

FLOW: ABSTRACTING MUNDANE ENVIRONMENTS

A thesis submitted to the  
Kent State University Honors College in  
partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for University Honors

by

Ariana J. Parry



Thesis written by

Ariana J. Parry

Approved by

\_\_\_\_\_, Advisor

\_\_\_\_\_, Chair, Department of Fine Arts

Accepted by

\_\_\_\_\_, Dean, Honors College



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES.....	vi
ACKNOWLEDGMENT.....	vii
CHAPTER	
I.    INTRODUCTION.....	1
II.   I BEGAN TO PAINT.....	2
III.  INTELLECTUALIZING A VISUAL LANGUAGE.....	3
IV.   WITHIN THE CONFINES OF THE LOCAL ART SCENE.....	6
V.    MOVING FORWARD.....	8
REFERENCES.....	10

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Magenta and blue.....	2
Figure 2. The Remains of Minotaur in a Harlequin Costume.....	3
Figure 2. Triptych Scroll.....	

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Professor Jack McWhorter for being my thesis advisor and go-to art critic. He has served as a great mentor during my time at Kent State University at Stark, and I cannot imagine completing my thesis without his guidance. I would also like to thank my oral defense committee Dr. Leslie Heaphy, Dr. Marie Gasper-Hulvat, and Dr. Brian Betz. Each have provided me with important insights on an academic and practical level. I have been truly lucky to know and study under each individual. I would also like to thank Robert McKinney for providing me space to showcase my artwork, and all the time and effort he put in for making my gallery show a success.





## **Introduction**

Sometimes an idea is born of itself, while other times it is carefully planned and executed with extreme care. My thesis was the latter. I entered my Junior year of college having a vague idea of what I wanted to accomplish. As a double major in psychology and fine arts, I wanted to create a project that explored both realms of my academic career. However, as I would find out, marrying two separate worlds is not only difficult, but near impossible. I struggled for some time on how and where to begin.

I read and downloaded countless scholarly articles about the psychological concept of flow and artmaking. I read Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's book *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (1991). I contemplated writing an analysis related to the book and articles. But of what worth would it be? I was not planning to create my own research. I did not think I had anything new to say without sounding trite and anecdotal. The articles already existed for individuals interested, and I had convinced myself I had nothing of significant importance to add to the dialog surrounding the concept of flow.

I was frustrated. I tried my best to plan and outline the trajectory of my thesis, but the preplanning was only increasing my anxiety. I knew my method needed to change. I needed to be authentic to myself if I wanted to create a thesis that would not only highlight my academic progress, but also be inspiring to my future development. I needed to create without inhibition.

## **I began to paint.**

I decided to expand on ideas that I explored prior to my thesis at the end of Painting III. I had been keeping a regular sketchbook for some time, but rarely referred back to the drawings. They were cathartic more than anything. Contemplations on the natural world done in harsh, black ink. The technique was somewhat of a mix between Franz Kline and Bada Shanren. Both artists I have been drawn to while visiting museums, so it is no surprise their aesthetic would sneak into my work in one way or another.



Figure 1

Between sketches, lay written entries. Sometimes lists of artists or ideas, other times personal details of struggles I had been facing. The drawings served as a beginning point for my final in Painting III, the first use beyond my private sketchbook. I utilized three images in the first painting and overlaid them in a manner that created a twisted and contorted environment. I explored color in new ways. I enjoyed the end result. Unbeknownst to me, I created the first painting in my *Flow* series at the end of spring 2015.

Once summer came I began to paint freely and created three paintings in the *Flow* series in a short amount of time. I was engrossed with the work I was creating from sketches of mundane environments. I took a month and a half long

trip to France that summer, and the colors and culture of France caused me to think about my paintings in new ways. While in France I saw a large, painted stage backdrop by Picasso titled, “The Remains of Minotuar in a Harlequin Costume”. The backdrop was large measuring 13.25m by 8.3m (*The modern collection*, 2014). The enormous size of



Figure 2

the backdrop was impressive, and I believe, influenced my interest in creating large canvas scrolls about a year later. Upon returning I created a couple more paintings before the start of fall semester 2015.

I felt good about what I had begun. I was no longer spinning my wheels, and I was proud to be making a body of work independent of classroom assignments. The creation of the paintings provided me a foundation for my thesis. I had a structure to build on that both challenged and excited me.

### **Intellectualizing a Visual Language**

There comes a time when art needs to move beyond the confines of the studio and reach out into the public. I could decide to remain within the sphere of the university, or I could take a risk and venture out into the commercial realm. I decided to do both.

I started with my plans at the university. Every year I have been in college, I have taken part in the Undergraduate Research Conference. I knew it to be a fruitful and worthwhile venture. Previously, I had only shown work and not given talks. For my thesis I wanted to challenge myself to talk about my work in a lecture format. Since painting is a non-verbal language I knew it would be a challenge to put words to what I had created. The concept of flow had served as a catalyst during my creative process, decided to use the idea of flow to highlight the links between psychology and my art.

I became interested in the idea of flow during the fall of 2013 in the Psychology of Motivation course. Csikszentmihalyi described flow in his book, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (2009), as being in “the zone”. Flow the feeling of being completely immersed in an activity. An individual has a sense of timelessness and full enjoyment in the activity (Csikszentmihalyi, 2009)

At the time, I was at a stagnant phase in my life. I was in the throes of a yearlong depression, taking three studio courses, and between school and work averaging twelve hour days. I was beaten down and beginning to feel like I was losing my sanity. I slept every chance I had as a way to escape from the mass amounts of stress laid upon me. I was miserable, and barely remember anything positive from that period of my life. However, the concept of flow still remained strong in my mind, and a point of interest in the darkness.

My first painting class in the spring of 2014 proved to be therapeutic, and was the first university-level art class I took that allowed for a full exploration of color. At the end of my spring 2014 semester I traveled to China on a class trip. I had many new experiences in China and ample time to self-reflect. By the time I had returned to the United States, my depression had effectively disappeared. The summer of 2014 I began to paint uninhibitedly. I found the power of flow through painting. Every time I painted for an extended amount of time I would find myself losing sense of time and feeling as if my sense of self evaporated. I believe the experience I had with painting and flow in the summer of 2014 ultimately led to my thesis in 2015.

During the preparations for my Undergraduate Research Conference talk I found accounts from others who described experiences quite similar to what I have experienced with painting. One of the best quotes I found came from a TED talk by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi called *Flow, the secret to happiness* (2009), in which he shares the description of flow by a music composer. It goes as follows:

“You are in an ecstatic state to such a point that you feel as though you do not exist. . . My hand seems devoid of myself. And I have nothing to do with what is happening. I just sit there watching it in a state of awe and wonderment. And [the music] just flows out of itself”

When the time came to give my talk in spring 2016, I was nervous but well prepared. I created a slide show, hauled my work over to main hall, and

invited as many professors and classmates as I could. I had a wonderful turnout despite giving everyone the wrong room number initially! A friend even secretly recorded the lecture and sent it to me afterwards allowing me to listen to myself speak, which has proven invaluable (especially in recognizing repetitive speech patterns). Overall, the Undergraduate Research Conference was a great way to highlight my thesis within academia. However, I still wanted to experience the perception of my work outside of the university so I decided to pursue having a gallery show.

### **Within the Confines of the Local Art Scene**

I consider myself incredibly grateful to have had the opportunity to visit New York City and see the power and prevalence of art on a grand scale. Unfortunately, ignorance can definitely be bliss. When I came back to quaint, Stark County Ohio, I realized the options available for showcasing art are slim, and that is giving a generous description. Of course, I could be unfair comparing Stark County to Manhattan, which probably has more art galleries than all of Northeast Ohio. Nevertheless, I had three venues in Stark County I could inquire about before resorting to setting up my show in the student gallery, where the show would attract minimal new traffic outside university staff and students.

The spot I booked happened to be my first and most desired location, *Gallery 121*. *Gallery 121*, was a bar and small-plates establishment in Massillon, Ohio that also served as a gallery showcasing several shows a year. I had the

opportunity to be in group shows there twice before with a substantial amount of positive response towards my work. Robert McKinney, the gallery director, was excited when I approached him about doing a solo-show. I was a bit shocked to be able to establish a venue for my show so effortlessly, but I did not complain. The show was set to open July 5<sup>th</sup> and end September 3<sup>rd</sup>. I was excited and set forth on finishing my body of work.

I painted minimally until the end of spring semester 2016 when I went to the Blossom program at the Kent campus and was able to devote a minimum of eight hours a day for two weeks toward the Scroll Triptych in my show. The Blossom program was an eye-opening experience. I was surrounded by other art students who were hardworking and devoted to their art. I also had the opportunity to meet Angela Dufresne and Steve Rodin, both reputable artists. My experience at Blossom gave me a jump start to continue painting during the summer and complete the artworks necessary for my gallery opening.

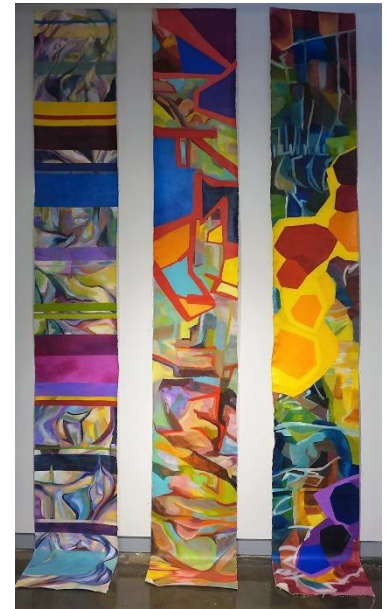


Figure 3

When the time came for my gallery show I was beyond excited. I had done several group shows in the past, and a small solo-show on campus for a portrait project I did my first year of college, but I had yet to experience the excitement of a public opening in an environment outside the university. The show was hung, and I had a total of fourteen paintings on display. I had hopes of

selling at least a couple paintings, so I made sure to price them reasonably given the lackluster art market in Massillon.

The opening ended up being an exciting and exhilarating experience. I had a good turnout of family and friends among other patrons in the bar. After the opening I stayed in contact with Robert McKinney and managed to sell three paintings for a total of about one thousand dollars. However, with good news also came disappointing news. A few days before my show was going to close, *Gallery 121* was sold and would cease to exist.

Luckily, the closing did not affect the success of my show, in fact I ended up with about two-hundred dollars more than I expected since Robert did not collect the twenty percent his gallery normally took for sales. I was saddened to see an independent art establishment close. Stark County already has poor representation of the arts compared to other parts of Ohio so any loss is a tragedy. Completing my thesis opened my eyes to the need for independent art establishments for local artists to show. I hope in the future changes can be made to help the art-scene in Stark County. In order to do so, it will take a collective of people, organizations, and passion over several years to make a difference.

## **Moving Forward**

Having successfully created and exhibited my thesis I am relieved to finally move on to the next project. I have begun to create paintings deeply exploring color relationships, ideas related to chance and automatism, and planar



spatial relationships. I am excited to see the direction my work has been taking and I believe the discipline I developed during my thesis is to thank for the current progress I have been making.

I hope to make a body of work that is impressive enough to get accepted into a Master's in Fine Arts program so I can continue to make art academically. The concepts of flow and other psychological ideas will undoubtedly continue to affect the trajectory of my work. My happiness in life lies in my ability to continue to create novel and challenging creations. I find art to be one of the few domains where true uninhibited creation still exists and flourishes.

## References

(2014) *The modern collection*. Retrieved from

<http://www.lesabattoirs.org/en/collections/modern-collection>

Csikszentmihaly, M. (2009). *Flow: The psychology of optimal experience*. New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers.

Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2004). *Flow, the secret to happiness* [Video file]. Retrieved from

[https://www.ted.com/talks/mihaly\\_csikszentmihalyi\\_on\\_flow?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/mihaly_csikszentmihalyi_on_flow?language=en)