The Same and the Other:

Transforming Material Experience into Images

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

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Michael Cusack (signed) date

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ABSTRACT

Making a visual model of experience is one of the ways that human beings come to understand and respond to the world. For some artists, mimetic description is unsatisfying and inadequate. The shift in focus from representation to presentation in the art of non-relation offers an alternative model precisely because it is able to highlight the inherent inexpressibility of being without completely giving up on the task at hand. The hand of the painter might reach further into the mind than the writer because it is able to distance itself from the constrictions of language, while holding onto some kind of essential (though impure) experience of being. I maintain that expanded painting is able to do this by engaging in a game of 'the same and the other': that is, by focusing on the gaps within the artist's relationship to experience, ideas, and materials, and, by extension, the gaps between the artist's intention and the viewer's relationship with the works' visual, tactile, and spatial dimensions.

In this exegesis, I examine some of the ideas of writer Samuel Beckett; in particular, his commitment to 'the imperative of saying' in the face of inexpressibility, which is uttered through the slippage between relation and non-relation, and his use of 'visual abstinence'. I maintain that Beckett's artistic project of 'ill seen ill said' offers artists a strategy when seeking to translate experience of the world *through materials* because it interrupts the ready-made responses between subject and object. While acknowledging the differences in the goals and challenges of writing and visual art production, I will relate these ideas to contemporary artists Christopher Wool, Terri Brooks, Thomas Nozkowski, Ron Gorchov, and Paul Wallach. Finally, I will consider how these concerns play out in my studio by engaging with Beckett's strategy of exhausting the possible through language, image, and space. The resulting body of work is a document of my 'ill seen ill said' or 'best worse' in the face of the discussed challenges.

INTRODUCTION

How do artists engaged in abstraction transform a material experience of the world into images?

Making a visual model of experience is one of the ways that human beings come to understand and respond to the world. For some artists, mimetic description is unsatisfying and inadequate. Their engagement with abstraction as an alternative model for understanding and responding to the world around us is not just a historical concern; it is an ongoing preoccupation. Contemporary artists continue to explore ways in which they can process perceptual experience, translating it into meaningful marks in a way that resonates within a broader cultural context.

It is useful to define some key terms within this paper from the outset as they influence both the choice of artists in the case studies and the focus of my own practice, as well as the apparent tension is choosing the word 'image' when discussing abstraction in painting. For the purpose of this paper the term 'abstraction' is not limited to simply non-representational painting in its various forms, but one that is influenced by Samuel Beckett's use of abstraction as a methodological practice shaped by a belief in the inherently fictive role of perception in experience[1]. Transforming experience is not about rejecting or disguising a realistic or mimetic description but engaging with Beckett's impossible project of liberating imagery from language. Despite the cultural and art historical linage of the term 'image', I have chosen to use it in this paper as it highlights the role of perception over materiality. While acknowledging the importance of materiality in my practice, in the game of looking at painting we have to offer up images as part of this field.

In my practice, the transformation of perceptual experience into painterly form is about tugging at the relationship between ideas and materials (with a particular focus on translating experience through materials), something that James Elkins is concerned with when he asks how substances occupy the mind.[2] Elkins's writing on

[1] Charlotta Palmstierna Einarsson, "Beckkett and Abstraction", *Academia*, accessed 12 May 2016, https://www.academia.edu/8551579/Beckett_and_Abstraction
[2] James Elkins, *What Painting Is* (New York: Routledge, New York, 2000), 96.

the importance of materials and the language they produce[3] and Paul Carter's focus on material thinking provide some guidance in this research.[4] Yet, it is important to note that when painters engage with their work, they are not just involved in painterly questions and answers, they are also engaged with an ongoing interaction with a complex range of material, historical, biographical, and social concerns. Norman Bryson suggests this when he says:

> It is true that the artist's work has a flow in two directions, for the painter can work on the discursive material that comes to him, can elaborate it, transform it through labour, and return it to the social domain as an alteration of or revision of society's discursive field.[5]

Nearly four decades before Carter's *material thinking*, Hans Hofmann was focussed on the translation of experience and appearance in accordance with the medium of expression, one that moved beyond mere imitation towards creation.[6] In his 1967 essay *Search for the Real,* Hofmann sees the painting problem as twofold: the artist must learn to *see* and *interpret* the visual experience in relation to the characteristics and limitations of his or her materials.[7] This translation requires not only an emotional but also a material empathy, an idea reflected in Carter's model on material thinking.[8]

The question of how to transform material experience of the world into images is, on the one hand, complicated by the proliferation of imagery in the digital age and by the reticence of artists in being associated with formalist ideologies, on the other.[9] Photography and digital media have challenged the validity of painting and the image, yet various scholars have argued that painting maintains its strength via its ability to transcend meaning through its tactile quality and physical properties.[10] Indeed, the transformation of perceptual experience into paint warrants further study precisely because of the proliferation of imagery and painting's role as both image and object.

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[3] Ibid., 98.
[4] Paul Carter, *Material Thinking: The Theory and Practice of Creative Research* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2004), 10.
[5] Norman Bryson cited in ibid.
[6] Hans Hofmann, *Search for the Real* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1967), 64.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Carter, *Material Thinking.*
[9] Yves-Alain Bois, *Painting as Model* (London: MIT Press, 1990), 241, original italics.
[10] This is the idea put forward by Miles Hall in "The Anatomy of an Image: Painting in the Digital Age" (PhD Thesis, Queensland College of Art, Griffith University, 2011).

There has been a subtle shift from picture to object that Mark Titmarsh describes as the final stage of painting, where a "traditional concern with picturing things" has been replaced by "an intense interest in its thingliness, its status as an object"; a strategy that Titmarsh calls expanded painting.[11]

Yves-Alain Bois discusses Hubert Damisch's anti-historical Theory of Games as an alternative to the paralysing double bind of either the denial or affirmation of painting's demise. Damisch's strategic approach encourages indifference because it "deciphers painting as an agnostic field where nothing is ever terminated or decided *once and for all…* (thus dismissing) all certitudes about the absolute truth upon which the apocalyptic discourse is based".[12] Instead, Damisch sees this discourse as a confusion between the end of the game itself and a particular match or series of matches.[13]

This paper does not attempt to provide an overview of the state of abstract painting, but rather to look at the motivations and methods that a selection of contemporary artists bring to the studio when seeking to translate an experience of the world through materials. This is a seemingly simple task until one begins to unpack any assumption that the world is what we see, or to take Maurice Merleau-Ponty's point that "problems arise as soon as we ask the meaning of *we*, *see* and *world*".[14] What complications arise if we take the view that being in the world *is* in the mind? For this challenge, I have used some key ideas put forth by writer Samuel Beckett, and others who have interpreted his work, regarding the relations between life and art, the role of the artist, the primacy of visual thought and the implications of liberating the image from language. Due to the ambiguous nature of Beckett's work, its contested ground in art criticism and other fields, as well as the complexity of his philosophical ideas, I will narrow my focus to his "inexpressibility of being", and a commitment to "the imperative of saying" in the face of inexpressibility (his use of language, its

[11] 'Expanded painting' is a reference to Rosalind Krauss's essay about sculpture. Mark Titmarsh, "Shapes of Inhabitation: Painting in the Expanded Field," *Art Monthly Australia*, May 2006, 27.
[12] Bois, "Painting: The Task of Mourning", in *Painting as Model*, 242.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Lois Oppenheim, *The Painted Word: Samuel Beckett's Dialogue with Art* (Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 2000), 42, original italics.

breakdown, and silences), which is expressed through his "visual abstinence".[15]

Here, I acknowledge artist Richard Diebenkorn's influence via his "vocabulary of impediments" in which he urges a method through which to *nurture* obstacles in paint, not *master* them.[16] This is a model alluded to by Hofmann, who argued for an investigation of the "limitations, qualities, and possibilities" of paint through variation and interrelational mark making,[17] and one that is certainly mirrored by Beckett when he says "I am not the master of my material…I'm working with impotence, ignorance."[18] Though discussed more fully in the following chapter, suffice to say that Beckett sought a methodology to rupture the limitations of the structure in which he wrote, just as an artist might set up a series of impediments to trigger some kind of opening or to ensure an ongoing dialogue with their work.[19] Elderfield alludes to this when he states that Diebenkorn's *Ocean Park* series (figure 1) "aimed to put into disarray any sense of an ending….painting undertaken in this way is a continual wishfullness…where a wished for object is continually deferred".[20]

[15] A phrase from Werner Spies cited in James Knowlson, "Images of Beckett," in *Images of Beckett*, ed. John Haynes and James Knowlson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 43.
[16] John Elderfield, "Leaving Ocean Park," in *The Art of Richard Diebenkorn*, ext. cat., ed. Jane Livingston (New York: Whitney Museum, 1997), 110.
[17] Hofmann, *Search for the Real*, 57.
[18] Marcin Tereszewski, *The Aesthetics of Failure: Inexpressibility in Samuel Beckett's Fiction,* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), 15.
[19] A sentiment that Beckett shared with Jasper Johns, where "none of the negations, denials, or cancellations are final; the circle does not close". Samuel Beckett, *Foirades/Fizzles, Jasper Johns* (London: Petersburg Press: 1976), 4.
[20] Elderfield, "Leaving Ocean Park," 110.

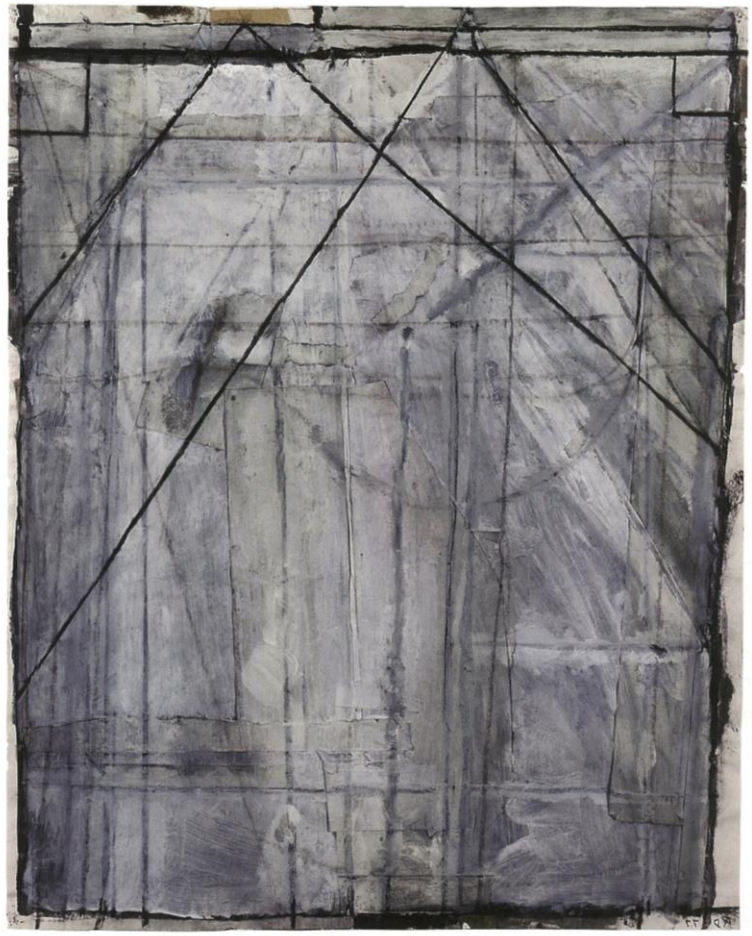

Figure 1 Richard Diebenkorn *Ocean Park Drawing* 1977, gouache, crayon, wash, collage on paper, 58.7 x 47cm

Before moving on to Chapter 1, I acknowledge that any writing about painting must first consider the relationship between the two. Just as a digital representation of a painting cannot deliver the same information as the painting itself, writing about that object cannot replace the experience of it. To paraphrase Bois (who in turn borrowed from Roland Barthes), the object comes before the theory,[21] or painting comes first, followed by the concepts to explain it. Bois argues that the goal

> should not be so much to write about painting as to try to do something with it, without indeed claiming to understand it better than the painter does… [to try to] see a little more clearly, thanks to painting, into the problems with which [the writer] is concerned, and which are not only, nor even primarily, problems of painting—if they were, all he would have to do would be to devote himself to this art.[22]

[21] Bois, "Resisting Blackmail," *Painting as Model*, 12.
[22] Bois, "Archaeology," in ibid., 257.

Bois uses Damisch to explain painting:

> one that also remains as close as possible to its object, deliberately situating itself each time at the very heart of pictorial invention. For what the perceptive, technical and symbolic models aim primarily at demonstrating are the mechanisms of this invention, and what the strategic model takes account of is its mode of historicity.[23]

As the next chapter will demonstrate, the challenges go far deeper for anyone deciphering what it means to *try* to say something when engaging with the limits of expression. Beckett offers us something that appears to be missing from Hofmann's focus on *painting's problem of imitation versus creation* (or Bois's object before theory), which is a way to speak of the paradoxical situation that painters face. That is, not moving the painting project beyond its failures but rather formulating a way to think about the ongoing failure and obligation to persist in the face of this failure.[24] However, the notion of failure can be viewed in a number of ways. Like Philip Guston I see failure as productive,[25] even necessary in the studio. Guston believed that the only technique to learn was 'the capacity to be able to change'; failure for him was connected to both playfulness and despair.[26] It is a studio methodology that seeks to change the rules in order to destabilize an artist's language so that something else might appear[27].

I argue that Beckett's examination of how language obstructs our understanding of experience—the essential inexpressibility of being—might inform artists meeting the challenge of transforming material experience through abstraction. Whereas for Emmanuel Levinas, language was the "link" between the same and the other, which he related to justice, for Beckett, language was something that was imposed on the self from outside and was thus more aligned with injustice.[28] The focus of this paper

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[23] Ibid.
[24] To be discussed in the following chapter in regards to *Westward Ho,* but for more on this idea, see Samuel Beckett, "Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit," originally published in *Transition* 49, no. 5 (1949), http://opasquet.fr/dl/texts/Beckett_Three_Dialogues_2012.pdf.
[25] Craig Burnette, *Philip Guston: In the Studio* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2014),18.
[26] Ibid.
[27] For Guston this changing of the rules, ironically, meant moving away from abstraction.
[28] Anthony Uhlmann, *Beckett and Poststructuralism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 160.

is not the ethical relation with the other, but what Anthony Uhlmann refers to as the "apparently unplayable" game of the same and the other, where "there are too many pieces seemingly missing".[29] This is why Bram van Velde, an "artist of non-relation", so interested Beckett; van Velde represented "a self in dispersion", a "decentred" subject who recognised that "heterogeneous materials and experiences can never be completely given as a whole".[30] Beckett's answer is not to abandon the imperative to say something of experience but to focus on the failure inherent in this task. In painting, the paradoxical strategy of abandonment (Pollock's abandonment of the brush, Rauschenberg's abandonment of the picture plane) and an engagement with the "impurity of the hybrid" (assemblages, performance art, installations) have led to an extension of the medium.[31]

These challenges will be discussed in relation to the work of contemporary artists Christopher Wool, Thomas Nozkowski, Ron Gorchov, Paul Wallach, and Terri Brooks. Finally, I will consider how these concerns, as well as self-imposed impediments via Gilles Deleuze's four ways of exhausting the possible, have played out in my studio practice. The resulting body of work is a document of my "ill seen ill said" or "best worse" in the face of the discussed challenges.[32] In playing out the game of the same and the other, I attempt to engage with "the riddles of painting" where "painting is not one thing but two, always separated from itself by the division between its "thingliness" and its discursiveness. This inherent division continually displaces itself into other ways of being.[33]

[29] Ibid., 165–66.
[30] Ibid., 98.
[31] Titmarsh, "Shapes of Inhabitation," 28.
[32] Alain Badiou, "Being, Existence, Thought: Prose and Concept" in *On Beckett*, ed. Alberto Toscano and Nina Power (Manchester: Clinamen Press, 2003), 92–93.
[33] Titmarsh, "Shapes of Inhabitation," 32.

CHAPTER I:
BECKETT, ABSTRACTION, AND INAUDIBILITIES

Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.
—Samuel Beckett, *Worstward Ho*[34]

[34] Samuel Beckett, *Worstward Ho* (New York: Grove Press, 1984).

Samuel Beckett

Beckett's influence on writers and artists is well documented. Building upon and reacting against important writers and thinkers such as James Joyce and Henri Bergson, Beckett's approach to our understanding of what language and images can and cannot do has affected literature, philosophy, theatre, contemporary dance, and the visual arts.[35] Anthony Uhlmann argues that while Beckett emerged from modernism, he clearly developed his practice well beyond it. In fact, Uhlmann states that because the implication of Beckett's use of the image is not yet fully realised, he might be considered not only our contemporary but also a "writer from the future".[36] Some interpretations of Beckett's work (such as Alain Badiou's reading of *Worstward Ho*) privilege the role of philosophy, which has led some to invest in the conceptual landscape of his texts, while others have focussed on art's immanence and thus have highlighted its poetic or creative forces (such as Deleuze and the creative process of self-exhaustion).[37] Marcin Tereszewski argues that the philosophically ambivalent nature of Beckett's artistic program occupies an ambiguous place between modernism and postmodernism and warns against any totalising interpretation.[38]

According to Uhlmann, Beckett did not rigidly follow philosophical doctrines; instead, he developed his own artistic consistency. Beckett stated that while James Joyce made use of the concepts of philosophers, he approached philosophy as an artist might. Consequently, Beckett was able to enjoy a freedom and open up possibilities.[39] With this approach, the focus is shifted from straining to develop a conceptual consistency to a playful one, one that uses "concepts in a detached and disinterested way; developing variations on themes without having to adhere himself to any of them".[40] It is in this spirit that I delve into the volume of information available on Beckett. Using Beckett's model of artistic play has prevented a paralysis that might come from the complicated and varying interpretations and critiques of his oeuvre,

[35] Anthony Uhlmann, *Samuel Beckett and the Philosophical Image* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 13.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Christopher Langlois, "'Cease to Exist in Order to Be': *Worstward Ho* between Badiou and Deleuze," *Mosaic* 45, no. 3 (September 2012): 17–32.
[38] Tereszewski, *The Aesthetics of Failure*, 4.
[39] Uhlmann, *Beckett and Poststructuralism*, 29. Uhlmann also notes that Deleuze, whose ideas on Beckett will be discussed in this paper, shares this creative approach of borrowing and transforming concepts taken from antecedents.
[40] Ibid., 10.

and allowed my focus in this research to stay on the underlying task at hand: how to make paintings. I am, however, aware that the depth and richness of Beckett's work and those who write about him are not represented here.

As I have alluded to above, there are several good reasons for exploring Beckettian themes in relation to contemporary abstraction and the transformation of material experience: his commitment to the primacy of the visual (*Ill Seen Ill Said*, and not the reverse);[41] his preoccupation with inexpressibility and the related use of the visual to distance himself from language despite his continued belief in its inevitable failure; and his use of *unknowing* and *negation* as deliberate strategies for creating work. [42] This essentially skeptical view of expression coupled with a paradoxical obligation to continue is a position many painters would find familiar. While Beckett's work adhered to the theatre of the absurd, I would argue that there is nonetheless a commitment to form in Beckett's work, however impure or perverse. James Knowlson argues that even in Beckett's "blackest, bleakest sentences", there is "a shape, energy and dynamism that serves to negate nihilism".[43] Dennis Donoghue states in terms of the poet: "the mage seeks an image, the poet's imagination seeks a form, the bundle of accident and incoherence seeks lucidity".[44]

Just as Beckett looked at philosophy for poetry, so I look to Beckett for painting. As Uhlmann writes, "writing, for him [Beckett], involved 'getting down below the surface' in an effort to find 'the authentic weakness within'".[45] Beckett's interest in poetry and the use of language has long influenced my approach to painting.

Inexpressibility and the Unword

Both modernism and postmodernism have been engaged with the limitations of expression; indeed, Tereszewski reminds us that inexpressibility (along with ineffability and unrepresentability) has "been present in Western literature, philosophy and religion since ancient times".[46] What makes Beckett so relevant to the

[41] For example, *Ill Said Ill Seen*. Oppenheim, *The Painted Word*, 44.
[42] Ibid., 30, and see also Beckett, "Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit."
[43] James Knowlson, "Beckett as Director," in *Images of Beckett*, 20.
[44] Dennis Donoghue, *Yeats* (London: Fontana, 1971), 31.
[45] Uhlmann, *Beckett and Poststructuralism*, 19.
[46] Tereszewski, *The Aesthetics of Failure*, 5.

question of how to transform experience into images is not so much the relationship between Beckett's work and the visual arts, "but how inexpressibility remains one of the dominant themes in *the visual dimension*" of some of his pieces, and how the related themes of absence, invisibility, and ill-seeing rest on the belief that "the failure to represent is a necessary failure, one which is responsible for the ethical relation with the inexpressible Other".[47]

It is Beckett's *un*doing, or the language of "the unword",[48] that makes abstraction a useful strategy when seeking to transform material experience of the world into images. Through an exploration of the distinction between the real and a mediated representation of the real, the slippage between an object and its representation is the base of Beckett's "poetic differentiation":[49]

> In speaking of the eruption of involuntary memory into the present in *Proust,* Beckett suggests that the process involves the passing of the essence (held in the memory) into the appearance (present in matter), creating a bastard which he called the "Ideal real".[50]

Beckett's aesthetic method of illuminating "inaudibilities" through deconstructed language is clearly relevant to abstraction in painting. However, it is not just the form, but *the failure to find words* that is relevant here. Lois Oppenheim links Beckett's "*unwording*" of literature to Mark Rothko's paintings of "*nothing to see*". Oppenheim writes, "Just as the visual subject for Rothko conceals, it is words themselves that, for Beckett, dim the view."[51] In Beckett's own words, "Less. Less seen. Less seeing. Less seen and seeing when with words than when not."[52] This is the basis of his idea of the word as impediment.

The Failure in Painting

The focus of this research is not the failure of painting as a discipline in the historical sense but on failure as it relates to Beckett's aesthetics of inexpressibility. Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit used Beckett, to explore the use of impoverishment in

[47] Ibid., 7, my italics.
[48] Beckett's term, which is discussed by authors such as Anthony Uhlmann and Lois Oppenheim.
[49] Donal Fitzpatrick, in discussion with the author, December 2015.
[50] Uhlmann, *Beckett and Poststructuralism*, 19–20.
[51] Oppenheim, *The Painted Word*, 48.
[52] Beckett, *Worstward Ho*, cited in ibid.

cultural production.[53] For Bersani and Dutoit, this is a strategy of turning away from the articulation of what it means to live and instead focussing on the silences, gaps, and the "unsayable': in essence, Beckett's focus on the void and a commitment to failure rather than the redemptive nature of cultural production is what gives him his power.[54] For Maud Ellman, the importance of this project is that it redefines the role of art "… not to comfort or redeem us or improve our politics, but to overwhelm us: to transport us to the limits of perception where being is created and dissolved…".[55]

This "Fidelity to Failure" is well examined in the beautifully articulated "Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit".[56] This feigned correspondence between Beckett and Duthuit, where Duthuit ruefully exposes the paradoxes and weakness in Beckett's arguments about the work of three painters, was in fact written by Beckett for Duthuit's literary journal, *Transition.*[57] In it, Beckett writes "to be an artist is to fail, as no other dare fail"; that "the history of painting is the history of its attempts to escape from this sense of failure"; and that "there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express".[58] Stanley Gontarski's reading, however, views these statements as active phrases: "what remains to be expressed *is nothingness*"'.[59]

Though Beckett's taste in painting was diverse, his support of struggling abstract painter Bram van Velde in essays such as "Painters of the Impediment," written in 1948, and the above mentioned "Three dialogues" adeptly articulate this approach to art making where "since the essence of the object is to evade representation, what a painter is then left to do is to represent the conditions of this evasion".[60] Van Velde helps to articulate a key difference between an approach that holds on to the

[53] Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, *The Arts of Impoverishment: Beckett, Rothko, Resnai* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).
[54] Ibid.
[55] Maud Ellmann, "Review of *The Arts of Impoverishment Beckett, Rothko, Resnai,* Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit," *Essays in Criticism* 45, no. 1 (January 1995): 84.
[56] Beckett, "Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit."
[57] Anthony Cronin, *Samuel Beckett: The Last Modernist* (London: Harper Collins Publisher, 1996), 396.
[58] Beckett, "Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit," 103.
[59] Stanley Gontarski cited in Tereszewski, *The Aesthetics of Failure*, 16, my italics.
[60] Gwenaël Kerlidou, "Failure as Success in Painting: Bram van Velde, the Invisible (Part 1)," *Hyperallergic*, 14 February 2015, http://hyperallergic.com/182275/failure-as-success-in-painting-bram-van-velde-the-invisible-part-1/.

conscious act of painting but seeks to subvert the painter's ego. This contrasts with other strategies of negation such as automatism or approaches that elevate the ego, such as Expressionism. As Gwenaël Kerlidou observes,

> If we understand Expressionism as the putting forward of an ego, as the vehicle for an existential angst driving the act of painting, to the contrary, what a painting by van Velde's shows us time and again is the spectacle of the debacle of the ego, the failure of the painter to impose his will over the painting. Every time van Velde made a painting, he found himself in the position of watching himself "fail."[61]

Beckett's focus on failure has further implications. Like Marcel Duchamp's use of the found object, Beckett's interest in the corruption or impurity of language has helped open the way for artists to use materials in new ways. For example, artists discussed in this paper might utilise a combination of representational and non-representational images (Lawrence Carroll), a combination of disparate or discarded materials (Paul Wallach, Terri Brooks), a process of impediments that does not completely reject the conscious act of painting but delays or defers any resolution, sometimes referred to keeping a painting "open" (Christopher Wool, Thomas Nozkowski). Other artists take Beckett's approach to unburdening themselves of restricting theory while not dismissing the attempts to theorise. For example, Terry Winters has articulated ambivalence towards restrictive theories but finds a use for a kind of "anti-theory with no effective closure" embodied by writers such as Gilles Deleuze.[62]

Inexpressibility and the Image

Uhlmann, Deleuze, and Badiou, highlight different aspects of Beckett's use of the image. Uhlmann focuses on Beckett's use of the image in the processes of relation and non-relation, Deleuze on the concepts of sensation and exhaustion, and Badiou on the concept of inaesthetics ("the recognition of art and philosophy as independent yet equal ways of thinking and making contact with truth"[63]). Despite differences in their approach to artistic experience, these authors share a belief that Beckett's use of the

[61] Gwenaël Kerlidou, "Failure as Success in Painting: Bram van Velde, the Invisible (Part 2)," *Hyperallergic*, 15 February 2015, http://hyperallergic.com/182278/failure-as-success-in-painting-bram-van-velde-the-invisible-part-2/.

[62] Richard Shiff, "Manual Imagination," in *Terry Winters Paintings, Drawings, Prints 1994–2004*, ex. cat., ed. Adam D. Weinberg (Massachusetts: Yale University Press in association with Addison Gallery, 2004), 21.

[63] A concise definition taken from Inaesthetics, http://inaesthetics.org/index.php/main/about.

image opened up the possibility to consider how relation (or representation or illustration) impairs experience, thought, or sensation, and that non-relation's (abstraction's) power comes from its (attempted) extraction from context, even though this attempt will ultimately fail: "A pure image must be divorced from these contexts and interpretations: that is, it is necessary to create a presentation, to create a thing or an object which is presented to us, rather than attempting to represent an already interpreted object".[64] It is not just the image but sight that is used as a "quintessential ontological metaphor",[65] where "one can never see one's self seeing"[66] and every "reality apprehended through the eye"[67] includes "a kind of perceptual blind spot".[68] The belief that authentic reality might exist "behind the obfuscating appearances of language"[69] has led to visual strategies that aim to distance oneself from language.

Non-Relation and Intention

Abstraction can be a way to create images that are a presentation, not a representation. A presentation is something that requires interpretation on behalf of the artist and the viewer, as it hasn't been "more or less completely interpreted by being drawn in a stable relation".[70] For Uhlmann, the shift between relation and non-relation in Beckett's work can be subtle; a lack of connection can be minimal:

> There is not a huge gulf to be traversed: rather, there are gaps, fissures, tears in the surface, but it is through these small gaps that relation turns to non-relation. So too, what I have called a presentation will not be something which we completely fail to recognise. We will recognise aspects of it.[71]

Oppenheim provides a concise summary of Beckett's link of non-relation to a failure to express:

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64 Uhlmann, *Samuel Beckett and the Philosophical Image*, 35.
65 Oppenheim, *The Painted Word*, 186.
66 Ibid., 37.
67 Ibid., 134.
68 Ibid., 37.
69 Tereszewski, *The Aesthetics of Failure*, 8.
70 Uhlmann, *Samuel Beckett and the Philosophical Image*, 53.
71 Ibid.

> Expression here carries the sense of representing, and to represent carries with it the idea that the work and the artist who creates the work, develop a virtual interpretation which inheres within it. The artist who expresses, then, has something to say, and it is the role of the reader to decode this message.[72]

Uhlmann offers the term "intention" as a way to describe this "virtual interpretation", which does not belong solely to the artist but is situated within the work as well. Intention "involves putting before the reader elements which are expected to be drawn into relation".[73] Uhlmann makes an important distinction here, as Beckett's approach "can be taken to affirm an artform which while not giving up the process of attempting to draw things into connection, intends to fail to do so".[74] Or, as Beckett stated in relation to van Velde, "I'm not saying that he doesn't seek to re-establish correspondence. What is important is that he does not manage to."[75] Within this framework, the body of work developed during my MVA marks a process by which I am less interested in providing "clear lines of intention with which to draw connection" and more interested in how materials bring experience "to the surface at the same times as that connection is refused".[76] While Beckett provides a strategy to loosen the ties between relation and non-relation, painting can advance this further, as Shiff suggests when he states "the painter's hand extends into the process of thought as thinking and sensing body becomes one":[77]

> On the one hand, painting offers access to the unconscious an exposure; on the other hand, it brings material extension to whatever area of the unconscious it enters. What is exposed does not remain untouched, unaltered. Painting invents the unconscious, finding it and making it in a single movement.[78]

Transforming Material Experience

In order to further explore how to express experience through abstraction, we need to first ask what it means to try to express something of experience at all. Badiou offers a very useful reading of Beckett's "testamental" text *Worstward Ho*,[79] which I will

[72] Ibid., 56–57.
[73] Ibid.
[74] Ibid.
[75] Beckett cited in ibid., 57.
[76] Ibid., 38.
[77] Shiff, "Manual Imagination," 26.
[78] Ibid., 19.
[79] *Worstward Ho*, published in 1983, was written in English and considered "untranslatable" by Beckett who normally wrote in French first.

consider more fully here for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is an important text because it is a "recapitulatory" one, alluding to previous texts and theoretical hypotheses, while at times modifying and contradicting them. Secondly, it is particularly relevant to this paper because it is a distillation of Beckett's ideas on the "question of being",[80] and the challenge of translating experience. The four conceptual themes of *Worstward Ho*, as outlined by Badiou, allow us to consider Beckett's notion of "ill seen, ill said" and "the laws of worsening". The first theme is "the imperative of saying",[81] and the second immediately correlated theme is that of "pure being", described as the "There is", or "that about which there is something to say". The "There is" has two names: the void and the dim (a key difference will be discussed later). The third theme is the "inscribed in being", and is "visible humanity", of which there are shades that expose the plurality of being.[82] The final theme of *Worstward Ho* is thought, and Badiou summarises Beckett's question as this:

> Knowing that thought (the fourth theme) is the focal point or the recollection of the imperative of saying (the first theme) and of the arrangement of visible humanity—that is, of the shades (third theme)—what can thought say about the second theme, that is about the question of being?[83]

Badiou argues that Beckett reduces thought to two key components: "there is the visible and there is the imperative of saying. There is 'ill seen ill said'".[84] The ill said is both opposed to "well-saying" and to silence ("the temptation of subtracting oneself from the imperative of saying").[85] From here, we can explore the "laws of worsening" as a way to explore how artists engaged in abstraction might transform material experience of the world into images:

> To approach the thing that is to be said in the awareness that it cannot be said under the guarantee of saying—or of the thing—leads to a radical autonomisation of the prescription of saying. This free saying can never be

[80] Badiou, "Being, Existence, Thought," 80.
[81] Ibid., 81.
[82] Ibid., 83–84. Beckett keeps these shades to three. The first is the standing shade, the one represented in the "figural register" as a woman. Then second is a pair, represented as an old man and a child, a reference to the-one-and-the-other, to internal duplicity and the unity of the pair, and to the polarities or infancy and old-age. The third shade is thought, presented as a head or skull.
[83] Ibid., 85.
[84] Ibid.
[85] Ibid., 91.

> direct, or, according to Beckett's vocabulary, it is a saying that leastens, that worsens. In other words, language can expect the minimum of the best worse, not its abolition.[86]

The tension between the dim and the void can be described as such: the dim is what exposes being,[87] and is a condition of the movement ever *worstward* but not *voidward.*[88] The experiment of worsening fails because the dim and the void do not operate in the same way; while the dim can be ill seen and ill said, the void "remains radically unworsenable and thus unsayable".[89] *Worstward Ho* is presented as "an attempt to escape the phenomenological world of the 'there is' and catch a glimpse of the pure presentation of being… the unpresentable Void".[90]

Beckett's compression of his ideas in *Worstward Ho* is not a reduction in a formalist sense but a way to consider these impossible values, and the paradox of the world ceasing to be real as it enters the mind. This is where abstract painting can offer a way to describe this impossible place in the world: a model of the impossible space in the head, a model of thought *as visible*.[91] In Beckett's words: "Blanks for when words gone. When nohow on. Then all seen as only then. Undimmed. All undimmed that words dim. All so seen unsaid."[92] For Deleuze, this "something seen" is called Image, provided it is liberated from the hold that language has on it, a near impossible task, so that it arrives "at the point where it suddenly appears in all its singularity, retaining nothing of the personal, nor of the rational".[93] Image is not an object then, but a process,[94] which "as well as standing in the void outside space, and also to one side of words, stories and memories, stores up a fantastic potential energy that it detonates in dissipating".[95]

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[86] Ibid., 93.
[87] Ibid., 98.
[88] Ibid., 99.
[89] Ibid., 100.
[90] Langlois, "'Cease to Exist in Order to Be'," 22.
[91] Donal Fiztpatrick, in discussion with the author, December 2015.
[92] Beckett cited in Gilles Deleuze, "The Exhausted," *SubStance* 24, no. 3 issue 78 (1995): 8, http://pages.akbild.ac.at/kdm/_media/_pdf/Gilles%20Deleuze%20-%20The%20Exhausted.pdf.
[93] Deleuze, ibid., 9.
[94] Ibid.
[95] Ibid., 11.

Non-Relation and Habit

Beckett's goal of radical decontexualisation (related to Henri Bergson's impossible object and Marcel Duchamp's readymade) calls for a dislocation of habit.[96] Studio impediments articulated by artists discussed in this paper are consciously acted interruptions of habit—what Ulhmann describes as "a process of inversion; or a folding of thought whereby the opposite of an idea is played with to create new affects and percepts, that is, new sensations".[97]

In *Worstward Ho*, the imperative of saying "belongs to the regime of the attempt, of effort, of work", and Badiou argues much of its text is composed of "experiments in "worsening".[98] Its recurrent themes of eyes and the "oozing of words" and the notion of "clenched staring" speak of the inevitable reprisals, rejections, and corruptions in this task. The effort of "saying more about less"[99] and the recognition that "worsening is labour, an inventive and arduous effectuation of the imperative of saying"[100] recalls Deleuze's writing on the exhausted.

For Deleuze, Beckett's project was characterised by "the exhaustion of the possible"; not just physical and mental exhaustion, but the exhaustion of language, images, and spaces.[101] Deleuze identifies four ways of exhausting the possible: forming an exhaustive series of things; drying up the flow of voices; extenuating the potentialities of space; and dissipating the power of the image. Deleuze argues that through exhausting the possible, Beckett sought to "allow the sudden appearance of the void or the visible…silence or the audible".[102] A link can be drawn between the exhaustion of the possible and entrenched studio habits. Drawing on Bergson's description of habit as "spontaneous memory" but more in line with Proust, Beckett believed habit or "involuntary memory" was a "guarantee of dull inviolability". This contrasts with Bergson, who believed memory (habit) allowed an individual to construct a reality "…in which everything has its place, in which nothing is surprising or new, in

[96] Uhlmann, *Beckett and Poststructuralism*, 74–75.
[97] Ibid.
[98] Badiou, "Being, Existence, Thought," 100.
[99] Ibid., 94.
[100] Ibid., 96.
[101] Deleuze, "The Exhausted."
[102] Ibid., 22.

which…the objects and more importantly the response to them are ready-made".[103] In other words, they are fixed in a stable relation.[104]

If, as Delueze tells us, the exhausted is the dried up, the extenuated, and the dissipated,[105] and if habit might veil new possibilities, what strategies might we engage with in the pursuit of transforming material experience into images? Strategies in the studio may then include not only a willingness to question and interrupt long-standing intellectual habits, but also a consideration of inclusive disjunctions, a focus on exhausting all possibilities, and a resistance towards a definite goal.

[103] Uhlmann, *Beckett and Poststructuralism*, 75.
[104] A "ready-made" in this sense is a Beckettian red flag for trouble, given the inherent chaos of being and existence.
[105] Deleuze, "The Exhausted," 12.

CHAPTER II:
THE PAINTED IMAGE
Case Studies

In relation to intelligence, the image is the condition of thought; "there is no thought without an image," because the image is the material through which intelligence contemplates the universal.
—Emile Brehier[106]

[106] Emile Brehier, cited in Uhlmann, *Samuel Beckett and the Philosophical Image*, 1.

The Painted Image

While acknowledging the differences between the goals and challenges of writing and visual art production, as well as between Beckett's artistic project and those discussed in these case studies, an underlying theme of the slippage between relation and non-relation can still be identified. Taking Beckett's bias towards an aesthetics of inexpressibility and visual abstinence, coupled with Deleuze's belief that the image is not an object but a process, I will articulate in this chapter how the selected artists engage with Beckett's strategy of working against language by relying on process or the physical properties of materials to communicate experience. The painted images within this chapter may be thus understood as a kind of "least best worse"; despite little or no relational content, they are able to evoke a kind of "intelligible collective narrative" whose relationships and compositions act like "triggers of cultural connotations"[107]—a way of illuminating inaudibilities rather than turning away from the imperative of saying. Looking at the strategies of the artists mentioned in this chapter allows a discussion of the task of painting within this slippage. However, whatever the strategy, there is a time in painting when what is meant to happen, meant to work, is superseded by the materials' force.

Case Study 1: Christopher Wool (Erasure and Reduction)

American painter Christopher Wool is useful to this research because while his practice often references the urban environment, he is primarily concerned with "…how a picture can be conceived, realized, and experienced".[108] When Wool transforms material experience of the world, he engages with reproductive filters as part of an "antiheroic notion of mark-unmaking". In this way, his use of graffiti-like imagery can speak of the urban experience as well as the art historical context. For example, Wool's oeuvre is part of an ongoing dialogue around painting's demise, and the strategies to reposition it within the new hierarchy of art production.[109] Katherine

[107] I have borrowed this phrase from Lorand Hegyi. Though Hegyi uses it only in relation to Wallach, this phrase beautifully illustrates the artistic program of the artists in the case studies. Lorand Hegyi, "Organising Temporalities – Balancing Uncertainties – Systematizing Situations, Paul Wallach's sculptural Settlements," in *Where What Was*, ex. cat. (Paris: Galerie Jaeger Bucher), 83.

[108] Christopher Wool exhibition press release, Guggenheim, http://www.guggenheim.org/new-york/exhibitions/upcoming/christopher-wool.

[109] See for example, Douglas Crimp, "The End of Painting," *October* 16 (Spring 1981): 69–86; Suzanne Hudson, "Fuck 'Em If They Can't Take a Joke," in *Christopher Wool*, ed. Katherine Brinson (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications 2014), 52.

Brinson argues that Wool's use of erasure (see figure 2), or the reworking of his own paintings through mechanical means, is a critique of modernist clichés and assumptions such as a "linear progress toward artistic mastery".[110] His erasure of his work also references art mythologies such as Robert Rauschenberg erasing the drawing of William de Kooning to create a new work.

Where Beckett used the image to distance himself from language, Wool has used text to distance himself from painting's legacy; in Beckett's language, to "go on". It could be argued that Wool is engaging with exhausting the possible in his deconstruction of language and continued re-enactment of erasure,[111] and that each rehearsal re-enacts an impulse *to woo* and *to storm*,[112] to bring meaning to the surface and to push it away.

Figure 2 Christopher Wool *Untitled* 2009, enamel and silkscreen ink on linen, 320 x 243cm

Since the 1980s, Wool's large-scale works have shifted from being text based to pattern based, and more recently to semi-erased gestural marks that have commented on the condition of painting and abstraction. In 2000, while working with spray enamel, Wool wiped out his linear composition with a turpentine-soaked rag. The act

[110] Katherine Brinson, in *Christopher Wool*, 47.
[111] Beckett used the phrase "literature of the unword" in a letter to his friend Axel Kaun to suggest a process of destroying language, of revealing its "terrible materiality", or, as Jonathan Boulter describes, as an attempt to "use language to silence language". Jonathan Boulter, *Beckett: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Bloomsbury, 2008), 20.
[112] To paraphrase Beckett in "Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit," 110–11.

of erasing became the act of addition, and he began to experiment with this technique to make some of his most successful works with this technique.[113]

Wool is ambiguous about the meaning of the early work *Hole* (figure 3), allowing multiple readings of the phrase "Hole in the Head", which may be seen as threatening, humorous, literal, or figurative. While his paintings may reference the urban landscape (either what is written upon it or what is experienced within it), they may also be seen as "illustrating the limits of painting at the time, demonstrating the fallacy of language and symbolic meaning in general and in art".[114] Though its intention is unclear, Wool's use of text here is quite literally word-as-image. As Peter Hallward argues, "what matters then is not what such a text might *mean* but what it can be made to produce or accomplish".[115] Wool invites the viewer to determine or "re-imagine the meanings behind the phrase".[116] Wool's use of text, digital treatment of imagery, and his strategies of effacement are part of a practice that has shifted from a focus of *what* to paint to *how* to paint.[117] This subtle shift is recognised by Titmarsh in relation to the expanded practice in painting.[118] In engaging with the "pictorial possibilities of language", Wool is not interested in the meaning of the text but in "text as image… allowing words to operate as shapes on a surface".[119]

[113] It is interesting to note that Diebenkorn and Wool share a paradoxical studio strategy of self-imposed restrictions to ensure an "open-endedness", and a practice that moves between representation and abstraction. It is also worth noting the similarity between Diebenkorn's *Ocean Park* (figure 1) and Wool's *Untitled* (figure 2), with Diebenkorn's deferral strategies and Wool's erasure processes producing similar results on the screen. In reality, the surfaces are quite different.
[114] Christies, "Lot Notes," *Christopher Wool, Hole in Your Head*, http://www.christies.com/lotfinder/paintings/christopher-wool-hole-5371688-details.aspx, accessed November 2015.
[115] Langlois, "'Cease to Exist in Order to Be'."
[116] Christies, "Lot Notes."
[117] Brinson, *Christopher Wool*, 38.
[118] Titmarsh, "Shapes of Inhabitation," 27.
[119] Ibid., 40.

Figure 3 Christopher Wool *Hole* 1992, enamel on aluminium, 132.1 x 90.8cm

To a certain extent, Wool's artistic project, like Beckett's, depends on negativity for its structure.[120] Wool uses reduction and erasure as a way of constructing stories about painting. Like Beckett, Wool works "in the realm of pervasive uncertainty".[121] Purposefully setting up conditions of "unknowingness" through his use of erasure in various forms, he works with "change, doubt, indecisiveness, and poetry". Others, from Merleau-Ponty (regarding Cézanne) to Thomas Lawson, have identified doubt as a strategy in painting, the latter arguing that it was a crucial component in negotiating the impasse that Douglass Crimp described in his essay "The End of Painting".[122]

[120] Tereszewski, *The Aesthetics of Failure*, 15.
[121] Brinson, *Christopher Wool*, 40.
[122] Ibid., 37.

Figure 4 Paul Doran *It's Not Easy To Be Me* 2009–12, wood, acrylic paint, linen, fabric and pencil, variable dimensions

Others artists such as Paul Doran engage with corruptions and complications of the painted surface while successfully highlighting the tension between a process-driven focus on surface once espoused by Greenberg and the more inclusive Hoffman approach that allows for "other elements, other gestures, and other perspectives" that Greenberg found so problematic.[123] Though Wool fails to offer the physicality of Doran's cut, scraped, and collaged paintings (figure 4), his use of erasure and reduction can be linked to an aesthetic dilemma as articulated by Beckett in *Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit* where art is "weary of its puny exploits, weary of pretending to be able…".[124] Beckett's insistence on attacking the form of language, of corruptions and bullet holes and tearing into language[125] is perhaps better echoed in the more physical approach to painting displayed by artists Terri Brooks, Ron Gorchov, and Lawrence Carroll, whom I will discuss next.

[123] Robbie O'Halloran, "Critical Mass," *Profile 24: Paul Doran*, ex. cat. (Ireland: Gandon Editions, 2006), 7–9.
[124] Beckett, "Three Dialogues with George Duthuit," 139.
[125] For example, in Beckett's famous letter to Axel Kaun, cited in Ruby Cohn, *Disjecta* (New York: Grove Press: 1984), 172.

Case Study 2: Terri Brooks (The Makeshift, The Discarded)

Terri Brooks's personal "interest … in the un-discussed makeshift qualities of painting evident in a sub-genre of Australian abstraction" has led her to focus on "artists who work with found objects and materials, and artists who work in a makeshift manner".[126] Brooks's abstraction is informed by urban and natural environments, as well as Australia's post-settlement; in particular, the spirit of "makeshift" or "making do", which informs both her process and chosen materials. Artist Terry Winters refers to the process of "making do" in the studio with the given conditions, both psychic and material.[127] Brooks has argued that this approach has new relevance due to global financial and environmental pressures. The cyclical pressures of adversity asserted by climate go some way in explaining not only the popularisation of the "rough and ready" Australian character but also the primacy of the role of landscape in Australian art.[128]

For Brooks then, the choice of favouring common materials to address contemporary abstraction is a conscious one.[129] What is of key relevance to this paper is the ordinariness of the makeshift, its application of skill and inventiveness but not expertise,[130] or, in Beckett's language, the art of *impoverishment*—a restriction of materials to say more with less. The discarded, forgotten, or overlooked nature of the makeshift—its ordinariness—is what brings it into relevance with Beckett. Beckett's characters "play with the possible without realising'[131] engaging in the combinatorial, "the art or science of exhausting the possible, through inclusive disjunctions".[132] There is a poetry and a deadpan approach in Brooks's work that she has likened to larrikinism,[133] and one can draw a connection to what Knowlson describes as a very Irish trait of humour, which is an "automatic reflex response to adversity".[134] It is also the properties of "economy, directness and egalitarianism" that, for Brooks, orientates

[126] Terri Brooks, "'Rough and Ready': Makeshift, Abstraction and the Australian Patina" (PhD Thesis, University of Ballarat, 2009), 23.
[127] Shiff, "Manual Imagination," 29.
[128] Ward cited in Brooks, "'Rough and Ready'," xv.
[129] Dion Johnson, "Covering Ground", *Terri Brooks Contemporary Abstraction* (blog), accessed September 2015, http://terri-brooks.blogspot.com.au/.
[130] Brooks, "'Rough and Ready'," 123.
[131] Deleuze, "The Exhausted," 4.
[132] Ibid., 5.
[133] Brooks, "'Rough and Ready'," 127.
[134] Knowlson, "A Portrait of Beckett," in *Images of Beckett*, 21.

her away from American abstract expressionism and more closely aligns her to Australian Lyrical Abstractionists such as Ian Fairweather, Tony Tuckson, and Elywn Lynn as well as some Australian Indigenous artists such as Sally Gabori and Paddy Bedford.[135] However, Brooks is still influenced by the 1950s' "grunge abstraction" of Cy Twombly and the anti-aesthetics of Joseph Beuys, whose approaches moved Brooks towards "…pure abstraction, away from figurative representation and traditional "high" art notions of beauty and decoration … [This] desired state of ambiguity is difficult to achieve, but it is an essential quality for an abstract painting—mystery uncertainty changeability".[136]

Figure 5 (Left) Terri Brooks *Cylinder Drawings* 2014, pencil on paper (Right) Terri Brooks, *Deflated,* oil and enamel on constructed paper

Brooks works with "Nature as the maker", co-opting the natural degeneration of weathering of the built environment; she casts her eye over "weathered walls…in a state of decay and abandonment…often found in laneways and factories where appearance does not matter and anything is used". These unintentional marks, "the crude attempts to repair and maintain the boundary", constitute a "contemporary manifestation of the makeshift" and are a source for her painting.[137]

Brooks's engagement with "the makeshift" has influenced the strategies she undertakes in the studio, simplifying colour and using household materials, such as

[135] Brooks, "'Rough and Ready'," 57.
[136] Ibid., 77.
[137] Ibid., 67.

cardboard, house paint, and found objects. Her studio practice is characterised by looking and collecting. She literally is "covering ground" in her process, walking her local environment, bringing found objects into the studio, and documenting street markings and graffiti. Her particular focus is on the convergence of 'man-made' marks and marks made in nature, which are often repetitive, reduced, and fragmented, as well as an interest in elemental or universal marks.[138] But Brooks is careful to note that her work is a "synthetic pool" of multiple influences, encompassing a simple response to mark making as well as references to art history; as she says, "a good painting can hover, in a frozen moment, referencing many things at once".[139] In this way Brooks's artistic project can be characterised as collaborative, where object and process compress into materiality as image.

Figure 6 Terri Brooks *Small Tablet Series* 2015, oil and enamel on constructed paper, four tablets, each measuring 40 x 30 x 5cm

Case Study 3: Thomas Nozkowski (Residue, Distillation and Memory)

Although American artist Thomas Nozkowski began his career as a sculptor, he is best known for his small-scale distilled abstract paintings. The strength in his paintings comes from an ambiguous relationship between works so that when installed together, they develop a kind of unknown but familiar language or narrative (figures 7 and 8). Since the 1970s, Nozkowski has drawn upon many themes, choosing to paint "everything from personal experience…in the broadest possible

[138] Ibid., 75.
[139] Ibid., 73.

way. Events, things, ideas—anything. Objects and places in the visual continuum…but also from other arts and abstract systems".[140] As Sharon Butler notes,

> When Nozkowski states that he is interested in painting solutions and things that painters do he is alluding to how experiences can be distilled by perceptual and painterly means, thus his paintings can be "excavations" of his own memories[141] where a subject or object is used as a touchstone to return to but is transformed by visual treatments that open up the painting and put "everything back into question (for example veils of colour, cross-hatching, scrapping back the painted surface).[142]

Figure 7 Thomas Nozkowski *Untitled (P-48)* 2008, oil on paper, 56.5 x 76.2cm

When translating material experience of the world, Nozkowski quotes Cézanne's paintings of apples as a reference point, arguing that an apple for Cézanne was more a *place* in which to contemplate what painting can do rather than a *thing* to be painted, and to paint it was to allude to all the qualities that affect the moment rather than to describe the iconic image of the apple.[143]

[140] John Yau, "Breaking the Postmodern Creed: Thomas Nozkowski's Unimaginable Paintings and Drawings," *Hyperallergic*, 3 March 2013, http://hyperallergic.com/66111/breaking-the-postmodern-creed-thomas-nozkowskis-unimaginable-paintings-and-drawings/.

[141] Ibid.

[142] Sharon Butler, *Thomas Nozkowski Describes a Good Day in the Studio*, video, 28:19, posted 18 June 2012, posted by "Two Coats of Paint," http://www.twocoatsofpaint.com/2012/06/at-gorkys-grandaughter-watch-zachary.html.

[143] Joseph Masheck, "No Pictures, Please: Ten Paintings and 25 Drawings by Thomas Nozkowski," in *Thomas Nozkowski* (Dublin: Douglas Hyde Gallery Dublin).

Whereas Wool uses images he "doesn't have to think about", other artists such as Nozkowski use an arbitrary image or experience to consider from every angle.[144] For Nozkowski, an introductory scene in Nabokov's novel *Bend Sinister* (1947) best encapsulates how abstraction is able to transform a complex system of perception and experiences into an image:

> …the book is really about a spoon-shaped puddle outside of his window in Cambridge. At first I thought it was a joke. But now I think he was dead serious. He saw this extraordinary object and spun a whole world out of it. It's the secret motif of the book. Yet who would read *Bend Sinister* and say: …I get it. It's about (a puddle)… You write these wonderful novels—and who knows where they come from? I'll never know what it was you really cared about at the core of it, the kernel. What we admire is the completeness of the vision. What we admire is how full, how rich this thing is.[145]

Whereas the evasive quality in Wool's paintings are part of his "engagement with the question of how to make a picture",[146] Nozkowski is less interested in arguing a position for his painting in an art historical context and more in how complex phenomena might be articulated upon a standard store-bought support. That is not to say that his oeuvre does not engage with the traditions and critiques of painting—his choice of "chamber" scale is a case in point—rather, he is able to synthesise seemingly disparate ideas. His paintings have been described as bringing together two opposing tendencies exemplified by poets William Carlos Williams and Stephane Mallarmé; the former famously wrote "No ideas but in things" and the latter's constant search was for the ideal form that is not too closely tied to reality. For John Yau, Nozkowski's use of objects and experiences as a touchstone for his painting coexists with a commitment to the continuous variability of experience.[147]

While one can trace elements of his work to Abstract Expressionists, Nozkowski does not burden himself with the task of railing against the rhetoric of painting, unlike Robert Motherwell who said "every modern painter carries the whole culture of

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[144] Brinson *Christopher Wool.*
[145] "In Conversation: Thomas Nozkowski with John Yau," *Brooklyn Rail*, 5 November 2010, http://www.brooklynrail.org/2010/11/art/thomas-nozkowski-with-john-yau.
[146] John Caldwell cited in Brinson, *Christopher Wool*, 35
[147] Yau, "Breaking the Postmodern Creed."

modern painting in his head".[148] For Yau, this is what makes Nozkowski an important and influential artist. Again he compares him to Mallarmé:

> Instead of striving for some kind of purity… Nozkowski recognizes that the entire mechanics of painting and drawing can be used in any combination that the work requires. The only rules are the ones that you make up and believe in. In this regard, Nozkowski shares something with Mallarmé, who understood that language—from syntax and sound to etymology and individual letters—had to be unraveled and made fresh.[149]

Figure 8 Thomas Nozkowski *Untitled (P-47)* 2008, oil on paper, 56.5 x 76.2cm

Nozkowski's willingness to offload the burden of painting's history or theory that would restrict rather than serve his practice is mirrored by artists such as Terry Winters. For Masheck, Nozkowski's images "are discovered "pragmatically" in the course of play within the game of painting, and so make firsthand sense in the mind of the spectator as well as in that of the artist".[150] Nozkowski's use of figure and ground abstraction seems able to distill an experience and completely invent it at the same

[148] Ibid.
[149] Ibid.
[150] Masheck, "No Pictures, Please."

time, and provides a point of inspiration. Among his repertoire of "tentative and exploratory moves"[151] is to play with the role of the grid while staying firmly within the "chamber" painting tradition.

Case Study 4: Ron Gorchov (Working Outside of the Grid)

Other artists have moved outside of the painter's flat rectangle altogether to interpret their perceptual experience. Since the mid-1970s, American painter Ron Gorchov has discarded this traditional format, and instead worked with an idiosyncratic shape that projects out from the wall and "into the viewer's space". These distinctive canvasses, which balance image and structure, function "as a kind of proscenium stage upon which pictorial events occur"[152] (figure 9). Silvia Osman's observation of Beckett in the following text could well be used to describe Gorchov's artistic project:

> To write about Samuel Beckett you have to be able to cross the bridge between the surrounding world and the stage that softens it, following the trail left behind by him. To write about him…is as if you willingly sign up to follow a path of an eternal return, a curb of a perpetual rehearsal, always new and forever the same.[153]

It would be hard to argue that Gorchov is advancing painting in a new direction, given that he is aged eighty-six and has a cohesive oeuvre that has rarely strayed from his idiosyncratic shapes; however, his work is important as it represents what Olmo describes as a "trans-generational convergence of artistic projects" located between abstract expressionism and postmodern multiplicity, linking the "objectuality between a painting-painting and an expanded painting".[154]

From the beginning of his practice, Gorchov related the negative curved surfaces (saddled shapes) to "Arguments with Rectangles, Flatness and Dimension", wanting to change the context of painting because he opposed the ad-hoc acceptance of the rectangle, seeking a more intentional form that would create a new kind of visual

[151] Ibid.
[152] University of Berkley Art Museum & Pacific Film Archive, "Art Exhibitions, Ron Gorchov," http://bampfa.berkeley.edu/exhibition/8.
[153] Silvia Osmann, "Samuel Beckett and the World of the Unword," http://aflls.ucdc.ro/en/doc2/3%20SAMUEL%20BECKETT.pdf.
[154] Santiago Olmo, "Painting Is Not a Canvas," in *Ron Gorchov*, ext. cat., ed. Omar-Pascual Castillo (Madrid: Turner, 2011), 146–47.

space.[155] Rosalind Krauss's writing on the expanded field is relevant here in relation to her influence on the relationship between artist and the legacy and history of painting, opening up the possibility for artists—in this case, painters—to perform operations, as practice, on the collectively held idea of what constitutes "painting". [156] His use of the saddle shapes can also be seen as a visual metaphor for seeing, a step in liberating painting from the wall, and thus illuminating the space between the viewer and the object, a chance to catch ourselves in the act of seeing, and therefore thinking about painting.[157]

Figure 9 Installation shots of Ron Gorchov's show at Cheim & Reid, New York, 2012

[155] Ray Smith / Ron Gorchov, "As an (Impossible) Continuum," in *Ron Gorchov*, 183.
[156] Bois, *Painting as Model*, 237.
[157] I have borrowed this idea from Oppenheim, who wrote about Beckett's "dependence of identity (or self-awareness) on the visual explains the continual effort of Beckett's characters to, quite literally, catch sight of themselves". Lois Oppenheim, *The Painted Word*, 32.

Figure 10 Installation shot from *Ron Gorchov, Recent Paintings*, Paris, 2012. Courtesy of Galerie Richard.

For Robert Storr, Gorchov's strength lies in his use of different proportions, sizes, and orientation, where ovals, rectangles, and squares are never quite true. The purpose of these idiosyncratic shapes is "not to give all his paintings the same look but to subject the act of looking to the subtle pressures of not knowing quite where to focus".[158]

Figure 11 Ron Gorchov *Cabaret* 2008, oil on canvas, 59.7 x 58.4 x 17.8cm

This loosening of any optical bearings and disorientation affected by the warping of

[158] Robert Storr, "Old Master Ron," in *Ron Gorchov*, 57.

space is key to Gorchov's ability to transform material experience into the painted form. Gorchov's saddle-shaped canvases distort vision, play with the picture plane, and interfere/rupture the image, where they take hold "and draw the viewer in to visual zones that cannot be mapped but only experienced".[159]

Lawrence Carroll's large bed-like paintings are another example of this rethinking of the traditional painters' support to articulate an experience; in this instance, an embodiment of place.[160] Like Gorchov, Carroll's paintings purposefully play with the tension between a painting-as-image and painting-as-object. They occupy and invade space, using subtle graphic elements and found materials covered over but visible in varying degrees. Carroll describes them as "re-mades", recycled and worn-out, but also organisms, whose evolution is central to the work. They are "witnesses of these processes as are the cracks, folds and other 'injuries' that we observe at the uneven surfaces of the works".[161]

Figure 12 Lawrence Carroll *Untitled* 2011, oil, wax, canvas, buckets, shoes, leaves, 351 x 301 x 30cm. Courtesy Galerie Karsten Greve, Galerie Buchmann. Photo credit: Carroll Studio.

[159] Ibid., 58.
[160] Carroll in conversation with Laura Mattiolli Rossi, "For a Biography of Lawrence Carroll," in *Lawrence Carroll* (Milan: Charta, 2008), 39.
[161] Eastment Gallery, "Lawrence Carroll," accessed November 2015, http://www.eastmengallery.be/en/artists/lawrence-carroll.

Both Gorchov's and Carroll's works reposition the rectangle, granting the support a more meaningful and less merely instrumental function,[162] positioning painting as a place where things can "be created and kept"[163], a place of potential. While Gorchov's motivations are described as utopian, echoed in his use of vibrating colour, alluding to a kind of forward motion of potentiality, Carroll's are melancholic, whose visual abstinence reference "Rauschenberg's white: absorbent and capable of including everything".[164] The use of illusive titles in their work rarely provides any illustrative or conclusive purpose. Both are interested in communicating experience by rethinking perspective and scale, the relationship between painting, sculpture and architecture, and the "perception of canvas as both object and void".[165] They do not step away completely from the desire to engage with the act of painting and with a connection to the traditional painting support. For Gorchov, engaging with the tensions inherent in the history of painting doesn't mean a practice that diverts from its original language, nor is his studio strategy one of silence, a giving in to the temptation of "not saying". Rather it is a commitment to exhausting the possible through illuminating the inaudibilities of experience.

Figure 13 Lawrence Carroll, Installation shot from *In the World I Live* 2013, Hugh Lane Gallery Dublin.

[162] Storr, "Old Master Ron," 147.
[163] Angela Vettese, "Until the Emotion," in *Lawrence Carroll*, 17.
[164] Ibid.
[165] Ray Smith / Ron Gorchov, "As an (Impossible) Continuum," in *Ron Gorchov*, 183.

Case Study 5: Paul Wallach (Forms in Transit, A Kind of Logic)

American Paul Wallach, who has lived in France since the 1990s, is another example of an artist working with the tensions inherent in modernist notions of beauty and balance and postmodern questioning of "formalistic or hierarchical order",[166] ideas about relation and no relation, and of heterogeneity.[167] His work begs the question, if there is no centre or core, what opens up, and how do you find an orientation? The parallels with Beckett's use of the art of impoverishment, and the tensions between order and chaos apparent in the characters of *Molloy* and *Moran*, are evident here.[168] For Wallach, the answer seems to lie in building a faux core or orientation, one that holds its own centre through some strategy. Within Wallach's work is a sense of impermanence, an improbability of materials, and a fragile relationship to harmony. Works are often both balanced and off-centre. As in Gorchov's work, this creates a kind of orientation that is both non-relational and relatable, a language that relies of the physical properties of materials to communicate experience. His use of (small) scale and the work's relationship to the wall, including the revealed hidden spaces, express a "reservation about monumentalism" (figure 16).[169] The creation of passages between the work and the wall recall the work of other artists, such as Richard Tuttle and Jessica Stockholder (though his language is less laconic than Tuttle and his minimal use of colour and scale is more subtle than Stockholder's). Like Gorchov's, Wallach's work is situated in the "inbetween" space; his works are "drawings in space, which become forms of sculpted space…a painting-becoming-sculpture…. (inviting) us into the heart of geometry and its many spatiotemporal landscapes as well as mindscapes".[170]

Yet it is worth considering the elements of Wallach's sculptures that can be linked to Tuttle whose varied body of work since the mid-1960s has made him difficult to categorise historically or even stylistically. Like Wallach's, Tuttle's work exists in the space between painting, sculpture, poetry, assemblage, and drawing. A summary of Tuttle's central concerns could easily be read as Wallach's: a use of humble materials,

[166] Hegyi, "Organising Temporalities," 83.
[167] Paul Ardenne, "Forms in Transit", in *Where What Was*, 92.
[168] Uhlmann, *Beckett and Poststructuralism*, 59.
[169] Ardenne, "Forms in Transit," 91.
[170] Mutual Art, "Paul Wallach's h e r e t o f o r e Opens at Galerie Jaeger Bucher in Paris," http://www.mutualart.com/OpenExternalArticle/Paul-Wallach-s-h-e-r-e-t-o-f-o-r-e-opens/82E252C31391C3FC.

investigations of line, volume, colour, texture, spatial relationships, and form without a specific reference point.[171] For Lorand Hegyi, Wallach's strength lies in evoking a kind of intelligible collective narrative, or "imaginary reserves of meaning", and his compositions act like "triggers of cultural connotations".[172] Hegyi has described Wallach's work as "material constellations" and "sculptural settlements"[173] that have a painterly quality where space, volume, and colour set up a constant reciprocity.[174]

Figure 14 Paul Wallach *Before the Nearly Last* (detail) 2013, wood, canvas, lead, string, pencil, oil paint and acrylic, 250 x 36 x 12cm. Courtesy Galerie Jaeger Bucher, Paris. Photo : Georges Poncet.

[171] Pace Gallery, "Richard Tuttle," http://www.pacegallery.com/artists/474/richard-tuttle.
[172] Hegyi, "Organising Temporalities," 83.
[173] Ibid.
[174] "First Big Parisian Exhibition for Artist Paul Wallach at Galerie Jaeger Bucher, 2010," *Art Daily*, http://artdaily.com/news/35699/First-Big-Parisian-Exhibition-for-Artist-Paul-Wallach-at-Galerie-Jaeger-Bucher#.VQAXh2TLf9c.

Figure 15 Paul Wallach *Absence Disparue* 2012, wood, cloth, string, paint (acrylic), 93 x 37 x 52cm. © Paul Wallach, Courtesy Galerie Jaeger Bucher. Photo: Georges Poncet.

There is little written on Wallach's process to take into the studio but the qualities apparent in the work described above provide points of inspiration. For example, Wallach hangs his work away from the wall, painting the back and letting the reflection activate the work. His use of space as a way to stand outside of language is an aesthetic method of illuminating the "inaudibilities" reflected in the following passage from Beckett's *Belaqua*: "The experience of the reader shall be between the phrases, in the silence, communicated by the intervals not the terms of the statement…".[175]

What Wallach offers here is a way to articulate "the unword", a way to make non-relational art that is able to connect with its audience. Wallach is an example of how to begin to move my painting outside of the materials with which I am familiar and to begin to operate in a more three-dimensional way that retains some of the silence that painting can hold. Knowlson tells us that "the silences that figure predominately in Beckett's plays are filled more by the spectator measuring what is being seen against what has just been said or following, within specific constraints or patterns of

[175] Beckett cited in Uhlmann, *Samuel Beckett and the Philosophical Image*, 39.

statements".[176] The sense of silence in Wallach's work, and hence his invitation for the viewer to lean into the work, is articulated not just through his use of space but also in the treatment of each material, a vulnerability that one feels when in proximity to the work because the disharmony is so beautifully balanced.

Figure 16 Paul Wallach *Untitled* 2012, wood, cloth, string, oil and acrylic paint, 83 x 227 x 55cm

Summary:

The focus on this paper is not to just examine the methods of other artists,[177] but to also consider their motivations to more fully develop my work. The examination of the artists in these case studies has allowed a consideration of how their strategies play out in their sympathetic or strategic encounter with materiality: through an engagement with space, with the poetic, or in the ways they operate in relation to the history of painting (provocation, playfulness, or in a 'make-do' way). These strategies have disrupted habit, created painting hybrids, and articulated unexpressed intention.

[176] James Knowlson, "Beckett's 'Bits of Pipe'," in *Samuel Beckett: Humanistic Perspectives*, ed. Morris Beja, S.E. Gontarski, and Pierre Aster (Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1982), 23.

[177] For example, Diebenkorn's *nurturing* obstacles and Christopher Wool's acts of reversal or erasure. Were there space, the list could go on *ad nauseam*; Rachel Whiteread's use of negative spaces, Jessica Stockholder's use of passages and room interventions, etc.

Each artist has placed him- or herself in the position of watching themselves ‘fail’. In difference to the general pessimistic reading of Beckett’s project, for me, this is ultimately an optimistic view, as it allows for the possibility to ‘fail, and fail better’. The following section will not only document how to engage studio impediments through the acts of reversal or erasure, the use of ready-mades, and of spaces, but also consider the implications of a fidelity to failure through a deferral of the wished-for object and a shift from *what* to paint to *how* to paint.

CHAPTER III:
INTERRUPTING HABIT AND EXHAUSTING THE POSSIBLE

The Art of combining is not my fault. It's a curse from above.
For the rest I would suggest not guilty.
—Narrator in Beckett's *Enough*[178]

[178] Cited in Uhlmann, *Beckett and Poststructuralism*, 98.

Beckett and My Practice

In 2014, while enrolled in my MVA, I undertook a residency at the Cité Internationale des Arts in Paris. Among others things, I wanted to challenge the way I made work; specifically, I wanted to rethink the surface, form, and structure of the paintings I was making. One component of the residency was to visit the areas where Beckett lived and worked. Though I had acknowledged the influence of Beckett's approach to language, I had not really considered the ways in which his "philosophical allusions, aesthetic concerns, and artistic assumptions" could shape and alter my future work.[179] The residency and this resulting exegesis have led me not only to question my methodology and habits in the studio, but also the role of relation and non-relation in my practice. Given the complexity of ideas touched upon in this paper, it is worth restating my personal objectives with regard to Beckett: to understand the influence Beckett has had on my way of being and to my art practice, and to relate the literature of Beckett to philosophy.

When I was growing up in Ireland, Beckett, Joyce, Yeats, and O'Casey were central figures in the cultural landscape. Being a a painter, I have found that Beckett has the most resonance with me, more than any other writer. I took from Beckett his language—more importantly, his breakdown of language—and his ability to create visual worlds, however minimal. Beckett for me was never a daunting figure because I did not try to understand his work. Rather, I found Beckett poetic and humorous. There was, at times, a touch of the Marx Brothers about his lines: *I would never belong to a club that would have me as a member*. For my practice, he provides a way of thinking, of breaking down and understanding experience that holds resonance in the studio. This is partly because the ideas I bring to the studio evaporate in the studio to be replaced by ideas based in the realities of what materials can or cannot do or how I respond to them.

As an artist inspired by landscape but not interested in a mimetic description, I find the question of how to transform material experience of the world into images crucial.

[179] Marcin Tereszewski, "Towards the Inexpressible Nothing in Beckett's *Text for Nothing*," *Anglica Wratislaviensia* 46 (2008): 64.

That is, I am interested in how the details of a place are transposed, not as a recognisable representation, but into a new thing with essential residual components.[180] (This notion of residue is now informed by Beckett's "ideal real" in which he "develops an essence of the impure", playing with Plato's opposition between essence and appearance.[181]) My observations of the urban environment—the patina of walls and broken concrete, the incidental scuffs and marks of everyday life—and the found and the discarded objects that inform my visual vocabulary are transformed by both evocation *and* perception, and all part of a broader cultural context. Carter understands this when he states that all work begins as a social relation.[182] Even when taken out of context, they interact with complex systems of understanding. It is this slippage between information and meaning that opens up so much possibility, where the visual language of "deferral, removal and reassignment"[183] becomes not a description but an armature to the canvas, creating its own logic. It is within this tradition that I have used the canvas or support as a test site for shapes, using the transparency and opacity of paint to expose their strengths and their vulnerabilities, and to explore how the eye interprets foreground and background.[184]

Figure 17 (left), Michael Cusack field research 2009 (wood on street in Paris)
Figure 18 (right) Michael Cusack *Arp* 2014, oil on linen, 60 x 80cm

Previous work has drawn from architectural plans, engineers' drawings, and boat and

[180] Paul McGillick, cited in Gavin Wilson, *John Firth-Smith, A Voyage That Never Ends* (Sydney: Craftsman House, 2000), 96.
[181] Uhlmann, *Beckett and Poststructuralism*, 19.
[182] Carter, *Material Thinking*, 10.
[183] Sally O'Reilly, "Circling the Square," in *Profile 24: Paul Doran*, 12.
[184] *Michael Cusack* (Melbourne: Karen Woodbury Gallery, 2014), http://issuu.com/karenwoodburygallery/docs/kw254_cat14cusack_v1.4.

building diagrams, to name a few. While these diagrams hold their own specificity—to take, instruct, or demonstrate—they relinquish their original role in my work, shifting the focus from function and being recast in another world where materials are transformed and where meaning is wrested and inverted.

Material Thinking in the Studio

Painting is for me what drawing is for Terry Winters: an experimental and investigative tool where materials can generate ideas with which to address perceptual experience.[185] Although the artists discussed in the previous case studies might reference place / experience / objects, and bring these "things" to the studio, their studio practice ultimately involves an untangling from all these ideas. Their methodology allows them to partake in the relational, but simultaneously *the studio investigation takes over*. In this process, there is no allegiance to the source, but an allegiance to a studio practice is given over to a material investigation and an attempt to fail *through materials*. In my practice, ideas, intuitions, moods, biases, and relations are perverted, corrected, rejected, and extended by the body, the paint, the support. There are materials with which I have a natural affinity, and there are materials whose otherness brings me to a halt.

I spend large periods of time in the studio searching without knowing, simply trusting that the gathering of materials will inform the methods within the studio. I am looking for what might be called a non-presence, or some kind of unexpressed intention. This focus on the unknown and the breaking down of imagery is a lesson I take from Beckett and his deconstruction of language. When asked to describe his work, Beckett said "I simply know nothing about my work in this way."[186] My practice is full of contradiction and misquotation. Like Beckett, I am drawn to the poetic. Poets are the senses, philosophy the intellect; or as Beckett said, "poetry is a prime condition of philosophy and civilization".[187] Language at times escapes me, but I have tied my leg around poetry. Making paintings is like being in the ether (Winters has said "paintings

[185] Terry Winters cited in Shiff, "Manual Imagination," 19.
[186] Knowlson, "Beckett's 'Bits of Pipe'," 16.
[187] Beckett quoted in Uhlmann, *Beckett and Poststructuralism*, 20. Beckett also writes, "Poets are the sense, philosophers the intelligence of humanity". Ibid.

are projections").[188] There is nothing concrete. Everything is a breath away from being anything. There are ideas and thoughts and discipline and practice, of course, but nothing planned except for the doing, which has its own plan. After doing, there is a new thing, which begins a process of questioning. I learn to see this new thing and whether it has any character or quality or whether it hides things of others, bravado, or shyness and/or tranquillity. I have paintings in my studio that stumble along, never wanting to be anything, that just live in the studio as workhorses for shapes and marks.

There are acts involved in my studio other than painting; indeed, the act of being in painting sometimes involves everything else other than painting. It includes but is not limited to: constructing, pouring, mixing, scraping, scratching, sanding, polishing, wiping and tearing, preparing supports. Yet in the end, I am a painter and will always return to the act of painting. Lawrence Carroll articulates this well when he says "I am a painter and I have always thought of myself as a painter. I am always thinking what I can add to the thread of painting, what I can give it and leave there, this has always been important to me."[189]

The Discarded

In some way, all of Beckett's work is about the discarded: his characters and their histories are discarded. Language, where words are a "materiality of the verbal utterance",[190] might be termed discarded. I too am interested in words and sounds and phonetics that are divorced from their context. In this sense, even my paintings' titles are discarded images, as I have often used only parts of words, the form or sound of which somehow correspond with the image I have made.

In Paris, I made work using found materials such as vintage photographs and books, cardboard and paper, and even film canisters. I was interested in collecting shapes and forms, fragments, incidental things, fallen-off things, forgotten things. I wanted to put the pieces back together to form a sort awkward lump that had to be moulded into

[188] Shiff, "Manual Imagination," 29.
[189] "Questions for Lawrence Carroll and Onya McCausland: Enantiodromia Part II," *Abstract Critical*, 1 May 2014, http://abstractcritical.com/article/questions-for-lawrence-carroll-and-onya-mccaulsand-enantiodromia-ii/index.html.
[190] Oppenheim, *The Painted Word*, 51.

shape. I was looking for a visual truth when there could be none. I wanted to expand the way I make art by pushing the work toward a kind of painting hybrid where the found object and the gestural marks are a meeting point. While I have always collected discarded materials, this was first time I utilised them so fully. In *Molloy,* Beckett describes Molloy's infatuation with a stolen but unknown object:

> … for a certain time I think it inspired me with a kind of veneration, for there was no doubt in my mind that it was not an object of virtue, but that it had a most specific function always to be hidden from me. I could therefore puzzle over it endlessly without the least risk.[191]

What Molloy is able to embody here is the power that an object holds from the breaking of the relation between "the individual who apprehends and the object apprehended".[192]

> …For to know nothing is nothing, not to want to know anything likewise, but to be beyond knowing anything, to know you are beyond knowing anything, that is when the peace enters in, to the soul of the incurious seeker.[193]

The inference of this encounter goes so much deeper with regard to an impossible object so isolated that "all possibility of comprehension is removed".[194] It speaks of a true absence of relation. In the studio, my incorporation of found objects and the discarded corresponds to Nozkowski's process discussed previously where images are discovered "pragmatically", but also to Beckett's use of inclusive disjunctions, perception, and apprehension. However, all these objects cannot be absolutely decontextualised; they can only allude to this impossibility. Whereas I have articulated in the past a desire to make a new object—something that stood alone, equivalent to other objects—this research has shown me that the game of painting is made up of many contradictions, personal and historical. As Badiou's reading of *Worstward Ho* tells us, "thought cannot bypass existence and descend into the depths of pure being".[195]

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[191] *Molloy* 85–86, cited in Uhlmann, *Beckett and Poststructuralism*, 76.
[192] Deleuze, "The Exhausted," 85.
[193] Beckett cited in ibid.
[194] Uhlmann, *Beckett and Poststructuralism*, 77.
[195] Langlois, "'Cease to Exist in Order to Be'," 23.

Interrupting Habit

My studio practice is based on a physical encounter with inert materials, and the belief that these materials can translate experience. The question becomes not only how to develop a language that articulates something of "inaudibilities" of experience, but also how to dislocate habit so that that language is continually tested. Returning to Bergson's idea that habit is a useful strategy in life[196], and using Beckett's strategy of decontexualisation, we can see that in the studio, interrupting habit turns Bergson's idea on its head. In interrupting habit, we hope to come upon that something that is surprising, where the objects, and more importantly the ready-made response to them, are ruptured. As a way of interrupting habit and extending my practice, I have sought to distance myself from the painting language I had previously developed and engage more overtly with the practice of expanded painting. To do this, I have followed Deleuze's focus and engaged with Beckett's strategy of exhausting the possible through language, image, and space. This imposing of studio impediments is a form of "clenched staring", the result of which is not meant as an illustration of the ideas discussed in this paper but an autonomous body of work.[197] Autonomy and relatedness, however, are another contradictory pulsation of the game of same and the other.

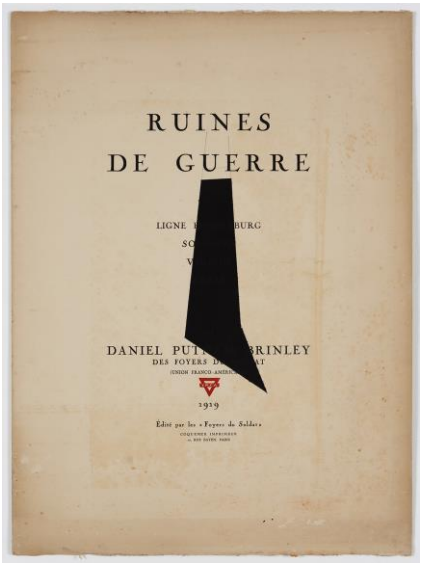

Figure 19 (Left) Michael Cusack *Ruins of War* 2014, acrylic on found paper, 60 x 46cm
Figure 20 (Right) Michael Cusack *Street furniture* 2014, mixed media on paper, 60 x 46cm

[196] Uhlmann, *Beckett and Poststructuralism*, 75.
[197] An acknowledgement must be made here of Miles Hall's succinct summary of Alain Bois's arguments and Hall's insistence on the autonomy of his studio research. Hall, "The Anatomy of an Image," 85.

Exhausting the Possible through Language and Image

Repetition in Beckett's work has been linked to "the possibilities of reproduction over the sterile compulsions of replication", where "repetition enacts a doubleness, asserting both the freedom of the language from referential constraints and its internal emptiness and exhaustion".[198] In my studio research, the painting support acts as a test site to engage with the first of Deleuze's four ways to exhaust the possible. It is a project followed by many artists, with Ron Gorchov a clear example. *Ruins of War* (figure 19) is another case in point, where the shadow of Paris rooftops has been reproduced repeatedly. In my practice, the interplay between overlapping, transparent and opaque shapes (figure 18) could be likened to Beckett's use of characters in inescapable relationships, and is an example of a strategy with which I am already familiar. This body of work focuses less on shapes (and exhausting them in relation to each other) and more on materiality. By removing the need to continually adjust multiple shapes in relation to another, the dark shadow cast in *Ruins of War* and other works dominates the support but becomes redundant, silenced by its own ubiquity. The repeating of a word until it loses its meaning, it is testing the ground, the materials, to see if repetition might kill it off or silence it.

Having a fidelity to one material can also introduce its own dilemmas, as Richard Deacon has so clearly articulated when reflecting on the importance of working in more than one material: "If I made only work in one material then the work becomes only about the material. The material becomes only the medium rather than part of the message."[199] Such an idea relates to the second strategy of studio impediments and a shift from *what* to paint to *how* to paint, as discussed in relation to Wool (however, in this instance, not to paint a painting but to construct one without paint[200]). This body of work shows a move away from oil paint to towards the discarded: to board, concrete, rubber, and tarpaulin. This drying up of my traditional language (oil or

[198] Steven Connor cited in Andrew Gibson, "Badiou, Beckett and Contemporary Criticism", in *Alain Badiou on Beckett*, ed., Alberto Toscano and Nina Power (Manchester: Clinamen Press, 2003), 119.
[199] "Richard Deacon on Being a Fabricator," video, 3:41, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, https://www.sfmoma.org/watch/richard-deacon-being-fabricator/.
[200] Titmarsh has discussed the irony of young artists being "thrown into painting practice where 'not painting' is their starting point". Titmarsh, "Shapes of Inhabitation," 29.

acrylic paint) had the effect of eradicating the image, projecting or embedding the expression into or through the material. The tarp works are a sort of drawing/painting through construction/assemblage by folding, tearing, gluing. The result is a corrupted painting. The tarp work is a physical encounter. It is much heavier than regular canvas; it is oily and stained and has hitches and ropes attached. It has been well used and has such a strong presence that it needs little in the way of paint or marks. It is simply read as a painting. Its physicality is enough. It asks questions of the viewer. The rubber works are in some ways less visible—so invisible that they lived on my studio floor for a long time, walked on by visitors to the studio. Now, attached to a support, or hung on the wall, they are non-images, voids that are paradoxically *very physically there*.

Figure 21 Michael Cusack *Tarp Painting* 2015, mixed media on tarp, 28.5 x 20.5cm
Figure 22 Michael Cusack *Rubber on wood* 2016, rubber, wood, 28.5 x 20.5cm

Erasure and deconstruction represent further strategies of impediments in the studio. *Ampersand* is a large-scale work on paper where I have broken text down to its smallest components; the physical characteristics of individual letters of particular fonts have been recast in large-scale abstracted forms. The process involved drawing, erasing, gluing, and sanding in multiple phases.

Figure 23 Michael Cusack *Ampersand* 2014, mixed media on paper, 168 x 137cm

My paintings and drawings are often about erasure. After building up colour, marks, and shapes, I use a process of erasure, of knocking back and bringing the work back to the (impure) essential. The goal here is to focus on the corruptions and complications rather than seek a harmonious composition too early. In some ways, *Ampersand* (figure 23) is the least successful as it is the most representational work; however, it also represents a necessary shift in the deconstruction of my language.

The Untold (figure 24) is a series of five film canisters that conceal/reveal a number of images. The film canisters were found on a street in Paris, originally made to hold 5 x 4 inch photographic film before being developed. Inside them, I have placed found paper and forgotten drawings (found images, oilstick and gouache on found paper, accidental images, paper glued on paper). These canisters re-enact the process of erasure, yet they are also a re-enactment of the act of collecting images.

Figure 24 Michael Cusack *The Untold* 2015, mixed media, found objects, variable dimensions

This process of concealment/revealment in this instance is a snapshot of the act of dissipation. As Badiou argues about *Worstward Ho*:

> On the one hand there is what appears in the dim, what the dim allows to appear as a shade—as a shade in the dim. On the other, there is what makes the void appear as an interval, in the gap of what appears, and consequently as a corruption of the void….[201]

Unlike Giacometti who suffered the "anxiety of representation and evocation" or "the relation of vision to memory"[202], I do not seek to illustrate this point (however poetic); instead, I am content to half-forget and let the residue—*the interval*, *the gap*, *the void*—begin to play out through materials.

Carroll uses a process of concealment/revealment as a method to keep his work open and begin again, to "paint away what was there, erase (his) path and start over". He views this process as optimistic because the painting is "never stalled and always ha[s] a potential to move forward".[203] In this way, the dissipation of the image is both its vulnerability and its strength.

[201] Badiou, "Being, Existence, Thought," 82.
[202] Oppenheim, *The Painted Word,* 150.
[203] "Questions for Lawrence Carroll and Onya McCausland."

Figure 25 Michael Cusack *Cage Work* 2016, wood, canvas, mixed media 40cm x 38cm x 15cm.

Exhausting the Possible through Space (Caged Paintings)

The final impediment involves making use of space(s). The caged paintings refer to space by constricting space. Deleuze has said that the image is "not a representation of an object but a movement in the world of the mind".[204] In this way, I wanted to somehow move my images *forward*. Discarded objects are coupled with paintings in the manner of the makeshift; the paintings must 'make do' with their lot. The role of the support is brought forward in an awkward manner. (Within any studio research, there is failure.) Drawing from Uhlmann's reading of Beckett's inclusive disjunctions, their ineptitude is a "coming together and falling asunder of forms".[205] One could argue that these caged paintings show a tension in painting—"(asserting) its object status over its pictorial function".[206] Or perhaps, like an actor on a stage, the rupture of painting from the wall and its awkward suspension will alert the viewer to measure what they see against what else is being presented. This idea is considered by Knowlson in regards to Beckett's plays, in which the "imagery echoes not on the

[204] Langlois, "'Cease to Exist in Order to Be'," 26.
[205] A phrase from Beckett's *Murphy*, cited in Uhlmann, *Beckett and Poststructuralism*, 74, n16.
[206] Titmarsh, "Shapes of Inhabitation," 28.

boards alone, but in the mind of the spectator".[207] In reality, the studio process was simply inquisitive, the question of how I could move the painting off the wall did not include the viewer but was a response to the physical problem at hand. It is a reminder that the relationship with materials—whether paint, wood, or cement—is what drives me. I am interested in questions posed by materials as they can *be met and considered by materials*.

My studio methods of erasure, concealment, reduction, and expanded painting have brought surprising results and have failed too. In the end, the studio research can be described as a movement between extension and contraction. By constricting my current language (paint), I have been able to extend my practice's materiality and its use of space, and, importantly, engaged with the idea of what might constitute a painting. A constriction in the mark and shape making has played out in the extension of the physicality of the materials. The points of reference, or relation, for the viewer have reduced as the focus of my intension have become clearer. From the entanglement of ideas, a visual line of inquiry has emerged. Unsurprisingly, there are references to voids and silences in the work; there are images erased or in the process of disappearing. In the end, I do not have the severe self-discipline or vigilance of Beckett[208]—perhaps I am closer to one of his characters, bringing many ideas about poetry, place, and any number of things to the studio, but failing to provide the links, simply shifting through the possibilities. In translating experience through materials, I take heart from Andrew Gibson: "While failure never ceases to haunt [Beckett's] project, tentatively, contradictorily, fitfully, and by a variety of different names, Beckett edges towards a faith in possibility."[209]

[207] Knowlson, "Beckett's 'Bits of Pipe'," 23.
[208] Gibson, "Badiou, Beckett and Contemporary Criticism," 133.
[209] Ibid., 135–36.

CONCLUSION

…it is worth stressing how much this creation of a multiplicity of voices, levels, tones, and registers demands by way of active involvement on the part of the spectator. By a technique that clearly owes far more to suggestion and ambiguity than it does to reference, the spectator is able to move freely between these different levels, questioning, judging, and often supplying what is hinted at rather than stated.
—James Knowlson[210]

[210] Knowlson, "Beckett's 'Bits of Pipe'," 23.

Conclusion

In this research, I have sought to understand the relationship between ideas and materials when transforming perceptual experience into images. In this exegesis, I have argued that Beckett's desire to distance himself from language[211] articulates something of my approach to art production in the studio. Whereas in the past, Beckett's use of "unknowing"—of fractured language—was folded in my methods in an intuitive if not explicit way, a more in depth reading of Beckett's work and related philosophies has strengthened a focus on the slippage between relation and non-relation. I have also argued that Beckett's strategy of focussing on the silences, gaps, and the "unsayable'—a focus in essence on a failure to express—offers a way forward when seeking to translate material experience through abstraction. Indeed, this "fidelity to failure" coupled with the physicality of materials (and the will they assert on ideas) have been the two guideposts for this paper. Within these guideposts, I have considered the motivations and strategies embedded in the work of relevant precursors and contemporary artists Christopher Wool, Terri Brooks, Thomas Nozkowski, Ron Gorchov, and Paul Wallach.

The focus on this paper is not to just examine the methods of other artists, but also to consider their motivations to more fully develop my work. The examination of the artists in these case studies has allowed a consideration of how their strategies play out in their sympathetic or strategic encounters with materiality: through an engagement with space, with the poetic, or in the ways they operate in relation to the history of painting (provocation, playfulness, or in a 'make do' way). These strategies have disrupted habit, created painting hybrids, and articulated unexpressed intention. Each artist has placed him- or herself in the position of watching themselves 'fail'. In opposition to the general pessimistic reading of Beckett's project, for me this is ultimately an optimistic view, as it allows for the possibility to 'fail, and fail better'.[212]

As noted previously, the work presented here is both a departure from and an extension of my current practice. Using studio impediments, I have sought to engage with a wider variety of materials and to form hybrid paintings, "inclusive

[211] Tereszewski, *The Aesthetics of Failure*, 12.
[212] Samuel Beckett, *Worstward Ho* (New York: Grove Press, 1984).

disjunctions", that highlight the act of looking and of saying. Their role is to pose questions, not provide definitive answers. Beckett's writing (and others' writing about him) has led me to the strategies of expanded painting. Expanded painting resists, in Beckett's words, the temptation to give in to silence but instead sets a path to 'plod on', *Worstward Ho*. In the end, however, like Carroll, I am a painter interested in painting, and what paint can do, even when it fails.

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APPENDIX:
CATALOGUE OF WORK PRESENTED FOR EXAMINATION

On the way to this literature of the unword, which is so desirable to me, some form of Nominalist irony might be a necessary stage. But it is not enough for the game to loose some of its sacred seriousness. It should stop. Let us therefore act like the mad (?) mathematician who used a different principle of measurement at each step of his calculation.
—Samuel Beckett[213]

[213] Cited in Uhlmann, *Beckett and Poststructuralism, 18.*

Catalogue of Work Presented for Examination

Figure 26 Michael Cusack *Two Files* 2016, wood 60 x 44cm

Figure 27 Michael Cusack *Grey Painting* 2016, mixed media on canvas, 50 x 60cm

Figure 28 Michael Cusack *Large Rubber* 2016, black rubber, 110 x 88cm

Figure 29 Michael Cusack *Steel Frame* 2016, steel, 40 x 30cm

Figure 30 Michael Cusack W*hite Cut Painting I* 2016, mixed media on board, 30 x 40cm

Figure 31 Michael Cusack W*hite Cut Painting II* 2016, mixed media on board, 30 x 40cm

Figure 32 Michael Cusack *Tarp over Tablet* 2016, tarp and mixed media on canvas, 60 x 50cm

Figure 33 Michael Cusack *Tarp over Orange* 2016, tarp and mixed media on canvas, 46 x 38.5cm

Figure 34 Michael Cusack *Cement sheets* 2016, cement sheets, 140 x 90cm

Figure 35 Michael Cusack *Folded Tarp* 2016, tarpoline, 68 x 41cm

Figure 36 Michael Cusack *Large Army Tarp* 2016, army tarpoline, 200 x 157cm

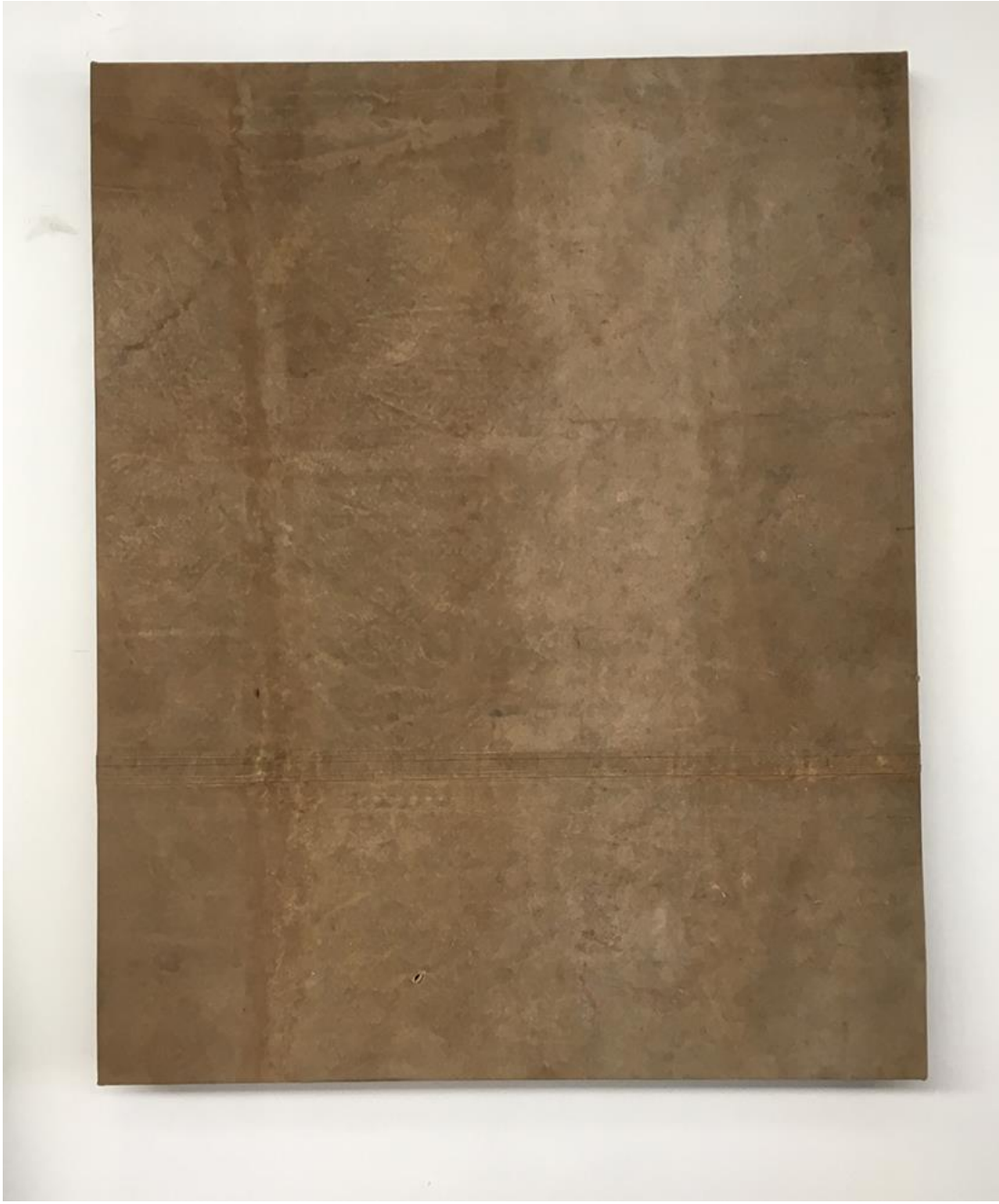

Figure 37 Michael Cusack *Raw Canvas* 2016, raw canvas, 137 x 110cm

Figure 38 Michael Cusack *White Painting* 2016, oil on canvas, 168 x 183cm

Figure 39 Michael Cusack *Kitchen Table* 2016, wood, 75 x 121cm

Figure 40 Michael Cusack *Raw Canvas* 2016, raw canvas, 50 x 40cm

Figure 41 Michael Cusack *Plywood Hull* 2016 (Side view), plywood, 40 x 30cm

Figure 42 Michael Cusack *Plywood Hull* 2016 (front view), plywood, 40 x 30cm

Figure 43 Michael Cusack *Racket Frames* 2016, wood, 50cm x 45cm

Figure 44 Michael Cusack *Lavage* 2015, acrylic on Paper, 46 x 60cm

Figure 45 Michael Cusack Studio shot 2016