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**You Can See Me
but You Can't Find Me**

by

Eric Bohrer

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Fine Art in Fine Art Studio

School of Art
College of Art and Design

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Abstract

I finesse the atmospheric value of objects—the gestural systems brought forward in their material and forms. As Baudrillard describes, the tools we use and the furnishings we live among are increasingly defined by their formal adherence to systems of *control*. Individual function is suppressed for the sake of a homogeneous interrelationship between multiple objects.

Through the use of a gestural system that prioritizes *effort* instead, objects are defined by instinct as opposed to cultural connotation. Material is liberated from the increasingly abstracted contemporary discourse surrounding its use and the object as a whole is allowed to retake an anthropomorphic status. Every material is thus valued for its innate qualities—what it is on its own, instead of what it has come to represent in relationship to other materials. In the end, the formal presence of muscular energy reifies both the object's dependance on and function for the productivity of humankind.

Muscular energy in this case is used in the specific and heterotopic cultural ritual of “art-making.” The materials used and the resulting forms into which they are arranged are intended to reflect their nature as an “art-object,” which is used in the separate but parallel cultural ritual of “art-viewing.” Within this relationship the art-object, like any other tool or furnishing, has its atmospheric value, its cultural relevance and productivity within the environment it is used, defined by gestural systems taken on during its production.

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I.

Introduction: Newer Objectivity

Neue Sachlichkeit, (New Objectivity): A reactionary movement of young German artists in the early twentieth century born from an opposition to the primitivist pastiche of the expressionist *Die Brücke*. George Grosz, Max Beckmann, and their colleagues decided that art involving expression, abstract or otherwise, was too self-involved and ignorant of the perils of a Weimar Germany spiraling down the drain of nationalist ideology and violence. They aimed to produce work that took a step back from the personal and subjective experience of the everyday. Instead, they sought to observe and subsequently document the ugliness of violence, poverty, and luxury as it took hold of post-war Germany. Their caricatures of the disparity between classes were certainly biting and provocative, many members of the group were expelled from the country and much of their work was destroyed by the German police.

Newer Objectivity: A further reaction, the next stage of a historical feedback loop reverberating back after a century of new context. The realization that to critique the state of one's own culture and its systems of control and inequality through the distancing of one's self and their experiences from being a consumer and product of these realities is not only privileged but incredibly foolish. The understanding that rational inquiry is its own system of control; it might be useful in determining the order of things but ultimately bears the inherent side-effect of maintaining the order of things. The gut feeling that the rejection of the self and self-expression is counterintuitive to engagement with reality. The recognition that the work of art is an

opportunity to use our culture's contemporary ritual cycle, (of having and owning at the behest of simply being), against itself. The attempt to discover and draw the lines between a reality that is true and one that is mediated from within as opposed to standing idly on the sidelines.

...

The above dialectic is a fairly tongue-in-cheek outline of both the basis and goal of my overall thesis project, respectively. While I am under no actual false pretense that I am capable of ascribing historical significance to anything, much less my own work, I am of the belief that selling one's self short is a waste of everyone's time. What is the master's thesis in Fine Art if not the hubris of the amateur philosopher on display?

Frankly, I position my own work in this way out of admiration towards the New Objectivists as opposed to derision; my desire is to recognize their faults and build upon what they started, rather than deny or erase it. I personally have taken great inspiration from their well-intentioned satirizing of the inequalities and hypocrisies of fascism's onset. Grosz's hastily rendered portraits are of particular importance in the development of my work. However, I also realize that the passage of time, development of context, and close observation of contemporary political systems has taught us that at the very least, good intentions are not enough. When it comes to the observation and objective examination of power structures within contemporary cultures, Walter Benjamin is correct in describing New Objectivity's output as mere "reportage," making "the struggle against poverty an object of consumption," (Benjamin 774-776). I often think back to my initial reaction upon reading Stanley Cohen's examination of the development of modern incarceration policies. He states that "good intentions are taken entirely at their face value and are radically separated from their outcomes. It is not the system's professed aims which are at fault but their imperfect realization. The solution is 'more of the same,'" (Cohen

18). The work of Grosz et. al. doesn't seem to offer much more than their "face value." While standing aside and pointing out what one dislikes about the order of things is all well and good, doing so accomplishes little beyond documenting a political situation while absolving one's self of personal responsibility within that order. Such work constitutes the same critical framework that Cohen outlines above, it is its own "imperfect realization."

My intentions are to move beyond "more of the same" and "reportage." I strive to create objects that are consumers in and of themselves. I aim to directly include both artist and viewer within the cultural systems my work critiques. They will become the objects to be consumed in a manner that is altogether visible, physical, and tangible. I do not restrict myself within particular mediums or methods. Paint and ink are spilled while dust and refuse are ordered delicately. Towers are built to be destroyed while stone is carved to be ignored. The subjects of my work are time and sweat. The framework is hardcore punk, free jazz, disco, house, and everything in between.

II.

Systems of Control: Ritual Process and Heterotopic Form

In an attempt to create work that doesn't capitalize on the critique of pervasive systems of control and class affirmation through rote documentation and subsequent editorialization, I instead intend for my work to embody and utilize such a system, reappropriating it for its own purposes. Specifically, my work is an examination of the atmospheric value of objects—a term coined by Baudrillard in order to describe the gestural systems brought forward in an object's material and forms. In doing so, both artist and viewer are involved in a multifaceted ritual and spatial experience informed primarily through the anthropological ideas of Victor Turner, the relationship of which to physical objects I must discuss in detail now before returning to my own work.

...

As Baudrillard describes, the tools we use and the furnishings we live among are increasingly defined by their formal adherence to gestural systems of *control*. Individual function is suppressed for the sake of a homogeneous interrelationship between multiple objects. (Baudrillard 2020, 49).

In *The Ritual Process*, Turner describes a continuous cycle of transition that serves to reassert cultural order on an everyday basis. Characterizing such an experience as “liminality,” he writes,

Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial... they have no status, property, insignia, secular clothing indicating

rank or role, position in a kinship system— in short, nothing that may distinguish them from their fellow neophytes or initiands (Turner 1977, 95).

Liminality, in this context, refers to a specific phase of *rites de passage*, or “transitions,” as defined by Arnold van Gennep (van Gennep 1909). In this phase, “liminal entities” signify their detachment from fixed points in societal structure and sets of cultural conditions, or “states,” through symbolic behavior. During this process, the characteristics that identify the ritual subject’s position in past cultural states are made ambiguous; passing through cultural realms, they are effectively “betwixt and between” means of individual identification, whether it be race, class, gender, or otherwise, in favor of a more general and collective identity. This lack of status and property, as well as the absence of visible “secular” signs, renders each of these individuals perfectly homogenous. Individuals of every “assigned” role and class abandon their customary “positions” and coalesce into Turner’s ideal “*communitas*,” a structureless society bound by solidarity, equality, and opposition to normative order and structures. Turner continues,

What is interesting about liminal phenomena for our present purposes is the blend they offer of lowliness and sacredness, of homogeneity and comradeship. We are presented, in such rites, with a “moment in and out of time,” and in and out of secular social structure, which reveals, however fleetingly, some recognition (in symbol if not always in language) of a generalized social bond that has ceased to be and has simultaneously yet to be fragmented into a multiplicity of structural ties... I prefer the Latin term ‘*communitas*’ to ‘community’ to distinguish this modality of social relationship from an ‘area of common living’... It is rather a matter of giving recognition to an essential and generic human bond, without which there could be no society (Turner 1977, 96-7).

I am particularly struck by the phrase, “a ‘moment in and out of time.’” Somehow, in this space that apparently straddles between motion and stasis resides an “essential” and inclusive “bond.” Turner uses this notion to describe *communitas* as being freed from the typical “structural ties” of society through the active “blending” of social distinctions due to liminal phenomena. Wholly separate from “areas of common living” that form a community, *communitas* is a state of thorough generalization and homogenization of everyday social relationships, essentially stripping “society” down to its most base form for the purpose of recognizing just how

“fragmented” it has become otherwise. While Turner would go on to explain that this timeless and classless *communitas* is in fact the ultimate conception of human culture, as he does at the end of the passage above, this moment of unity is in all cases spatially bound and temporary. As mentioned above, liminality is but one phase in a larger ritual process. Turner reasons that the experience of liminality leading to *communitas* is purposefully cyclical; it is “a type of dialectical process that involves successive experience of high and low, *communitas* and structure, homogeneity and differentiation, equality and inequality... In such a process, the opposites, as it were, constitute one another and are mutually indispensable,” (Turner 1977, 97). For Turner, the experience of liminality and *communitas* is a crucial component of civic life. It is purposefully limited by physical and temporal boundaries in order to produce a sensation that is simultaneously within and without one’s everyday experience for the purpose of reinforcing that everyday experience.

This idea of a spatially bound dialectical process is clarified within Foucault’s attempts to overcome the “fundamentally unreal” nature of utopias and delineate their physical manifestations in real space, which he described as “heterotopias,” (Foucault 1984, 3).

There are also, probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places—places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society—which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively realized utopia in which the real sites, all the other sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. Because these places are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about, I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias (Foucault 1984, 3-4).

According to Foucault, a heterotopic space is “absolutely other” to and “outside all places,” yet still “localizable,” “effective,” and ingrained into “society itself.” As “realized utopias” within the physical world, they “reflect, contest, and invert” the “real emplacements,” or indications of an individual’s placement within the social structure of a particular culture. In other words, heterotopias function as real, localizable sites of *communitas*. They are spaces that are both

distinct from and implanted within everyday civic space, which serve primarily to reveal and reflect both the social and structural organization of a culture, along with the various partitions therein. Foucault pursues their reflective nature further in likening their function to that of the mirror.

From the standpoint of the mirror I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there.

Starting from this gaze that is, as it were, directed toward me, from the ground of this virtual space that is on the other side of the glass, I come back toward myself; I begin again to direct my eyes toward myself and to reconstitute myself there where I am (Foucault 1984, 4).

Ultimately, the heterotopic space created by *communitas* allows one to not only “see” themselves but to literally *be* “over there” and look “back.” In doing so, they see their status and emplacement within the determined structural ties of everyday life from the perspective of a unified, homogenous collective consciousness. From such a viewpoint, the necessity of their individual emplacement is “reconstituted” as being for the betterment of the collective, and their belief in the overall system and structure of their culture is reinforced. As one exits the heterotopic “mirror” they will retake their previous positions as if they had never left, unable to notice the transition and thus, unaware of its effects.

Herein lies the nature of *communitas* as it relates to the atmosphere of physical objects. Its ubiquity is manufactured, and revolves around the attachment of one’s self-identity to a larger collective one. To return to Baudrillard— within heterotopic space the experience of liminality exposes the nature of the individual person as an object informed by a system of control. Its presence results in a temporary separation from the structure of individual experience and subsequent incorporation into a constructed homogeneity. It is presented to us such that we hardly notice our reincorporation into individual consciousness and we are unable to see the threshold we cross to do so. The collective identity supersedes our own as we engage in our

respective daily routines. We are blinded by the mere thought of having and of belonging; we all are chasing the same carrot on the end of an infinite stick.

...

In the case of the art-object, there is an opportunity to turn this discursive cycle on its head and invert the mirror. Whether the instrument at use is one's hands or one's eyes, the act of interpreting form involves the engagement with the same ritual of *communitas* where the art object itself delineates an idealistic, utopic, and metaphysical point of contact, (fig. 1). It is at this point in space and time that artist and viewer connect in an anti-structural other-space, wherein labor, material, ideas and individual expression are ascribed their value and exchanged in turn. It is specifically the power of the work of art to do such a thing that I am interested in. My hope is that the heterotopic process and the consequential collective consciousness are reappropriated as a means to affirm individual experience through expression instead of observation or depiction. Again, I do not wish to merely describe this system of control and manipulation through formal means from the perspective of the passive bystander. I intend to create work that embodies this system and necessitates the involvement of artist and viewer as unwitting participants. Instead of exploring the individual consciousness only as a means to reinforce a larger collective one, I aim to produce work that explores a more transcendental and critical enlightenment— an enlightenment that deliberately exposes positivist systems of *control* and manipulation through the use of a gestural system that prioritizes *effort* instead.

The objects I've produced are defined by instinct as opposed to cultural connotation, questioning the value of the rational and the empirical if it does not lead to liberty. Material is

unfettered by the increasingly abstracted contemporary discourse surrounding its use and the object as a whole is allowed to retake an anthropomorphic status. Every material is thus valued for its innate qualities— what it is on its own, instead of what it has come to represent in relationship to other materials. In the end, the formal presence of muscular energy reifies both the object's dependence on and function for the productivity of humankind. Each work is a “moment in and out of time,” a space between progress and stasis, and an acknowledgement of one's place in these moments and spaces. They do not seek to move forward, to do so is only to move closer to non-existence. Instead, they seek to be still and let time pass, offering an opportunity for their creator and viewer to reflect on the space and material they themselves take up.

III.

Enlightened Fugue

The first piece pursuing these goals is a large composition utilizing a combination of silk screen and monoprinting techniques in acrylic ink and paint titled, *Enlightened Fugue*, (fig. 2). Occupying a ten-yard stretch of wall space, this piece is meant to command the full attention of the space it is in. Beyond sheer scale, this is also accomplished in the demonstration of the labor carried out in its creation. The specific actions taken to create each form— whether geometric, gestural, figurative, or textual— are as integral to the piece as the forms themselves. The deliberate pattern in which these actions were taken out are reflective of a sort of hyper-exaggeration of the typical heterotopic nature of the process of making any work of art. The emphasis on this aspect of the process within the final composition requires each step taken, every action performed, and all of the “moments in and out of time” to be retraced and relived.

In its initial stage, *Enlightened Fugue* was an extension of a mechanical and considered process of pattern making, wherein five-inch squares have been individually applied starting from one end of the roll and weaving back and forth until reaching the other side. This pattern of alternating vertical bars is an analogue of the repetitive mechanics related to the silk screen process that created it. Each square required the performance of a specific series of movements used to move the screen, align the stencil, and apply the ink. As a result, every square blends together into a continuous field of color stretching across the entire length of the piece— once their predetermined end is met, the parts become the whole. After this purposefully tedious procedure was completed over the course of multiple months, the next stage involved performing a direct counter in terms of action, form, and time. Over the course of a few long nights, ink,

paint, and water were spilled, dragged, and smeared across the piece. The marks made responded to what was below in terms of color, but otherwise held no consistent pattern or boundary, and sought no predetermined end. In contrast to the individual squares carefully ordered underneath, each gesture is able to be considered on its own merits if examined closely enough, (fig. 3-5). Furthermore, while the squares involved the repetition of the same exact actions, these gestures are entirely one of a kind.

Forced to coexist, these contrasting approaches to mark making blend together into a singular and total record of action, as well as the state of mind felt as it was performed. Terse passages of text and unidentifiable figures populate this intangible field, acting as the sole localizable points of focus. They are streams of consciousness, fading memories, and waking dreams that are all their own form of internal gesture on display.

IV.

Effort Objects

In contrast to the bright and painterly effects of the previous work, the *Effort Objects* are the results of multifaceted experimentation with material and form as a means to produce atmosphere and environment throughout a space (fig. 6-13). Consisting of concrete, steel, and a variety of found materials including primarily cloth, denim, and linen fabrics, each object explores a balance between gesture and structure. While the gesture in this case is less overt and individualized than it is in *Enlightened Fugue*, these pieces are a record of time and action in their attachment to a system of gestures carried out as a part of a consistent studio process.

From the outset, I have been drawn to concrete as a structural material that involved a specific routine in order to produce and manipulate it. In general, I feel that the acts of transporting the bag of cement, mixing it together with aggregate and water, and finally pouring it into a mold are inseparable from the form taken after the concrete sets. For these pieces specifically, the inciting impetus arose from a desire to transform concrete from a structural material to a medium. Solid molds were abandoned for the paradoxical purpose of having greater control over form. Clothing, rags, paper, and plastic were introduced as a means to demonstrate the ability of concrete to subsume other materials, which themselves become a sort of mark making process on the surface of a solid canvas. By maneuvering concrete in such a way that it might simultaneously be both a form and a substrate it, as well as the labor and time taken in its production, could be appreciated at face value.

My familiarity and confidence with the material grew exponentially as I worked with it more and more. The forms created began to reflect this change in ability and my own personal

connection to each completed piece, the actions taken on and the time spent performing them, was heightened as a result. I began to realize that this is not so much a predetermined series of works as it is an evolving collection of evidence of my experimentation. Each piece is a kind of notetaking, a fragmented collection of ideas and points in time, rendered through the expense of muscular energy.

In the end, the atmosphere produced by these objects is influenced most by the effort needed to create and transport them. Their value as art-objects is not found within their individual forms or compositions and how they relate to each other. Instead, their productivity is found in their elevation of individual materials and the process that put them there. As a result, each object is its own point of connection between artist and viewer, a simultaneous window and mirror, a generator of heterotopic space.

V.

Conclusion:

You Can See Me but You Can't Find Me

To be frank, I truly feel that I have only just begun. If the work and research that inspired it described above seem vague, far-fetched, or overly aspirational, they were indeed meant to be. I am incredibly satisfied with my growth as an artist throughout the production of this project, as well as the forms in which it has materialized in the final show and this paper. The sheer amount of work produced that did not “make it” into the show, stone carvings, brick towers, and paintings alike, is something I’m honestly proud of. What feels even more satisfying, though, is the sense that I have left myself with even more room to grow.

As described, these works were the result of strict adherence to art-making as a process that is equal parts ritual and research, expression and experimentation. I’ll be the first to admit that questions raised are likely not answered to completion, but it is the ability to ask them in a way that moves beyond pure philosophy and into something visible and tangible that is exciting.

Moving forward, materials and methods may change over time, but the dialogue between artist, object, and viewer is likely to remain central. I plan to continue making within the overall framework I have set out here— hardcore punk, free jazz, disco, house, and everything in between.

Figures

All photographs courtesy of Elizabeth Lamark unless otherwise noted

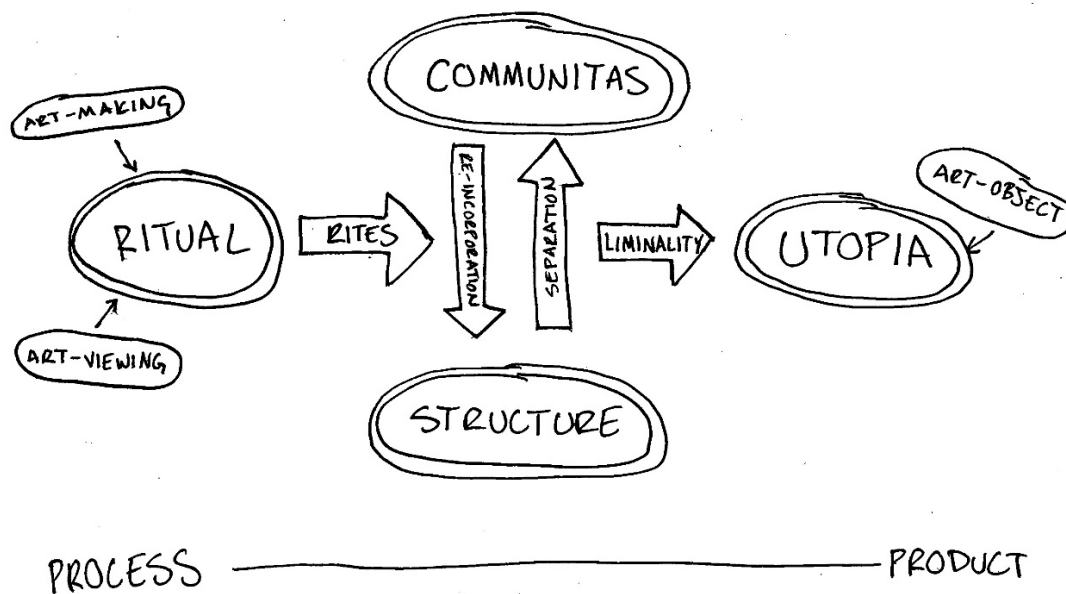


Figure 1: Art-object as Heterotopic Figure, 2021 (Drawn by the author)



Figure 2: *Enlightened Fugue*, Installation view, 2022

30'x50," Silk screen print, Acrylic

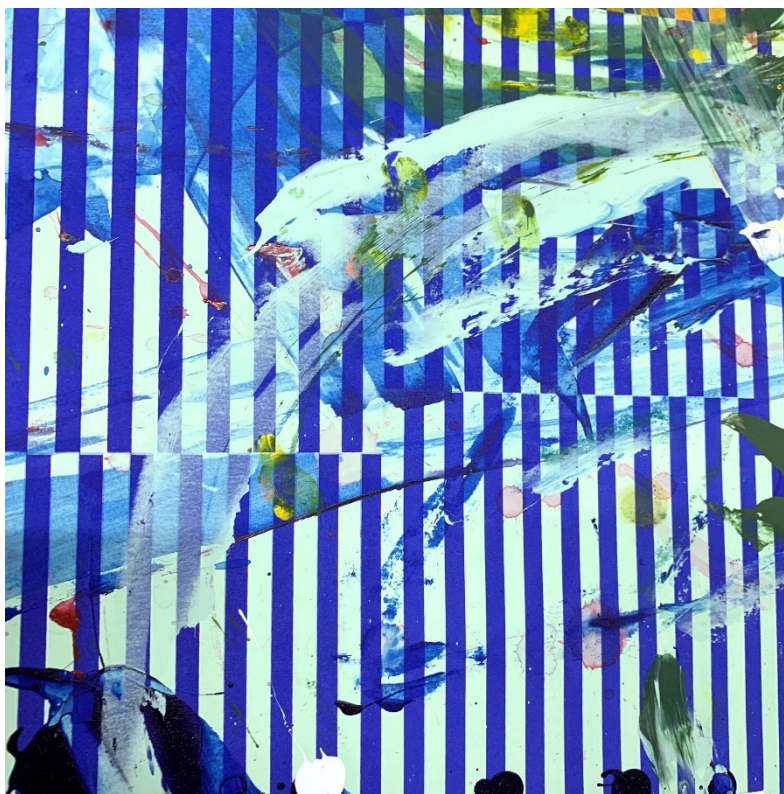


Figure 3: *Enlightened Fugue*, Detail, 2022 (Photo by the author)

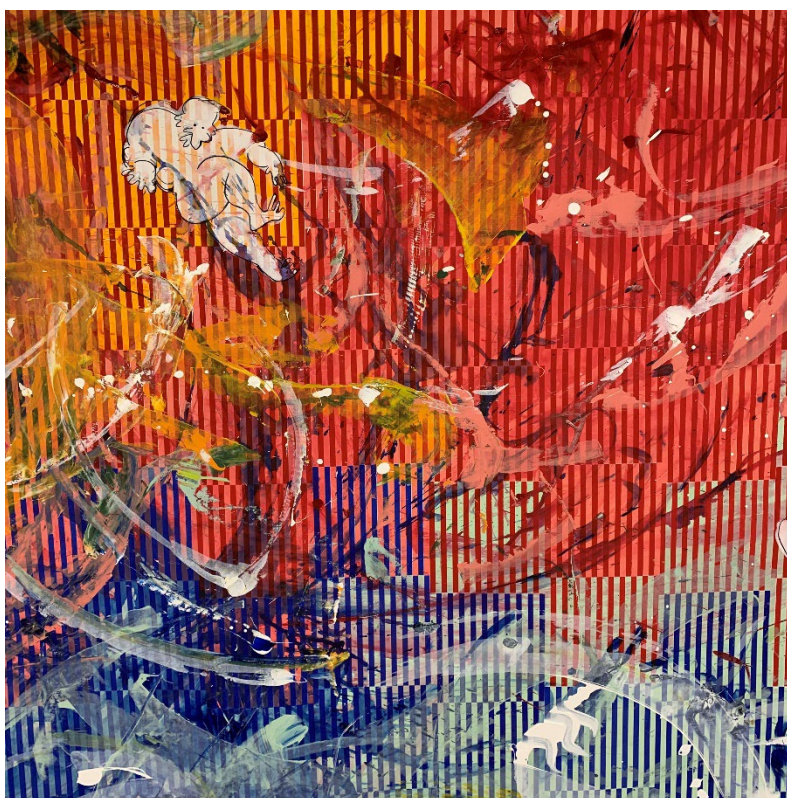


Figure 4: *Enlightened Fugue*, Detail, 2022 (Photo by the author)



Figure 5: *Enlightened Fugue*, Detail, 2022 (Photo by the author)



Figure 6: *Effort Objects*, Installation view, 2022

Concrete, Steel, Cloth Fabric, Found Material



Figure 7: *Effort Objects*, Installation view, 2022

Concrete, Steel, Cloth Fabric, Found Material



Figure 8: *Effort Object*, 2022

45x9x10," Concrete, Steel, Cloth Fabric, Found Material



Figure 9: *Effort Object*, 2022 (Photo by the author)

31x35x5," Concrete, Steel, Cloth Fabric, Found Material



Figure 10: *Effort Object*, 2022

24x43x4," Concrete, Steel, Cloth Fabric, Found Material



Figure 11: *Effort Object*, 2022

22x42x3," Concrete, Steel, Cloth Fabric, Found Material



Figure 12: *Effort Object*, 2022

12x12x2," Concrete, Cloth Fabric



Figure 13: *Effort Object*, 2022

13x10x2" Concrete, Cloth Fabric, Found Material

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