

COLOR AND CONSCIOUSNESS:
RESEARCH AND PAINTED PROCESS OF *INUNDATE*, *INTUMESCE*, *HERMETIC*,
AND *LUMINIFEROUS*

by

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Abstract

Throughout my undergraduate career, I have grappled with understanding my own disjointed internal experience and conveying it through my paintings. I braided together the different elements of water, fabric, color, and life to visually communicate the ineffable. Color and self-consciousness, and the link between the two, are major concepts behind my work. I focus on color, a visual phenomenon, and self-consciousness, a metaphysical phenomenon, because both share a varied and indefinable nature, and everyone experiences the two differently. Through research, I found that both color and self-consciousness are co-dependent with language, and that an expanded vocabulary enhances our perception of the two phenomena. With *Inundate*, *Intumesce*, *Hermetic*, and *Luminiferous*, I aimed to supplant written language with visual language in this co-dependent relationship by creating hyper-saturated, figurative paintings that allow for the viewer to expand their self-consciousness alongside their understanding of color. In this project, I organize both my research on color and self-consciousness and my painted process to supplement the overall goal of communicating my inner experience.



Figure 1. Shelby Sult, installation of *Inundate*, *Intumesce*, *Hermetic*, and *Luminiferous*, 2019, oil on canvas, 50 x 38 inches each, Texas State Galleries.

Preface

Throughout my undergraduate career, I have grappled with understanding my own internal experience and conveying it through my paintings. After experimenting with my paintings, I found what felt most natural to paint, and then researched to better understand why. In *Inundate*, *Intumesce*, *Hermetic*, and *Luminiferous*, I braided the universal elements of water, fabric, color, and life to visually communicate the ineffable.

I found that language was an inadequate means of communicating my experiences and turned to painting. But does painting, as a visual language, function like our written and spoken languages? Can I send a clearer message through a medium that is less bound in denotative meaning? What do different hues communicate? Upon researching color, I found that color and its unique ties to language mirror the codependent relationship that our very self-consciousness has to language; we cannot perceive one without the other. I discovered my prompt. In addition to replicating my own experience, I aimed to develop the viewers understanding of color and self-awareness with visual, rather than written language. My goal through my paintings is to accurately communicate my inner experience, and to expand viewers' visual vocabulary, enhancing their understanding of color and their own self-conscious experience.

The purpose of this project is to explain the process behind my work and expand how I use the four components of water, fabric, color, and life. But before this, I will elaborate on my researched findings on the relationship between color and self-consciousness to language. While I developed my process and research synchronously, presenting my research first will best preface the progression behind my painted work, where I test my theories about the relationship between color and self-awareness.

Color and Consciousness

In pursuit of creating paintings that offer a window into my experience, I began research that led me to serendipitous findings on color. To understand what color communicated, if anything, I had to first consider the root of our ability to perceive color. As it turns out, we can conceive of colors not just because of their existence, but because we have developed a vocabulary that includes color. The relationship between color and language is not unlike the co-dependent relationship between our very self-consciousness and language. Just as we use words to conceive of color, the pronoun “I” allows us to conceive of ourselves. I explore the two phenomena of color and self-consciousness because they are similar in their elusiveness, and, through my own work, I test whether visual language can also enhance a viewers’ understanding of these two concepts.

To better understand the origins of self-consciousness, I turned to philosophical and anthropological findings. In *the Bodily Self*, philosophy professor José Luis Bermúdez draws comparisons between conceptual and non-conceptual self-consciousness. Conceptual self-consciousness is more content-based and linguistic, whereas non-conceptual self-consciousness includes facts that are undiscovered, unrecognizable, or otherwise unable to be located or described.¹ Bermúdez begins *The Bodily Self* by focusing on the correlation between non-conceptual and linguistic self-awareness, or otherwise the use or understanding of “I.” He claims that one is not born from the other but that they are both codependent, and cannot be fully developed without the presence of the other.² He emphasizes that neither non-conceptual nor linguistic self-consciousness are inherent to

¹ To define the co-dependent relationship between self-consciousness and language, I draw from: José Luis Bermúdez, *The Bodily Self: Selected Essays on Self-Consciousness* (The MIT Press, 2018).

² Ibid.

our existence, but that they are learned.³ This means that if we have access to language that defines our own existence, we can conceive of it. Without access to the pronoun “I” or another self-definitional concept, we cannot achieve the same degree of self-awareness.

Color has a slightly different relationship to language than self-consciousness does, but it shares in this co-dependency. Color is a natural phenomenon that is a product of light and we conceive of its existence because of our ability to perceive it. However difficult to imagine, humans have not always been aware of color, because our vocabulary did not include it. In *Colour Studies: A Broad Spectrum*, Dr. Carole P. Biggam explores the prehistoric development of color in language. Dr. Biggam suspects that color-defining language arose out of survival needs, such as warning others of danger associated with a certain color, or some other means of great importance.⁴ As a result of this language, she claims, we developed awareness for color itself.⁵ As we develop more and more terms to describe different hues, our awareness of these colors grows. This resembles the co-dependent relationship between self-consciousness and language. While our existence and color may exist regardless of our perception of them, we can only come to be aware of these two phenomena by having a language that allows us to conceive of their existence.

While the comparison could be made between any phenomena that have a co-dependent relationship with language, I am drawn to compare self-consciousness and color because they are both prominent parts of my painted work, and they both share in their indefinability. I found color to be the visual counterpart to self-awareness; both concepts

³ Ibid.

⁴ Carole Hough, Christian Kay, Wendy Anderson, and C. P. Biggam, *Colour Studies: A Broad Spectrum* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2014), 17.

⁵ Ibid.

are universally experienced, but they are experienced differently by everyone. Because these two concepts have a linguistic counterpart that is essential to our comprehension of them, I argue that the development of our vocabulary surrounding both color and consciousness will heighten this knowledge, and that visual language can supplant written language. With my paintings, I am testing these claims. I use specific color to define my own self-conscious problems and invite the viewer to share in this experience. My paintings are an attempt to develop a visual language, rather than a spoken one, and provide an experience where viewers refine their perception of both color and self-conscious existence.

Inundate, Intumesce, Hermetic, and Luminiferous

The concept of using the visual language of painting to elaborate on one's understanding of color and self-consciousness was not the launching pad for my painted body of work. Rather, I painted *Inundate, Intumesce, Hermetic, and Luminiferous* to visually communicate my internal disconnection with the world. Paintings offer a direct and engaging way to share information with viewers without the baggage of coding and decoding words that are laden with meaning. Aside from the directness that paintings allow, I found this medium to be more suitable for communicating transcendent concepts. While planning the most effective way to translate my state visually, I sought to learn about different colors' effects, and whether they carried inherent meaning. I learned that colors have endless, flexible associations, but this research led me to understanding their connection to language, and my final concept of creating multilayered, provoking paintings that expanded one's visual vocabulary.

In pursuit of accurately replicating my internal experience, I experimented with different types of imagery and symbols in my work. I followed where I felt led, and one day I decided to create a series of diptychs to represent what it felt like to exist amid a meaningless, or absurd, world. These diptychs featured two portrayals, side by side, of the same figure in full detail, surrounded by a colored body of water, which represented our absurd surroundings. This body of work led me to create *Inundate, Intumesce, Hermetic, and Luminiferous*, which more thoroughly braided together the different elements that I was interested in. By blending elements of water, fabric, color, and life in my paintings, I was able to organize these universally experienced components in a way that was calculatedly disorienting, and representative of my own mental experience.



Figure 2. Shelby Sult, *Inundate*, 2019, oil on canvas, 50 x 38 inches.

Inundate

1. “to flood; cover or overspread with water; deluge.
2. to overwhelm.”⁶

The choice to depict my models underwater has always felt instinctual to me. Water itself is versatile and can carry innumerable meanings. The experience of being underwater is otherworldly and evokes the subconscious, which is why I use it in paintings that depict my internal existence. In addition to its ability to carry meaning, water is an excellent match to the medium of oil paints. Though it is difficult to stage photos in water, it helps me achieve ethereal compositions with multilayered, glossy texture. Water’s beauty is paired with its dangers, and this dualism becomes particularly apparent with the suspension of breath I depict in my paintings.

Any time I made an authentic effort to convey my own experience with the world, I found myself painting water. I have my most introspective experiences when surrounded by water, and always have. Whether alone with my thoughts while swimming a long distance at practice, or taking a bath at night, my experience in water was always conducive to meditation. Its serenity is balanced by the dangers it presents, however, which I witnessed while coughing up water after a failed flip turn, or by melting into sleep during a hot bath. This duality extends deeply beyond simply “good” and “bad;” Water can be tranquil and restorative, or agitated and freezing. Our relationship to and fear of water is profound. While I could not guarantee that every viewer would have the exact same experience as myself, I could invite my viewers in and ensure that they each left with a unique understanding by incorporating the universal element of water.

⁶ *Dictionary.com*, s.v. “inundate,” accessed December 4, 2020, <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/inundate>.

Water also provides an interesting set of problems when staging the photograph, particularly when fabric is involved. When staging, my goal is to create an interesting composition that includes the figure and the fabric coming in and out of the water. Between readjustments and instructions, I will take multiple photos as quickly as possible to avoid waterboarding my volunteer. The model and I will pull, hold, or breathe into the fabric to create a multilayered look, and defy fabric's natural tendency to stick to the face and sink in the water. When we fold, bubble, or stretch the fabric it results in complex compositions that thoroughly incorporate water, fabric, color, and the figure. To best communicate my concept, I have found it essential that these elements appear interconnected in a way that is disorienting. The model's difficult experience is evident in the photograph, and so is their peace. The images pinpoint this emotional experience of walking the thin line between a calming bath and unsettling near-suffocation, and capturing this feeling is as essential as creating an interesting composition.

Because I paint in a photorealistic style, I largely base my paintings off the photograph that I took, and the original composition remains mostly unchanged. In addition to selecting a picture with a compelling composition that meets my goals, it must satisfy my instantaneous mental test of whether I find it 'paint-worthy.' The test does not have specific criteria, but I instinctually distinguish whether an image is best as a photograph or a painting. After I choose it, I crop each image in the series to position the figure's head slightly above center, like a bust or a headshot. By focusing only on the head, I indicate to my audience that my work deals with the mental psyche. Alongside selecting and cropping my reference images, I determine my approach for the paintings by planning their scale and color.



Figure 3. Shelby Sult, *Intumesce*, 2019, oil on canvas, 50 x 38 inches.

Intumesce

1. “to swell up, as with heat; become tumid.
2. to bubble up.”⁷

Fields of color create a strong first impression with the viewer and influence their experience with a painting. I chose brightly saturated colors because they exude “newness,” and are enticing yet difficult to look at. To intensify the colors of these four paintings, I began with a neon base and I carefully layered adjacent colors on top of this to preserve luminosity. By playing with the relationship between warm and cool tones, I was able to create different visual harmonies within and between my paintings. These colors hijack the brain with an intense visual experience, and add to the dualities that permeate *Inundate*, *Intumesce*, *Hermetic*, and *Luminiferous*.

By choosing brightly saturated colors, I set an intense tone with my paintings and create a visual “hook.” These radiant colors have an attractive, eye-catching quality that grabs attention, but they become increasingly difficult to look at over time. The enticing yet strenuous visual phenomenon adds to the dualisms that I present in my body of work. Flashy colors have a popular appeal, but their overconsumption is nauseating, like a poisonous flower. These bright colors are also relatively free from associations because the paints themselves are newly engineered. This opens up more room for meaning and distances my paintings from their color field ancestors. To preserve bright saturation and luminosity, I am careful to mix as few colors as possible. I limit the value range of each painting by not using white highlights or dark shadows, which allows hue to take the center stage.

⁷ *Dictionary.com*, s.v. “intumesce,” accessed December 4, 2020, <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/intumesce>.

My first color decision was to practice layering adjacent colors to see what would result in a bright, glowing effect. I had previously made a painting with quinacridone magenta that glowed, and I learned that I could intensify this by layering the cool quinacridone magenta over a warm neon pink, which I did for *Intumesce* (figure 3). I found that warm over cool created a similar humming effect, and in *Hermetic* (figure 4) I layered quinacridone magenta over a cooler neon blue. As the center of the complete lineup of paintings, these two works needed to have a harmonious color conversation.

In addition to layering my base colors, I considered how to position warm and cool colors in ways that would support or challenge traditions in painting. In *Intumesce*, I kept with pictorial traditions of the foreground being a warmer temperature than the background by emphasizing protruding bubbles with warm coral and distancing the underwater areas with cool magenta. For *Hermetic*, I reversed these optical expectations by using cool blue to highlight and warmer violet in the sunken areas. This reversal gives *Hermetic* an alien quality, and contributes to the paintings' discomfort, which is antithetical to the bubbly warmth in its' neighbor, *Intumesce*.

My color choices in *Inundate* (figure 2) and *Luminiferous* (figure 5) were much more straightforward. I chose blue and orange to balance out the warm and cool relationship between pink and purple, and staggered the order so that they could create a visual loop (figure 1). The blue and purple share in their darker value and cool temperature, while the pink and orange are both lighter, warm colors. By separating these pairs, each painting has more individual presence and the body of work strums a complex visual chord. The balance of temperature and value gives the set of work rhythm, and allows the viewer to enter at any point, without worrying about chronology.



Figure 4. Shelby Sult, *Hermetic*, 2019, oil on canvas, 50 x 38 inches.

Hermetic

1. “made airtight by fusion or sealing.”⁸

This series of work was the first substantial time I used fabric, which allowed me to achieve both my psychological and color goals. By staging the photo with fabric, I could obscure the figure in the water and destabilize viewers’ recognition of her. This veiling symbolizes my feeling of disconnection with the world around me, and the trapping fabric communicates how uncomfortable and pervasive this feeling is. The combination of fabric and water also allowed me to capture breath, which adds suspense to my work. Finally, by filling the scene with fabric of my choice, I can achieve a composition with all-over color. Adding fabric into the picture gave me greater range for color, and exciting new possibilities of tension and symbolism.

My use of fabric conveys the suspension of breath and is another example of dualism in my work, both of which promote my psychological goal of replicating my inner experience. By depicting fabric, I add a layer of separation between the viewer and the painted figure, which refers to my own disconnection to the world around me. Regardless of its symbolic meaning, the fabric’s dualities present the same distressing, ineffable feeling in a more tangible way. Fabric is inviting and soft, yet in my work it appears suffocating. Like water and color, my use of fabric suggests that too much of a good thing can be bad. This is particularly evident in *Hermetic* (figure 4) where I stretch the wet fabric tightly across the model’s face. My use of fabric, even more than color and water, puts viewers in a self-conscious position where they must come to terms with how they feel and make a choice to stay, look away, accept, or ignore the distress at hand. I rely on

⁸ *Dictionary.com*, s.v. “hermetic,” accessed December 4, 2020, <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/hermetic>.

asphyxiation being a universal experience to some degree, and that I will strike a chord with viewers that will cause them to catch their breath themselves.

Capturing this breathlessness adds suspense to the viewing experience, which is complicated by the otherwise tranquil aspects of the painting. Because I paint with a drybrush method and build up the painting with thin layers of paint, my facture is smooth and the paintings have a “licked surface,” comparable to the blended brushstrokes of academic art. By building up slowly with thin, semi-transparent layers, I ensure that the paintings’ first coat of paint glows through all the middle layers, which creates a luminous effect. In the middle stages of the painting process, I build up each painting alongside one another, which guarantees their interconnectivity. Consciously or subconsciously, I learn lessons with each painting that I apply to its neighbor and using one paint palette ensures the cross-transmission of paint, which builds hue bridges.

Though I paint them synchronously, each painting presents its own problems. While *Luminiferous* unraveled very naturally from start to finish and *Intumesce* was a pleasant process of pushing and pulling, paintings like *Hermetic* (figure 4) and *Inundate* (figure 2) required constant, large-scale revision. After accidentally creating too much contrast in these two paintings, I applied an all-over glaze to each. By adding a semi-transparent glaze of cobalt and ultramarine blue to *Inundate* and quinacridone magenta and violet to *Hermetic*, I dulled their depths and highlights to unify the surface and stabilize before forging ahead and repainting. Because each painting varied in its ease and complexity, even the form itself mirrors the psychological crossroads of serenity and strain.

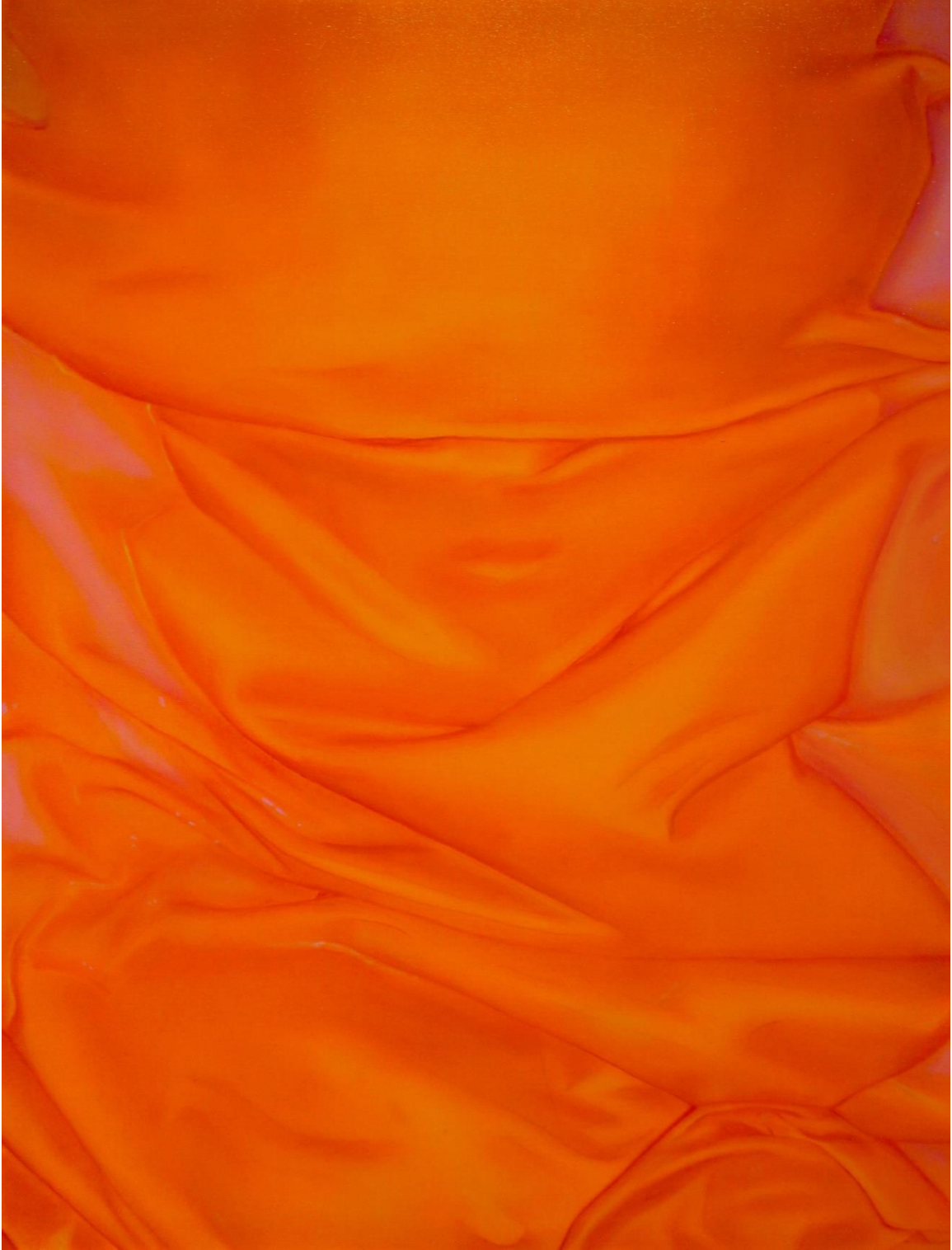


Figure 5. Shelby Sult, *Luminiferous*, 2019, oil on canvas, 50 x 38 inches.

Luminiferous

1. “transmitting, producing, or yielding light.”⁹

Light is a fundamental concern for painters, and we load this phenomenon with symbolic meaning, like by associating it with life or creation. Depicting light is a constant painterly problem, and “luminiferous” refers to the glowing effect I achieve in this orange painting in particular. While artists can emulate light in their paintings, the ability to perceive it relies on the quality of light that is shone onto the painting. Literally, light is necessary for color to exist, which is why paintings must be delicately lit upon installation. Symbolically, I entertain the association between life and light in my work. I chose to use the human figure and depict scenes as realistically as possible as a sort of alchemic experiment of creating life on the canvas. By closely imitating a natural glow, enhanced through bright, diffused light, I present a human experience in a lifelike style to achieve a sympathetic response in viewers.

There are several ways to depict light pictorially, and many artists throughout history have excelled at capturing light. Through a feat of realism, painters create works that achieve the impossible: their surfaces seem to emit light when they technically only reflect it. The title of *Luminiferous* refers to this paintings’ intoxicatingly bright orange glow, and the quality of luminosity across all the paintings in the series. I achieve this by working in thin layers, and by allowing the neon base coat of each painting to radiate through the painting. Preserving areas of the painting with the fewest combinations of paint results in a glow, as mixing and layering paint furthers a color from being prismatic.

⁹ *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. “luminiferous,” accessed December 4, 2020, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/luminiferous>.

The luminosity of my paintings goes hand-in-hand with my depiction of life. By painting the figure realistically, I hope to create a believable experience that viewers can sympathize with, like an old-school augmented reality. To achieve my goal of communicating my inner experience most successfully, I paint believably close to life so that viewers imagine themselves in these scenes. This sympathetic experience happens all around us, like when we cringe after seeing someone else's injury. The more complex and disorienting my imagery is, the more prolonged and varied someone's sympathetic experience is. For example, while the viewer is looking at the work, they relate to the subject of the painting, who is visibly struggling under the fabric. While some viewers recognize her immediately, the figure's face is distorted enough for some viewers to not see her at first glance. Even viewers who do not immediately recognize the figure report feelings of tension and breathlessness, which leads me to think that their subconscious is alerted of the suspension of breath before the viewer consciously realizes what they are looking at.

The final stage of creating this body of work is installing it. To ensure that viewers can relate to my paintings, I hung them slightly lower than a standard eye-height, so that we can have a more corporeal connection to them. By positioning bright light onto each painting, I ensured that each would exhibit its truest hues. I hung each large-scale painting with enough space for viewers to have individual experiences with them, but close enough together to highlight their interconnectivity. Through an alternating balance of value and hue, the body of work altogether produces interrelated visual cycles, that are echoed within each individual work of art.

In conclusion

While there is so much to be said of the research, planning, and execution of this painted body of work, what I have put into words is simply the tip of the iceberg. I turned to painting to replicate my mindscape and communicate that which I could not trust language to fully capture. Yet, when we create a work of art, we cannot guarantee that it will perfectly relay the message we intend for it to. Interpretation allows for viewers to draw their own conclusions from art, and I fully embrace this creation of meaning. The meaning of my work shifts over time and is made up of all the collective readings others project onto it, just like our individual human experience is formed by everyone around us. I hope that, regardless of interpretation, my paintings' viewers learn something about myself, themselves, or the world we share.



Bibliography

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