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### Visualizing Philosophy and Depicting the Inner World

Becky Moon

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# **Visualizing Philosophy and Depicting the Inner World**

Becky Moon

May 3, 2024

Thesis Statement for BFA in Studio Art

Washington University in St. Louis, Sam Fox School of Design and Visual Arts

**Abstract:** I examine my process and significance of visualizing arguments and examples in the philosophy of perception, especially the works of Susanna Siegel through the language of painting. By creating highly detailed figures and narratives, I give tangible form to the invisible inner world. I explore themes of perception, mind, belief, inner/outer world, and text/art. I reference artwork by Adrian Piper, Hito Steryl, Danica Lundy, and David Altjmed.

## **Introduction**

If you rewind the process of an artist making art you would be left with a strange footage where the paint gets absorbed back into the paintbrush and the canvas turns from full to empty. Then the starting point of the artwork would reveal itself. Inspiration, content, concept, intuition, and idea are some words given to the immaterial beginning of an artwork. Some come from within like a mellow whisper from a long-forgotten personal memory. Others come from outside, like a line of text representing a phenomenon that has long been waiting to be reverted to its original nonverbal form.

My inspiration mainly comes from texts in academic philosophy. I have been visualizing philosophy and depicting the inner world through the language of painting. I am going to talk about the 8 paintings I made and their conceptual starting points. I will also discuss how my method of visualizing philosophy has evolved from a singular text source to a combination of various ideologies.

## **Visualizing Philosophy**

Just like how American philosopher William James called the world “a blooming, buzzing confusion”, the world is an ever-changing interaction sometimes chaotic and incomprehensible. In a fast-paced modern age, it is hard to have a moment of pause and think before acting upon something. And behind every action rational or irrational is a reason conscious or unconscious. As a high school student activist in South Korea writing a human rights petition signed by 60,000 people, I began to obsessively think about why things are the way they are and what forces people to harm others, or reversely do good for others. Then I had a conversation with my

philosopher father and realized something that forever changed the way I think. It is that hard powers like laws are not the only way to change the world. Rather, soft powers like art, philosophy, and literature are the true forces that shape the ways we see and act.

Looking at the history of human thought through philosophical texts dating back from Ancient Greece to now helped me gain a better understanding of myself and the world. Some questions like *What temperature does water boil?* can be answered through science, but some questions like *Who am I? Who are you? Why am I here? What is a being? Does god exist?* need a different approach, and philosophy can be a good wayfinder toward the answer.

Philosophers are similar to little children as they never stop asking why. Philosophy as a discipline began when humans gained the ability to think deeply beyond what was happening immediately. Despite the rich history and the benefits, the impression of philosophy in the contemporary world comes as monotonous. Many people still picture an old white man with a long beard slumped on an armchair when they hear the word *philosopher*. Philosophy book covers are the duller of all books in the library stacks. But philosophy is so much more than that.

Literature on the other hand has been an artist's good companion throughout history. Every nook and cranny of literature has been visualized. Natalie Frank's painting series inspired by the French erotica *The Story of O* was the first instance that made me realize that there could be a direct text reference behind a work of art without making it fall into the realm of book illustration. Anselm Kiefer also had a show displaying multiple room-sized paintings and sculptures in 2023 responding to James Joyce's novel *Finnegans Wake* at White Cube London.

Instances like these are important because they give tangible, colorful, and exciting forms to literature, highlighting literature's ability to become an aesthetic experience that can also be a way to look into human consciousness.

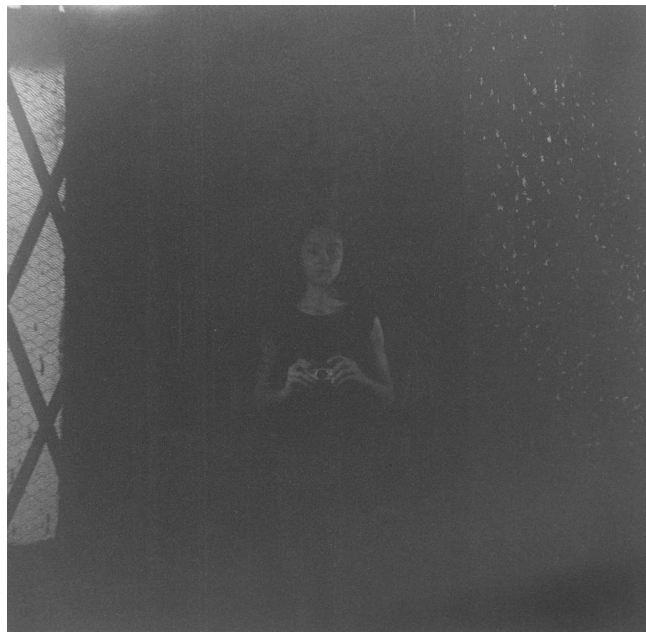


Natalie Frank, *STORY OF O VIII*, 2017-8, gouache and chalk pastel on Arches paper, 22x23 inches



Anselm Kiefer, *Finnegans Wake*, 2023, installation

Thankfully several modern artists have been creating art driven by philosophy. Adrian Piper, a prominent Kantian scholar and multidisciplinary artist pioneered in philosophy-art collaboration. In 1971 Piper performed *Food for the Spirit* where she isolated herself in a loft in New York and spent days reading Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781). From the performance, she created a series of fourteen black-and-white self-portraits that were shot with a Brownie camera. Piper said, "I rigged up a camera and tape recorder next to [a] mirror, so that every time the fear of losing myself overtook me and drove me to the 'reality check' of the mirror, I was able to both record my physical appearance objectively and also record myself on tape repeating the passage in *Critique* that was currently driving me to self-transcendence."



Adrian Piper, *Food for the Spirit*, 1971, selenium toned silver print, 18x20 inches,

Although not directly drawing from the contemporary philosophy of perception, Hito Steryl's video works contain a philosophical narrative that hits on various topics debated frequently in the

contemporary philosophy of perception. For example, *How Not to Be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File* (2013) is a 14-minute video where Steryl in a black Judo uniform gives a tutorial to the audience on how to be invisible.



Hito Steryl, *How Not to Be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File*, 2013, video, 14 minutes

Steryl's video can be used to explain the concept of cognitive penetrability in a vivid visual way that is different from reading a philosophy paper. Invisibility here is not just about hiding oneself behind a green screen. Steryl's list of methods to become invisible includes "being caught by a filter", "being a Wi-Fi signal moving through human bodies", and shockingly "being female and over fifty." The piece therefore explores what it means to not perceive something in a broader context than just vision, in a sociopolitical setting. The notion of cognitive penetration in contemporary philosophy directly aligns with the content of the video. Cognitive penetration, as argued by Dustin Stokes in *Cognitive Penetrability of Perception* is in simple words a phenomenon where belief interferes with our perception and modifies what we are actually

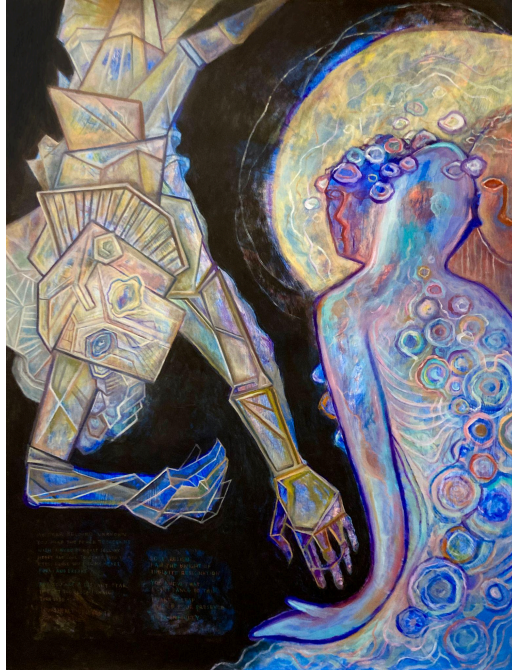


meant to see. When a misogynistic agent considers someone unimportant when they are “being female and over fifty”, cognitive penetration might occur and make the female invisible.

So upon entering college, I started to make paintings directly inspired by a philosophical text.

Art being a nonverbal language makes it a perception and a sensation. Philosophy begins from an original perception or sensation the philosopher observes and then puts into words. Turning philosophy into art reverts it to its original nonverbal form. The essence of the text – be it a book, a page, or a paragraph – is extracted when it is condensed into a singular image.

The first philosophy-driven painting I made was titled *Knight of Infinite Resignation*, inspired by Danish Existentialist Philosopher Soren Kierkegaard’s book *Fear and Trembling*. To explain the concept of eternity, he uses the story of a knight who is in love with a princess who cannot be with him, forcing him to resign his love eternally. To the knight, Kierkegaard says there is no need to despair. The neverness in the situation takes him to the realm of infinity, transforming him into the Knight of Infinite Resignation. And when he starts to believe that in another world, in another life, through the power of the divine, their love will come true, he transforms into the Knight of Faith. The concept can be also applied to yearning for a variety of virtues besides romantic love like peace, goodness, and justice when it is realistically unobtainable.



Becky Moon, *Knight of Infinite Resignation*, 2020, 30x40 inches, oil, acrylics, and colored pencil on paper

In sophomore year I had my first collaboration with a living philosopher. Heisook Kim is a contemporary South Korean philosopher specializing in epistemology and feminist philosophy. In her book *The New Theory of Yin and Yang: The Deconstruction and Rebuilding of East Asian Cultural Logic* (신 음양론: 동아시아 문화논리의 해체와 재건), she talks about the importance of reinterpreting philosophical texts from the past from a modern feminist perspective. So I created a scene where women from different time periods and regions are discoursing and philosophizing together at a fictional venue called Site N.



Becky Moon, *Site N*, 2021, oil and acrylics on paper, 52x36 inches

Then I began to think about the complexity across various disciplines in philosophy and how one argument sparks a hundred agreements and disagreements, making philosophy a giant web rather than a single line. And therefore instead of looking into one book or one philosopher, I began to create even more complex compositions, drawing sources from various texts both historical and contemporary.



Becky Moon, *Hello*, 2023, acrylics on canvas, 12x16 inches



Becky Moon, *Unjustified Beliefs*, 2023, acrylics on canvas, 18x24 inches

*Hello* and *Unjustified Beliefs* are the result of such attempts. The mind and the elements in it were a mesmerizing topic and I wanted to show how fearful and chaotic unjustified beliefs would look when given flesh, feathers, veins, and eyeballs.

### **Depicting the inner world**

I wanted to dive further into looking at the structure and form of the mind. When you imagine a tomato, an image of a tomato appears in your mind. Where does the tomato exist? There is no tomato nor a printed image of it inside your brain even if you open it up, dissect it, and search every crease and corner. But that doesn't mean the image of the tomato in your mind isn't real. In our minds, there's more than one tomato going on. A multitude of thoughts and memories run around the complex system of cognition.

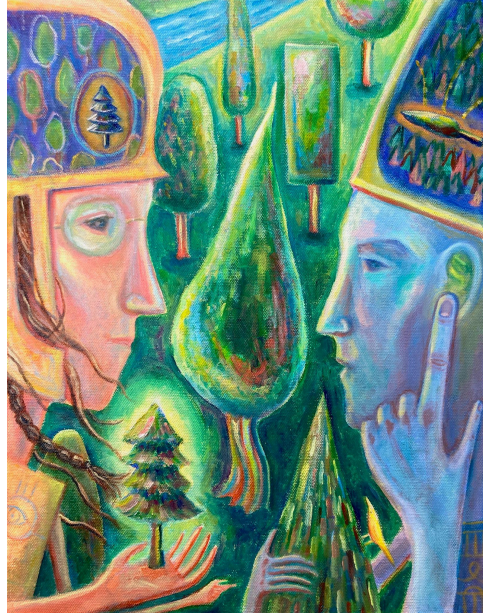
The philosophy of perception is a branch of philosophy that deals with the interaction of the mind and the external world through the senses. When we say that we see something, what do we really mean? Are we indicating the fundamental structure of the visual world like lines, shapes, and colors, or do we see beyond that? Can we always trust our perception?

American contemporary philosopher Susanna Siegel's works on perception, mind, belief, and knowledge especially spoke to me and provided ample visual synesthesia as I read through her vivid examples and arguments. In her two books *The Contents of Visual Experience* (2010) and *The Rationality of Perception* (2016) and other writings such as *Rich or Thin?* (2016) and *Affordances and the Contents of Perception* (2014), she introduces the idea that we see more than simple lines and colors. Rather, perception comes as a whole and we see properties of things such as the property of being a certain shape, being someone, and even being moral or beautiful.

In *Which Properties Are Represented in Perception?* (2006) Siegel asks, what if you have never seen a pine tree before, and learn how to distinguish pine trees from other trees since you are hired to cut down all the pine trees in a grove containing many different types of trees? After time passes, your ability to distinguish the pine trees from the others will improve. Eventually, you can immediately say "That's a pine tree!" when you see one.

This suggests that once we learn how to distinguish one type of tree from the other, the phenomenological experience of seeing trees changes due to the new knowledge gained. Her views struck me because they show that a two-way interaction between what we learn and what

we see is real, confirming that we have a very complex inner life that shapes the way we see the outer world.



*Becky Moon, Susanna and George, 2022, oil on canvas, 12x16 inches*

So I painted *Susanna and George* where Siegel points to a pine tree while George Berkeley, another philosopher of perception in the 17th century is questioning, “If a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?”

Then I painted *Franco*, a character in *The Contents of Visual Experience*. Siegel uses Franco to explain how we perceive properties. Imagine you see Franco on a boat steering your waterski or Franco curled up on a couch reading a book. Although the events are in different settings, something is constant, which is the property of seeing Franco in your visual perception.



*Becky Moon, Seeing Franco I, 2022, acrylics on canvas, 40.5x60.5 inches*



*Becky Moon, Seeing Franco II, 2022, acrylics on canvas, 25x31 inches*

I enjoyed painting in a succinct visual language where the subject matter is clearly depicted, but at the same time, I yearned to embrace the complexity of the mind. Two contemporary artists who use dense visual language to depict the inner world are Danica Lundy and David Altjmed. Lundy paints complex scenes where the inner structure of objects is as vibrant as the outer structure. The bone is as pronounced as the skin. The inner cords are as assertive as the outer powerline. To the question of why focus on the tactility of surfaces, she notes: “Maybe it’s an argument for a specific kind of experience...”



Danica Lundy, *Baby can you see through the tears*, 2022, oil on canvas, 60 x 48 inches



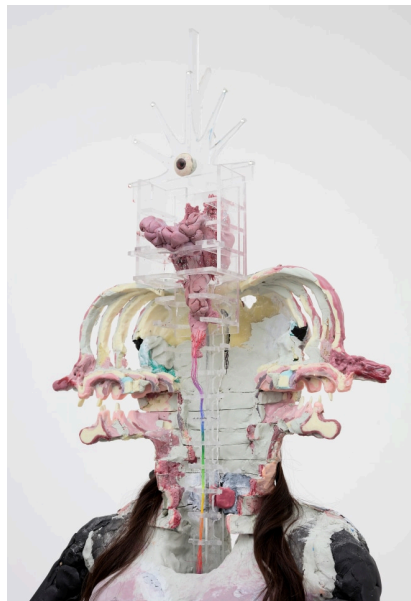


Detail shot

As shown in his sculpture *The Enlightenment of the Witch*, David Altjmed takes a more direct approach to show the inner world by actually dissecting the head of a figure and letting the inside expose itself. However, instead of a brain, there is an amalgamation of unexpected, out-of-ordinary-logic objects filled inside like crystals, clay, and a rainbow rod.



David Altmejd, *The Enlightenment of the Witch*, 2021, expandable foam, epoxy clay, epoxy gel, resin, wood, steel, acrylic paint, quartz, glass eyes, glass rhinestones, glitter, hair, wire, thread, pencil, marker, plastic, screws, and Plexiglas, 56x45x30 inches

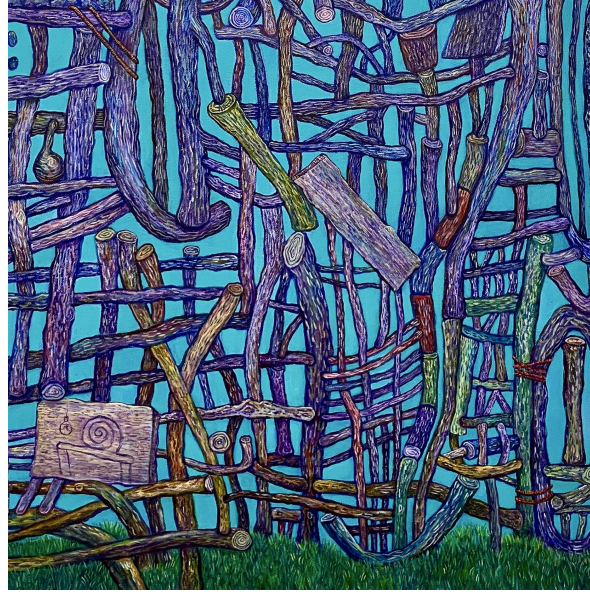


Detail shot

Therefore I have created a series of paintings combining Siegel's philosophy of perception and a highly detailed visual language that depicts a complex internal structure. In *Woodlover's Affordance*, I depict what the mind of an avid woodworker would look like as they perceive the affordances of a singular block of wood.



Becky Moon, *Woodlover's Affordance*, 2023, acrylics on canvas, 24x36 inches



Detail shot

Siegel writes, “J. J. Gibson invented the word “affordance” to denote possibilities of action for a creature that are given by the environment. He proposed that we perceive affordances and that paradigmatic perceptions are byproducts of action plans. These proposals inspired an “action-first” approach to visual perception, which foregrounds the role of the perceiver as an actor”. (Affordances, 1)

While a normal person would see just a block of wood, the woodlover would perceive a broader range of affordances and see all the numerous possible ways the wood can be crafted, bent, modified, broken, and combined. I use colors that are unconventional because the world of the mind has hues of its own. Whereas Lundy and Altjmed leave the depiction of the outer structure, I exclude it to transform the inner mind into an outer, tangible, physical thing. The fuzziness and the little wormlike lines growing on the trees also exude some sort of strange affordance of discomfort and amusement.

## **Endnote**

### *Embracing the complexity of the human mind*

1. According to research, 60,000 thoughts cross our minds every day.
2. Some linger briefly before evaporating, while others remain and stain.
3. Thoughts are sour, spicy, bubbly, soggy, and umami. They also come in all colors of the spectrum.
4. My mind is a hundred-ingredient salad, a thousand-shelved cabinet, and a million-wheeled wheel of fortune.
5. I paint to show the image of the mind that I see intuitively.
6. And this time it came as a fragile yet upstanding construction of odd-colored branches.

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