IN GOOD FAITH

A Project

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Submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

Art Studio

by

Kerry Elizabeth Cottle

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IN GOOD FAITH

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by

Kerry Elizabeth Cottle

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Date

Department of Art
Abstract

of

IN GOOD FAITH

by

Kerry Elizabeth Cottle

I wished to discover what it meant to devote myself to something that could help me determine my place in the world. To put myself into the work and then draw wisdom from it to provide a foundation on which I could begin to both improve myself and the painting was my ultimate goal. I wanted to begin to understand what it meant to make a good painting and what kind of person it might take to make one. This project will shed light on the process of painting and what that process taught me.

______________________, Committee Chair
Andrew Connelly, M.F.A.

______________________
Date
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THE BEGINNING

“All art is incarnational, full of matter, and for the same reason, to make actual the mystery. Pound is right: some knowledge cannot survive abstraction, and to preserve this knowledge we must have art. The liquid light, the *nous*, the fecundity of nature, the feeling of the soul in ascent—only the imagination can articulate our apprehension of these things, and the imagination speaks to us in images.” (Hyde)

The only way to understand something in a resounding bodily way is to place yourself before an entity that has the ability to take you out of yourself. The Grand Canyon does this, Yosemite, and the ocean. I have experienced an equally reverent feeling in the midst of works of art. They remind me of the profundity of my existence—how lucky I am to be here, to experience this. Art is created by a sort of alchemical bond between disparate elements that in turn ignite into a filament of light and serve as what Elaine Scarry has termed a “tear” in our existence. These works of art or nature simply act as reminders.

How any given person or set of circumstances can accomplish such a work is a part of the mystery. The factors that create the work, the effect they can have on people, are also part of the mystery. It seems to me that the only way to potentially get close to understanding this is to strive, in good faith.
I believe in the idea of universal symbols. The symbols in my work are ones that I discover in the world and adopt as my own. The circle is profound. It exemplifies many things in a reductive, honest way. When I saw Kazimir Malevich’s *Black Circle*, I was struck by its power. It is a dark beacon. It is an icon that alludes to the connective nature of all things. Circles are vast.

The wheel, the endless cycle is contained in the circle. This, when combined with another symbolic shape—the triangle—form a teardrop. The teardrop is significant to me in that it can both act as circle and triangle, but also, arrow. It serves a purpose of directing one’s attention, and I direct this attention upwards. The pursuit of art is the pursuit of elevating the human spirit. I use images to inject a feeling of hope in a place where hope is not always present.

The column, both anatomically and architecturally, is a symbol of strength. I use columns to remind us that we must emulate their strength and carry our own weight. I build them to remind myself of that, too.

The doorway—also a keyhole—allows us to see what is beyond what we construct for ourselves. It is symbolic of awareness; it is a threshold. Through them, we pass.
In objects or entities that I consider to be art there is a stark and confrontational power that speaks to me very clearly. These things are at once dark and beautiful, full of intensity. They are more than just things—they have substance and impact. I am very interested in attempting to create something of such intensity with very meager means. I use only very few elements: line, shifts, the grid, and the unreliable nature of pouring thinned paint to communicate an upward and rising motion. I want to create something that is itself, something that is actualized.

I collect elements that have begun to take on personal meaning, and assemble them into a composition that suggests a world where struggle is imminent. The attempt for wholeness is sought after but the ambiguity of what goes on in the interim prevails. In this way, the work contains life.
HUMILITY

“If you had a two-sided chalkboard in your living room I’d write humility on one side and surrender on the other for you. That is what I think you need to find and do to get yourself out of the funk you’re in. The most fascinating thing to me about your letter is that buried beneath all the anxiety and sorrow and fear and self-loathing, there’s arrogance at its core. It presumes you should be successful at 26, when really it takes most writers so much longer to get there. It laments that you’ll never be as good as David Foster Wallace—a genius, a master of the craft—while at the same time describing how little you write. You loathe yourself, and yet you’re consumed by the grandiose ideas you have about your own importance. You’re up too high and down too low. Neither is the place where we get any work done.” (Strayed)

Painting confronts me with myself—it has mirroring capabilities. In the work, I see the world behind me reflected back. It has taught me humility. I hope it always will. It demands time and energy and discipline. This is the most valuable part of the process of creating—that if I give myself to it, it will reveal things to me, ad infinitum. The work asks that I allow myself to quiet my ego—the ego interferes with the non-judgmental act of seeing—and that I disengage from the past and the future, and that I am simply here, now.

On a personal level, painting is a tool. Painting is a method that I use to inform myself. The canvas serves as a small, manageable world where I am able to test myself and solve problems that in every way relate to how I operate in the world at large. Painting has confronted me most notably with the problem of inaction. This inaction is a result of the fear of doing irreversible damage as well as a large sense of uncertainty. This inaction stalls work, and limits it.
Uncertainty is not something you can deny. It just is. Sometimes it seems dark and nebulous. Other times, I realize that it only makes the world greater and more joyful. In uncertainty I have freedom.

Fear has been very present at times, but I am getting the feeling that fear does not serve me or the work. I plan on replacing this fear with confidence. This will be my new experiment. It is difficult to let go of what I have relied upon in the past, but in order to change, I must.

I used to believe that painting was a process of receiving and then transcribing what I received, but now I realize that I must be aggressive and exert my will. I must give more to the work if I wish the work to give back. The stakes are as high as I want them to be. If I find myself competing with others, then something is amiss. I am my only competitor.

This newfound will to act reminds me of a piece by Nigel Poor called *Tiny Writing*. In this piece she uses three pieces of paper to record how her actions spawn thoughts and the corresponding emotion. The first page—with the least amount of writing—contains the list of her daily, noteworthy actions. The second page contains the corresponding thoughts that these actions invoke. The third page, which is filled completely, has the emotions that result from both the actions and the thoughts. This, for
Poor, proves that “actions in our lives take up the smallest amount of space”, and that the thought and emotion it thereby creates are truly what substantiates a life. What stuck with me since the time I saw the piece three years ago was how little time was spent acting and how unfortunate it was that most of our time is often whiled away in the isolation of our isolated experiences. I realize that my work demands movement, and that the work is catalyzed by a confidence in my voice and a faith in my vision.

There is a time and a place for being still, however. There is a balance that must be achieved between being still and receptive, and being active and assertive. I consider this balance a large part of the work; I haven’t mastered this yet.
THE OPPOSITE

“Bad faith is the opposite. It is the confidence that there is corruption, not just that the covenants of men may be severed, but that all things may be decomposed and broken into fragments (the old sense of “Corruption”). Out of bad faith comes a longing for control, for law and the police. Bad faith suspects that the gift will not come back, that things won’t work out, that there is a scarcity so great in the world that it will devour whatever gifts appear. In bad faith the circle is broken.” (Hyde)

Confidence sometimes eludes me. When I am actively painting, I see and feel very acutely that only progress can be made if I push on. The fear of losing what precious things I have managed, or of overlooking those things and concealing them in favor of something uglier and, perhaps, more real sometimes stops me in my tracks. I must pick up again and proceed despite these fears. It is when the fear is too large a factor that the circle becomes fractured.

Painting is just an act of making after all—no more, no less. This allows the work to open up, to become less rigid, as well as less predictable and more genuine. Painting is less an act of the cold intellect as it is an act of the intuition. Painting is a physical process.

Painting the grid brings me true joy and is a devotional act for me. Not only am I paying homage to Agnes Martin, who helped me to learn how to speak, but I am setting up a structure on the canvas that is both strong and ephemeral—a foundation. The grid,
too, speaks of a longing for control while acting as a veil. The grid is paradoxical in this sense.

Painting is to me a holy thing, and I am not ashamed.

The paintings contain my shortcomings, my fallibility. Fallibility is a part of the work and what I find to be most interesting and relatable. The shortcomings are the threads that tie the work to the rest of the world. They are what tie me to the work.
EPILOGUE

“...though the wide universe is full of good, no kernel of nourishing corn can come to him but through his toil bestowed on that plot of ground which is given to him to till. The power which resides in him is new in nature, and none but he knows what that is which he can do, nor does he know until he has tried.” (Emerson)

This is the very beginning.
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