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### Rhetoric: the art of using language effectively

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#### Recommended Citation

Burwell, Eric, "Rhetoric: the art of using language effectively" (2016). *Graduate School of Art Theses*. ETD 56. <https://doi.org/10.7936/K76D5R7C>.

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Rhetoric:

The art of using language effectively

By Eric Burwell

A thesis presented to the

Sam Fox School of Design and Visual Arts

Washington University in Saint Louis

In partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of

Masters of Fine Arts

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## *ABSTRACT*

My thesis is constructed of fifty text modules, each containing 100 words exactly. These modules express my technical interests, my personal history, and artists that influenced my writing and paintings. The module form enables me to concentrate my thoughts about how I approach personal studio methods and constrain personal limitations that direct my writing into poetry. The methods employed in the writing also correlate with my paintings. Many of the modules address methods I use in constructing my paintings; arrays of gestural marks of language and sometimes specific words. I choose to arrange these letterforms in gestural fields of color. The writing and paintings that follow are of equal importance for me in my art practice. Mark making, for me, is both indexical remnant and a means of communication. Whether legible or not, my marks always propose that they can be read and the act of reading is inseparable from the visual surveying of my art.

Thesis unfolding. My meditation as to what is considered to be art. Life memoirs inked on this paper. An understanding of who I am. A concept of what a finished document could be, not what it's assumed to be. Fragmented language mimics every painting I have ever made, every paper I have written and every speech I ever spoke. Actions over time create a provisional product, always unfinished. I sit and complete this document only to realize that I am not complete, work not finished, nothing ever full. Continuation of life and art is to go on, evolve; interest exists.

100 words, no more, no less. Total care for control, allowing for anything to be written. Thoughts come and go; modules will not suffice the amount of information. Meaning will be lost, this is a given. Significance spilled the moment I'm at the screen, no Hollywood script created. Stream of consciousness is my method; yet these words are made with discipline. Blocks of information are each more valuable than at first writing. Spliced grammar accumulates. Sentences with only one word or two remain crucial elements in completion of my thought. Some take no time; others the blinking cursor flashes forever.

The old adage about writing: it's never done, it's just due. As for painting, the task is never done, neither the oddling nor the body of work. The oddling and the body are never-ending conditions synonymous with one another. There is an idea that painting has an endpoint, a finished stage, ready to hang. This is the byproduct of being due, rushed to completion, no matter how well thought through. But as I write this, I am only painting the pages with ink. I discover that the task of writing will never be done, my words will only be due.

Monochrome and text is viewed by many as me confining myself. I feel the opposite. I will make a claim that my freedom is to have chosen these limits and find, in making art, all kinds of freedom of choice, of mark, medium and outcome. Many artists will not agree; I enjoy the fact that this makes them uncomfortable. Art needs to come from a place deep within, a place where we can wake up, feel free, and create whatever we wish. But I will say that artists who limit to a construct can't grow and the work slowly vanishes.

It took Paul Goodman five years to write his book, me three years to write a thesis. Paul Goodman's writing influenced the way I transfer my thoughts from brain to paper. Fragmented sentences, total run-ons, comma splices, one word sentences. This document is made from decree; I call it semi-literate; others might dismiss the voice of the ink; trust me nothing is easy. I like my writing. Total care is exhausted in every word, each one is a place holder, non-reversible. There is no plagiarizing Paul, he writes his truths. I write my truths; I only know my three years.

In life we try to surround ourselves with the people that we need. Ones that guide us, help us, care for us, give us all they have. These people make us, but we need to find them, they just do not come to us. If you want to achieve greatness you need to stand on the shoulders of others first, for help to reach a view you can finally see. This task is not an easy one, the hardest part is climbing onto their shoulders. Once you have lifted yourself up, your mind opens and you never pull back again.

Language has been evident in my work for years; I'm interested in how written forms of language effect people. Language for me is about communication, but depending on the written form, the same language can contain different concepts. I find it vital to keep my hand visible; this allows me to give specific meaning to my visual rhetoric. In the form is where meaning exists. The agency of my work is by manipulating letterforms and mark making processes. I can never abandon the use of visual language in my work; such rhetoric is the best way to express my thoughts.

I feel we are devaluing what painting is in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Some critics see painting peaking in the 1950's. What is made today is treated with some level of disregard for craft, meaning that the seriousness, validity and quality has fallen; this is really untrue. As a painter this claim is personal; painting is very relevant, not just because I'm a painter but more so because painting is still what first comes to mind when we use the term "art." Painting will never die, a long line of people waiting with fervor, brush in hand, marking space, marking time.

The question of what 21<sup>st</sup> century painting is has not been answered. Different forms and styles are acceptable today, none of which are leaving a lasting scar about who we are as painters. We make reference to Abstract Expressionism. We bleed its ghost. Our phantasmal creations have been seen before; one can never escape referencing the past. Our reason for creating is to leave a lasting scar, but how? Only in time will the definition of painting in this decade be resolved. In hopes of success we will transform, become shadows, and realize how we reconfigured the vista in time.

Ghostly language is visible when searched for in the white of night. Lines, circles, scars, and gestures in paint form an image of unreadable language. English is made up of such lines and circles as these to create every word we use. Some lines are more correct than others, but this does not matter. What does hold interest is the artistic intent to form language with no meaning. Why search for what this painting is trying to say when it says nothing. It bears its letters and can be viewed as a conversation, but its meaning is visual, not linguistic.



Speech is like a concert, played for many to hear only that one time. Writing is like a cassette, recorded to be heard and repeated forever. Writing hands over information which stays intact. Speech makes for that transfer to be fragmentary, not understood, context lost. Both speech and writing are accommodated in my paintings. The visual language of writing, the meaning it contains; the speech I spoke in process, the words you say when you stop viewing the work. The concert, the cassette, bundled in one object sitting on the wall. Everything else is decided by you, concert or cassette.

A dog named Checkers. I would never have thought a speech with a dog's name for a title, by a man whom I never cared about, would be a story that feed my writing. President Richard Nixon, the ultimate common man for some and a crook for others. Either way his speech, one that I wrote about, opened my eyes to the ways of communication. Nixon's troping showed me a way to use pathos in a manner that could impress others. Now that I am coming from out behind the 8-ball, doesn't mean that damage control is not necessary in.

Unconventional, a word that is wide open for interpretation. De Kooning was labeled unconventional for his use of materials; exploration is how I would label it. What I find interesting is how de Kooning and I share the mixing of mediums in our work. De Kooning got this label since most of his peers used more conventional methods. De Kooning was like a surveyor. Every line was a marker of the distance he was closing. I continue to push my limits and see where the next stroke will lead me, nothing set in stone, only dried in paint. Cracking forever.

I claim mark making of any kind is a form of communication, medium not important, the dialogue produced holds the power and intentions of personal agency. These communicating marks have a relationship to abstraction and nonrepresentational works of art. These marks once were referenced as having one of two meanings. The marks are linked to a historical reference or otherwise related to a psychological meaning. In contemporary painting these constructs no longer exist as absolutes. Mark making is about dialogue, communication.

Through painting my dialogue will emerge and communication begins, with the atemporal link between the viewer and the painting.

Two questions Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe asks of critics and artists are; what is it about? The other can be framed as, if the work is reductive what does it reduce? Gilbert-Rolfe states that these are both questions about meaning and how images are produced. The “about” is a difficult construct. I make nonrepresentational work; it does not follow after things in the world. It allows for a closing of distance between the viewer and the work. I am reducing the reading value of language in order to explore other forms of potential meaning and thereby assign to it a different value.

Nonrepresentational painting is not devoid of meaning, there is always something being said. This style of work asks two main questions. What is it about? And to frame a question about reduction, if it is reductive what does it reduce? These questions address meaning and how meaning is produced in nonrepresentational painting. Language is the perfect way to deal with these claims. Visual language and mark-making are the oldest form of communication, in humans and animals. Icon, symbol, and index; all marks contain meaning. We just need to figure out what they are about and what do they they reduce.

Neither concept nor idea is distinct. The beginning structure is created; this process is expressed through arduous mark making and cannot work until the marks become alphabetical enough to be “read” by the viewer. Without letter shape, they are formless until reference allows them to be revealed. The role is not to assign phonetic meaning but rather let the letter forms start a dialogue among themselves and with other paintings in proximity. The works cannot have meaning by themselves, they are not exclusive. They need an audience to establish value. To be read audience and paintings must be in agreement.

My formative years were spent in Las Vegas. I grew with this place while it changed from a town to a metropolitan city. I don't remember much of the growth, maybe I do, just not with perfect memory. I recollect the glitz and glam of adult Disneyland; all was constructed of lights and text, almost my nirvana. Was it the pink neon that seduced me? Or the letterforms? Strip clubs and multi-million dollar structures radiate this beautiful essence. The letterforms that make up my city and overshadow the rest of the daily life on the street. Textual metamorphosis has begun.

I attended an AAA baseball game recently. One difference between these players and the majors; discipline. Little mistakes lead to serious errors that cause teams to lose. These minor mistakes stem from lack of discipline. This insight made me think about my personal artmaking discipline and how a few errors in practice or application can result in failure. Overconfidence is a trait I share with those AAA players; this is a huge downfall; attention to detail gets the job done every time. Discipline separates the real from the fake; it's not hard to understand why, it's just hard to execute.

Josh Smith. Josh Smith. Josh Smith. Josh Smith. And I could go on. I, Eric Burwell, refuse to sign on the front of any work I make. His almost shameless autographs painted as the subject questions the credibility of the artist. Josh and I both attack the canvas, almost as a sport. His text allows for people to see his own hand, the autographic gesture. I am interested in the originality of my mark making, but with no names to be know. I want the viewer to see my words and gestures for themselves, not bit parts on a marquee.

Some have compared my early pieces to Jean-Michel Basquiat, it feels good to be in his company. There is a visual connection, a level of aggression, not much more. Our aggressions don't compare. Political power structures fueled his attacks on the canvas. This is not interesting to me, digging out who/what I am in my work is of great consequence to me. It's easy to look out the window and make art, next time look inward and find something that connects you to You. Even while I started with with Mr. B, I will end up being Mr. B, Burwell.

A week after the AAA game, I visited L.A. to see the Dodgers play. The concept of discipline is still my focus; I noticed such a difference, as expected. All players, no matter the skill level never seemed to show overconfidence. The only celebration was on a home run and the completion of the game. Showing me that in professionalism lies humility. A big catch, doubling to right, these actions warrant a celebration for amateurs only. Pros don't celebrate what is expected of them, why do the same in the arts. Be humble, grind on, it is the best policy.

MoMA one Friday. Entry was free. Inspiration came on the 7<sup>th</sup> floor. That day would change me for the rest of my life. “The Forever Now” show was in full effect; paintings everywhere. The talk of Zombie Formalism, the new casualists were the buzz. Titles and definitions for the artists. The names were new to me, but in the shadow of other names that have been around forever, I didn’t care, I was being moved. I returned to the studio with these painters burned into my brain. Now and forever that show will stand as a springboard into my future.

Reduction is always an additive process in my paintings. I reduce the the text to almost nothing in my mind. Then using the elements of art I reconstruct the image over time with surface build-up. I do not intend to dislocate the meaning from the original, but meaning will be lost in any translation, especially in the written form on the canvas. But all the while it divides the original meaning of language. The final products are good example of a contemporary change in how we see and view language. But just as import how we hear language as well.

Richard Serra: “To clear away the clutter of what you have inherited from the tradition that you are working in, even though you know that you are just going to be another rock on the wall.” Marks on surfaces becomes rocks, although the tools we use may vary. I agree that drawings are just rocks on the wall, procedure is what sets us apart. Mark-makers are concerned in the why of drawing, not always with what the drawing says. Every made mark will become a rock, yet my rock contains different intention than others who make a seemingly identical rock.

Icon, symbol and index; concepts I have not thought much about, but in my work I cannot avoid. I view all my work as containing all three. Resemblance, the icon, every letter you think you see or is real. The alphabet is that of the English language, letters almost globally understood, meaning will not be lost or not understood with such letterforms. Cause-and-effect represent my final product. Remnant left behind, the painting is completed for now, an impression made only to fade, being seen as a trace of where I once was and what I once created. I was here.



I struggle with the assumption that each painting I make is better than the prior; at the time I believe this to be true. After time passes it proves to be untrue. This is the only thing that is true. I have no idea why I judge my own work. All this cycle does is take my mind to places it need not go. I do not even think it matters why I do. As a self-critical person this behavior is entrenched inside of me. Just as I am judging this paragraph; it was once good, not so much anymore.

This moment in time is one of remix, mash-up and sample, prominently in painting. Painters are interested in making work from discontinuity instead of being from a single source. Laura Hoptman describes contemporary painters as Dr. Franksteins; as if we have looted tombs for data to solder past constructs with the present moment. These ideas are not the same as the past; we are not re-incarnated artists, rather we see the world with a new vision, but the past still lives inside. Past artist's names get dropped in conversation with the current, for me they will never solve my equation.

I never thought of canvas as a surface that could be viewed or treated any other way than a starting point. After viewing work by Landon Metz, I see, by dyeing the canvas, one can change the meaning of its surface and function. For me the canvas will always be a surface to add to, not in the way Metz does, rather as a starting point to begin building upon. I build up on this surface only to make a final product, and I view any uncovered area as a waste of real estate instead of part of the image.

Two minutes of hard work, then thirty minutes off doing nothing, maybe thinking about the next two minutes. Like de Kooning's painting methods, I find myself doing it in painting, writing and life. The down time allows for thoughts to process, nothing is ever understood before completion. Time for paint to dry, ink to set. I was told this by person I hold in high regard, not the two-minute drill, but rather that time allows for understanding of personal creations. This has stuck with me and I use it as an advantage in my process of life, thanks Jeffery Uslip.

My influences in no particular order: Willem de Kooning, Jean-Michael Basquiat, Jackson Pollock, Sol LeWitt, Clyfford Still, Josef Albers, Cy Twombly, Barnett Newman, Joan Mitchell, Robert Ryman, John Zinsser, Landon Metz, Julian Schnabel, Agnes Martin, David Smith, Ed Ruscha, Franz Kline, Hans Hofmann, Mark Rothko, Helen Frankenthaler, Sturtevant, Mark Dutcher, Josh Smith, Oscar Murillo, Christopher Wool, Matt Connors, Charline von Heyl, Julie Mehretu, Joe Bradley, Mary Weatherford, Brian Henry, Morris Louis, Richard Diebenkorn, John Chamberlain, Jonathan Meese, John Baldessari, James Rosenquist, Jenny Holzer, Louise Bourgeois, Marilyn Minter, Haim Steinbach, Francisco Jose de Goya y Lucientes, Chris Burden and Richard Prince.

Robert Ryman's white is not my white, never has been, never will be. His agency is not my agency. The relationship between light and matter; me, the concept of how language is read and the conversation that the scars on the surface spawn.

Ryman nonrepresentational painter; Eric Burwell contemporary abstractionist. We are not similar because we share the use of white or because we limit use of color in our paintings. Ryman points out that he is not limited since he has no narrative to get across. We both are not limited. The only limitations are those that we impose.

Failure, a concept that influences my current series of paintings, is based on how I consider the current state of art. I don't view my paintings as failures, nor myself as a failure either; rather I explore in my painting what constitutes an artistic failure. What matters most in a painting? What makes a painting a failure? These questions are present in my "failure conscience." Failure defines everything, yet I cannot define failure, but I can succeed at forcing myself to invent my own concepts of failure. None of these ideas are rational; but then I never look for success.

Imagine my paintings as each side of an enormous wooden block, the adult rendition of the little wood blocks of letters and pictures we played with as children. We learn that letters form words and for me they also create a visual product. To create this product, you need to have the mind of a child, not polluted with an adult agenda. My paintings, like those blocks, are a device for reading and communicating. Just as the child cannot yet read the blocks, I create paintings that offer viewers the same visual pleasure. My paintings point toward words in conversation.

“The rectangle” has always been associated with painting, I prefer the square. Every professional painting I have conjured, is on my square. The harmonious balance of this shape is pure fluidity. Text on the square is not of normality in writing, this is not important. The middle of the square is 90 degrees, that is what I like. It reminds me of my childhood. All the blocks we once manipulated, most of the books containing letters all made into squares. Leading me to believe that to be a true success in the creative field, one can never abandon one’s childhood.

WWW.com is a place that does not exist. Many will argue with me, but it’s where people go in order not to be real, an alternate reality for many. What is real is the readable language that lives in an intangible place; then these words become tangible language. I’m interested in the space between the reality of current speech and the digital pixels that construct ideas. Creating language on an electronic device; beginning in the world of language that moves into speech as we read it, finally ends as language again. All residue left behind, indexical, was it ever real?

I was not interested in the honesty, nor the learning of why language was important, the value embedded in self interest. It liberated the way in which I existed. Finally, I found a purpose, one to Issue into the world. Purpose produced product, this product held weight, the rest, mere details. The painting of words, the writing of fragments, speaking with no purpose, writing with purpose and yet achieving nothing. Brain pumped with chaos from the city, trying to understand these actions, a losing battle. Questioning this is pointless. Las Vegas, my sad home, you will always be with me.

Mary Weatherford and I share a love of neon. She fell in love with the neon signs of Bakersfield, CA. I found my love for the glow of neon in Las Vegas, NV. Weatherford uses flashe paint, the medium of sign painting and stage sets, as backdrop for bright lines of neon mounted to the canvas. Weatherford's neon tubes break the plain surface of Bakersfield, adding light to that drab place. I don't use neon, but my oil paint has a sheen that comes out of the constant glow of Vegas. My overboard aggressive marks are neon in the mind.

Third grade calligraphy was introduced as an option to basic writing during school, I was rejected from this tight knit group because I had poor penmanship. I have never forgot not being allowed to study with the group. It made me study language and writing as methods to express my meanings. I realized that the English language is made up circles and lines from which we create a letter, word or write a novel. Exploration of what I love, language, is also doing it for the club that never accepted me. Now my life's work is about text and language.

Documenting the process of the practice. My method is to take cell phone photos, being a painter it is the action that suffices. I shoot roughly an image every time I stop painting, weather I work for two minutes or two hours. The archive that I build becomes a peat bog. Why take Images that look no different? But as the archive grows, the images become a record of the past. The importance of dialogue, revealed from subsequent images speaking, each having a voice. These images contain value for my future work, a value was not visible at the time.

Abstraction starts with source material, then broken down to contain parts or all of the original in fragmented form on the surface. Nonrepresentational work begins with a concept. This idea gets broken down in the same way abstraction does, the key difference being that the visual conclusion does not share any of the original visual imagery. My work contains language and text, visually the finished product has no resemblance to any starting point. The work appears to look like something we can read, no message is palpable. These differences are key in understanding the work, many will, many will not.

Each mark contains value, a grouping of marks hold value, the group is just treated as a thought or phrase. The single mark or nonrepresentational mark is incomplete. While I paint, I talk to myself, saying things unknown, not related to the painting directly. These words are arbitrary, they aid the mark making. These marks I find as indexical, the remains of where I once was. Where my voice once spoke. I'm grounding something from which I'm not speaking about. If I use the same word or phrase twice, I will never know and it will never look the same.



Abstraction of language and language of abstraction are approaches I use in creating paintings and my creative process. Each promises a different visual ending, when I use either method it seems to result in a similar product. Both techniques have been present in my work for years, although I never paid much attention to them as strategies. The use of language is necessary to express my thoughts, while gestures of mark-making inform the language and thoughts that I want to convey. One is not weaker than the other, both are distinct as visual communication and crucial to the final product.

Uncovering visual depth is my efficacy; I don't know where or when the depth begins in monochromatic painting, this is the challenge. The use of only one hue is not effortless; this I have learned in addressing a monochrome painting. Deciding to limit materials in the arena and complete a painting as an action in style is what drives me to paint in monochrome. Combining action and abstraction is an affect in my monochromes, resulting in painted fields of color. This is the drive, the confusion that makes me paint. Questions are better answered in the arena by following rules.

I call them the “stainers,” Helen Frankenthaler and Landon Metz just to name two. It is passive, no commitments need to be made, always room for edits. Metz is very careful, repetition dominating. The disconnect from hand to surface. The work requires a different perspective; the floor being the origin. Painters make work on a wall; its made where it lives. These stained surfaces crawl back to the wall. Surface flat, texture absent, banality setting in. No expression visible, no aggression. The “stainers,” are they a truly painters or is their process so different that it deserves its own description?

Mark Dutcher, a friend of mine, is also a painter like me. We share the use of text and gesture in our work. “Contextual abstractionists” is a label we pin to our paintings. Dutcher’s palette of cool hues, impressionist application, uses scattered words in repetition like a haystack from a Monet. My early work is closer to Dutcher’s than my new group of paintings. Too much aggression radiates from me. With Dutcher, the application of paint is softer. His process looks slower, perpetually incomplete. His work approaches patterning; mine attempts to create something more open, where writing and gesture unite.

Prussian blue shimmering on the surface imitating a hue of black. Other black pigments reading as flat or glossy. Not containing the shimmer of Prussian.

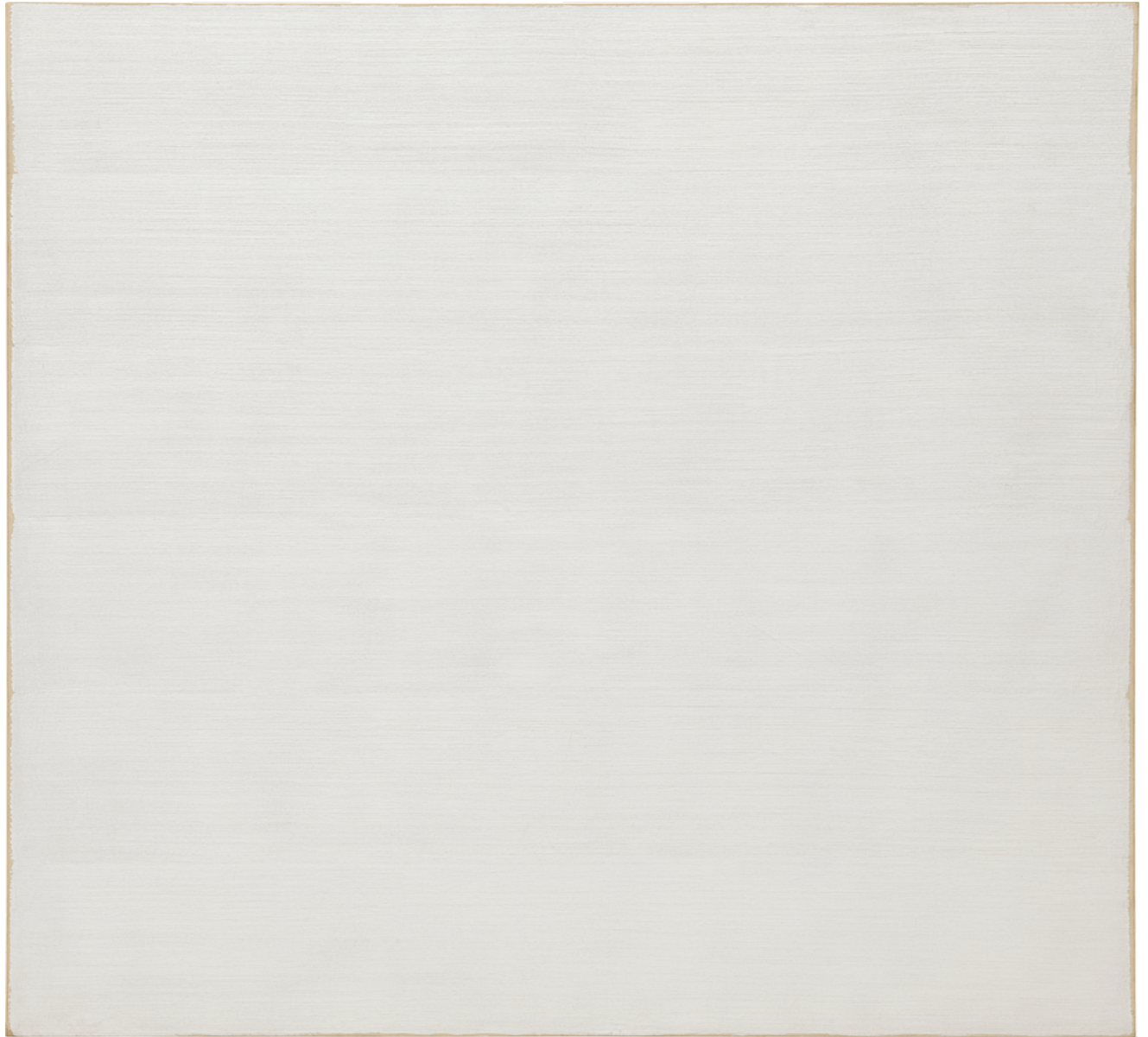
Darkness seems to be absent in the work, only the reflection of yourself can see.

The distortions and fragmentation allows for the marks to read as form. In this painting getting to the language happens last, like the absence we would find in black monochrome. It's as if the looking glass has something to tell you, nothing will be found, my intention. Words are being spoke, one-on-one, or to any other object Prussian Blue encounters.

Yellow is my least favorite hue, yet I use it in almost every painting in the FAILURE series. I do not view yellow as a failure color, just one that I don't like. Maybe I just find it to be successful on paintings. Naples yellow is a substance like cake frosting. Dry with no flow, the final product containing bubbles. High gloss yellow, another variant that is present. Many other yellows hues littered all over in my work. Yellow dominating, first hue painted on the canvas, in the end still visible. I don't like yellow, but clearly I need it.

I have little interest in how most pigments change over time. But flake white hue, the change from white to a yellowish tone, amazes me. It is intense dry pigment, goes on hard and is not malleable. On my first white painting I saved this color for last, the top of the food chain, then it yellowed. I felt that I failed, that the painting failed, because I had not allowed for things to happen on the surface. But this was something that I couldn't control. I embrace the power of the pigment, and its interactions, love me some science.

My time comes to an end, paint was spilt, items configured to create simulacra. My paintings more understood than my simulations; real failures. Text as image, text as nothingness, always invested in every work I make. Progress has its peaks and valleys, nevertheless it was immense. My work poetic in form, also visual product. Discipline was handed to me, still I needed to apply it. Maiming the surface to create works to last the test of time. Total control of everything but the process of painting, nothing done without reason. I have lived this life, surviving everything, yet not happy.



Robert Ryman, *Allied*, 1966, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York Panza Collection, 1991



Mark Dutcher, *Time Machine (Still)*, 2013-2015, courtesy of the artist and Jason Vass





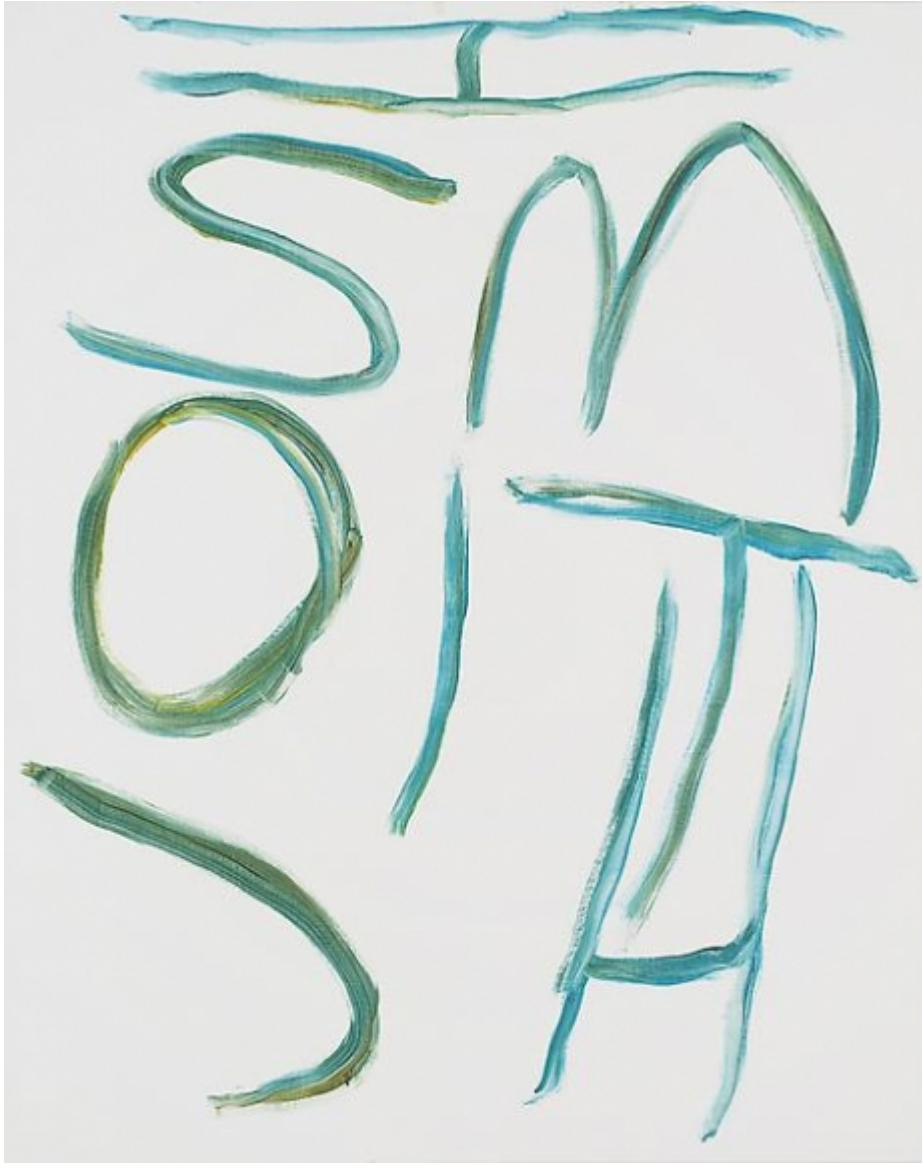
Jean Michael-Basquiat, *In Italian*, 1983. Acrylic, oil paintstick, and marker on canvas mounted on wood supports, two panels. The Stephanie and Peter Brant Foundation, Greenwich, Connecticut



Landon Metz, *Untitled*, 2014 Michael Jackson Penthouse, Retrospective, Hudson, New York

2014





Josh Smith, *Untitled*, 2007  
Oil on canvas



Josh Smith, *Untitled*, 2003  
Oil on canvas

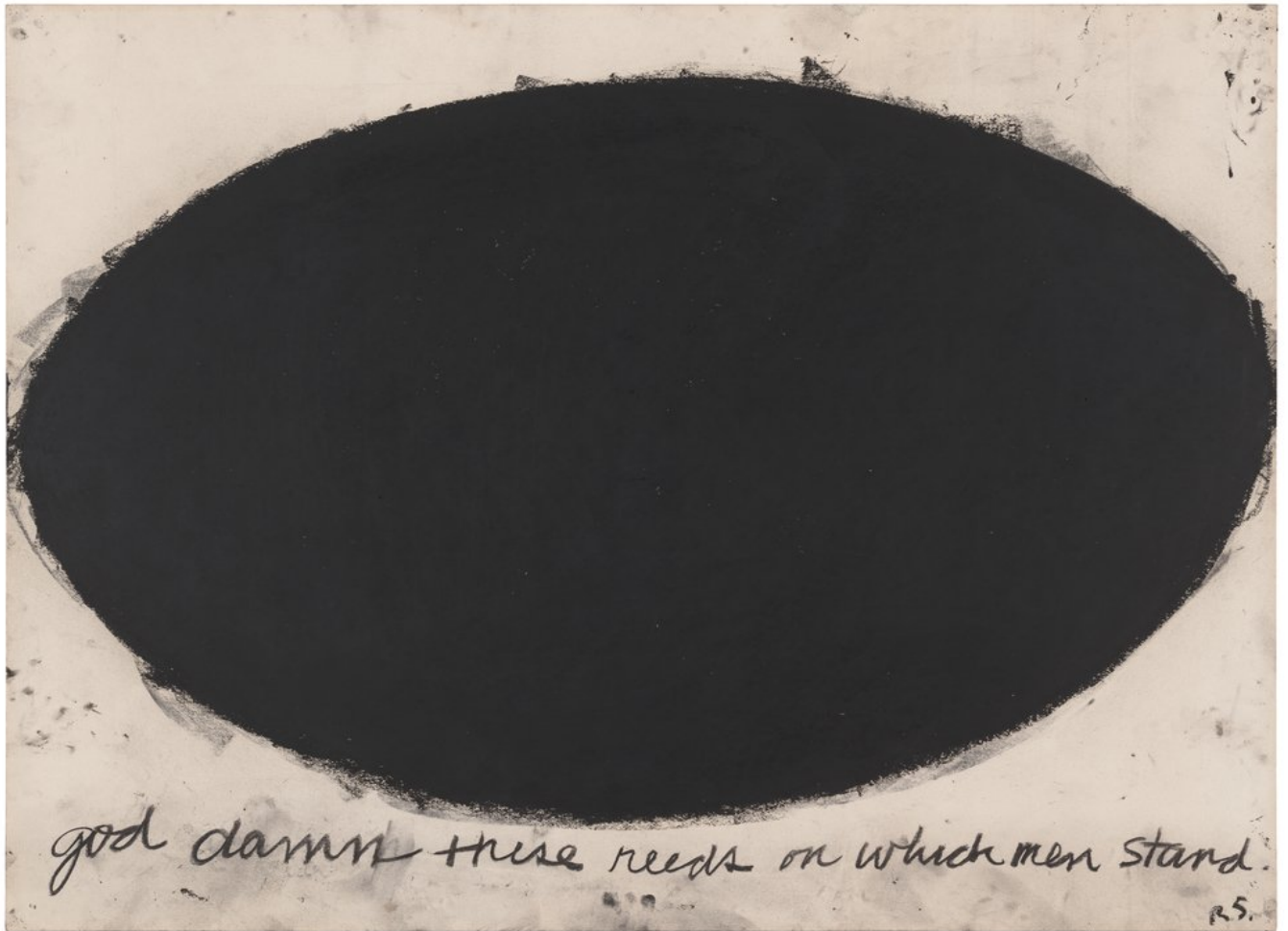


Josh Smith, *California Painting #5*, 2003  
Oil and acrylic on canvas





Josh Smith, *Untitled*, 2001  
Oil on canvas



Richard Serra, *God Damn These Reeds on Which Men Stand*, 1973  
Collection SFMOMA  
Purchase, by exchange, through the bequest of Elise S. Haas



Willem de Kooning, *Black Untitled*, 1948, Oil and enamel on paper, mounted on wood  
From the Collection of Thomas B. Hess, Gift of the heirs of Thomas B. Hess, 1984  
© 2016 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York





Helen Frankenthaler, *Mauve District*, 1966

Synthetic polymer paint on canvas

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Julian Schnabel, *Untitled (Milton Puffy Clouds Strong Cocktails)*, oil, gesso on tarpaulin, 108 x 156", 2005





Eric Burwell, oil and acrylic on canvas, 2016 52x52in





Eric Burwell, oil and acrylic on canvas, 2015, 52x52in.

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