

**The White Empty Space
in
Pictures of the Fluidity of Meaning**

A conversation approaching the idea from a Buddhist perspective

Jason Englund and Sean Feit in Conversation 2012

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"Void In Art", Mark Levy, PhD, Bramble Books 2006

Conversations took place in Jason Engelund's studio at University of California Davis, in February and March 2012, and through email exchange.

Intro • Two Contemplative Technologies • Product and Process oriented arts

Jason Engelund: I'm Jason Engelund an artist working in abstract photography at the University of California Davis, Art Department Master of Fine Art Studio program. I'm very pleased to have in conversation a guest in my studio Sean Feit. Sean, why don't you tell us about what your field of study is here.

Sean Feit: I'm Sean Feit. I'm a PhD student in performance studies, which is a graduate group connected to the Theater and Dance department. My training is in music primarily and then dance secondarily and simultaneous with that, a long time Buddhist practice, both in Japanese and South-East Asian forms. Much of my work is in multidisciplinary performance, post-dramatic theater, recent dance and movement-based performance art, some recent music-based work. I'm doing more body-based work right now than specific music or sound-based.

JE: The way that I found out about your work was through a lecture that you were giving in which you talked a lot about contemplative technologies. Can you talk a little about that and give a **definition of what you mean by contemplative technology?**

SF: Sure. I use "contemplative technology" to mean specific methods or practices that one might take on, that are more than a physical skill or even a mental skill. It's a little bit of a mental skill, but more like a manual skill. **"Contemplative" refers to a skill that is working on attention and perception itself. A core contemplative technology is the practice of mindfulness, a simple definition of which is conscious awareness of what's happening: what's coming through the sense doors, including the mind, in the moment as it's happening. It's a present-time-based practice.** And then the cultivation of that skill, because it has to be practiced, will involve trying to do it and noticing that it's difficult; **that it's difficult to keep the attention vibrant in the present moment when the mind has very substantial habits of wandering, often into past and future, or to things that are not present.** So the technology of it is that it's not itself a thing, like a state or something, but it's a tool. It's a thing in your tool belt. As if you were wandering around the world saying, "Hey, in this moment it would be really useful to **use the tool of mindfulness to relate more intimately or more deeply or more clearly with what's happening right now**", because I might notice that I think I'm talking to you but I'm actually thinking about lunch. So I'm slightly both not present and also slightly disembodied. I'm slightly not here in my form. So I'll use the contemplative technology of mindfulness to recognize what's happening: "Oh look, I'm a little disembodied" and apply that tool to the situation by dragging my mind back from the future. I might say to myself, "I'll think about that when it gets here. And right now I'm gonna see you, and I'm gonna attend to the content." So that would be a contemplative technology. A different technology would be in the context of formal mediation, and this is a little bit what I was talking about in my talk that you were at, the technology of focused concentration, which is different than mindfulness. Where mindfulness just says, "what's happening right now? Oh okay. Now what's happening? And oh, well, now what's happening?" And it really stays very current, just to whatever's coming in. Which means that, what one is attending to is changing all the time. I notice the blue of your eyes and I notice the sound of the fan and I notice the colors in that print and I notice again the sound of the fan and I notice the fan behind me and I notice the

deepness of this chair and it just goes on and on. It's like (snapping fingers) pouring forward moment after moment.

JE: **Very perceptual based.**

SF: Very perception based. I'm turning my attention to the objects of perception moment to moment to moment and that's going to constantly change. And the more I practice that skill, the more that technology gets exercised, the more I'll see. So I'll get quicker, and I'll be able to sustain that for longer so that I might not even be able to say my attention is going to the fan and then to your eyes and then to the brown in your drink and then to the shape of that form, but actually in a way that I couldn't even tell you in real time, I'm conscious that my attention is going ping ping ping ping ping ping, and I'm just tracking that moment to moment. The different and sort of complementary skill, **the other contemplative technology that I think is most valuable and is central to Buddhist and yogic practices is the conscious placing of your attention on one thing and sticking it there.** So rather than letting all the perceptions ping in and recognizing that my attention goes to all of them and seeing it as kind of a constant bubbling river, I'll make the choice to pick one thing, like in classic meditation I'll pick my breath, or I'll pick the sensation of my body, or I'll pick my body posture in yoga perhaps, and I'll stick my attention there and I'll ignore other sense perceptions for the time. I'll keep my attention with the sensation of the breath only to the exclusion of all else. I'll get married to the breath forsaking all other lusts. I'm gonna stick it there. And what happens when you stick your attention to one place for a long time is that your experience, your intimate experience of that particular thing, like getting married to one person, deepens and deepens and deepens. Really cool stuff starts to happen to the mind when you stop wandering your attention around and you stick it to one thing.

JE: Earlier you called that a focused attention approach.

SF: Yes, focused – the traditional word in Buddhism and yoga is Samadhi – which is the resultant state of the mind being completely at rest on something. The practice of that has other names. There's the word dharana, which is the focusing itself, and lots of other names for it, but basically you bring your attention to bear on something and you apply just enough effort to keep yourself there without bringing in extra tension. You want to stay really relaxed in this particular technology, but you'll lean in just enough to not be pulled away by the fan or a wandering thought or lunch or whatever. **So when I say contemplative technologies, mostly I mean the play of those two primary tools of mindful attention: whatever's happening in the moment, or concentrative attention: sticking with one thing.** There's others. Once those two are practiced a little bit you can do things like feel the energy in your body and start to move it around. And push the vibration up and down your spine. These kind of energetic technologies that kind of come out of the basic mental skill of focusing your attention.

JE: And you are applying this to an approach to the creative practice? Is that correct?

SF: Yes, sort of like, "What happens to an artist and their artistic perception if they do this?" If they cultivate these tools?

JE: So it's about being able to cultivate those tools as part of your practice, in a way.

SF: And of course as an audience member you're doing the same thing. As an audience member, one who has that kind of cultivation is doing the same thing. So if we jump right to it, if I take that print there...



(Jason Engelund, "A Geometry of Searching" 2011)

It's an easy one for my attention to land on. It has this sort of central point and a round shape and the color is quite clear and attractive, so there's something pleasurable about looking at that blue. I could as viewer apply the contemplative technology in this moment, right? Mindfulness is happening, I just noticed that the fan stopped and it's much quieter.

JE: (sound of the) Lawnmower comes up.

SF: And then I notice that there's pleasure with that, but I could apply the particular technology of focus, you know, and I could sit in front of that photo and I'd probably want to move in front of it and then to the right distance away. I'd find where that spot felt right, and then let my attention just rest there, and I would do the practice of not letting my attention wander for a little while. As a viewer I would do that. Probably if I'd created it, in the creation process I would be doing the same thing. The contemplative part of the process for me is in a way the moment in "the classic painter image" where you're in there and you're putting your little dot, you're little fleck of white on Napoleon's shoe and then you back up to whatever optimum distance is, you're ten thirty or forty feet, if you're Rothko, and then you just see it. You go "hey, what am I experiencing? What's happening?". And then you go in again. So **the contemplative moment for me is the moment where I kind of drop the technical doing of it and just see everything.**

JE: So you're getting back to testing the perceptual experience, like how is that piece working now.

SF: Yes. What's the kind of psycho-physical or psycho-emotional effect of being in the presence of this particular sensory stimulus, as in this image. I mean that's one way to approach it. That's sort of a product oriented way, like "what's the result, and what does it do?" And so then I might consider those horizontal gradations in the bottom where I see a crisp line, I might step back and want that line to be crisper or I might step back and want that gradation to be smoother, and then I might go back in and rework. From the level of product, I might engage my contemplative faculties and see perceptually what's the result.

There are artists who I think use contemplative practice more on the process side, like John Cage creating a piece of music. He's maybe not actually thinking about what it's going to sound like. He's completely engaged in the process of throwing coins, coming up with hexagrams, applying those to a chart of parameters and then placing that parameter in the score at a certain spot and then throwing the coins again. **He's in this kind of process mediation of letting his attention just rest in the kind of mathematical and chance process that he's set up. Then he just puts the pieces in order and it becomes kind of a meditation for him. As the listener I don't get to do that. I'm just hearing the result, so I have to engage with the product. In that sense the composer and listener are doing two fairly different tasks.** Maybe they're different. Maybe if his practice is to engage the chance process and then to just place the thing in, my practice could be to engage the chance process and just let each sound live on its own without expecting the next one. Without having any expectation of what might come next, and in that way maybe our two processes are similar.

Kasina • Nimitta: an experience in deep meditation

JE: Something in my work I'm interested about is **how the piece of art produces an effect on the viewer. How can the work elicit or encourage that sort of contemplative response from the viewer.** And maybe we can talk about that in a little bit. But first, another topic I wanted talk a bit about was kasina.

SF: Kasina.

JE: They're actually often a painted disk that's mounted on a wall that's used a visual focus during meditations.

SF: Exactly.

JE: Where do you see that tool fitting in? Are the kasina crafted by an artist who is consciously crafting them in that a way ?

SF: They're not really. I imagine they could be, but kasina practice is pretty rare now, not a lot of people are doing it, it's really old-fashioned. It shows up in the early Theravada commentaries, the *Visuddhimagga*, (The Path of Purification) by Buddhagosa in , I don't remember the date, some hundreds of years after the Buddha, but quite a long time ago to us. [around 400 CE] A kasina is a kind of physical thing used as a meditation object. Some of them are there to directly remind you of a cardinal element, like a bowl of water, as a representative of water as an encompassing concept, or a disk smeared with mud to remind you of the cardinal element of earth. And you would use the visual object until — this gets into kind of a detail in the commentaries that many systems of mediation don't use — but if you're using the kasina as in the *The Path of Purification* you would use the kasina to remind you of earth until a psychic phenomenon appears in your mind called a nimitta. A nimitta is a sort of effect that comes on later on (and I'm talking from the text now, as I don't do this practice). These types of things happen at extraordinarily deep states of attention. They're not easy to come by. The people that I know that have reached that kind of practice are doing 24/7 silent practice on a year long retreat and even then people who do that kind of retreat sometimes don't get this far. You have to have a fair amount of skill: mental skill, a kind of inner skill. Your tools are quite sharpened at this point. and you know to get here. But what comes on eventually, the text says is a thing called the nimitta. It's essentially a signal that the mind is kind of dropping to a new level and you might at that point let go of the visual image, the material visual image and turn your attention to the sign itself.

JE: The sign that the conscious change is happening, or the sign of the cardinal moment?

SF: One of my friends did long term practice on the breath and the instruction is to stay with the breath at this very, very, very fine point. It's not even on the body but a little bit out from the tip of the nose, sort of just sensing in the subtlest way the passage of a very subtle breath through this spot in space, essentially. Somewhere like 8 months or so into his retreat, this is all day doing this and nothing else, he begins to experience, when his concentration is quite deep and the mind quite still of thought, a kind of a light appearing from sort of the corner of his eye. And the instruction is "don't look at it", which of course is ridiculously difficult. And he says, of course the first couple times it happens you're very excited. You look at it. It goes away and then your concentration is

broken and it might take you a couple of weeks to get back into that state. The mind is a crazy beast. But eventually he cultivates the ability to get to that depth of concentration and stay with the primary object.

JE: The space.

SF: The spot of breath, yes, until the light finally kind of creeps up on him until it turns around and is filling his entire mental field and at that point, at a particular subtle moment in there, the teacher asks "How big is it? How overwhelming?" It's really about feeling into the right moment...

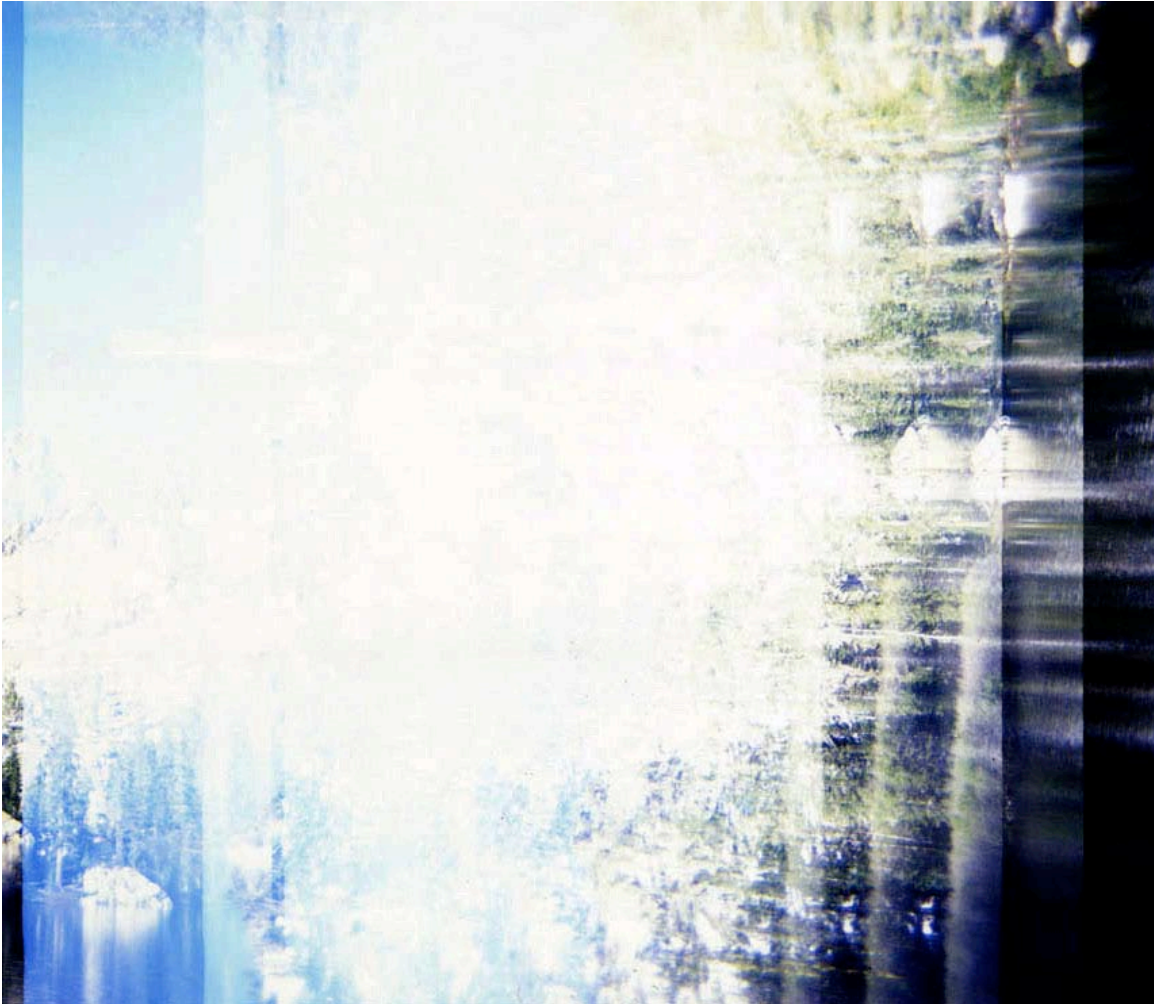
JE: So there's a teacher there talking to him?

SF: No, the teacher's will be saying this later in an interview. You would describe your experience to a teacher, and the teacher will say, "Okay when it comes and fills your field until there's nothing left, then and only then", (and this instruction varies teacher to teacher, there's lot's of different ways), the teacher would say "now turn your attention to the sign. To the light", which is the nimmita in this case, and the text describes nimmita as being like smoke or an altering of the visual field. You turn your attention to that and now you're quite in the immaterial. You're not attending to physical things at all. So kasina can be one thing that can get you there, you focus on the kasina, my friend was doing breath, but the kasina will do it, until you get a nimmita. You're focusing on a disk of earth until something else happens, and at a certain point, at a certain skillful point you would turn your attention away from that disk. The story is that if you develop that depth of concentration on earth, as a thing, you could then sit at the edge of the lake, develop that degree of clarity on earth such that the experience earth fills your consciousness to this extraordinary depth, and that you could then apply that to all the material around you, including the lake, and walk out across it like solid ground. And the text reads things like "well if your concentration is weak, it might only feel like mud and you would sort of sink...". So, who knows? But that's the story.

So the kasina is kind of a plain visual image. And the sense, I think more towards your question is that it's not considered an aesthetic image. It's not considered an artistic image. But of course throughout the arts in Asia there's this sense that contemplation of the aesthetic object does take you into states. So setting aside early Buddhist (extremely specific) stuff, like the kasina, later on you'll get aesthetic appreciation leading to very lovely, really important states of realization. In the Japanese flower arranging (ikebana), there's going to be an exact term for the moment when you contemplate the flower arrangement and you see everything in its place. Everything in its proper place. Or at the rock garden. When you look at the arrangement of stones and it's perfectly asymmetrical. It is perfectly random. And perfect symmetry won't do it, right? And perfect man-made order won't do it. But the balance of forces is somehow right, to drop the mind into a useful contemplation, that everything is just the way it is, or whatever it happens to be. "Oh, my life is like this. It's perfectly imperfect."

The White Empty Space

JE: the white empty space in these new photographs, is one of my primary investigations. For me the white space is metaphorical. Through an in camera process, the photo was taken in one prolonged motion. I'm out by the lake in front of the mountain. I see the landscape, in however many exposures. That is, 6 exposures create that piece all at once in camera. That's the process. But what's that doing is, in additive color theory, with the addition of more and more light things merge into this large white space. **What I'm interested in is through that, through an amplification, by adding that light, the detail is lost and it all just becomes this one space.**



(Jason Engelund, "Photographing Nothingness", 2011)

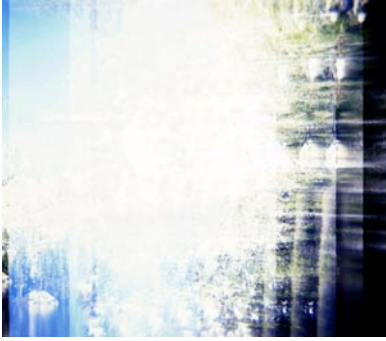
SF: It's interesting that that's combined in each of these images with these parallel lines, which is really different than it being kind of a soft edge mandala, that you know is kind of white in the middle and sort of opens out to an image. I like hearing about the additive process. What it does for me as a viewer is a couple things. One is that my attention is drawn: it gives it a center point. In each of these 3, my attention is drawn to something like the center of the white space, as if everything else is radiating out from, that even though structurally it's not all doing that. Like in this one there's really this

sidelong landscape and these layers. But that one, structurally, it's a circle. Even with that big vertical divide in the center I'm still identifying that as the center of a sphere of light, in a way. It's not random, of course, that the contemplative images that come from India and many parts of Asia and some parts of the West as well are circular: circles and mandalas and kinds of geometrical patterns. The most famous of the early tantric contemplative images from India is the Sri Yantra, this pattern of interlocking triangles that is almost but not completely symmetrical, and it's this interesting pattern. It's absorbing – which is the whole point. [Here's a few versions of the Sri Yantra:]



(Sri Yantra mandalas)

Your mind doesn't quite figure it out but you kind of land in the center. It has all those, you know, kind of metaphorical structures around it you know a model for this or that energies. [I'm referring to the square frame around the central triangles that traditionally represents the cosmos like a house, or castle/temple, or like a map of the world as a symmetrical square with 4 directions and a central mountain, called Mt. Meru (in India) or Mt. Kailash (Tibet).]



(Photographing Nothingness, 2011) (untitled Ocean, 2011) (A Geometry of Searching, 2011)

JE: Yes, what I've read on the practice of yantric painting, there's an architecture to the symbolism that goes into creating the composition. On one level you could almost read it like a code. So this image, with a particular set of shapes and elements is about "these elements. And in specifically these elements in this relation."

SF: Yes.

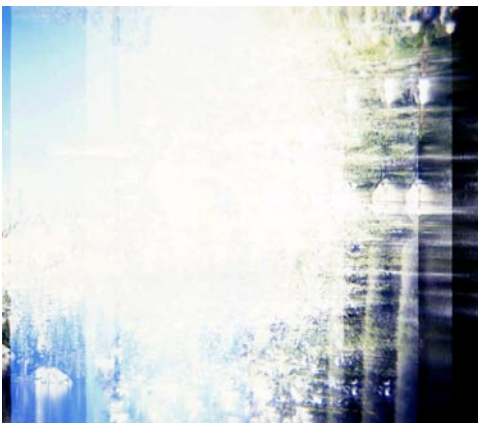
JE: And the idea of architecture in terms of composing light, I find, there's a nice through line there.

SF: One point about yantras, they work both if you know the code, but I think in a certain way they're only really powerful if they also work when you don't know the code. Because knowing the code is going to be an intellectual understanding, you know, deciphering it in a certain way, like "oh, okay that particular border is symbolic of the world as material and this border is symbolic of the world as energy". And there's going to be all sorts of stuff about it. But as a contemplative tool, and you'll use it in the same way you would use a kasina in the earlier Buddhist tradition, you'll just take it, tape it on the wall, sit in front of it and let your gaze just drop in, and use it as the focus object for the technology of concentration to still the mind on that one thing. And so of course one of the classic tools for that, if we're talking about light, is the practice with a candle flame (called *trataka*). And that you, **one of the nice things about light as the object is that, of course, all seeing is light, so it really gets down to the heart of what seeing is itself**, but also the candle flame as an object burns an image on your retina, and so, you know, you watch it and different teachers will tell you what part of the flame to watch, either you drop into the blue part or the moment right above the blue part before it becomes all orangey and flickery. Ideally you do it in a windless room so the flame doesn't flicker and you have a nicely trimmed candle and it's just this clear little white of light and you focus on the right spot in it, whatever your teacher tells you to do, and one instruction is to keep your eyes open and relaxed as long as you can, and let yourself really focus on it and what will eventually happen is that the all rest of your visual field will go dark, so all of your attention will go on that, partly through light contrast but also as a result of concentration. That will happen if you focus on anything visual long enough... it's a little trippy. So everything goes dark, and at that point, you can close your eyes and still see the image. And so in a way, if I took an image with a sort of strong light-dark contrast like this, I imagine that under the right conditions of external lighting I could really stare at that image with its strong contrast long enough or clearly

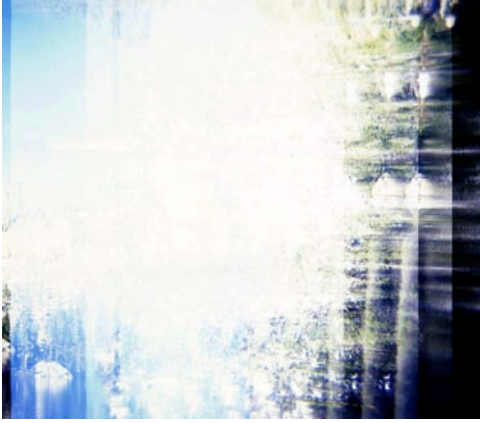
enough that when I close my eyes that outline of the white would remain. And so some folks doing the practice with a candle flame will practice in that way, kind of steady it and then bring it internal.

And I guess just the one more thing in relation to how you initially introduced your work. **If the product of the photograph or the image is meant to invoke a state in the viewer, then in a way, for me in a way it's quite hard to say this image will lead to this particular state or that particular state, in the way that you know maybe the Sri Yantra leads to the same kind of state in many people. I actually suspect that it doesn't. I suspect that it's a tool that brings the practitioner into a contemplative state, but what that state actually feels like or brings to mind or "is" really depends on that person's practice and that person's mind and heart and what they're like. So some people maybe drop in and they get "oh yeah, boundless love". And somebody else maybe drops in and they're like "vast impersonal space".** And those are different experiences, right? But they both have a sense of spaciousness to them. Maybe someone else sees all those triangles and that little spot in the center and they're like "everything comes down to one point". So it's hard for me as a teacher of mediation. I would never say "do this practice and you'll get to this state" but I would always say "do this practice and see what happens". So it's always phenomenological. It's always like, whatever the stimulus is, what's the result for you? For instance when I focus on the third one there, the clouds, you know within a couple seconds of focusing on it and letting other things drop away, the first state that comes upon me is a wave of restfulness. It's "calm" as an initial state. And then if I stay with it from that first calm, then something else starts to bubble. This one in the middle ("untitled, ocean") is really different than that. When I first focus on it the initial hit is more like freeze-framing an explosion kind of in mid-blast, in mid-expansion. Where the state is actually quite a bit more aroused, but stopped. And maybe this is a quality of photography in general but I feel it when I look at this one (Photographing Nothingness" it's like "psssst" (expanding noise). There's not a full release either. It's like if you pushed play it would continue to white — kind of expanding and washing out the whole thing I'm kind of stopped half way. Which "A Geometry of Searching" actually doesn't make me think of. It doesn't make me feel like the white is in the process of expansion and it's going to fill the field.

JE: What about this third one here?



SF: That one also feels like there's motion to it. Almost even like there's speed lines on the right here as if something's going "psst" (noise). Is it going out or in? I'm not sure. You could make up which direction it feels like it's going. The left side feels like it does "restful" more. There's less of the sense of visual motion on the left, it's more just lands and that little bit of lake which is quite grounding on the lower left. But the right side, especially with the strong parallel lines and the way it goes out into black is, yeah, almost like something is going "pstt" or "ssst" (noises). And in that sense, my experience of looking at it, my affective experience changes depending on which part of the image I look at. So if I stick my attention in the center, it's quite soft and motionless. If I look on the right there's this sense of both kind of fractured-ness and speed, which are just words but that describe the sense of, like, I get a tiny bit more sense of nervous system arousal on the right. Like, oh, it's a little bit just more buzzy. And then I think we're used to seeing parallel lines denoting speed and that's where that comes from, but the palpable sensation is actually just of a little bit more unrest. Of a little bit more vibration in my seat. And then in the lower left, at that fragment of lake, my attention kind of drops like "clunk" again, and it's nice that it's in the bottom of the frame, and suddenly it's just a washed out but recognizable nature image of a still lake with very little waves, and so that again is just an associational image, but also because it's recognizable where nothing else is. My attention lands there, as a kind of calm spot. So this one, there's a lot going on in it as my attention moves around, differently than that one, which, you know, is more just like "aah" – laid back. And it's doesn't hurt that it looks like it was taken from an airplane window. So it's like, "oh yeah, nothing happens up here, above the clouds". **Different than down here, where stuff explodes and it's all kind of wild. One of the first things as contemplative images they remind me of is, Are you as the artist – if the image is to invoke a contemplative state of some kind – what are the parameters of that state that you're hoping to find?** This first thing that I sense is the scale between movement and stillness. Is something in motion or is something at rest? And contemplative technologies often, like on the concentrative side, are supported by the perception of rest. And so leaning on that end of the spectrum will bring the viewer towards the possibility of those kinds of contemplative states. Different that seeing... you know, if I go and see a 30 ft long Roy Lichtenstein that goes "Blam!" some part of me is being asked to go "pwhooo" with it, big freeze frame, and some part of me is being asked to say "ha ha comics"; all sorts of things. But there's a lot of movement in some way. You can flip it and you can say "nothing's happening – I got really close to it and it's just this dot..." But he's playing with that scale in some way. Differently than say, my guy Rothko, where I feel like I'm being invited do nothing more than sit down and stop being so busy and just hang out with red and yellow for a little while and feel what's really happening here. Nothing is really happening here. And so that one leads me more toward that side of things. This one leads me more toward the like "something's actually happening" so I wouldn't say that it's not contemplative, but it's differently contemplative than the one that inclines toward rest.



Photographing Nothingness, 2011
2011



A Geometry of Searching,

Talking about Artwork in the Studio: How the White Space Works, and One Corner Painting

SF: These pieces remind me of John Cage's prints and lithographs at Crown Point Press, late 70s, early 80s. He was inking the edges of abstract metal shapes and then getting these kind of shadow forms on the page organized in a chance way, but structurally very nice. And these others he made outside, bundles of stray and then doused with paper,

JE Lit on fire?

SF Yes, lit on fire, and you get these kind of outlines and smoke marks on the print.

(John Cage prints, from Crown Point Press)

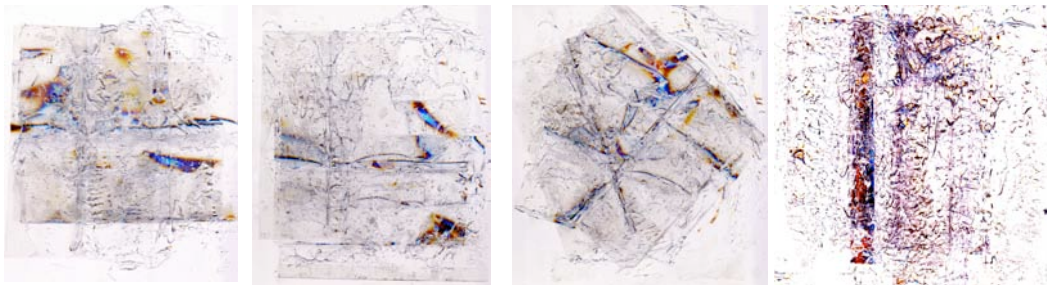


SF I'd have to remember more closely how he made those. But again interesting and the way that you have the outline here in this work, it reminds me something of an after image phenomena. Cage's work is not like your pieces at all, but your work reminds me of them.

JE Similar elements of chance, in art making.

SF You're kind of taking these marks as they come, and this edge, but it ends up being, compositionally a really beautiful edge here.

JE These are new pieces. Ironically even though this piece (demolishing light) looks similar, this is a crumpled up color film slide put on a scanner bed and then inverted. I did that at the recommendation of my teacher after he saw these first pieces. I found it interesting that it was similar color.



SF What is it that makes the blue orange colors happen?

JE It's going to be the inverted color. These are scans so it would normally have a black background, so trace it back from there. So with this, (gel piece) it's the light from one of the flashlights that was shooting into it. Then inverted and printed.

SF That makes sense.

JE I think you've seen this stuff before. Though with this one, (Nothingness) there's a new and different version. This print is made from the same film strip. This is the same in-camera shot, multiple exposure, that happens by taking a picture, slowly advancing

the frame just a little bit, taking another picture, advancing the frame a little more, another picture. This is the more of the film strip that we're seeing, than in the initial version, which I like a lot as I like the empty white space as that's what I gravitate toward. After showing the first version to a bunch of people and getting their responses, they said they didn't have enough to hold onto in that image. By showing more of the original film strip imagery, it seems to give more of a narrative as to how the empty white spaces becomes what it is. The landscape itself dissolves away. If you read it in this narrative path.

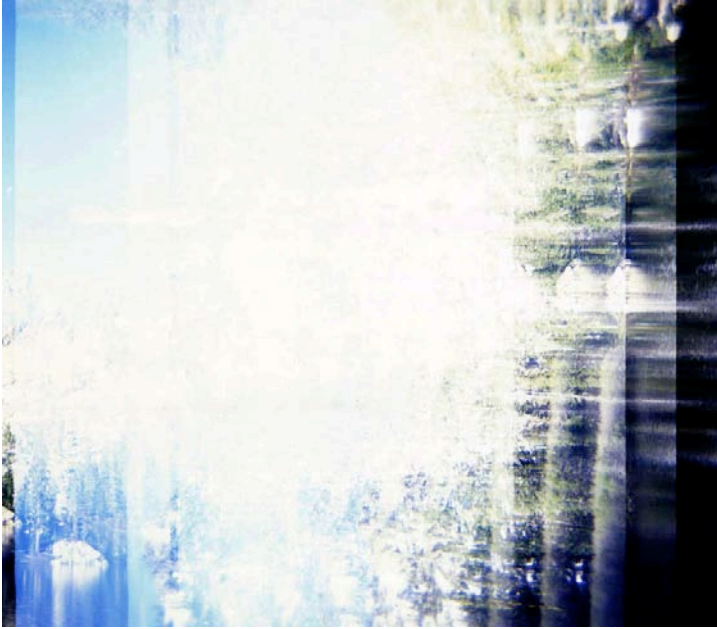
SF: Totally

JE: I like both. In a way they are two different pieces.



(Jason Engelund, "Photographing Oneness" 2012)

SF: They certainly are to me as well. I get why people would have that response. I read this white space differently from this one. This one (Photographing Oneness) gets really empty. For a bit in here, it's just plain paper. And in a certain way, I don't see the "lightness" of it or the "dissolve into lightness", as much in here anymore. Because once these (Nothingness) little spots disappear, it's really just blank paper (Oneness). In a way that it's not here. There's still the image behind here.



(Jason Engelund, " Photographing Nothingness", 2011)

JE Right, you're still getting the noise, essentially from the residual information of the imagery.

SF With this movement, it goes all the way to the middle. Sort of exploding from the middle. Whereas here, it's the vertical lines that are more prominent and it kind of just disappears into plain white.

JE (laughing) Hours of labor trying to print this thing. But so it goes.

SF (smiling) There you go...

JE That's part of the process. But ya, I like both actually. Technically speaking, (nothingness) this line I found disturbing, but to get rid of that I had to sacrifice that. The type of paper it's printed on is relevant to that whole process too. These are from two different printers and two different papers... but anyway, what can you do?

SF Right?

JE And this piece is pretty new, [Blossom 2] as the trees blossom this week. I'll be doing some more of these. This again is the idea of the multiple exposure, in camera work. You can see the one exposure that's taken "correctly" so you get the reference to the element of nature, and then by blowing out the focus in another exposure is where the image starts to fall apart. And that's what I like: What's the vision that happens where the vision falls apart?



(Jason Englund, untitled "blossom 2", 2012)

SF This one is simpler. In a certain way, even with the multiple exposures, which aren't as apparent, it has less narrative for me, it's in a way less conceptual. I get the tree and blossom, then there's a little play with it, in the way that it blows out, but it doesn't really move way past the original image like the others do. I'm still pretty much with

"I'm lying on my back looking up through a blossoming tree, and the sky, and light." I like really sensing the detail of the original thing.

SF When I first see it, my first hit was, the sky when the clouds are really spotty and high up. It looks more like sky and clouds, than tree at first go. That moment of being "what is it? ...oh... oh.. I get it" is nice.

JE: Cool.

SF Like those over there, there color stuff is fun. I can't actually tell what color the tree actually is. All of this purple that comes through. I think it's a tree with brown branches and white blossoms, but all this purple, the little bud of the blossoms really fuzzes out in a nice way.

JE It's interesting how that happens. One of my photography teachers was playing with it in photoshop and I got the sense that he wasn't sure what the natural color of the blossom was either. This is one of those magenta pink trees that you'll see out there. But then when you blow it out, like that...

SF So the blossom itself is actually more magenta and then it's because of the exposure that it turns white.

JE Exactly.

SF That's nice.

You know in an opposite direction to the sort of blowing it out with light, in a certain way the place that my attention is drawn even though this is kind of a triangular or the sort of mandala center of it, I keep kind of landing down here, in this really clean color, in the corner.

JE Can you talk a little bit about that?

SF I think there's a way that the primary image is really busy, and maybe in the way that I was responding to in relation to these, (Nothingness, Oneness) where there's a clear center of saturation.

JE Right

SF My reaction to this was that it was a little too empty, for me, but there's also a "Yeah, it's just gone... All this stuff dissolves into total, real emptiness." Almost even from a sort of art-conceptual emptiness, it's just photo paper. Not even "I'm looking at an image that tells me something about light, but oh, I'm looking at an image that tells me something about printing images on paper and hey this is just paper you know, we're just looking at paper. So in a way that's what I get from this. (oneness) In this one (blossom2) it's busy in here, so I don't really get anywhere to land. It's more like, I'm looking at a cloud or something, rather than a solid something, like in those landscapes. And so I kept noticing, "oh, that little patch down here in the corner". And it's interesting in this piece too (Nothingness) you have this little patch down in the corner. And I remember fixating on that little chunk, which like in the other piece is also blue, and that's the sort of defined, representative frame, or spot, that grounds it a little bit. I think that little blue corner grounds it as being like, ...you know, there's a phrase from the Buddha: "The blue true dream of sky". It's not only that that is a gorgeous color, that saturated blue, but it's the "not busy" spot in the whole thing. I think the image would be lesser if it didn't have that spot to balance it. Interestingly, we haven't looked at this one. But this one, the same lower left corner, "oh look at all that kind of play of light and then ... whoosh, just black.



(Jason Engelund, "Twice the Ocean at Night Gave Light" 2012)

JE It's definitely something I see in my compositional style. It's not something that I can directly articulate, as to why it works the way that it does. But there's kind of this resting

point, that's generally in... You know **I generally treat specific quadrants of the compositional plane in particular ways. They each have their own qualities. So there's this area here. It's going to be very different than right here. What you can do with these different areas of the compositional field and how they balance out in the overall gestalt of the composition.**

I'm just a little curious about it, but I wonder if that's a trained thing, as you know we read from left to right and top to bottom. But are those compositional quadrant qualities different in a culture where you read in the opposite way. Maybe, maybe not. I think it's probably more engrained from the relation to up and down, and the horizon line and the sky.

SF I would lean toward that. In some kinds of old Chinese landscape painting, there's all sorts of theory around "how do you compose the plane?" You have this really tall plane, and it's all mountains to here, and then a huge expanse of space above.

JE Right, right.

SF And then a tiny little horizon way down at the bottom. And to ground it all, one little dude in a boat.

JE Ya! Ya.

SF To just give you sense, of the space, or the huge horizontal spaces, rolling spaces, on and on and on. And always somewhere in there, there's going to be something that grounds it. A little hut, or a prominent rock, like that thing in the landscape.

JE: You know **I love big empty canvases. There are some in which there's just a little tree branch that comes into a corner of it, and then there's one little bird. I've heard it referred to as "one corner painting", because they just anchor it all in that one corner, but then give you all of this space to interact with.**

SF: Right. And in the way that we've been talking about space and emptiness, in an image like this it's like you're tricking me into thinking that all of this is what's to get activated with and to get busy with, but it actually all drops down to a patch of sky.

JE I hadn't made the connection until you just did, but in both of these pieces that one corner area is blue. And that one down there, has the rock in it, which is almost like this inside joke "Oh, you can go and sit on this rock if you want.

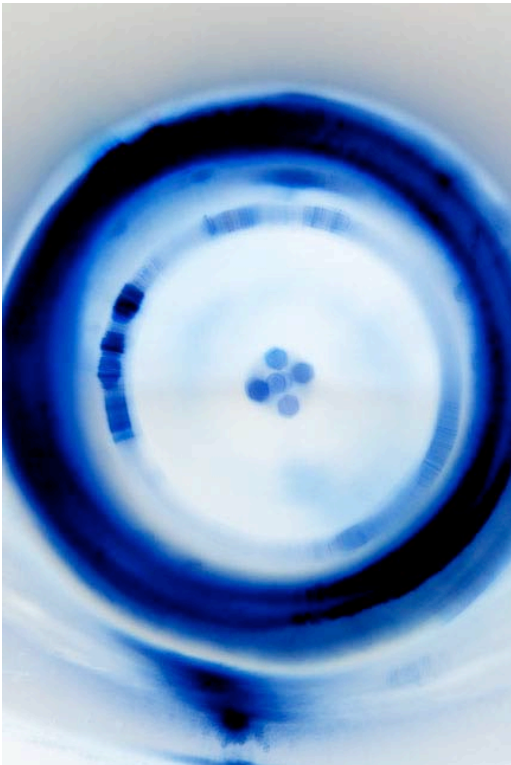
SF: (smiling) Totally, yes! Go to this lake.

JE: (Laughing) Actually I highly recommend you go to this lake and sit right there on that rock...

My color palette, this blue and white, and the other, the purplish.

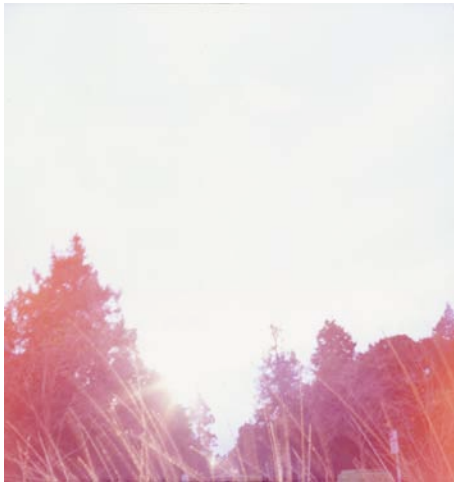
SF But it's interesting in these most prominent ones, that curve burn mark is this saturated blue, and you've got this circle on the wall which is beautiful, kind of the little mandala of saturated blue, and the sky with the little dots. So there's something in that color, I'm seeing around in the room. In that one as well.

JE Yes, that Photo Enso



(Jason Engelund "Photo Enso, 2319", 2009)

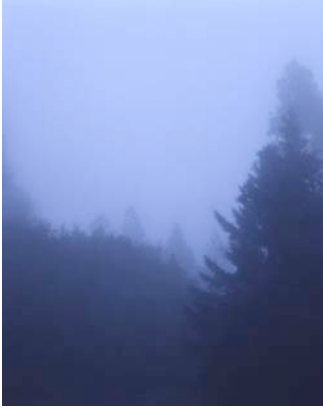
SF Which is super nice. I'm just kind of looking around now and sussing those blue, which are really different from one like this where your color moment is this brick orange red.



(Jason Engelund, untitled, 2011)

JE It's funny, there is a blue version of that picture. It's on the same roll. It's the same shot right after that, and it's the bluish version of that same scene, though shot as a multiple exposure.

SF It's curious because they wash out in different directions. That one with the red feels like the vibration is higher. It washes toward the high-pitched direction. Whereas blue washes out toward the low pitch direction. It's cool vs. warm. So the cooling, this gorgeous trees and mist kind of straight forward landscape shot: it's so restful. It's like "I know that; whatever that moment in time is when the mist is heavy on the trees. I've been there. I know what that feels like, and it's just dropped back, really in, in a different way."



Different from this (red trees above) where the sun is striking. And it even feels like you can't focus, like a photo from summer camp in 1975, Polaroid right?

JE (laughing) Ya, right, right ha ha.

SF But everything felt washed out at that time.

JE That's cool.

Discussing selections from Mark Levy's book "The Void in Art". The Void in East and West, Yves Klein on blue, Ad Reinhardt, Agnes Martin and the Politics of Accessibility.

SF This is from Klein "Monochrome Adventure 1957" in Levy.

"For Heindel and Klein, the color blue symbolized pure spirit manifest in an indefinable, boundless space. "To experience spirit without explanation," Klein wrote in 1957 in the "Monochrome Adventure", "without a vocabulary and to represent the sensation, it is this that had led me to [the blue] monochrome" (Institute 1982, 220) Although Klein's interest in blue started well before he came into contact with Gaston Bachelard's "Air and Dreams" in 1958, his reading of Bachelard reified his love for the color. Bachelard was also an authority Klein could cite who was more acceptable to the French intellectual and art world than Heindel (Institute 1982, 251.) In "Air and Dreams", Bachelard argued that the aetial and dimensionless qualities of blue appealed to the Symbolist poets, who associated blue with solitude, transparency, dematerialization, and reverie. Klein's use of blue was similar to that of the Symbolist poets, although with more consciously spiritual intentions than Bachelard assigned to the Symbolists."

(Levy, page 124)

JE Nice

SF nice right?

JE That's a great way to begin talking about that selections I've made from Mark Levy's book "the Void in Art" I'm ruining the ending, by reading from the afterward first.

SF All grad students do that.

JE Yes it's to find out if the butler did it, or not. With that I thought I would read through these and if something sparks your interests, we'll go from there.

SF Ya, Let's do.

JE So this is from the afterword:

“The presentation of the void in Eastern and Western art is a reaffirmation of the significance of ultimate reality for those who are intellectually aware of the philosophical meanings of the Void as well as for both beginning and advanced meditators. **The Void in art can remind us that our investment in the permanence and solidarity of the objects and thoughts in the world has only as much weight as we choose to give these things of the world as they are not the ultimate reality.** Indeed it is this “overloading of objects,” as the Buddhists call it, that is the primary cause of our suffering.”

And that continues...

“Even if the encounter with the Void remains an aesthetic experience that is not carried beyond the walls of the gallery, museum, or temple, I would argue that a different order of aesthetic experience is created when one is in contact with these works compared with others. For example, in a work where there is “nothing”, or not much to see, like a Mu Ch’I, Ni Tsan, Ad Reinhardt, or Agnes Martin painting, or a scrim piece by Robert Irwin, the viewer has to slow down the mind and emotions to apprehend the work. The process is a gradual revelation similar to meditation. **The work of art is a mental suspension, not a mental diversion. Many of the artworks in this book take us above the level of the mind rather just allowing us to substitute one set of thoughts for another.** “

SF It’s interesting. It’s clear that he’s a practitioner. That he’s coming at it as a meditator.

JE Right

SF In the first paragraph, “The Void in art can remind us that our investment in the permanence and solidarity of the objects and thoughts in the world has only as much weight as we choose to give these things of the world.” I wouldn’t phrase it in the same way. But I get what he’s saying, like: “Beware over-investment in things, or in image”. I don’t know what he’s quoting when he says “the overloading of objects as the Buddhists say”. And I’d want to pin him on that quotation. It’s really different if it’s a late Chinese Zen quotation, or an early Theravadan quotation. They are very, very different kinds of Buddhism. From a scholarly sense it doesn’t work for him to just say, “as the Buddhists say”. And the Buddha never said that overloading of objects was the cause of suffering. He said that grasping was the cause of suffering, very clearly. So it sounds like it’s a late Mahayana quote. And so I don’t know what he’s actually talking about.

SF - Levy: "Shifting to the reality of the Void is a way in which the illusory weight of the world can be reduced." I'm just curious "...periods when we are lost in our minds, and works of art, that embrace the void..." I'm just not quite sure how he's talking about Buddhism and meditation here. I'd want to talk to him. And of course he's not a Buddhist. He's coming from Swami Rudrananda and the kundalini stream, so really he's a Shaivite Tantrist, in that way. That makes a sentence like "Shifting to the reality of the Void ..." make more sense. It makes more sense in that kind of Americanized Shaivism context, than it does for me as an early Buddhist. But I get what he's talking about. I don't want to pick on him. He's actually totally great and I want to read the book.

SF: It's very hard theoretically to say "a different order of aesthetic experience." Especially to say it in the last paragraph of your book. What are you talking about? Are you ranking? I'm not sure what we're doing.

JE I took it as literally **the mechanics of the aesthetic experience**. In referencing one "inside a gallery or a museum", or "in your experience with a work of art" that aesthetic experience is different than your aesthetic experience of "walking to work", or doing something else.

SF For sure, but in that case, it sounds like he's saying "a different order of aesthetic experience is created when one is in contact with these works compared with others." So is it a different order of aesthetic experience to look at an Ad Reinhardt than it is to look at a Caravaggio?

JE Right.

SF And I'm not sure I could go there. I would probably say: I don't know if it's a different order of experience. It's a different experience. I'm not sure what he means by "order". I think **his thesis, from reading these last couple of paragraphs, is that the mind really has to do something different when it's confronted with empty space than when it is confronted with filled space. I might agree.** [Levy] "When you're confronted with these pieces the viewer has to slow down the mind and emotions to apprehend the work." I could make the same argument for Caravaggio. You could take it in at a glance, and say "oh yeah, naked lady reclining on the couch. Cool. Love it." and move on. In the same way you could take in Rauschenberg's White Painting and say "Cool. Conceptual white art." and move on.

JE Right

SF And I could get both of them on a surface image level. Or for either, I could stop, and slow down. And for the white piece I might go: "Whoa. Space." And for the Caravaggio I might go: "Whoa. Sex". But I don't think it's actually a different order of experience. I think he's suggesting that slowing down the mind and emotions to apprehend the work is valuable. And we might learn to do this from a very empty piece, but I don't actually think it's a different activity than seeing a piece with relatively more stuff in it.

JE That's a really great point, because really it just talks about the act of witnessing or the act of perceiving.

SF Yes

JE: And as you just said, I'm just reiterating, you can do that same type of perceiving, regardless of what the information is, regardless of what that piece of art is.

SF I think what he's getting at as a practitioner is that these kinds of artworks that he's championing could teach us to do that, in a way that we might not come upon looking at Carravaggios because there's so much to look at. "Ooh. Look at the sumptuous detail. Look at the painting skill..." There's so much to fill you up with that you might not figure out that you can have a very differently compelling experience by slowing down with it. Where with the Rauschenberg White Painting, or the Ad Reinhardt or the Agnes Martin, there's not so much to fill you up. Although I have certainly been in a gallery with someone who's not so used to empty paintings, "Here's the Rauschenberg white paintings. He was really working with space and form. Here's the one where he erased the De Kooning. You could go on and on about the New York School, about how he was friends with Cage, and Morton Feldman, and he was doing the same with music..."

JE Oh I didn't know they were friends. I have his "Rothko Chapel" piece.

SF Oh, yeah, it's gorgeous, so gorgeous. And I could go all sorts of places that are not meditative. For instance, Rauschenberg and Jones were lovers and living in this loft and making all these things. Jones is doing Flags, and Rauschenberg is doing combines, and that led him to do the white painting. Or I might be inspired to sit down on the bench, and slowly look at a piece.

JE Let's use that as a jumping off point into the next passage. Levy starts to pull out writings from artists where they state that that's the goal of the work, that the goal is to have the viewer think in that way.

(Levy p. 139)

"Ad Reinhardt (1913-67) had an intense interest in Eastern art and its philosophical underpinnings, which he taught along with painting for many years at Brooklyn College."

JE: I found that very interesting.

SF: Hmm, yes.

(Levy p. 139, 141)

"It is not surprising, therefore, that his gaze would be fixed on Nothing. By the early 1960s, Reinhardt arrived at his late style, summarized as "classical black-square uniform five foot timeless evanescence" {Rose 1991, 10}. ... Reinhardt fabricated a Void consisting of nine rectangles of slightly varying black tonalities. ... [excerpts from Reinhardt's relevant notebook jottings about the Void and painting:

Awareness of hidden things, look toward what is hidden

Avest for that which has no dimension no time

Nothing to take hold of, neither place, time, measure, nor anything else.

...

What is beyond all negation beyond becoming

Advance toward the formless, what is without contour,

Encountering nothingness...

At home with voids, reality, and self sums, products of zero

"Not that", it is "no thing", "nil", "nothing"

"A non-rendering of non-experience" turning up as dark

shadow...

JE: A part of the point of the book I think, is to ground it in that context, is the interpretation of these empty compositions, puts the West on a side, "Oh well the West doesn't know how to interpret these compositions, that are empty." That's an underlying argument I pick up throughout the book. Some of these writings address that. In the Reinhardt passages, he points out critics who argue as such, and counters with critics such as Barbara Rose who can see it, who are sympathetic.

SF: My first response is that it's great. And I actually like hearing that he was thinking about those things very directly. And I'm still aware about how both Abstract Expressionism operated in the States and how they bleed into conceptual visual art... It's almost as if you can take all of the representative form out, and all of the abstract form in terms of contrast, color and shape, **but they're deeply constrained by the forms that they are offered in which are these canvas paintings in galleries, within the capitalist system of late, mid-century, modernist art, and they've now been canonized, and they are mostly male, and they are fetching high prices. All of that form overshadows the Void in the image itself. It's great that Reinhardt's talking about all of that stuff in relation to his image, but when I see it, and I'm standing in the SF MOMA at \$20 an afternoon, with people wandering around in their bougie way, and there are no black people there except the guard... all of that makes me really know where I am. And I actually can't do the thing he wants me to do, in relation to that painting. In a way, what he wants, what they all deserve is the Rothko Chapel. You want to be able to go in there and have this space, and it's actually a contemplative space. And it's one of the things that that chapel is so brilliant for.**

JE: I want to address politics of accessibility and that sort of framework. What happens to a piece a artwork when it is encapsulated by these things that you mentioned, such as the capitalist art market, the institution of the museum, the surrounding, as opposed to the Rothko Chapel.

It's funny because as I was struggling with some new ideas with my art, to work on in my studio, some of these charts on the wall such as the Emotional Navigation Chart, and the flow chart of the Psychological Experience of the Sublime, I can't quite get these off the wall. I started putting these charts on a football, and a basketball, a cereal box, and entitled the pieces "**Sharing Information with People (Education through the Subversion of the Politics of Accessibility)**". **The idea being to make information free and delivered in a way that might be adopted by masses, in a guerrilla, grass roots approach through a community arts piece.** The funny part that I like about the basketball is when the emotional chart is mapped onto it, emotions bounce up at you as you dribble the ball. It replicates how sometimes we're faced with dealing with an emotion as it just pops up at us.

SF: Check out Richard Schechner "Rasaboxes". It's an exercise. It's a theater exercise based in the Indian Rasa system of putting on emotional states, or rasa, or bhava, from the outside into gesture, facial expression etc. Schechner and Michelle Minnick, and Paula Cole did an exercise in which they made nine big squares on the ground representing each of the nine classic rasa, which each describe a cardinal emotional state, and then actors would enter them and put on that emotion. And then jump into the next one and put on the other one, as a way to work with, rather than try to generate the feeling from inside, like traditional acting, but to put the thing on from the outside and learn something about it from taking its shape and then moving from within that.

Final Questions. Intent • Subjectivity • Semiotics

After time ran up during our conversation sessions in the studio, Sean and I exchanged final thoughts through email. Sean writes:

SF What wants to come next? I want to hear about...

SF: How does your own work situate itself in relation to intention. Is your intention to invoke contemplative states as a product of seeing the work (as Ad Reinhardt)? Or as the necessary process of viewing the work (which Reinhardt also implies)? Or do you emphasize the state that you enter in the making of the pieces – which will be a more process-based move emphasizing the artist's side? These varieties will imply where subjectivity is placed in the pieces.

JE It's less about me. I don't want to be in the way of the work. I'm not sure if I work in a contemplative state as specific as we've been talking about. There is a state that I put myself in, to facilitate making art. But the intent is about the viewer experience.

SF Do the images offer subjectivity to the viewer – as s/he is invited to find herself in a calmed or altered state when in the presence of the image? Or do they establish the subjectivity of the artist – as we see the marks that signal the in-camera manipulation necessary to produce the image? In what way does the dissolving into light trope support the viewer (I understand this as your primary intention) to relax back into these kinds of states?

JE

The subjectivity rests with the viewer. **The compositions are constructed to encourage the use of that subjectivity to be put it in motion.** As it is a two dimensional static image, that is to say, a print, the viewer is given the opportunity to go back and forth, to wash out the detail with amplified light, or move the eye, move the gaze back to the in focus reality. The composition is set up so they do, so they see that transformation.

The subject matter of the image is intended to support the viewer. I step back and think, "huh, I'm making big pictures of pink flowers." I'll print a bad one and it will kind of look like abstract wall paper from my grandma's house. So there is a cheese out factor I have to watch out for. Fred Tomeselli told me, "either embrace the kitsch or put something dirty in there, because life is dirty." Well the tree and blossom are chosen in

part, as subject matter because of the repetition and pattern I could create by the use of the multiple blossoms, and the light color of the flower worked, to dissolve into white. But it's the comfort and ease factor of the scenes in nature that I choose in support of the viewer. I'm eager to shoot more imagery of the mountains, but the trail to where I go is snowed in until June, so it's the blossoms now that Spring is coming. When discussing the sublime in photography, wartime images often come up. Terror is one basis for the experience of the sublime. For me it's political. **Artists are culture-makers, and I choose to accept accountability for the culture I make.** I don't think I'll benefit the world by making more imagery of war and terror. I don't mean to downplay the significance of those war images. They are from first person accounts, and the world needs to see them, in hopes of stopping more war. But I'm choosing to use nature politically as opposed say to the terrific shadows of urban night. **If the personal apocalypse of a threshold in understanding being removed is to be had, then have that event in nature. Mother nature wins in the end anyway.**

SF **There is also the semiotic deconstruction of the visual image losing its meaning/figuration as it dissolves. How does this dissolving reveal the already released nature of meaning to begin with? In other words, how can I realize in the seeing that the blossoming tree was always just light to begin with? That there was never anything solid there – on an existential level.** That kind of perceptual emptiness is I think what Reinhardt and the Asian-influenced artists are sometimes heading toward. Not just washed out, but the openness is just there to mirror to us a deeper emptiness. When we realize that emptiness – which has nothing to do with physical/visual spaciousness, and everything to do with **everything being non-solid – we will then see that the Caravaggio is the same as the Reinhardt. Neither one can solidify into a form we can believe in. Each one dissolves under the gaze. Into light. And we dissolve into it.**

JE: Well I think you just articulated the idea nicely. It is about the open, non-solid or always changing nature of the world, and that everything we see is just light. My photos are situated in our ability to dissolve into our own gaze. The "washing out" is the process of that dissolving, is the process of the dissolving away of detail through the addition of light in the photographic image. The abstraction through the amplified light is the action of that dissolving into the gaze itself. The one corner, or the representational image of the subject, i.e. an in focus flower near the out of focus flower, or from a slightly altered angle, becomes one side of that transformation. **From in focus to out of focus, the gaze can follow the transition from representational to abstracted image, back and forth, and then to another thing, another place in the composition. The understanding of the subject changes as the gaze moves through the composition. It's that shift, the transformation through the gaze I'm emphasizing. The intent is to encourage the understanding of multiple meanings from different perspectives, and when the gaze is in motion, it's about how meaning is fluid.**