

I'VE CHANGED

A Thesis

Presented to the faculty of the Department of Art  
California State University, Sacramento

Submitted in partial satisfaction of  
the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

Studio Art

by

Caitlin Chan

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A Thesis

by

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Abstract  
of  
I'VE CHANGED  
by  
Caitlin Chan

The following thesis is an examination of metaphor in my paintings. I will begin with a history of my painting studies in order to aid the understanding of my current work. This history will describe my artist influences and the steps that led to the way I paint. Next, the studio processes are described to facilitate the explanation of the metaphors. Lastly, the metaphors derived from my materials and methods will be discussed.

Ian Harvey, Committee Chair

11/13/2017  
Date

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## Chapter 1

### BEGINNINGS

My studio process began to emerge in my undergraduate work. Prior to my current investigations, I was making paintings more traditionally with oil paint and brushes. Once I thoroughly learned basic painting skills, the urge to make paintings in a radically different manner was overwhelming. Pouring paint onto canvas, instead of applying it with brushes, enticed and engaged me more than traditional methods. Now, I have completely embraced this departure from earlier practices.

Self-portraiture was a subject I started with while learning the technical skills of painting. My mentor had urged me to focus on painting less representationally. The requirements for making portraiture was inhibiting my ability to see other possibilities for the work. At first, the suggestion of pouring paint onto canvas sounded absurd. However, taking this direction revealed a new and interesting way to make a portrait. The work began with experimental, tentative black ink portraits that lead to unapologetic pouring of paint on top of canvases laid on the ground. From then on, I was fully immersed in ways of painting by pouring, dripping, and splattering.

I was interested in accumulating pours and splatters on the surface to make a portrait. The focus was making the portrait represent the person I was painting, as shown in *Phillip* (Fig. 6). While working this way, there was a part of me that was not satisfied. Even though I was interested in making the image specific to the person, I knew I was

more intrigued by the types of marks that formed from the splatters and pours. There was a challenge in balancing the specificity of the portrait with the quality of the mark making. These marks had an exciting unpredictability to them, however combining realism with an erratic process was difficult to balance. What I enjoyed most about making these paintings was how the paint would mix and form in unforeseeable ways. The process of making these paintings began to intrigue me more than just trying to bring the painting to a conclusion.

Through my early research of abstract painters, I found a kinship in the work and practice of Jackson Pollock. Pollock is famous for “action paintings” where he primarily dripped and poured paint in his late work, however his early work includes figuration. As I delved into this process of painting, I began to research Pollock and contemporary abstract painters like Jackie Saccoccio who came to similar conclusions in their work.

Pollock was one of the leading figures of the New York School of Abstract Expressionism. I found interest in Pollock’s early work *Bird* (Fig. 1) where he shows something vastly different than most of his abstract work. This early Pollock painting portrays an imaginative situation. The image includes recognizable elements like the eye at the top of the composition and the three heads that are clustered together. In *Composition with Pouring II* (Fig. 2) we see Pollock transitioning more into abstraction. He does not completely cover the canvas with drips in *Poured Composition II*, showing his attachment to pre-planning. *Poured Composition II* shows that Pollock is starting to

take interest in pouring paint, but the title hints at a more traditional, composed approach. These two paintings show that Pollock takes gradual steps into abstraction, revealed by the drips and splashes in *Poured Composition II*, which becomes an identifiable style of Pollock. In *Number 1 (Lavender Mist)* (Fig. 3), we see a complete departure from any sort of imagery. In this painting, we arrive at a very familiar Pollock style. The splattered drips cover almost every inch of the surface. The methodical way they were dripped across the canvas shows the dance and rhythm that Pollock adopted. We see that Pollock's final approach to painting is fully committed to abstraction in which Pollock's painting and process become one. I relate to Pollock's steps because I too drifted away from descriptive portraiture in my work, and began to focus on process. As I ponder Pollock's abstraction, I think of author Alan Kaprow's words:

“I am convinced that to grasp Pollock's impact properly, we must be acrobats, constantly shuttling between an identification with the hands and body that flung the paint and stood “in” the canvas and submission to the objective markings, allowing them to entangle and assault us.”<sup>1</sup>

The objective markings do more than just exist on the surface. The impact of the painting lies in how it was made. Pollock developed a way of making paintings that defied all expectations of painters at the time. When observing a Pollock piece, it is hard

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<sup>1</sup> Kaprow, Alan, “The Legacy of Jackson Pollock,” in *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*. University of California Press Berkley, 1993. 5.

to ignore how it was created, considering there is no visual representation. The marks demand us to look closer in order to understand the content.

As my own paintings progressed, I found that the interest was more weighted in the exploration of abstract marks. Portraiture was a vehicle to direct those marks until they began to achieve their own expressive value. As the research began in recent work, the portraiture was completely abandoned. This is when explorations into creating nonrepresentational painting with a focus in mark-making and experimentation with material became the weighted interest. I began experimenting with ways simple black ink could expand and appear on paper. I moved to dappling with color and different types of paint to see how chance interacted with new materials. Along the way, I played with ways of applying the material using brushes, buckets, droppers, and laying paper and canvas on the ground. As new and exciting methods developed, like Pollock, I was drifting more and more away from imagery.

Jackie Saccoccio is a current working artist I look to when studying abstraction. I admire her bold approach to color, and the way she pours and drips paint, allowing it to create moments of impact and contrast in her complex atmospheres. In *Square Portrait (Ass)* (Fig. 5), dark drips emerge out of the foreground and into the yellow space above. This moment of impact creates a conversation between chance operations and deliberate paint application. Other paintings like *Time(Shimmer)* (Fig. 4), have multiple transparent layers that remind me of ethereal mist. We see Saccoccio revel in gravity as the drips

creep to different areas of the paintings. These drips act as moments of contrast against smoother, more deliberately painted open areas, showing her interest in the way the material transforms into familiar imagery, like mist, forest landscapes, grid patterns from the drips, and more.

Saccoccio uses a process of dripping her paint from one canvas to another, creating a duality between surfaces. She carefully lifts one canvas with pools of pigment so that it drips off onto another canvas beside it. By doing this, Saccoccio creates a dialogue between the paintings, letting material expand rather than giving it a single purpose on one surface. This stimulates deeper thinking about material and how the function of the paint is transforming beyond its physical quality. The paintings and process interest me because of Saccoccio's interest in material and process. Saccoccio's paintings influence me to try different ways of using and applying paint, ink, and other materials. She also causes me to think about my intentions with the mediums. Saccoccio discusses her materials in an interview:

"I started to research painting techniques, and to wonder why we still use oil paints. The more I researched oils, the more things I found to do with them. I started to use more traditional materials, but in a contemporary way. For example, I started to use mica, which is something Renaissance artists used to mix into their gesso to bring translucency to the surface, but I used it with different varnishes."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Kerr, Dylan, "Painter Jackie Saccoccio on her Endlessly Regeneration Abstract Portraits". *Artspace: Insider Access to the World's Best Art*. August 14, 2015. 2.

I admire the way she drips and pours, and I admire her intentional choices of materials and the manner in which those choices alter tradition. In the same way, I was looking for other ways of using material beyond their expected use. Not only was I thinking about how I could use and look at the paint differently on the surface like Saccoccio, I was starting to use new materials like salt, isopropyl alcohol, and cellophane to make my paintings. I could relate to Saccoccio because I was not looking at material for its intended function, I was looking at how the process of using them, mixing them, and experimenting with them could create a dialogue and transformation.

Over time, my paintings started to become less recognizable and less attached to the physical world. However, my early graduate school work still showed its attachment to identifiable figures and objects. Mysterious forms emerged from the early paintings, beginning with bone-like structures, or organic, figurative forms, as seen in *Revolving* (Fig. 7). I was articulating these forms out of the pools of paint in order to make the image feel defined and complete. I believed that the paintings needed a semi-identifiable element in them so that they could be interesting and successful. However, when I began to focus on the context of the marks and the reasons why they were happening, I was able to allow serendipity to take control. I grew to be fully content with the occurring events in my painting process. Achieving a security in chance operations was difficult at first because I was still focused on resurrecting recognizable forms from chance operations. Eventually, my mark making matured and my paintings grew into a different direction.

When I started a new series of paintings, I gave myself more time to analyze my approach to the work and understand my actions so that I could grow in my process. By doing so, the aim was to deeply explore my concepts in the work by introducing these new materials. These components did not just give the work new physical qualities like texture or depth, but they caused new thoughts, new explorations outside of the studio, new writings, and more risk taking than before. Implications about the materials started to happen as they were used, and they contained more meaning and purpose than their original function. They were not just a list of materials to make paintings with, they were the concept of the work itself.



Figure 1. Jackson Pollock, *Bird*, 1941, oil on canvas, 28 x 24 inches





Figure 2. Jackson Pollock, *Composition with Pouring II*, 1943, oil on canvas, 22 x 25 inches

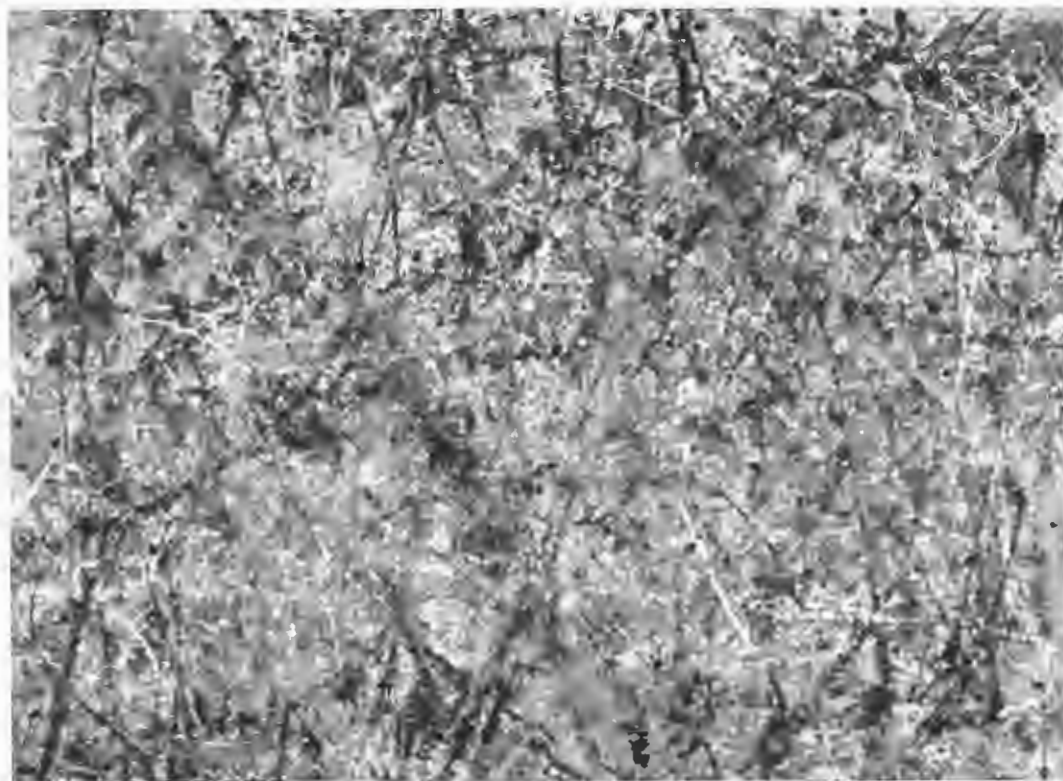


Figure 3. Jackson Pollock, *Number 1 (Lavender Mist)*, 1950, oil, enamel, and aluminum on canvas, 87 x 118 inches



Figure 4. Jackie Saccoccio, *Time(Shimmer)*, 2016, oil and mica on linen, 79 x 79 inches





Figure 5. Jackie Saccoccio, *Square Portrait (Ass)*, 2015, oil and mica on linen, 79 x 79 inches



Figure 6. Caitlin Chan, *Phillip*, 2014, latex paint and ink on paper, 50 x 60 inches





Figure 7. Caitlin Chan, *Revolving*, 2015, latex paint, acrylic, and ink on canvas, 84 x 96 inches



Figure 8. Caitlin Chan, *I've Changed*, 2017, ink, acrylic, isopropyl alcohol, sea salt, oil pastel, and colored pencil on canvas, 77 x 148 inches

## Chapter 2

### STUDIO PROCESSES

Recent paintings emerge from methodical and experimental processes, which have become the very core to the work's significance. Rather than a formulaic approach, I allow serendipity to take over while permitting myself to edit and respond to the material as needed. The methods that I use are primarily done upon canvas that is laid on the ground. This way, I am able to pour buckets of ink and paint so that I can use gravity to my advantage while pushing and pulling the paint on the flat surface. This can be done with brushes or tipping the canvas. I can mix the paint directly in the pools of pigment, creating different washes and values on the surface, while leaving room for unpredictability.

In addition to water mixed with ink and acrylic, I use isopropyl alcohol to expand the way I am mixing and creating different tones and values of color. There are many ways in which I mix it with pigment to get different effects. In *Figure 10* you can see the separation of pigment in the white orb shapes. In *Figure 9*, this effect happens by dropping the alcohol mixed with titanium white powdered pigment into the water-based paint. Alcohol based solution does not immediately mix with water based solution. This creates a separation in the pigments, revealing a physical movement of the liquids on the surface. Eventually, the pigments stop moving, and the paint begins to dry. The alcohol solution also aids in spreading the pigment in a different manner than water, creating a



ghost-like transparency. It has its own characteristics and it dries differently than when it is moving in the water-based paint. Upon research, isopropyl alcohol has a different density than water, therefore the push and pull effect happens. I pour the alcohol onto the wet paint on canvas, pre-mix it with paint, or soak the surface with it before laying down paint; there are many orders in which it can be used for different effects.

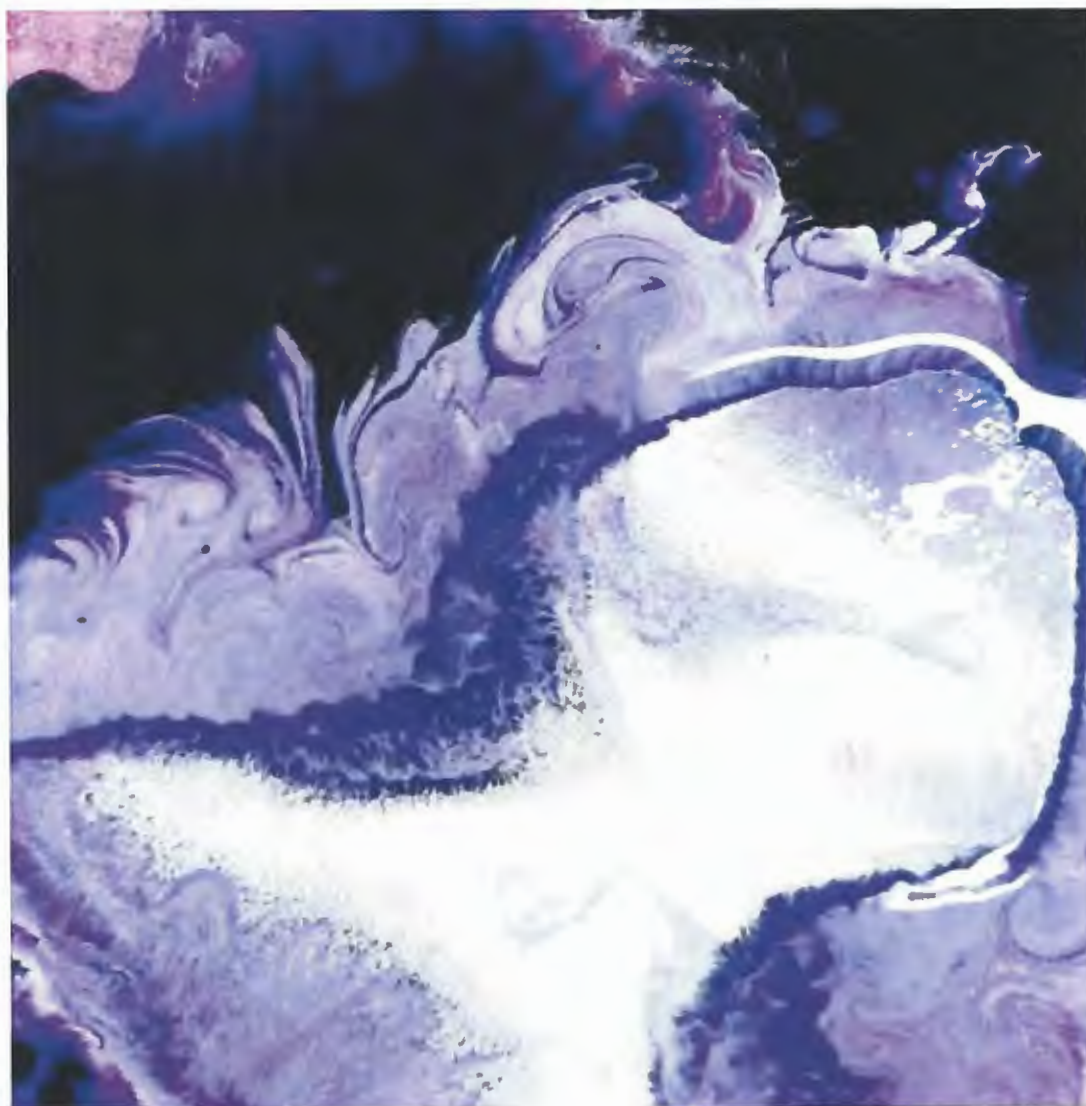


Figure 9. *Detail of alcohol and paint powder resisting mixing with ink, 2017*



Figure 10. *Detail of alcohol on water based layer of ink, 2017*

Salt is another element added to the process, in order to experiment with texture. At first, I used it generously on the surface, sometimes using whole containers of salt to cover my canvases. The way the salt laid on the surface reminded me of mountains or sand because of their built up, rough texture. However, I began to understand more potential when I started experimenting with ways it could go beyond sitting on the surface. When it would dry in the wet paint and adhere to the canvas, I noticed that the salt would dissolve in the wet paint as well. When this occurred, it would return recrystallized once the paint was completely dry. I started to notice that the salt would dissolve and return a different, recrystallized form than before. This encouraged practicing methods where I dissolved large quantities of salt in water before mixing it with pigment. When it dries, the results have been intriguing as I watch the crystals reform in a different capacity on the canvas than their initial granule form from the package. I also started to layer the crystals like in *Figure 11* by pouring layers of salt and paint mixed with water over the same area multiple times so that it could build up. *Figure 12* shows at least one layer of a salt water and ink mixture and how it recrystallizes.





Figure 11. *Detail of multiple layers of crystallized salt on surface, 2017*





Figure 12. *Detail of crystallized salt on surface, 2017*

Another process is where I take large sheets of cellophane and place them on top of the wet pools of paint. When the sheets lay on top of the paint, I can take the plastic and manipulate it in different ways. It can be crumpled in tighter wads or stretched in different directions. In *Figure 13* you can see the cellophane being stretched vertically across the surface. I poured the paint under the stretched plastic where I can spread the pigment by taking a brush or my hand and touch the surface of the cellophane, since the plastic acts as a barrier. Sometimes, days need to pass before peeling away the plastic. I wait for it to be completely dry before revealing the impression beneath. Sometimes the forms are very saturated and appear very distinct. This is when I lay down very saturated pools of ink. Other times they are subtle, and that is when less pigment is mixed with water or isopropyl alcohol.

Lastly, there are many types of deliberate marks throughout the paintings done with colored pencils, pastels, or paint. Hatched, linear, and organic lines can be found swimming in and out of the layers of color and texture. Sometimes brushstrokes and flat areas of color can be found. Some are short and bunched together, others are longer and spread throughout the painting (*Fig. 14*). The way these lines are added to the painting differ in method than the rest of how the painting is made. This is when serendipity and deliberate intention come together in harmony to create the image.



Figure 13. *Detail of peeling away plastic, 2017*





Figure 14. *Detail of line drawings and the process of using plastic sheeting, 2017*



Figure 15. *Detail of the process of using plastic sheeting, 2017*

## Chapter 3

## MATERIAL AND PROCESS AS METAPHOR

When these processes are executed, I meditate on my own state of mind, my being, and the way things change. I saw that the isopropyl alcohol was literally pushing the paint, resisting mixing, and causing mysterious reactions on the surface. When this material was new to me, I contemplated my internal change. These emotions were impossible not to insert into the paintings. I connected to this process, even before this realization. While I was learning what the alcohol solution had to offer, I began to have a dialogue with the painting. I was seeking a way of understanding my own change.

Jackson Pollock said,

“Painting is self-discovery. Every good artist paints what he is.”<sup>3</sup>

Not only was I imbuing my own human experience into the painting, but the painting was revealing to me the inner transformations I was unaware of. More things came into fruition as I made these paintings, revealing the change I had gone through in the last two years. When I was able to meditate and accept these truths of being different than I was, I was able to accept the paintings at their final stages.

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<sup>3</sup> Pollock, Jackson. *Art is the Highest Form of Hope and Other Quotes by Artists*. Phaidon Press, 2016. 52.

There are physical transformations in each of the paintings. One moment there are transparent layers of color and the next they are transitioning into more opaque forms. There are instances of linear shapes and lines that disappear into the atmosphere while cloudy forms emerge then dissipate into voids of color. Metamorphosis happens throughout my paintings, and these changes continue to surprise me.

The salt signifies the growth I have experienced in my time making the current paintings. When I first began to use salt, there were many ways it was used in the studio before I realized its true significance in the work. As I meditated on the reasons I used salt, the way it re-crystallized and grew upon the surface caught my attention. A literal growth on the surface reminded me of my internal growth as a person and as an art maker. These processes and ideas surfaced because of natural transitions in the studio. The painting's successes and failures were not coincidental: growth takes place in the paintings because of risks taken and a faith in the unknown.

The use of cellophane becomes a meditative process. It came into fruition because of current social and political events. The 2016 United States presidential election, and the results of this event, stirred up very visible hate and bigotry. I took advantage of my studio during times of worry and anxiety and began to search for ways to make work that would become a refuge during this uneasy time.

While discovering new processes, laying and pressing the cellophane sheeting upon my canvases soothed my anxiety. It reminded me of a blanket: a sign of comfort for

my worried mind. By letting it stay pressed upon the painting, sometimes for days, it gave me an opportunity to walk away for a while. I would return to the painting to uncover it, and reveal the impression it leaves behind. What remains is a representation of leaving behind worries, frustrations, and anxiety. Peeling away the plastic continues to transform conceptually, and is a way of revealing what is hidden underneath. This studio processes stimulates larger explorations and revelations within my own thoughts and to have my own revelations.

When the plastic is peeled away from the paint, its transformative power is revealed. In *Figures 13-15*, the manipulation of the plastic is shown: its malleability and the way it maintains the crumpled texture when wadded up. My aim is to bring a sense of familiarity of material to the viewer. On the other hand, using the material this way exhibits mystery, leaving behind textural forms that allow different interpretations. The abstract quality of the painting allows the viewers to grapple with their own thoughts.

Lastly, the line work and drawing needs to be addressed. For paintings that are about natural causes and serendipity, one must understand why deliberate editing and elaboration is appropriate. I needed a way to go back in and exhibit my control amongst the material taking control. I am deliberate over what materials I use and how I use them, but I needed a way to visually show it on the surface of the canvas. I wanted to be able to go back in and assert learned techniques alongside chance. What the lines physically do in the painting atmosphere shows the intention of movement and transformation amongst



the plains of color. Many of the lines have the same hue when they emerge out of the atmospheres of color (*Fig. 16*). I do this purposely to ease the eye into the transformations taking place. However, some linear forms and patterns create a pop of color, adding excitement and movement, and a way to grab attention. I am interested in the contrast of abrupt or gradual change that happens literally in the painting but also in our lives. I enjoy analyzing the purpose of these marks and use of materials so that I can connect to my own life and to the lives of others.



Figure 16. Caitlin Chan, Detail of *I've Changed*, 2017, ink, acrylic, isopropyl alcohol, sea salt, oil pastel, and colored pencil on canvas

Ultimately, these paintings have power because of their abstract nature.

Abstraction allows the opportunity for conversation between the work and the viewer because the image does not define a place or an object. These paintings are based on my experience of the world, my emotional connection to the painting process, and reflections on my internal transformations. I have imbued the paintings with these realities, letting them coalesce from a series of both unforeseen and deliberate moves. I have chosen specific materials and have let them facilitate my understanding of the work.



Figure 17. Caitlin Chan, *Yesterday*, 2017, ink, acrylic, isopropyl alcohol, sea salt, oil pastel, and colored pencil on canvas, 80 x 110 inches





Figure 18. *Installation view of Advancement to Candidacy: Recent work by Caiti Chan, 2016*



Figure 19. *Installation view of Advancement to Candidacy: Recent work by Caiti Chan, 2016*

## Chapter 4

### CONCLUSION

Process and materials have informed the way I make and think about my paintings. By acknowledging the intrinsic qualities of my paintings, I continually discover more about my identity. Materials and processes have become unique metaphors that reveal the significance of my studio explorations, my faith in experimentation, and the realities I overlook in myself. Abstraction is the means by which I invite the viewer to discover themselves in the paintings.

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