

**A Threshold into Unconventional Bliss**

by

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of the degrees of Masters of Fine Art in the Department of Art.

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## **Abstract**

My art challenges the confines of canvas and is an evolving dialogue between painting and sculpture. My process is intuitive and exploratory, often beginning with a single mark or gesture that I build upon, layer by layer. I strive to create actual depth and implied movement within the two-dimensional plane of the frame while building out from that defined box using materials like Sculptamold, modeling paste, cloth, wood, rocks, and acrylic paint. I use techniques such as blending, dripping, draping, and scraping to create rich, textured surfaces. The result is an interplay of color, mass, edge, scale, and texture. I have created a body of assemblages that transform materials and combine sculpture and non-representational painting.

My assemblages exist on the wall as both objects and the artifacts of my creative process. In my thesis, I explain my material choices and explore the importance of color, mass, scale, and edge in my work. I explain my process in creating each piece and how a cohesive body of work emerged. Lastly, I acknowledge influential artists and elaborate on my efforts to create process-based assemblages that challenge traditional definitions in painting.

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## Chapter 1: Assemblage

### Introduction

My art challenges the confines of the canvas and is an evolving dialogue between painting and sculpture. My non-representational assemblages exist on the wall as both objects and as artifacts of my creative process. Layer upon layer, I intuitively build out from the two-dimensional picture plan to create rich, textured, sculptural surfaces. Color, mass, scale, and edge are important elements in my work, and, in this section, I will explore these concepts and draw ties to artists who influenced my process-based paintings.

### Scale

Scale is the size of an artwork in relation to human beings or other objects (George 2014). My assemblages are larger-than-life, making them imposing and dominant. Because of the sense of scale, my assemblages alter the environment and force the viewer to contend with and confront the work. My work aims to overcome and overwhelm the viewer, creating a sense of immersion and drawing viewers close to their texture surfaces. Scale directs attention to the smaller details within the large surface area.

For my thesis exhibition, my works created an immersive environment, informed by the work of Sam Gilliam. Sam Gilliam was an American color field painter and lyrical, abstract artist. His work is colorful, and I was drawn to his installations of his large-scale drape paintings. With canvases draped from the walls and sometimes from the ceilings in ambitious scales, his installations create an immersive space for the viewers to explore. Gilliam's paintings influenced my assemblages. In comparison, drapery in my work is used as a three-dimensional, sculptural element rather than a flat but flowing surface, but Gilliam's sensitivity to scale is shared.

## Mass

Mass relates to weight and its distribution (George 2014). Mass is explored in my work by creating three-dimensional forms on top of the two-dimensional canvas. In addition, the physical size of my work also adds to the sense of mass. Layered textures, applied materials, and dark tones create a heavy but dynamic sense of weight. Although heavier than traditional paintings, my assemblages contain the illusion of heavy weight. The materials used, which are discussed in further detail in Chapter 2, are much lighter than they appear. For example, in *Negative Space Reflected* (Fig. 19), the navy puffy clusters wrapped around the top left and bottom right corners create mass because they are packed into one space. Density makes these areas look heavier. Also, another example is in *Stretched* (Fig. 11), in which folds and sags in the sheets make that mass at the bottom left seem heavy. In many of my paintings, there are parts of the composition that are bulky or compact. Overall, my assemblages contain various sensations related to mass—folding, twisting, bulging, and stretching, to name a few. Lastly, it should be noted that some sensations, like twisting and stretching, add movement to the compositions, which lightens the sense of weight.

Anselm Kiefer is a German artist who creates large-scale, immersive paintings. Kiefer uses non-traditional materials like straw, ash, clay, lead, and shellac, and his process is tedious, building the work in many layers (Rosenthal 1987). In process videos and interviews, Kiefer noted that he is particular about his process, selecting colors and materials intently. My process is tedious and my material choices are important, as well. In my beginning stages of planning, I referenced Kiefer's burning method and burned holes into my canvas to create an organic edge rather than straight ones from cutting. Kiefer's process informed and challenged me, and his sense of scale, mass, and materiality influenced my process and my paintings.



## Color

Color is a visual sensation, and it has the capacity to shape emotion and perception (George 2014). My paintings feature bold, contrasting colors to create tension, dynamism, and even discomfort. Saturated warm colors contrast with soft, subtle blues and purples. Vibrant yellow and oranges pack a punch and grab attention, reaching out to the viewer. Deeper colors—burgundy, dark blues, and purples—pull the viewer into the work like a vortex or a black hole. This specific color palette, on a large scale, attracts and repels the viewer at the same time, creating a push-pull sensation. For example, in *Shadowed Hues* (Fig. 22), I added shadows in the deep crevices and highlights of lavender around the edges. This pushed the edges forward and the crevices deeper into the painting. This is also found internally in the twisting, stretching folds of sheets. Overall, in my assemblages, color is a strong element that is used to create tension and drama.

Anish Kapoor's work is captivating to look at, and he has a rich color palette. Kapoor is a British-Indian sculptor that specializes in installation and conceptual art. His installation of paintings in the Modern Art Oxford Gallery influenced my color palette. His color scheme consists of bold colors contrasting with each other, and their vibrancy was compelling. In Figure 3, the contrast between the reds and oranges to the black paint creates the illusion of an object on fire (Ridgway 2022). Its intensity is hard to look at and overwhelms the viewer. In my painting *Sharp lines* (Fig. 21), I used similar contrasting colors and aimed for intensity and tension, as well.

## Edge

Defining the outer boundary or contour of the work is called edge (George 2014).

Materials can reveal their character by the quality of their edges. Edges mark an end, a change in direction, or a site of interaction. Blending multiple materials together can create interesting edges. An example of this is Richard Deacon's *On the face of it* (Fig. 10). He uses steel and cloth to create different edges in his work. The way that the cloth is draped gives the illusion that the metal rod goes all the way through the piece. We cannot know this for sure, but our eyes are being tricked into thinking so.

The edges of my paintings are not the boundary lines. The materials I use move over each other, spill over the side, and build up off the surface. I wanted to give the edges character and go outside of both the picture plane and the rectilinear structure. Edges are covered with either Sculptamold, modeling paste, or polyfoam wrapped in sheets. Some of the edges show the change from one material to the next. These transitions flow into one another. The edges of my work are important because they act as guidelines to lead the eyes around the whole composition. Since my work is three-dimensional, there are edges that protrude from the flat plane of the canvas. The forms move forward into the room, creating actual depth, rather than illusionistic depth, challenging the traditional boundary of painting. In addition to protrusions, there are exposed portions of the stretcher bars of the canvases. In this way, I create many edges externally and internally in each piece.

### Assemblage

Each of these artists—Gilliam, Kapoor, Kiefer—merged sculptural and painting components into assemblage. Painting and sculpture share similar elements, such as color, scale, and edge, but dimensionality determines whether the artwork is seen as a sculpture or a painting. My work employs both mediums and represents a dialogue between the two and their histories. Their convergence is known as assemblage. Assemblage is the layering of multiple materials and the combination of the flat surfaces with three-dimensional forms.

## Chapter 2: Materials and Process

### Materials

Materials come first, because everything is made from something and their possibilities. My process sought to discover artistic uses for various materials, transform them, and create assemblages. The materials I have in my work were selected for their ability to be manipulated to create three-dimensional form. I used various materials to create form and texture in my work and changed their intended uses in this process. For example, I took cardboard boxes and placed them on the supports with the bottoms of them facing out. I then stretched a sheet over the boxes. Each decision, such as this one, offered artistic opportunities to enhance color, texture, mass, and edge. The materials I used played a significant role in altering the edges of my paintings. Using modeling paste, I covered the stretcher bars to create a more organic form on the wood. I would use the bedsheets and stuff them with the poly foam to create organic forms on the corners of the canvases. I also used materials to create a sense of movement in the paintings and to play with mass. In my work, I used a mixture of found and purchased materials including wood, bedsheets, stretched canvas, chicken wire, Sculptamold, modeling paste, plywood panels, house paint, yarn, rocks, poly foam, Styrofoam balls, acrylic paint, plaster, and a pouring topcoat medium. I used combinations of these materials to create textures and forms. Each material was used to make a different texture.

Each material creates specific textures that complement the overall composition. For example, the yarn is only present in one painting, and it created a rope-like form moving down the center of the piece (Fig 18). Sculptamold was mainly used in the four smallest pieces. It created a chunky and bumpy texture that I clustered in the crevices of folded cloth and on the exposed parts of the stretcher bars resulting in more texture on the wood and increasing the

dimension on the piece. I used the bedsheets and canvas to create layers and depth. The bedsheets also helped exaggerate the stretched or pulling aspect shown in *Stretched* (Fig. 18) and *Negative Space Reflected* (Fig. 19). I also use the bedsheets to show a softer fluid movement within the composition in contrast to the stiffness of the old canvases. Styrofoam, poly-foam, and boxes were used to achieve exaggerated form in each piece, as well. These materials help to create protrusions and different edges. The boxes were used for their geometric edges and bulkiness, and the poly foam was used to make organic rounded forms in the compositions (Fig. 7). These materials were more challenging to manipulate, but created effective three-dimensional forms. Lastly, small rocks and Styrofoam balls could cover larger surface areas, and I mixed them directly into the paint before applying. Using smaller materials last, I created a final layer of texture on the surface (Fig. 8).

### Process

When I am painting, I am in my own world painting freely and intuitively with my music playing. I work on several paintings at the same time, allowing the development of ideas in one assemblage to inform the others. As a result, for this body of work, relationships exist between individual pieces, leading to a cohesive body of work. No matter at what stage of development, retaining compositional balance was of utmost importance. Although I work intuitively, larger compositions required a degree of planning. I made thumbnail sketches to provide starting points from which to paint intuitively. With these larger works, I added a new step to my process. I began taking notes on what was working and what I was getting stuck on. This helped me solve problems in the paintings and create compelling compositions.

I created the first four paintings in this exhibition on pre-stretched canvases, either bought or reused. With these first paintings, I had no plans for how I wanted them to look. As soon as I

got the canvases, I would just get started with my painting process. I partially disassembled them, removing some canvas pieces and parts of the stretcher bars. Then I began cutting, pulling, or burning off pieces. Next, I would add a variety of materials even reusing some canvas that had been removed. I then added bedsheets, foam, and plastic in the beginning stages, as seen in Figure 6. I would start by stretching a bedsheet over the exposed areas, wrapping them around stretcher bars, weaving them in and out of holes in the canvas, and stuffing some spaces with foam. Once a sense of balance was achieved, I would begin stapling and adhering the materials to keep them in place.

After these initial modifications, I would add textural elements. I used Sculptamold and modeling paste in various places on the canvas and on the stretcher bars. These choices were intuitive, and I did not follow a thumbnail sketch or plan. I went with what felt right to me artistically, and what I think would make a compelling competition. After adding all the texture and other materials, then I covered the entire painting with two coats of gesso to harden the bedsheets, and to adhere the other textures and forms to the framework of the canvas. After a couple days of drying, I began to paint a base layer of one color to cover the whole painting, as seen in Figure 11. That was a hard task, especially trying to get into certain spaces and folds of the painting.

After the base layer dried, I built layers of color. There were weeks of applying many layers of paint, taking away paint, leaving the painting alone for a few days and then coming back to add more texture. I used techniques such as dripping, splatter painting, and antiquing. Along with paintbrushes and palette knives, I used sponges and plastic wrap as additional tools to apply materials. I repeated these processes until I felt each work was complete.

Later, larger works presented structural challenges, requiring additional steps in the building process. With help from my grandfather, I built supports from plywood panels and wood planks to hold the panels together, as seen in Figure 12. We used an outdoor table to lay the panels flat and screw in the planks. We put them together two panels at a time, and, for my two largest pieces, we added hinges connecting the two panels to allow the painting to be folded in half for easier transportation, as seen in Figure 13. Once the five large supports were constructed, development followed a similar arc to earlier pieces.

For these, I still used the bed sheets and incorporated used canvases from other paintings. The used canvas pieces were less flexible than the bedsheets, creating a stronger folded form on the support. The challenge with applying the used canvases was they were stiffer than the blank ones, which made it difficult to staple. The stronger material was helpful in forming sturdier folds and textures. The next steps were to add the modeling textures. For these I used a plaster mix and modeling paste to cover more surface area and create bigger texture waves. Because these paintings were so big, I used my hands to add the paste onto the pieces instead of a paintbrush and palette knife. This part of the process was the most tiring but the most exciting. In these works, I had to focus more on balance within the composition with all of the materials, because the scale of the work required the use of more materials, meaning there were more elements in play. After applying all textures, I applied a base layer of gesso over the whole painting (Fig. 14).

After a few days of drying, I continued as usual. I painted a base layer on each piece and let that dry. Then, I began the painting process with the color scheme described in Chapter 1. I started painting the darker tones and moved into the lighter tones. Mixing, blending, dripping, scratching, and using various techniques were used along the way to add surface effects. This

process was repeated multiple times to create many layers. At the detailing stage of my process, I used smaller paint brushes, palette knives, plastic, and sponges to apply the paint.

The next step was figuring out how to hang my work. The four smaller paintings could be maneuvered easily, turning them around to see which orientation looked the best on the wall. Once I decided on how they would be displayed, the final step was trying to decide if I wanted to put anything in the negative spaces of these paintings, or let the gallery wall be shown through them. In the end I decided to add colored tulle into the negative space of the paintings that matched the detail colors inside of them. I wanted to add an element that was subtle to the background to bring those colors out more and add a light hue in the negative space of the paintings against the gray gallery walls.

Due to their size, the larger paintings were more difficult to flip around and turn compared to my smaller ones. Working on these was more physically demanding. I made a mockup of the gallery space.



### **Chapter 3: Reflection, Challenges, and Triumphs**

In reflecting back over my work, from my first semester until now, I can see tremendous growth. When I started the MFA program, my paintings were based on small concepts ranging from everyday objects to the organs of human beings. By the end, my goal was to make immersive compositions. My work now is focused on manipulating, repurposing, and transforming materials through assemblage. One significant change in my work was adding the three-dimensionality. I believe that texture and form elevate my work by moving beyond traditional painting.

As I look back on the creation of the work in my thesis show, I am so proud of how far I've come. When I first started planning for my thesis work, I had no idea what to do or even where to begin. I was told by my peers that I had plenty of time and the ideas would come as I progressed further into the program. This was not the case at all. One of my biggest challenges was creating a concept for my work during my time here. I had a variety of ideas, but none of them really stuck with me to build upon; they stayed small. I struggled with the research portion as I was closing in on deadlines. I never had taken the time before to really sit down and think about what my work was truly about and how it fits into the timeline of art history. Even now, I still second guess where my work truly falls into history. With the help of my classmates and professors, I was able to find artists that I could relate my process to. I also became more interested to learn how those artists make the decisions they do in their artwork and how that influences me to be more intentional about the decisions I make in my own artwork. I understand now that my work references certain elements and techniques from other artists and traditions. But, I do not necessarily have to fit my work into one box.

The process of making the work for my thesis exhibition was very ambitious in scale. I was energized by the physical and mental demands of the projects, welcoming the chance to see how far I could push myself. Each painting provided a challenge for me to think and imagine in new ways. Even though this process was demanding, I learned so much about myself and my studio practice. I have enjoyed meaningful triumphs that include pushing through significant setbacks and successfully maintaining a rigorous timeline. I faced challenges head on and invested deeply to get the work done. Another positive takeaway was that I never gave up on myself when I was so overwhelmed and doubting myself as an artist. Overall, my artistic practice during my time at Radford has been an adventure. I am more confident in discussing my work with others, and I have a better appreciation for process-focused artists. I have gained knowledge and an experience that will provide a solid grounding from which to shape my future.

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**Featured Images in Essay and the Exhibition**



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8



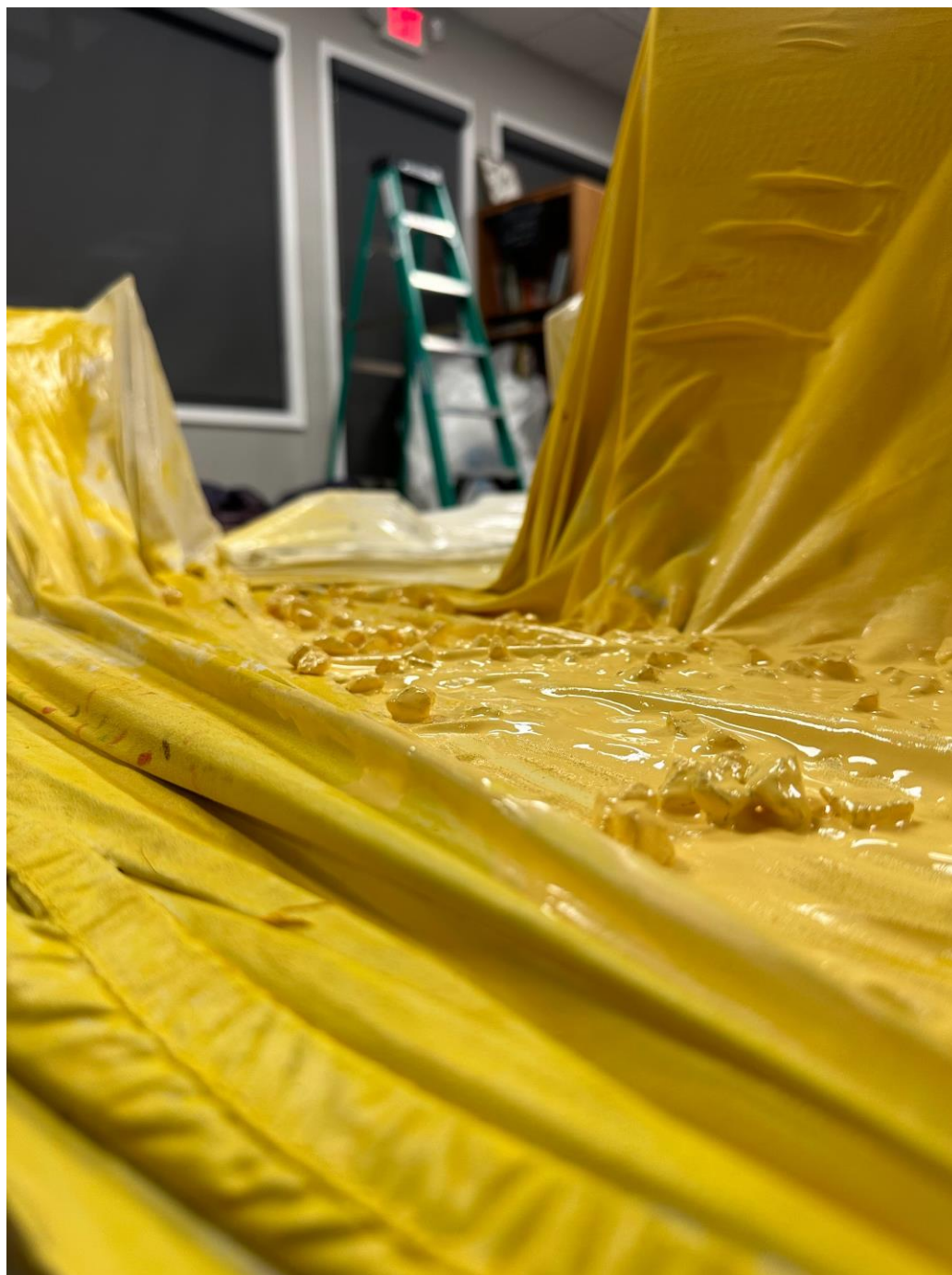


Figure 9



Figure 10



Figure 11



Figure 12



Figure 13



Figure 14



Figure 15



Figure 16. *Central Volume*, 4' x 4'



Figure 17. *Overlap*, 4' x 4'



Figure 18. *Stretched*, 3' x 8'



Figure 19. *Negative Space Reflected*, 4' x 5'





Figure 20. *Soft Curves*, 8' x 5'



Figure 21. *Sharp Lines*, 6' x 8'



Figure 22. *Shadowed Hues*, 4' x 8'



Figure 23. *Woven Canvas*, 6' x 8'



Figure 24. *Monochromatic*, 8' x 8'



Figure 25. *Painted Drips*, 16' x 4'