

A Thesis Presented to
The Faculty of Alfred University

A Connection Between Life and Art Through Light and Material

by

Katherine Turnquist

In Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for
The Alfred University Honors Program

May 11, 2015

Under the Supervision of:

Chair: Ashley Lyon
Committee Members:
Hope Childers
Stephanie McMahon

From my undergraduate education I have learned how to use my hands to create. I have been taught a physical ability and competence in several art mediums however, because of my passion for creating something new, I use my knowledge of craft and material to reach outside of the realms of tradition and explore new materials that I have not been taught to use and have not been used in traditional art practice. The application of light sources is the most significant element that all of my works possess. I employ the magical phenomenon of colored light to transform traditional applications of painting, sculpture, and installation seeking to redefine the expectations of cheap craft materials.

I follow the influence of the art movements and artists who have overturned their preceding artistic conventions. One such movement I look to is the modern art movement that is characterized by a rapid change of art practice, producing works that had much less to do with realistic depictions, and much more to do with aesthetics. Artists started to embrace their power to make art exist in any way they could imagine. As a result, many different factions arose and dealt with the different possibilities of perception that would only be possible through new aesthetics in art. Among others, these groups included Cubism, Surrealism, and Fauvism, which all sought to uncover an alternate mode of perception that were brought into reality through the artists' visions and ideas. Specifically Cubism, Surrealism, and Fauvism all dealt with a complete upending and replacing of priorities in perspective, concept, and color theory. Since then, a reshaping and stretching of the boundaries in art has become a tradition as artists found a sense of freedom in making based on interest. This discovery of expression has allowed for a continuation of exploration in medium and concept.[1] Unlike the revolution of modern art, I am not attempting to cause a great awakening for a new movement, but rather investigate the function of light as an artistic medium. I admire the evolution of aesthetics that came from

Modern art and how it has paved the way for experimentation in the personal interests of the artist that I am referential of in my work.

A contemporary artist I feel my work aligns with is James Turrell. He makes enormous immersive installations that are inspired by spaces, the earth, and optical deception. His work lies on a blurred boundary between painting, sculpture, and installation. Using the architectural spaces that are provided for him, he casts colored light in a way that causes the viewer to be enveloped by optical illusions. The light changes the viewer's surroundings, an effect only light can provide, altering the surfaces of the room. Through these transformations, his work creates an environment that causes the viewer to experience pure perception and 'wordless thought,' through vision.[2]

Like Turrell's, my work constantly presents varied sources of light that become integral to the viewing experience of each piece. I have become attached to the phenomenon of light and reflection, and hope to captivate the contemporary audience successfully.

The greatness associated with the old masters of the fine arts and the Renaissance are commonly associated with the ideas and belief in a "genius" or "divine" artist. Today's society isn't driven by sacred ideals as much as it was in the time of the Renaissance, and great artists are no longer commonly credited by a celestial connection to god. Rather, today's most notable artists are acknowledged for their individual accomplishments and are more so recognized for their place within the contemporary art movement as a whole.

The track record of successful artists throughout history suggests that society latches onto the art that is appropriate to the times. For example, during Renaissance art, the only known artists were men. This was not because there were no women artists, but because the accomplishments and interests of the male artist were commonly acceptable for the time and the

culture.[3] Even if the most talented artist of that time was a woman, she would never have found success if she searched for it. Artists are products of the culture from which they come, and reciprocally the people that belong to a culture define it. Likewise, no artist today can separate him or herself from this inevitable system. As long as art fits into the current cultural demands, recognition and achievement are possible. Success can only be achieved if the work falls into these unpredictable satisfactions of the contemporary viewer.

From studying art in both historical and contemporary contexts I feel that I don't have pressure to accomplish outlandish tasks beyond my abilities. Rather, I create freely without having to reach for the unrealistic expectation of becoming a "godlike artist" of the Renaissance. The pressure has been relieved from me, the creator, and is placed on the satisfactions of viewers and society as a whole. With this realization, I've determined that the best thing for me is to follow visions and ideas without restraint. Although I am liberated from the pressures of what I cannot control, I can continually strive to make work that creates a cohesive conversation between general theories and objectives, art history, and the contemporary art movement.

Mary Heilmann is a contemporary painter who is influential to me based on her interest in the banal and bridging the gap between the everyday and high art. She does this by engaging with both the traditional modes of painting and nontraditional content. Her paintings look similar to formalist and color field paintings of the 1940's and 50's. However, her paintings take these aesthetics and repurpose them to broaden the spectrum of the medium.[4] Several of her paintings are composed on flat geometrical shapes like triangles, or several rectangles that connect to make a many sided surface. On these paintings she depicts abstract shapes and colors that have been inspired by her environment. In contrast to modernist painters, her work pulls inspiration from the television media, and popular entertainment, specifically she often

references “The Simpsons.” This brings in a conversation about hierarchy of topics or content that may be present in artwork.[5] I find myself aligned with Heilmann’s influence because my work recontextualizes ordinary materials that introduce a hierarchical narrative. While Heilmann is criticized for her inspiration of subject matter, I make work that heightens questionably kitschy and crafty materials into the realm of high art.

I create abstract minimalist paintings, and mixed media sculptures that incorporate inclusive light sources. I consider in these pieces the infinite possibilities of art material and how it can stretch beyond the realm of traditional media. My painting surfaces often accumulate a variation of glass beads, glitter, and other reflective or light absorbing materials. I experiment to find materials that will create an optical effect or a magical quality. The phenomenon of light and reflections resonate with my childhood nostalgia of fantastical imagination. I often reminisce of a time during my childhood when I would experience a hopeless longing and desire to jump into a fantasy land and enter the nature of another world. I used to wish with such force to have the ability to befriend magical creatures like unicorns and elves, that I would feel pain over my physical inability to bridge reality. After a certain age the same feeling is hard to obtain, and it is this sensation that leads me to return to many of the same materials that evoke a sense of wonder.

One of my primary interests is the function of color and the role it plays in viewing an artwork. More specifically, I’m interested in the interpretation of color through human sight because it is like a magical unseen system that exists in our world, but holds mysterious and wondrous qualities of my nostalgic interests. The physical addition of light into my work presents the tangible scientific process of color interpretation. In human perception, waves bounce off, travel away from the surface of an object and into the human eye where they are translated by the brain into images. Most of my painting compositions feature the addition of

LED's, neon, projections, or other tangible light sources. The addition of reflective and translucent materials and surfaces further exaggerate the effect of the light.

To further this optical effect, I search for materials based on their interactions with light. Glitter creates brilliantly colorful reflections, and can transform any surface to behave similarly to the surface of a mirrored disco ball with the addition of light. Velvet and very dark materials absorb the light and creates a pushing and pulling of space that may confuse the viewer's eyes. I collect all of these materials obsessively until I have a large store to choose from. These materials form a vocabulary that I work from to accompany the different lights that I choose for each piece. A process of editing and distilling leads to the transformation of the everyday items that I work with. Both the light and the materials mutually compliment and highlight each other until an enchanting aesthetic is present. I've combined materials like turf, nightlights, chipboard and mylar paper. I uncover and expose the beautiful qualities that each of the materials holds. When presented to highlight these characteristics, the materials obscure their previous kitschy associations. When stripped of the connotations, the materials allow for the viewer to see a glimpse into another world that originates in my imagination.

I've made many compositions of glitter fields on painting surfaces. For example, *For Bill Nye's Bathroom* is a panel with an uniform covering of black glitter and a grid of LED lights that highlight its reflective qualities to reinforce a fantastical effect. Around the edge of the panel is a frame of frosted plexiglass that conceals more lights that were placed between the painting and the wall. This frame allows for a warm glow creating a halo around the painting. The interaction of each element alters the viewer's perception of space on the surface and a confusion of the light and color. With these optical dynamics, the familiar materials offer the viewer unexpected rewards and a relationship to how the piece physically affects the observer

and this allows for the work to take on a life of its own in the mind and imagination of the viewers where it will no longer need my explanation.

-The Project: *16 Cones*-

For this project I created an environment to submerge the viewer within a work of art. This gives the sense that the art is perhaps as alive as the viewer, thus creating the possibility for a personal experience or relationship with the work. The title *16 Cones* refers to the largest number of color receptive optical cones that any creature on earth has. The mantis shrimp has sixteen color receptive cones as compared to the three that humans have. It is impossible to fathom what visual experiences would be possible with more than five times the amount of cones that we have now. In this piece I've tried to create an experience that seeks to visualize what it might be like to live as a human with mantis shrimp eyes.

An eight by eight foot surface holds a field of silver glitter. Three twenty-foot walls are set up to make an open-ended rectangular room. The back wall holds the square with the other two walls on either side. A projector sits on the floor in the back of the room shining onto the surface. The projection matches the size of the surface and will play a video of moving shapes in different colors. The video includes footage of the original surface of glitter as it reflects different colors of lights. The light of the projector bounces off of the surface of the painting allowing the colored lights to move around across the floor, ceiling, and walls. Everything in the space is surrounded by the effect of glitter's reaction to the light. The reflections depict the process of light that I am interested in. The way light waves bounce off of a surface back to the viewer's eye is presented in a visible way, and can remind the viewer of this process, and the importance of it to viewership.

As people walk in front of the projection their movement directly affects the light in the room and their figures cast a shadow. This may be a discovery that will create a greater lifelike quality to the piece as it responds to the viewer's movements, and invites them to become a part of the piece. The physical interaction personifies the painting, and makes it relatable to the viewer not only optically, but also psychologically. The viewer's surroundings are changed by the atmosphere from the projection and reflection, and further by their movements within that atmosphere, highlighting a contemplation of human perception and physical existence.

16 Cones is a product of an artistic vision to upend the expectations of material through light. I am accentuating the unseen processes of vision and color perception and highlighting the transformations that are made possible through an uninhibited expression and creation.

[1] Clement Greenberg, "Necessity of 'Formalism,'" *New Literary History* 3 (1971): 171-175

[2] "James Turrell Art21," last modified 2015, <http://www.art21.org/artists/james-turrell?expand=1>

[3] Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?," *Women Art and Power and Other Essays* (1998): 147-158.

[4] Ross Bleckner and Mary Heilmann, "Mary Heilmann," *BOMB* 67 (1999): 57.

[5] "Mary Heilmann Art21," last modified 2015, <http://www.art21.org/artists/mary-heilmann?expand=1>.

Bibliography

Art21. "James Turrell Art21." Last modified 2015. <http://www.art21.org/artists/james-turrell?expand=1>

Art21. "Mary Heilmann Art21." Last modified 2015.

<http://www.art21.org/artists/mary-heilmann?expand=1>.

Bleckner, Ross and Mary Heilmann. "Mary Heilmann." *BOMB* 67 (1999): 56-63.

Clement Greenberg, "Necessity of 'Formalism,'" *New Literary History* 3 (1971): 171-175

Nochlin, Linda. "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" *Women Art and Power and Other Essays* (1998): 147-158.







