil on two 16.5"x16" panels, 2013

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- <sup>1</sup> Vija Celmins, *Vija Celmins* (New York: Phaidon Press Limited, 2004), 26.
- <sup>2</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (New York: Routledge, 1962), 379.
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 353.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 379.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 235.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 384.
- <sup>7</sup> Celmins, 10.
- <sup>8</sup> Merleau-Ponty, 365.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 355.
- <sup>10</sup> Hans Georg-Gadamer, "From *Truth and Method*," in *Aesthetics: The Big Questions*, ed. Carolyn Korsmeyer (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 1998), 95.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 93-94.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.
- <sup>14</sup> Merleau-Ponty, 375-76.
- <sup>15</sup> Gadamer, 92.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 93