

# PANTA RHEI<sup>1</sup>

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*In the end, there is only flux, everything gives way.*

Heraclitus<sup>2</sup>

*I tried to find beauty where I had never thought it might be found:  
the most ordinary things, the profound life of still life.*

Marcel Proust<sup>3</sup>

As recently as ten or fifteen years ago, the opening of an MFA thesis show was the domain of artistic academe. It usually did not raise much public attention outside the boundaries of the school of art where it took place. Professors, students, and a few friends and relatives, were the actors and attendants of such events: everyone knew each other. This served as a symbolic moment to bestow on a group of students who had gone through the drill, the ultimate graduate art diploma on behalf of the art school they were about to leave. This was also the loaded moment when art students stopped being students. They were to enter the *real* world. Yet, the *real* world was largely absent at these thesis shows. The diverse layers of this increasingly complex, dynamic and fast transmogrifying 'art world' were not seen at such events.

The acronym MFA (Master of Fine Arts) continues to have the same potent symbolic value as it did then, but carries different implications. Today, things are altogether slightly different. First of all, it is not infrequent for a student to already be immersed in the art world even before s/he obtains her degree. The public attending these thesis shows has also changed in size and nature. One now expects to meet all stripes of the art world there: professors, and students, of course, but also art critics, dealers, collectors, and even, art historians.

The artists, whose works are displayed today, have little more in common than having gone through the rigorous process of being admitted to the MFA program a few years ago. They have been taught by the same group of faculty, of course: but these are, as in every major graduate art program, very different from each other. This is perhaps especially true at Hunter. The diversity of practices and media is a definite emphasis of the program. The artists who are presenting their thesis work here represent every possible medium. They also tend to transform themselves, and their working process so much so that some barely know what they are going to show for their thesis before it happens. For example, Brett Skarbakka whose work (just as the title of one of his pieces) is always "in transition." He explains: "My work is a bit difficult to pin down.... It seems to change and flow like life, sometimes I have no idea what it will look like next." The video piece he calls "In Transition" depicts youngsters who are migrating, leaving a particular place for a dream, and belonging to neither points of origin or destination. His work reminds us of Rineke Dijkstra's *Almerisa* project. Skarbakka's subjects can be seen as bearing an analogous fate to many of the participants of this MFA Thesis show: they are at a transient stage. James Vanderberg quotes Pat Steir: "an end, a conclusion is artificial." Therefore, we should keep going, and Vanderberg tells us: "For me the act of looking can never be finite, but rather exists as a continuous dialogue of ideas and experience." Vanderberg's practice as a painter catalyzes this non-ending flow of reflection. In different terms, Teru Matsuyama's experiment with abstract painting, echoes Vanderberg's and Skarbakka's concerns. Matsuyama sees painting as the source of a meditative experience that turns the initial 'linear time progression' that produces the

painting, into a timeless experience. Painting, for him, embodies “a condensed impression of the entire life time of the artist.”

Analogously, Jeemin Kim works with the concept of the ‘void’ in Confucian philosophy: her paintings visually resonate with abstract work by Robert Motherwell, Sam Francis, or Franz Kline. Kim refuses, however, to let her work be pigeonholed as deriving from the grand tradition of post-war abstraction. She articulates these impressively—sometimes aggressive, sometimes soft and serene—gestural abstractions through her understanding of Chinese philosophy. Therefore, her references vary somewhat from the system elaborated by Clement Greenberg. Kim, quietly, has us wonder: could we re-read the story of post-WWII abstraction through Confucius, rather than Greenberg?

On a different note, Roberto Soto articulates changes and flux through his work by accumulating notably diverse techniques. Here is the description of one of his works: “I am currently working on pieces mixing drawing, photo transfers and etching on paper, bread and tortillas.” Soto’s works, too, are constantly in the process of transformation and address the dilemma between determinism and free will.

Aisha Bell brings a potent note to this state of indeterminacy by looking at the cross-cultural relationships that make up the fabric of racial identity. She creates zones of insecurities and “self-prescribed traps” that are part and parcel of her experience as a black female artist. She articulates and interlaces various tokens of rituals, myths, and daily practices into a haunting, uncanny, and at times strangely seductive, visual poem.

In her video piece *Ana-Maria*, Patricia Valencia brings together two stories: that of a young immigrant (she shares this interest with Skarbakka) who was unjustly imprisoned for 23 years, and the last night of Ana Mendieta’s life. We want to ask the artist what these two lives have in common. Her programmatic statement partly answers us: “I cannot seem to get over the fall. I am obsessed with the fall, and I mean all its possible meanings.”

A good number of artists in this group are painters. They too, to various extents and with different means and media, dwell on fluxes, movements, and unresolved tensions within their work. Take Kristine Moran: her work, visually, appears to oscillate between Francis Bacon and Christine Baker. But to reduce her work to a pictorial exercise or experiment would not do it justice: Robert de Niro in *Taxi Driver*, or Ferdinand Céline have more to do with her works. The latter could have anticipated a painting by Moran when he wrote these words: “To hell with reality! I want to die in music, not in reason or in prose. People don’t deserve the restraint we show by not going into delirium in front of them.” There is a good dose of delirium in Moran’s painting: that provides the arena for a violent collision between figuration and abstraction.

Retaining a strong attachment to a pictorial practice anchored in the Hudson River School, Purdy Eaton blends together concept and pigment, pixels and paint into a collage of painting and video. Her painting is based on George Inness’ *The Lackawanna Valley*, 1856 (National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.) whereas her video work (encased and visible within her painting) is more reminiscent of Gordon Matta-Clarke’s more trenchant work. Eaton brings together bucolic nostalgia, and the devastation of our post-capitalist world. Having grown up on a farm that was, as she put it, “guillotined by a highway,” she plunges us back into the site painted by Inness as it looks today. The irony (or hypocrisy) of this whole situation is that this beautifully observed painting by Inness was commissioned by the Pennsylvania Railroad Company; the party responsible for violating the environment openly celebrates its natural charm.

Eaton is not alone in pushing painting’s conceptual edge by referencing the Hudson River School or the European Romantic schools. Michelle Hailey, through layers of found photography and various images of landscape, is interested in the way we compartmentalize nature in order to make sense of it. She shares with Eaton an interest in the Hudson River school, but only insofar as these images can be deconstructed in order to comprehend the exercise of visual perception that they then reveal. Colette Murphy creates an impressively ambitious project—echoing Caspar David Friedrich, Théodore Géricault, or Frederick Church: her painting triptych is based on found archival photographs of major shipwrecks that she dug out of the New York Public Library’s collections. Her work has the uncanny effect of

bringing to the fore of our consciousness these historical catastrophes in which nature broke apart these man-made vessels, as seemingly fragile as eggshells. She also subtly collapses these recreations of historical tragedies on our awareness of our tragic present.

Scott Penkava is not a painter. Yet, through dramatic, combined media installations, he too conjures up apocalyptic thoughts (or nightmares) within his work: “there are many scenarios,” he tells us, “for the end of the world when all the comforts of our culture are stripped away by some travesty, or tragedy.” This inevitable end will, according to Penkava, have a positive outcome: “the rebuilding of civilization out of the means and materials that are available.” In a sense, Penkava’s work at large can be read as a first draft for the destruction, followed by a grand reconstruction effort, of the world.

Oscillating between pigment and concept, dots and bullets, Luke Thorpe sprays small circles with paint through a stencil made by a hole punching machine. He thus elaborates ‘targets’ of such holes/black dots—the visual result of which conjures up both op-art and an orthogonal minimalist structure. Perceptual shifts occur that meld together visual references to religious crosses and hunting targets.

A similar interest in transience and the passage from the real to the imaginary, the rational to the absurd is evident in Susana Gaudêncio’s *Equestrian Project*. The artist asked mayors of three cities (St. Petersburg, London and her native Lisbon) to “lend” her the monumental equestrian bronze statues that are public hallmarks of their cities, for the length of time it would take these horses and riders to reach the closest deserts. The fact that Gaudêncio’s work rhymes eloquently with Bulgarian artist Luchezar Boyadjev’s project *On Vacation* (whereby he photoshopped dozens of monumental equestrian sculptures in European cities, and finally “freed” these bronze animals from their riders) adds to the interest of her project. Humor, absurdity, and a sense of the grotesque all coalesce together into a surreal conceptual project.

Exploring the interstices between irony and seriousness, absurdity and logic, Amanda Riner “gathers, reconfigures, and curates information” in her work. She brings together collages of readymade and handmade images in order to address the ‘ideological systems’ operating within them. She has an interest in 1970s pop culture, and addresses the quirky familiarity that we may experience in family portrait images or television personalities such as *60 Minutes’* social commentator, Andy Rooney.

Jiyoung Park investigates the space between the familiar and the uncanny through the depiction of known and unknown architectural spaces. She creates large scale drawings using acrylic and ink on paper recreating domestic interiors she has never seen. Her bases for these vast drawings are small digital images provided by the inhabitants of these spaces. The result is an odd hybrid that provides a degree of intimate and private information from the digital images, although, this intimacy is partly left or ‘stretched’ when it reaches the large scale of these drawings.

These imaginary loci where the familiar and the uncanny meet are also the evident in Akane Ito’s work. Her video piece consists of stop motion animation shots and moving images shot outside her studio with a special low-tech shooting device. Ito placates the narrative of Maurice Maeterlinck’s *The Blue Bird*, 1908, onto her observations of today’s daily lives. Similarly and somewhat reminiscent of Jeff Koons’ *Banality* series, Nickolas Lascot grafts together a stock of private imagery (drawn from his own personal history) and symbolic elements (drawn from his interest in the collective unconscious). His skillfully sculpted three-dimensional objects such as the work *3<sup>rd</sup> Ward Croc*, do not let the viewers easily forget them. In the end, Lascot tells us, “The viewer is left to resolve the ambiguous dilemmas which the piece poses.”

Also conflating mythology and personal interpretation, Aya Uekawa focuses on Medusa, the mythological queen who, courted by Poseidon, gave herself to him in a temple dedicated to the goddess Athena. Furious, Athena took her revenge and turned her into a monster. Uekawa re-examines the legend of Medusa through 20<sup>th</sup> century feminism, in which she is seen both as a victim of rape and as a heroic symbol of the impossible standards of women in society.

Uekawa produces an imposing and impressive large-scale portrait of Medusa comprised of fifty 18 x 24 inch framed charcoal details. It is interesting to look at this fragmented image through Freud's own words as he described the Medusa complex: "the supreme talisman who provides the image of castration—associated in the child's mind with the discovery of maternal sexuality—and its denial."<sup>4</sup>

The gap between the imagination and the real is an important theme among this spring's MFA graduates. Mollee Luson-Klein tends to adopt the opposite vantage point from Jiyoung Park: she takes spaces that she once inhabited, and recreates them through her imagination, thus creating hybrid, unwelcoming, and slightly haunting spaces. "The structures I am currently making resemble habitats without functional entrances, windows or sometimes both. These domiciles functionality is interrupted by desperation and poverty of content."

Going from the secular to the spiritual, Courtney Tramposh collages different archetypal forms of religious architecture, drawing upon both her first-hand experience and pictorial depictions of cathedrals, mosques, and various sites of worship. In an unusual and provocative gesture, she brings together a combination of architectural elements that are kept very separate in our daily geo-spiritual reality.

In a way, Yeon Jin Kim also travels within architectural and inner psychological spaces. She creates box-like, multi-compartmental spaces out of cardboard or paper. These then function as the locations for her camera whose every nook and cranny her camera explores like a searching eye. This hybrid construction appears fragile, perishable, non-functional, and yet, somewhat organic, and is imbued through the penetrating lens of the artist's camera, with certain intimate, even sexual connotations.

Parallels can be drawn between Kim's intimate video journey and Rachel B. Ostrow's many small intimate and occasionally large scale paintings, that are meant to arouse the viewer's imagination: "They are filled with strange (bodily) forms and the space, or perspective is often skewed."

Finally, Ye Leen Lee creates images that explore the gap between the real and the fictive, what we can trust vs. what we cannot trust. In fact, Lee goes even further by casting doubt on every possible image we perceive. Her brief manifesto reads this way:

Is the world we live in real?  
Is it possible that fake, reflected images are really real and our world is fake?  
Or is it possible that the two worlds coexist?

Possibly unbeknownst to her, Lee appears to revive 17<sup>th</sup> century philosopher René Descartes' very important argument of the evil genius. An evil genius could unwittingly deceive us in whatever we perceive or think. The result of this evil demon's influence is very similar to what Lee imagines: what we see and believe is, in fact, nothing but an illusion. Lee's final conclusion, however, offers a "flicker" of possible hope:

"It might be that only when the ground flickers, the world can be seen."

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<sup>1</sup> One of Heraclitus' most famous statements that translates as "everything is in a state of flux." This could be the shibboleth of the present MFA Thesis show, despite, as I argue, the immense diversity of proposals, and media explored by the present group of graduate students.

<sup>2</sup> Heraclitus, *Fragments*.

<sup>3</sup> Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, III, 448.

<sup>4</sup> Sigmund Freud, "Das Medusenhaupt" (Medusa's Head). First published posthumously. *Int. Z. Psychoanal. Imago*, 25 (1940), 105; reprinted *Ges. W.*, 17,47.